

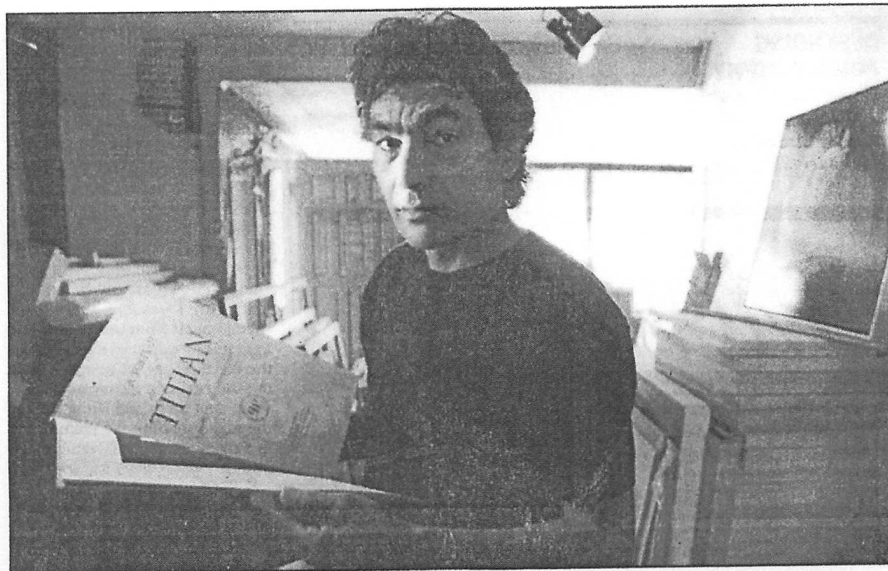
Symbolic journeys to places of intrigue

By ROBERT L. PINCUS
Art Critic

A group is gathered around an elegant dinner table, and from the smoke of their cigarettes rises an apparition of Tina Modotti, a silent-film actress and photographer who spent time in Mexico. A couple, obviously tourists, stare quizzically at a modernist sculpture, but the ancient sculptural figure behind them appears more full of life than they do.

This pair of scenes, simultaneously strange and funny, are characteristic of the paintings in Raúl Guerrero's current show at the Linda Moore Gallery in Mission Hills, "Historia y Leyenda de Las Calles de México."

"The right image or icon stills the moment," he said during a recent



Portrait of the artist: Raúl Guerrero, in his Hillcrest studio, turns Mexico City into a symbolic world with paintings such as "Dinner Party" (left).

Venice, Tijuana, Iowa

Guerrero always felt like something of an outsider in L.A. But then he had always felt marginalized, at least as far back as high school.

He recalls being struck, at his Sweetwater High assemblies, by how the Mexican-American students would sit off to the side, refusing to cheer when the football team was being praised.

"It was an expression of alienation," Guerrero recalls. "We were never integrated fully."

Still, because of his middle class childhood, he never identified with the increasingly high profile Chicano movement.

"I didn't relate to the Chicano experience of the barrio. I thought my goals would be better pursued as individual artistic expression, through the use of modernist aesthetics rather than political art. But my objective and that of Chicanos can be compared in many ways. Both redefine the way society looks at people of Mexican heritage."

Guerrero found a form to fit his focus in the interpretation of places, symbolic journeys that frequently invoke the past as well as the present.

His response to Venice (1987-88) took the form of a fragmented tale about the life of an Italian courtesan. Paintings about Tijuana (1988-90) captured the life of its red-light district in portraits and nightclub scenes rich in an air of fantasy. An ambitious sequence about Iowa (1991) looked at the rich lore of symbols and landscapes we associate with the American heartland.

Cultural legacies

The Midwest may appear an incongruous subject for a Southern Californian of Mexican heritage. Yet Guerrero's American roots run deep, too.

"I feel as if Iowa is one of my cultural legacies, too. After all, California was established by Midwesterners, and National City had a partly Midwestern look. So going to Iowa was like going to Spain; it's part of my cultural heritage."

But he is already looking beyond it to another series and describes an intriguing painting in which the implicitly sexual metaphors of exploration — plunder and possession — will be made surreally literal.

"One will picture a nude woman in her boudoir. It will likely be tightly rendered, more realistic than my recent paintings. Tattooed on her body will be the trek Spanish explorer Cabeza de Vaca took through the Southwest."

Velázquez and Delacroix, long admired by Guerrero, will be sources for the style of these pictures. He retains an unshakable faith that painting can embody contemporary issues, too.

"The territory of art, now, is to decipher reality. Subject matter is everywhere, Duchamp taught us. To make a picture is as complex as developing plans to send a rocket to the moon. It's about delving into the self and finding a visual language to do it."

DATEBOOK

"Historia y Leyenda de Las Calles de México," paintings by Raúl Guerrero
Linda Moore Gallery, 1631 W Lewis St., Mission Hills. Through Saturday. Free. 260-1101

interview at a Hillcrest coffee shop. "If you can find it, it will stop the viewer in his tracks."

For the last decade, Guerrero, now 49, has been one of the city's most intriguing painters. Collectors, both locally and otherwise, have embraced his work, as has The Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego.

In the days before Guerrero took up the brush, his search for icons took the form of installations. In a 1979 show, he employed a Yaqui devil mask, meant for ritual dance, and gave it a new sort of role: He attached it to a motor and made it revolve.

"I wanted to isolate it for symbolic value," Guerrero recalls, revealing the influence of Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades — works for which the pioneering Frenchman used common items, as found or subtly transformed.

Guerrero still speaks admiringly of Duchamp. But he grew increasingly dissatisfied with the installation as an art form in the late '70s and early '80s.

"The problem with installations," he says, "is that they don't affect the design of objects; they're just an assemblage of things."

He wasn't alone. Painting was plentiful in the '80s, after a fallow period that persisted through much of the '70s.

In 1984 Guerrero spent six months in Oaxaca, where he taught himself to paint. A year later, the pictures he produced went on view in Los Angeles — and it was hard to believe he hadn't been painting for

current approach to Zen expressionism. "I want the painting to flow the way a Sumi brush painter would work."

Objects, poetry, concepts

Like so many artists of his generation, Guerrero began his career as a conceptual artist. When he graduated from Chouinard Art Institute in 1970, the Los Angeles art scene was in a transitional phase. The '60s had yielded artists of national and international renown: Edward Kienholz, Robert Irwin, Edward Ruscha and British expatriate David Hockney.

The older Ruscha was to become — and has remained — an admirer of Guerrero's work, but his peers were Jack Goldstein, Allen Ruppersberg and William Wegman, who all moved on to Manhattan and acquired reputations there.

But other influences figured just as early as conceptual art. There was Guerrero's own family history. He had chosen the mask he did because he had Yaqui roots on his mother's side.

Surrealism provided a founda-

Jungian archetypes."

Guerrero's Mexican heritage made him a rarity among L.A. mainstream artists. Robert Graham is the only comparable figure he can recall.

His grandparents had immigrated to California in the 1890s. The artist was born in Brawley and raised in Blyth and National City.

It was never clear to Guerrero, during his L.A. days, that he would return to San Diego. But when his wife died, he and his son, Quinn, came to San Diego for an extended visit in 1980 — and they stayed.

"I decided I liked it again. It was more of a typical California town then. In a way, it transcended its time, making me think of an earlier, quieter California.

"It was better to raise my son here," he adds, "and I needed to be away from art-world pressures."

Recently, he and two other artists established a space, Gallery 3770 Park Boulevard, which for him is a way of giving something back to an art scene that has been tremendously supportive of him.

"There are terrific artists in this