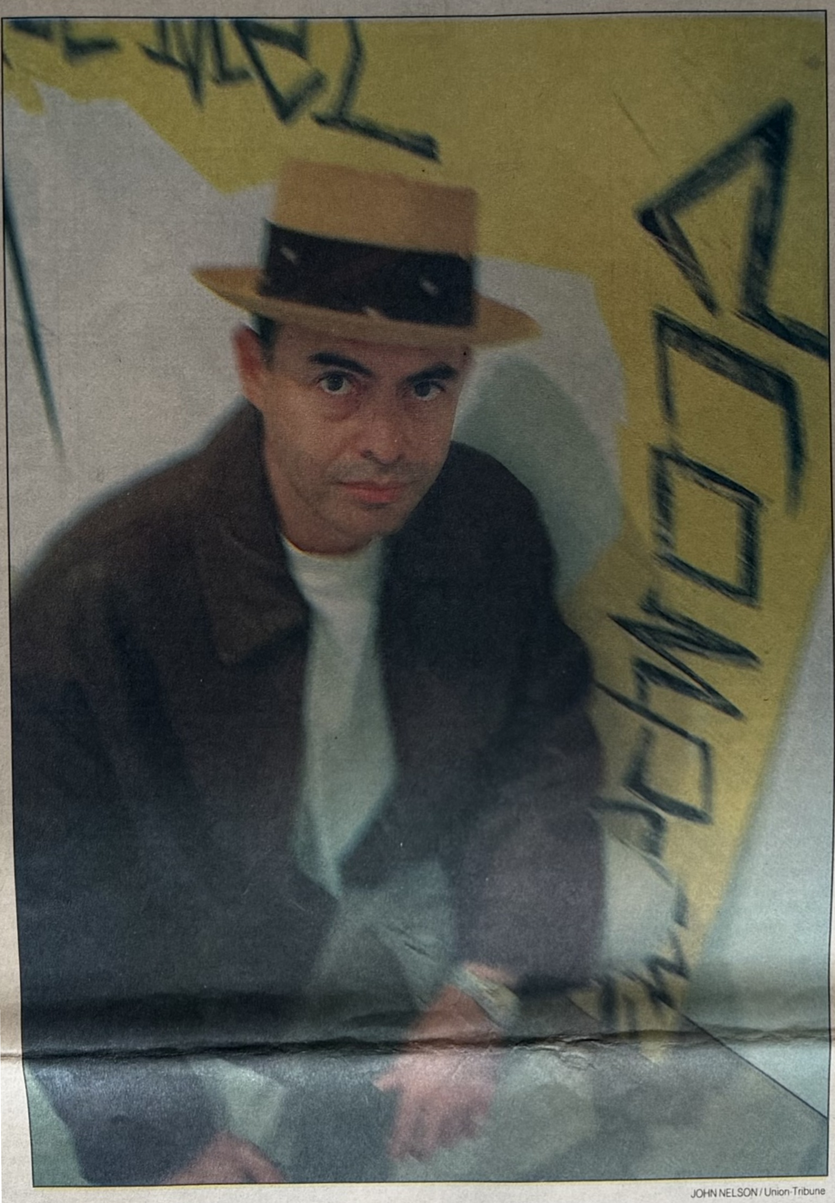
CURRENTS & ARTS

THE SAN DIEGO UNION-TRIBUNE • MONDAY, APRIL 7, 1997

ART INSTALLATION



JOHN NELSON / Union-Tribune

CHICANO ARTIST'S WORK BRIDGES THE BORDERS BETWEEN CULTURES

Links IN THE Fence

ARMANDO RASCÓN

His sweat shirt displays one word: "think." And it seems just the right word for Armando Rascón to be wearing.

The trim, soft-spoken artist loves to talk ideas. He enjoys speculating about topics as varied as the nature of the audience for art, the importance of calling himself a Chicano and the changing nature of the global marketplace. He interlaces his observations with allusions to French postmodern theorists such as Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard.

But with a quick transition, he'll turn the conversation toward his childhood in Calexico (about 100 miles east of San Diego). He remembers how he thought it was a great adventure to cross the border with his friends, saunter down the streets of Mexicali and return home before Mom and Dad worried about his whereabouts.

As his thought pattern goes, so goes his art. Rascón sees connections where others might not. He makes theory personal, and subjects his personal life to theoretical speculations in his installations.

