

# Guerrero's works may look familiar

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Art Critic

The scenes in Raul Guerrero's recent pictures create a strong sense of *deja vu*. He mingles popular pictorial borrowings, discarded objects and his own imagery to make familiar things look strange and strange occurrences look utterly familiar.

A current exhibition at Palomar College's Boehm Gallery surveys his work of the past three years. And there is ample evidence here — 23

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works — to persuade us that this San Diego-based artist is worth close attention.

His two major series of 1984-86 are the subject of this show. "The Mexican Paintings" (1984-85) have a dreamlike quality, though the iconography isn't the stuff of personal dreams so much as cultural archetypes. Some of the newer "Paintings/Constructions" (1985-86) employ familiar kitsch and visual sources, but he lends them an aura of psychological mystery.

"The Mexican Paintings," begun during a sojourn to Oaxaca, Mexico, and completed here, have a mystical or occult undercurrent. In "The Pool of Palenque," a frog sits by its edge, gazing at a Mayan mask, floating above the water and surrounded by butterflies. A jaguar is climbing a rocky slope in "Vista de Bonampak," within a landscape that peels away at the top of the painting; it reveals a wall of battling Mayans, done in the style of Mayan pictographic art.

Though these paintings are rendered in a semirealistic style, it's not the seen world that fills them but one that evokes the symbolic past of the region. Masks, female nudes and ritualistic looking effigies inhabit their scenes.

Yet even as he creates these mystical scenarios, Guerrero undercuts them with ironic touches. The appearance of the Mayan mask is being observed not by man, but by a seemingly uncomprehending frog in "The Pool of Palenque"; the jaguar approaches the Mayan pictographs in "Vista de Bonampak" with equal disinterest. Man has been excluded from these scenes, as if he is not privy to these locales of mystery and spiritual resonances.

Since his emergence in the early 70s, Guerrero has questioned the ability of art to recapture its primal ritualistic power. His recent work articulates this concern with great lucidity. The push and pull between the yearning for spiritual meaning and its unattainability is eloquently embodied by "The Mexican Paintings" and carries over into the recent paintings/constructions, too.

But the most recent works differ in their emphasis. Instead of taking solace in older forms of sacred art, they try to come to terms with contemporary culture and its lack of collective spiritual symbols.

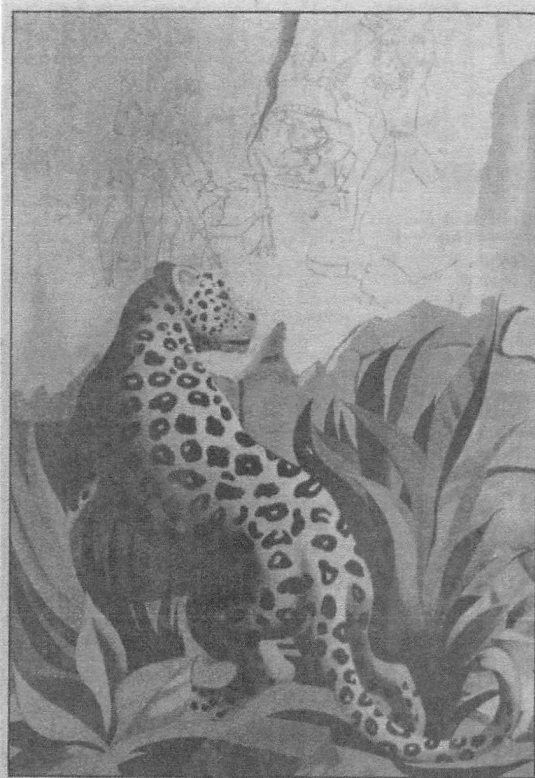
"Primitive Art" is a central work among this newer group. It has a concave relief surface which gradually recedes toward a centered rectangle — filled by the book cover of an early-20th century text on primitive art. Pull back its hinged cover, covered with a ferocious-looking mask, and inside is a small painting of a black woman's face, seemingly Jamaican or Haitian. Her smile seemingly mocks us, as if to say the true meanings and collective bond of aboriginal art will always remain hidden from Western man.

What we have substituted is kitsch objects and a vast pool of cinematic and advertising imagery, Guerrero's art implicitly asserts. In his "Paintings/Constructions," he challenges himself to breathe life into our visual clichés, and more often than not succeeds.

"Durango" pictures a horseshoe and a road sign on a road winding through steep cliffs. Even the frame is a cliché — fake-looking fence post-style poles from which he has hung a painted signboard of a cow's skull and a painted version of a wanted poster.

This picture looks like a still frame from nearly any and every western. But out of context, it is haunting — an apocalyptic landscape of sorts.

On the large painting, "Shadows," he attaches an example of that forgotten suburban artifact: the cuckoo clock. It sits on one side of a large canvas, as if the painted surface is a wall.



A jaguar climbs a rocky slope in Raul Guerrero's painting, "Vista de Bonampak."

The clock becomes a point of departure for a curious pictorial scenario, in which the wall also becomes a floor. Little toy birds, glued to its surface, seem as if they are walking all over it. The canvas is painted to look like a wood floor, with a mysterious light source creating shadows along its surface of a stairway.

Pictures such as these never let us forget that the scenes in Guerrero's paintings are completely fabricated; there is no illusion of realism in the "Paintings/Constructions," though some of the painted passages are illusionistically done. His art doesn't mirror our world but uses its discarded images and objects, manipulating them in intriguing ways. That Guerrero can also create vital art out of these things is something of a mystical act itself.

Palomar College's Boehm Gallery, in San Marcos at 1140 West Mission Road, is open Tuesday-Friday, 10 a.m.-4 p.m.; Saturday, 12-4 p.m. The exhibition continues through Dec. 19.