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Armando Rascón at Galería de la Raza

Artist Armando Rascón was born in 1956 in Calexico, a small town on the California side of the U.S./Mexican border. Back then, he says, the border was not yet the political and cultural dividing line that it is today; in fact, his mother regularly used to send him over to Mexico to buy tortillas. It's a powerfully specific image—a simple but instructive example of the profound changes that have taken place in the intervening years.

There are many such examples in this multimedia installation, which takes as its point of departure the Capilla Juan Soldado, a shrine in Tijuana that honors the patron saint of border crossers. Rascón has set up the gallery as a sort of prayer chapel that an undocumented emigrant might visit on the night before his or her departure for the U.S. It includes two DVD projections, a wall of large photographic prints, a computer terminal, and ninety-nine votive candles,

each customized with photographs from Rascón's family album. Some of the photos date as far back as the nineteenth century.

The act of border-crossing, and the prevention of that act, have become institutionalized—ritualized, even—on both sides. A unique regional culture has emerged with its own accompanying music, folklore and places of pilgrimage, which Rascón makes his own first by visiting the border and getting acquainted with its street-level life and politics, and then by converting those experiences into digital media, thus transforming them both literally and metaphorically into symbols.

The votive candle photographs are a fascinating mix of individuals and "archetypes": the 1950s-era hot rodder with slicked-back hair, the wizened grandmother, the young couple at their wedding. The photos are somewhat pixilated, and many of them have been artificially colorized, indicating that the artist scanned, manipulated and printed them all on his computer at home (he also personally digitized and edited the DVD projections). For Rascón, it is a consciously political act to put technology in the service of Chicano culture and aesthetics. The finished products become his own brand of homemade religious offerings, not unlike the border-crossers' handwritten prayers to get across safely, and the digital imperfections in the images contribute to their homespun (à la 2003) appearance. Digitization is also a ritual act for the artist. Just as the border crossers keep climbing the wall, Rascón keeps feeding the computer with their images and experiences and the output can be understood as his personal attempt to make sense of the frequently impersonal (and sometimes tragic) fate that awaits them on the other side.

Rascón extends the ritual metaphor into other spheres, as well. His DVD projection, *Two Balkcourts, with a Mediated Third*, cuts from footage of young men climbing over the Calexico/Mexicali border fence to shots of candles inside the chapel of Juan Soldado to clips from the 2002 quarter-final World Cup soccer match between the U.S. and Mexico. It's illuminating to consider these seemingly disparate elements as parts of a larger whole—to recognize parallels among individuals and ceremonies and stories that would otherwise, like a refugee wandering in the California desert, seem utterly isolated. Rascón's most important point, in this installation, is to push viewers to conceive of border issues as more than simply shameful examples of institu-



Armando Rascón, *Niña Perdida*, 2003, 2-channel DVD projection, at Galería de la Raza, San Francisco.

tionalized American racism. He certainly recognizes the border region as having more than its share of inequity and suffering, but within that premise, he attributes a much more complex set of characteristics to the area. Through his eyes, it becomes a genuinely creative space where culture is invented and enacted—where, for example, the tragic, true story of Juan Soldado can grow into a broader cultural myth and feed the hopeful imaginations of those who literally follow in his footsteps.

—Lindsey Westbrook

Border Xicanographies: Multimedia Project by Armando Rascón closed August 9 at Galería de la Raza, San Francisco.

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