The newest of his projects, "Postcolonial Califas," which went on view over the weekend, aims to connect the personal with the ideological. One hundred identical images of a section of the steel fence that divides Mexico from the United States line the walls of the venues where the exhibition is on view: 50 at the downtown galleries of the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, and 50 at the Centro Cultural de la Ra-

Brave new California: *"Postcolonial Califas," a dual-venue show by Armando Rascón (top), includes portraits from a series titled "Latina Postcolonial Photobureau" (above).*

See RASCÓN on Page E-6

nos who represent a post-colonial California. "Post-colonial," as Rascón sees it, is a way of describing an evolving self-consciousness among some of California's Latinos or Chicanos.

"It's about Californians who learned English and became acculturated, but who are not 100 percent a part of the dominant culture," he says.

By using the word *Califas* in his exhibition title, he extends this concept of the person who is both inside and outside American society. It's a street term for California.

Home away from home

Rascón lives in San Francisco, juggling careers as an artist and co-owner of the Terrain Gallery. He has exhibited frequently in the Bay Area. Three years ago, he was given the Adaline Kent Award by the San Francisco Art Institute — a prize that has gone to many leading artists connected to the region, such as Mildred Howard (seen here in Insite94), Bruce Conner and David Ireland. "The quality and integrity of Rascón's work," the judges wrote, "speaks with critical eloquence to the issues of the 1990s."

But for Rascón, San Diego offers a greater intersection of the personal and the theoretical.

"I have my own set of references, with eight brothers and sisters in San Diego. In that sense, San Diego is home, even though my parents are still in Calexico. I spent a lot of time in these parts as a teen, hitchhiking to San Diego, hanging out and going to concerts."

At the same time, San Diego suits his focus on post-colonial California. In the brave new post-NAFTA marketplace, this city is a kind of compressed paradigm, with Third World-style manufacturing occurring just south of the border and high-tech and biotech companies flourishing north of the line.

"The eyes of the world have been on San Diego, with numerous articles appearing during the past few years in *The Economist*, the Latino press and *The New York Times*. It's a micro-economy of the world. The rest of the border looks to see what San Diego is doing.

"In this sense, San Diego is *the* postmodern city, and the show, by focusing on it, is a quintessentially postmodern show."

Beyond exhibition walls

Given the broad range of Rascón's interests, it shouldn't surprise anyone that he wants to reach people who might not step though museum doors very often.

"I'm always asking: Who is the audience for art?," he explains. "How can you get to people if they're not cultural enthusiasts, if they're not people who visit museums or take their children to museums?"

His answer: access beyond the exhibition halls. He's created a Web site he hopes people who never see the show will visit anyway. Rascón views it not so much as an information source about the exhibition as a work of art itself (the address: http://www.xicano.com).

"If people like what they see," figures Rascón, "they might come."

Another of the artist's inventions, in the pursuit of accessibility, is the Postcolonial Historical Society, AKA Institute for Xicano Relations. Call (800) 973-1848 and you get push-button options that feature a little history lesson (in Spanish or English) about the Olmec Indians and an argument for registering and voting.

The Olmecs were, as Rascón says in the recorded information, the first high civilization in this hemisphere and the first to establish a sophisticated tradition of art. And they have been crucial, he adds, to the construction of a cultural history for Chicanos.

"In historical discussions of California, the Olmecs don't always come up," says Rascón. "But I think we should know about them. They are the early culture of the region."

Passionate intellectual

Showing his work in two venues is part of Rascón's desire to reach the broadest audience. It's also a telling balance of venues for an artist who considers himself a post-colonial.

He's accepted by the art world in general now, as the museum show indicates. But Rascón feels strongly that the history of the Centro is his history, too. It was a product of the Chicano civil-rights movement of the '60s and '70s — and so is he.

Rascón, born in 1956, considers himself a second-generation Chicano artist. Though he was a United Farm Worker volunteer and witnessed demonstrations on college campuses in the late '60s, Rascón was still a kid when the La Raza movement first bloomed.

He views himself as more analytical about the political process than were the artists who created, say, the murals in Chicano Park and fought to establish the Centro.

"I don't think I'm talking about politics so directly. I become a kind of cultural anthropologist, dealing with social history and the sites at which I work. Even with my own family pictures and history I try to create a critical distance from them."

But just because Rascón is an intellectual, don't think his art is completely analytical.

All of his strategies are underscored by a passion for those same concerns he analyzes. Art, to him, is "a little moment of celebration."

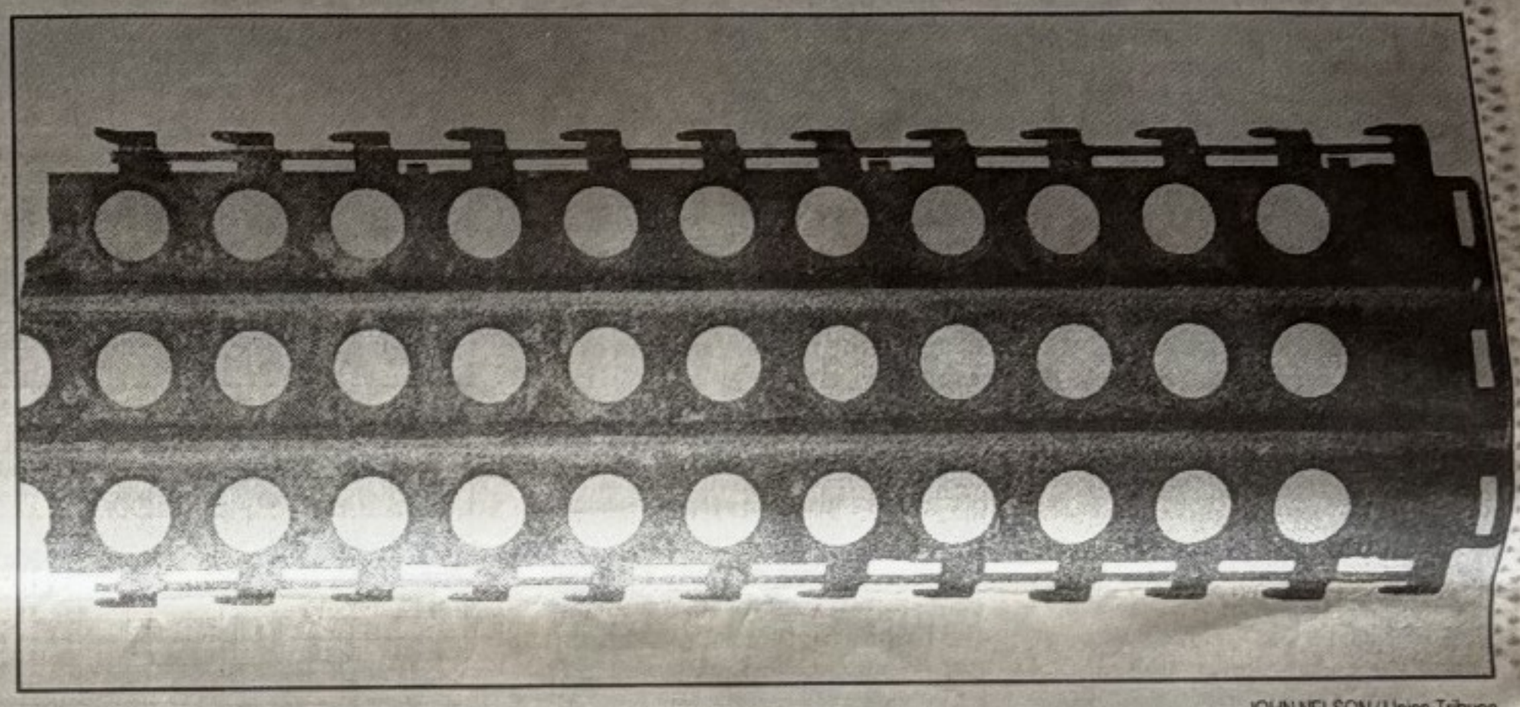
"There's a flame inside of you to celebrate your identity, your being in these complex times," he continues.

"The situation for me is really wonderful. I can comment on undocumented workers and celebrate my identity in the same breath. There is beauty in being able to do this."

DATEBOOK

"Postcolonial Califas," an installation by Armando Rascón

Through July 6. Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, 1001 Kettner Blvd. (at Broadway), downtown; and Centro Cultural de la Raza, 2004 Park Blvd., Balboa Park. $4 (Museum of Contemporary Art); free (Centro). (619) 234-1001 or (619) 235-6135.



