

Artist Interview

by Lisa Boosin

Artwork has never been a source of comfort for Abel Alejandro. “When I was ten, my father threatened to break my hands if he caught me making another drawing,” the Long Beach-based painter recalls. And the way he reckons, art shouldn’t be a comfortable experience for the viewer, either.

Conflict and discomfort have been constants through much of the Mexican-born artist’s life. Starting at the age of four, Alejandro labored in the cotton fields of Michoacan, Mexico to help support his family. “Earning a living took priority above any other desires or aspirations,” he said, referring to his ambitions to educate himself and create art. As a teenager, these ambitions earned him a five-month stint on the streets of Los Angeles— penniless and with no more than the clothes on his body—after his father chased him from the house with a hammer.

Alejandro’s adult years in the United States have been dotted with similar angst. As a first-generation immigrant, he’s encountered plenty of prejudice and bigotry, including in his life as an artist. “As a Mexican-American? I was always expected to paint pictures of the Virgin Guadalupe, bullfights, and sombrero-wearing rancheros,” he remarks. Alejandro defies these expectations by crafting images that mirror the tension, compromise, and struggle that have filled his 34 years. It’s no wonder Alejandro needs to work on a large scale to cram it all in.

The majority of pieces in Alejandro’s body of work, including oil, multi-media, and installation, tend towards the physically imposing and substantial. The pieces that comprise his opaquely titled series II, III, and IV, are 42” X 81” in size; when displayed, the work is hung high, by design, “to be intrusive and confrontational... I am absolutely trying to intimidate my audience,” he remarks.

Though often likened to better-known Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, Alejandro is stylistically closer to David Alfaro Siqueiros, the Mexican social realist and would-be revolutionary who is perhaps better known for his participation in the attempted assassination of Trotsky than for his murals. Alejandro’s work has a similar fullness to that of Siqueiros: a feel of being voluminous, textured, and spatially rich.

Like Siqueiros, Alejandro presents the political, couched in the concerns of the working class and gritty masses; that which isn’t strictly political in nature examines substantial themes like isolation, family versus community, prejudice, and communication and disinformation in the cyber era. