Opening history

Latino artist explores state's immigration issue

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NORTH COUNTY TIMES

Socio-political art is sometimes controversial but should always be thought-provoking. That, at least, is the aim of San Francisco artist Armando Rascon, who is staging a joint exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego's downtown location and at the Centro Cultural de la Raza in Balboa Park starting Saturday.

"Postcolonial Califas" is a multimedia installation that Rascon hopes will open hearts and minds to issues of California history, immigration and economics.

"There's a distinct system of illegality and legality, of people without citizenship," Rascon said of California. "But it's not about first-class and second-class citizens, but about human rights.

"In this country it's not open the gates when it's expedient and close the gates when it's not. That's not the case, that's not what our country signifies, what it symbolizes worldwide."

Rascon, who was born and raised in Calexico, a city on the border between Mexico and California, faces these issues personally in his life and in his art. Standing in one of the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego's galleries, looking out at the American Plaza, Kettner street and the train station, the artist points out a Latino man hurrying to catch a train.

"When I do this work, I think, 'Who am I?' I can't deny that I'm that guy. There's no 'us and them.' I'm a Latino and I can't deny that fact or how complex that is."

With "Postcolonial Califas," a Mexican-American term dating from the '30s that was used to designate California, Rascon weaves life and art together. He uses photography, paintings, slides, silk-screens and mass media, including video, digital imaging and computers. The artist has designed a Web page and a temporary tattoo with an informational 800 number (800-973-1848) that presents a view of Olmec history, the oldest culture based in the Americas, dating back to 2000 B.C.

Also included in the exhibit is a radio broadcast from Nov. 9, 1994, the day after Proposition 187, a proposal to regulate the immigrant population in California, was passed. For Rascon, it's a perfect example of the political and economic forces at work in the issue of immigration.

The broadcast includes concerned parents wondering if they should allow their children to go to school, immigration experts and advocates and the radio host engaging in a discussion. During commercial breaks from the broadcast, travel agencies, credit card companies and Sears, the show's sponsor, sell their products to a specifically targeted Latino audience.

"It's a very telling broadcast," Rascon said. "The producers of consumable goods are against (the regulation of social relations). They are not going to discriminate between citizen and noncitizen. They want to sell their products. It's a political fact."

In presenting these ideas, Rascon hopes the exhibit will bring people to an understanding of social and political trends affecting everyone in California.

"The show itself is celebratry," Rascon said. "It's creating a moment in California history, which is now, and proposing a model to work together."

The artist also hopes that institutions such as the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, and the Centro Cultural de la Raza continue to work together "as an educational component."

"There's the street and this is the stage where the action takes place," Rascon said, using his surroundings to make a point. "I want to take down the proscenium arch and break down the barriers."

Armando Rascon uses photographs, among other mediums, to express Latino history in California.

Another photo of a Latino woman is part of the 'Postcolonial Califas' exhibit.

■ "ARMANDO RASCON: POSTCOLONIAL CALIFAS"

Where: Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, 1001 Kettner at Broadway, San Diego, and Centro Cultural de la Raza, 2004 Park Blvd., Balboa Park

When: Museum hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays and noon to 5 p.m. Sundays; Centro hours are noon to 5 p.m. Thursdays through Sundays, Saturday through July 6

Tickets: Museum admission: $4, adults; $2, students, military and seniors. Donations are requested at the Centro.

Information: (619) 234-1001 (museum); (619) 235-6135 (Centro)