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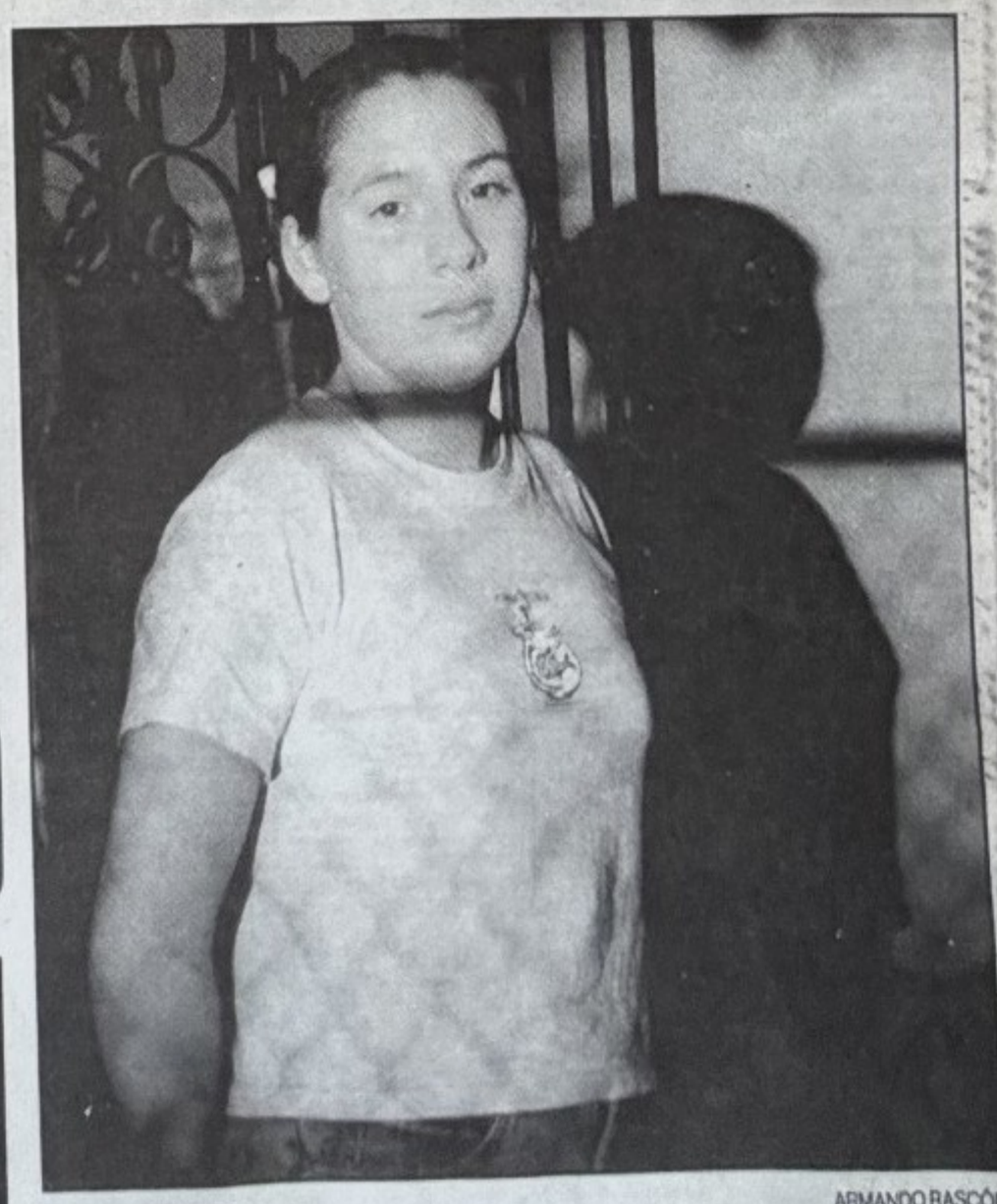
Reoccuring element: *100 images of a section of the steel fence that separates Mexico from the United States are part of Armando Rascón's "Postcolonial Califas."*



ARMANDO RASCÓN

Emblematic figure: *A detail from Armando Rascón's "Latina Postcolonial Photobureau" series.*

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