



JOE VITTI / L.A. Times

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## La Vida Nocturna

Artist Raul Guerrero shows a different side of Tijuana in a series of paintings at the Saxon-Lee Gallery

By KEVIN ALLMAN

**T**ijuana—after dark. For many Americans who haven't been to this border town in years, the stereotypes remain: tourists buying serapes, shoddy hotels without running water, beggars on every corner, servicemen drunk in the streets.

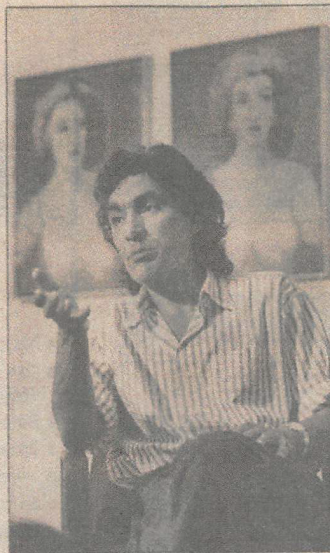
"Tijuana is almost a magical word," said artist Raul Guerrero, whose new series of paintings, "Aspectos de la Vida Nocturna en Tijuana B.C.," is on display at the Saxon-Lee Gallery in Los Angeles through Nov. 25. "But it brings with it a lot of preconceptions and stereotypes that are no longer true."

The truth, according to Guerrero, is that Tijuana is a playground for working-class Mexicans and has been since the 1930s, long before American tourists and shoppers left their mark on the city.

The San Diego-based artist drew inspiration for his vibrant canvases from "La Cahuilla," a downtown district of Tijuana that many Americans have never seen. It is a district where Mexicans eat, dance and listen to music—away from the tourists who shop, drink and dance in the American-style discotheques on the Avenida de la Revolucion, the city's main drag.

"I don't try to paint reality," said Guerrero, in Los Angeles for the opening of "Aspectos." "What I'm doing is capturing impressions, doing memory paintings."

"Even the artists who live in Tijuana haven't been dealing with the issue" of La



**'I don't try to paint reality. What I'm doing is capturing impressions, doing memory paintings.'**

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Cahuilla. "By nature, this area has always been disdained as being the area of the working class, and the poor try to break out of it, because it's not what they want to be identified with."

To be sure, the paintings in "Aspectos" convey despair and tedium—but most of all, they glow with life. An October article in *Vanity Fair* said of the show, "What Toulouse-Lautrec did for the Moulin Rouge, Guerrero is doing for Mexico's border town . . . Guerrero's work is *caliente*."

Rendered in dynamic, near-Day-Glo tones of blue, red, yellow and orange, Guerrero's paintings juxtapose the exhilarations of Tijuana's nightclub patrons with the passiveness and ennui of the musicians, bartenders, mariachis, B-girls and prostitutes who are there to serve.

In one large painting, four tired B-girls sit onstage at the Molino Rojo club, waiting for customers. At first, the women look much the same, bound by boredom and resignation, but a closer examination of the painting reveals the details that make each woman unique: the different curves of their bodies, their clothing, their body language.

In "Pickpocket," a man grabs a pretty woman who is simultaneously lifting his wallet from his jacket. And in a third painting, a man is face-down on a bar, his beer in front of him—an ambiguous image that could represent either sleep or despair.

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## Guerrero

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Guerrero, 43, describes himself as "a third-generation American of Mexican ancestry." Born in Blythe, he first visited Tijuana in 1963 and has been back many times since. After graduating from the Chenard Art School in 1970, he lived in Los Angeles for 10 years before settling in San Diego.

In a current long-term project, Guerrero is painting extended studies of three different locales from around the world, of which "Aspectos" is the second series. The first, "Reflections of the Life and Times of a Venetian Jewess,"

was, in his words, "creating a fiction based on fact, based on the way that a Californian-Mexican-American educated on films might have thought and felt about daily life in Venice."

Sometime in the near future, Guerrero will be leaving to collect impressions for his third series: a set of paintings about day-to-day life in Iowa. He has yet to visit the state and selected the locale based on descriptions provided by a girlfriend who was born and raised in the Midwest.

He'll drive across Iowa for several weeks, making sketches and talking to local residents, before returning to San Diego to begin painting.

"From the perspective of a Southern Californian, especially someone of my historical background, it's very alien," Guerrero said.

"But at the same time, it's a very important part of my cultural heritage. The Midwesterners came out here to live out their dream around the time of the war, and, in a way, their dream became my reality. In a way, it's like reverse colonialism."

Colonialism is also at work in Tijuana, according to Guerrero. Property and ownership laws have changed in Mexico, he said, allowing Americans to purchase homes and businesses there. The effects can already be seen on the streets

of Tijuana on any Friday or Saturday night. Upscale Mexican restaurant/discos, not unlike the ones in Marina Del Rey or Westwood, now line the Avenida de la Revolution. American currency is accepted everywhere, and prices for meals and drinks are competitive with those in the United States. One new club, the Manhattan, is even presenting Mexican-flavored Vegas-style revues.

Faced with the encroachment of Americans who bring their way of life and entertainment into Tijuana, Guerrero says many native Mexicans are withdrawing farther and farther into the darkened areas of the city, trying to preserve their culture at old dance halls such as

the Copacabana and the Guadalajara de Noche.

Guerrero thinks that change in Tijuana is inevitable, as the older bars, dance palaces and clubs give way to the far more profitable, and far more slick, American discotheques.

"I see, at most, another seven or eight years, before that old way of life is gone," Guerrero said quietly. "It's unfortunate, but the city is growing so quickly. Now that Americans can buy and own property there, that land is becoming so valuable. Look at what's left of the area around the Moulin Rouge in Paris.

"In a way, these painting are like a little bit of history being captured." □