



Armando Rascón: Installation view of "Occupied Aztlán," 1994; at Walter/McBean.

SAN FRANCISCO

Armando Rascón at Walter/McBean

Armando Rascón's recent exhibition, titled "Occupied Aztlán," questioned the way U.S. educational, political and cultural systems represent Mexican-

Americans. The 17 mixed-medium works included in the show utilize today's vocabulary of didactic text, video, film, photography, computer database, assemblage and artifacts. According to the artist, "Aztlán" refers to the historical/mythical place of the Aztecs' origin and, more specifically, to the Southwestern territory ceded to the U.S. after the Mexican War. Rascón calls for this region to be declared autonomous, whether by political or revolutionary action, and placed under Chicano sovereignty.

Posted in varying formats on the gallery walls were copies of such historical documents as the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (which ended the Mexican War), texts from 1954-94 U.S. Supreme Court cases involving civil rights, education and immigration issues, and three impassioned declarations of independence written by Chicano activists during the '60s. Meanwhile, 48 colorfully outfitted marionettes dangled from the ceiling in a line, casting their shadows on a concrete wall. These figures represented popular Mexican stereotypes—a mustachioed campesino under his sombrero, a dancing señorita. There could be little doubt as to who the unseen puppet master might be.

In one corner Rascón set up a research station—a desktop computer amid a wall of tacked-up newspaper clippings, a library of Chicano reference books and magazines, and FBI files relating to the United Farm Workers Union. On the computer visitors could record their names, addresses and comments. "I leave here hearing a thousand voices," wrote one viewer, "Mis abuelos, mis abuelas" (My grandfathers, my grandmothers).

But what made the exhibition so effective was the play between evidence of national events and the artist's evocations of his personal history. Born and raised in the border town of Calexico, Calif., Rascón included in the show a long series of his fourth-grade history tests. A dim light bulb illuminated each graded test as well as a personal snapshot—of Rascón's parents, for example—that contradicted the stigmatizing rhetoric of the test. This telling installation, which in mood brought Boltanski to

mind, served as a kind of elegy lamenting the misuse of education to advance ideological agendas.

As a whole, "Occupied Aztlán" served not only to augment "official" accounts of our relations with Mexico, but also to encourage our neighbors to see themselves anew. History, we are reminded, is relative to its teller.

—Betty Klausner

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