

## SAN DIEGO

### Raul Guerrero at David Zapf

The air is thick with luridly brilliant color in Raul Guerrero's paintings of Tijuana nightlife. The people in the clubs he depicts appear to move not so much through air as through a thick mist of violets, reds and greens. These hues, as the artist employs them, make us think of heavy cigarette smoke hanging under fluorescent and neon lighting.

Guerrero, long one of San Diego's most consistently intriguing artists, has been working on this series since the summer of 1988. At earlier stages in its evolution, "Aspectos de la Vida Nocturna en Tijuana B.C." was the subject of gallery exhibitions both in Los Angeles and at Zapf. "Aspectos" was fully resolved in the recent show. The centerpiece of the exhibition was a painting, *Club Guadalajara de Noche* (6½ by 14 feet), which offers a panoramic sweep of the subject at hand: seated pairs in the foreground, dancing couples filling much of the middle distance on the left and people seated at the bar on the far right. Suspended balloons punctuate the upper realms of the room, and a man carrying a tower of hats looms in the foreground. This sprawling picture "framed" the show. The other works offer more intimate views of club life in La Cahuilla, the red-light district of Tijuana, but the style remains consistent.

Guerrero emphasizes fluid imagery, though the paint surface isn't thick or heavily textured with brushwork. The overall effect might be described as a kind of measured expressionism. Drawings in various mediums rounded out the show. Here, *Sandra* was the single example of Guerrero's series of portraits of prostitutes. Her face has striking features, though the greens and purples of her flesh lend the picture a subtly grotesque suggestiveness. Other compositions in ink and wash define the interiors of clubs economically—with quick calligraphic lines and spare use of pale color

Guerrero is, in "Aspectos," something of a Toulouse-Lautrec of Tijuana's nightlife: he does for a raunchy milieu what the late 19th-century artist did for fin-de-siècle Paris. (Seemingly in homage to that city and that era, one of the Tijuana clubs Guerrero depicts is called Moulin Rouge—in Spanish, "Molino Rojo.") Instead of Jane Avril, we get portraits of nude dancers at the Coco Club. But like Lautrec, Guerrero isn't interested in titillating us as much as evoking the places that define this district and the people who populate it. There is an erotic undercurrent to "Aspectos," to be sure, but it is just that—an undercurrent.

A hidden element of elegy underscores this series. It is made explicit in an accompanying statement by the artist. "In time," he writes, "La Cahuilla will be gentrified, as the economy continues to change in this thriving border city. The area will be 'cleaned up,' and in the process, an area of marvelous history, textures and colors will be erased from its life."

A large element of the success of "Aspectos," as in Guerrero's strong work of the past, is his close attention to symbols and stories that are the foundations of a culture. Paintings of 1985, based on time spent in Oaxaca, were populated by creatures and masks that looked back to the ancient myths of the Mayans and the Aztecs. The same heritage is conjured up, though more surreptitiously, in this exhibition. Small mosaic heads, mounted on pedestals, are interpretations of ancient artifacts; each pictures a skull or masklike face. After viewing these icons in tile, stone and cement, one looks again at the faces of the people in these clubs and sees just how enduring is this Indian heritage.

—Robert L. Pincus



Raul Guerrero: *Club Guadalajara de Noche*, 1989, oil on linen, 6½ by 14 feet; at David Zapf.