

Armando Rascón

BLUE STAR ART SPACE

SAN ANTONIO

by Alexander Dumbadze

REVIEWS

Borders are real. People fight and die over them. Many are denied passage through them, and, as Etienne Balibar reminds us, “Borders are no longer the shores of politics, but have indeed become—perhaps by way of the police, given that every border patrol is today an organ of ‘internal security’—objects or, let us say more precisely, things within the space of the political itself.” In the case of the United States, when “our” borders become “the space of the political” they function in two ways. First, they figure as a political (and violent) tool of U.S. policies, and second, for subaltern groups, they can form a symbolic site for resistance, in the face of hegemonic forces, through cultural empowerment. Armando Rascón’s recent exhibition *Latina Postcolonial Photobureau* and *7 Related Media Installations* shows these issues at work.

An advocate for Chicano/a empowerment, Rascón investigates the colonial legacy of the Southwest, while interrogating different conceptions of the border. Rascón sees the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 as the moment Mexicans became the colonial subjects of the United States. With this historical moment in mind, Rascón seeks to represent the complexities of border culture and create a belief in a cultural whole that still maintains difference, to help form “empowerment models for youth and collaborative partnerships as part of a larger fabric of proactive engagement with issues that confront the Chicano/a communities throughout Aztlán.”

In *Latina Postcolonial Photobureau* Rascón fills two walls with large portraits of Latinas of different socio-economic and professional backgrounds. These photographs show three forms of objectification: the photograph itself, the woman as object of the (male) gaze, and the colonial Other. Yet Rascón subverts these stereotypes with the threat of these Others looking back. With confident expressions, these larger than life faces create, at the very least, an equality in the exchange of gazes, and in fact they seem to look at us, the spectators, and cast us as the constructed Other. Rascón’s photographs show these women asserting their own identity; when seen collectively, they can be understood as an empowering politics of difference within a Latino/a cultural unity.



Armando Rascón
KarmaBo(A)rder, 1998
Installation view
Photo: Courtesy of Blue Star Art Space

Rascón switches tactics in *Postcolonial Califas Diction(ary)*. In a room painted black with no lights, and only two small ceramic tiles on opposite sides (referencing 1950s visual culture), the space is filled with the ambient voices of Rascón’s family, recorded when he went home for a visit to the border town of Calexico, California. Occasionally, interrupting the conversations is the voice of Rascón’s mother, who recites proverbs or *dichos*. The fleeting sounds of conversation, interspersed with the faint rustle of noises like the clang of dishes, makes it hard for the listener to associate the sounds to a specific context or geographical place. It seems that the voices could be talking in Calexico, or Mexicali, or anywhere. The ambiguities of location are intensified by both Rascón’s mother reciting *dichos* that find frequent use in Mexico and the United States, and by the two tiles’ sentimental imagery, which references visual (and cultural) traditions on either sides of the border. Rascón shows that in many aspects of Chicano/a and Mexican cultures, borders are a fiction because they are crossed continually by the vernacular, visual culture, and tradition.

In his installation *KarmaBo(A)rder*, Rascón investigates Chicano/a youth counter-culture. Creating a mock skateboarding trade show booth, Rascón displays the wares of his fictive company KarmaBo(A)rder (a play on ‘boarder and border’). The space contains four skateboards hanging on the left side of the “display booth” and two dummies dressed in KarmaBo(A)rder clothes (white t-shirt and khaki pants, referencing vato fashion). Between the boards and the dummies is a video depicting high school age skaters from San Antonio. Mixing in interviews with the individual skateboarders, Rascón films the skaters, wearing clothes similar to the KarmaBo(A)rder design, performing the same trick over and over. The connotations of skateboarding, along with the skaters’ fashion reference to vatos gang culture stands in a direct affront to traditional “American” values. Rascón does not deny this; in fact, he celebrates it. The video’s strength is its ability to convey the sense of community these skaters share. In their resistance they create unity: an empowerment for today’s Chicano/a youth. ○