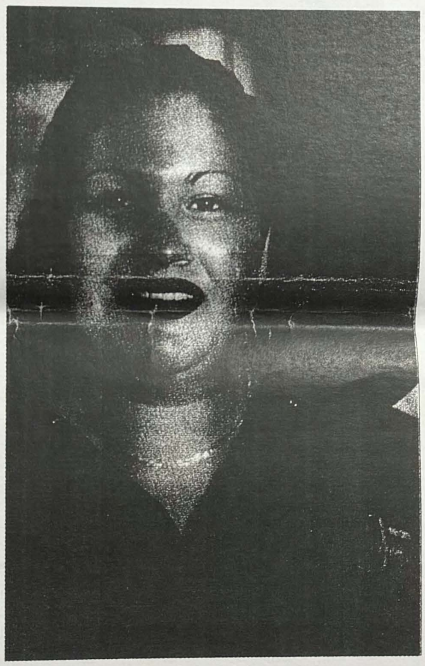
Cultural reflections

Armando Rascon's photos honor Latina leaders



SPECIAL TO THE EXPRESS-NE

A farm worker (from left), a Jiffy Lube employee and a high school student are some of the women featured in artist Armando Rascon's one-man exhibit, 'Latina Postcolonial Photobureau.'

BY DAN R. GODDARD
EXPRESS-NEWS ARTS WRITER

They are a border guard, a congresswoman, a child, a factory worker, a high school student and a farm worker. Defying stereotypes and blending cultures, they are part of California artist Armando Rascon's "Latina Postcolonial Photobureau."

Examining the effects of 1960s Chicano activism on the second and third generations of Mexican-Americans, Rascon pays homage to the female leaders who have emerged, influenced by both feminism and the traditional matriarchy of Mexican culture.

On view through Feb. 5 at the Blue Star Art Space, Rascon's one-man exhibit also features seven related installations, including one devoted to skateboarders from Jefferson High School.

"Photobureau" is an official sounding word that implies a larger organization than the lone artist. Rascon uses his images as a photographic archive, distributing them to the media to show types of Latina women rarely found in American popular culture.

"There have been many strong female figures in my life, and most of my reading about postcolonialism has been influenced by female writers," Rascon said. "I hope that Chicanas and Chicanos will find these images empowering."

At the Blue Star, he is showing 50-by-40 inch Chromogenic color prints as large as movie posters. Most of the women are informally posed, peering directly at the camera. Rascon used a 35mm camera and the grain is clearly visible in the huge enlargements. Rascon does not identify the women, preferring that they be known by occupation.

Rascon, who lives in San Francisco, took all of these images in California, though he said he has been photographing residents of San Antonio for future inclusion in his project that began in the 1980s.

One Latina, a natural blonde, is Rascon's assistant working on a mural project on the border fence between Mexico and his hometown of Calexico. The border guard proudly shows off her uniform, the farm worker hides behind a white mask, one woman glows with the last rays of the setting sun and the face of a young girl radiates innocence.

Probably the best-known woman is California Congresswoman Loretta Sanchez, who recently survived a bitter battle to continue representing an Orange County district in the House of Representatives. Her opponent, former U.S. Rep. Robert Dornan, contended that Sanchez won the 1996 election by encouraging undocumented immigrants to vote. The House ultimately decided to dismiss the challenge — which proved embarrassing to both sides.

Rascon incorporates the images from the "Photobureau" into a slide show, "Olmec Lightpiece for the 20th Century Fine de Siecle." Also, he includes images of his family and friends. Around the projection screen are two sayings in Spanish: "Andamos de Herodas a Pilatos" (We go here and there and get nowhere) and "Mas Vale Andar Solo Que Mal Acompanado" (It's better to travel alone than in bad company).

Folk sayings are an important part of "Stations of the X." In a series of still images, Rascon has written excerpts from prayers left to him by his grandmother across a photograph of a man's torso. Interspersed are parts of essays of cultural analysis by the writer Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Rascon also uses video of his mother reciting dichos such as "Camaron que duerme se lo lleva la corriente" (He who snoozes, loses).

He uses the audio to create a sound environment in "Postcolonial Califas Diction(ary)." Two tiles, painted with stereotypical 1950s images of a sleeping Mexican man wearing a sombrero and a Mexican peasant woman, are contrasted with a recording Rascon made during a holiday family reunion.

"My aim is to take a moment out of the everyday and celebrate it," Rascon said. "The work is intended to create a lexicon of populist sayings that are passed from

■ See UNDERLYING/13H

'Latina Postcolonial Photobureau'

■ Where: Blue Star Art Space, 116 Blue Star, 227-6960
■ When: Through Feb. 5

Underlying social message found in Armando Rascon's installations

■ Continued from 7H

generation to generation throughout cultures located on the U.S./Mexico broder from Corpus Christi to San Diego."

"Santa Fe" is his most successful installation. A video projection of sunlight glinting off water is contrasted with a straw hat that appears to be floating. On the floor are plastic containers filled with holy water Rascon made during a performance that is also part of the video. While "Santa Fe" has come to connote a type of lifestyle associated with the New Mexico city, Rascon attempts to restore the original meaning, "Holy Faith," to the Spanish words.

In "Free Radio Aztlan," a low-wattage transmitter in a bird cage broadcasts to a pair of speakers contained in the basket of an old, rusty bicycle. On the day after California passed Proposition 187, which restricted social services for undocumented immigrants, Rascon recorded Bay Area talk radio programs as the hosts tried to reassure people by informing them of their rights and what actions to take.

"A lot of people kept their children home from school because they were afraid they would be rounded up as illegal aliens," Rascon said. "The talk shows really provided a social service by calming people down."

His tribute to skateboarders, "Karma Bo(A)rder" resembles a trade show exhibit, with mannequins wearing skateboard fashions and boards decorated with black space alien heads. Rascon also made a video of the Jefferson students attempting to skate on the waxed floors of the Blue Star.

"There's a whole subculture of skateboarding that is Hispanic, Asian, black and Anglo. It's not determined by race. It's just that all these people are united by their interest in skateboarding," Rascon said. "It's become an empowering thing because you have 22-year-old kids who own their own skateboarding companies. I tell the kids they can do it, too."

Cool and sleek, Rascon's installations combine a minimalist aesthetic with an underlying social message. But he tries to show that the blending of Mexican and American cultures has gone beyond the purely political aims of the Chicano movement to encompass broad social and cultural issues. In the "postcolonial" era, "new cultural and political parameters were drawn that have ultimately spawned a new social order."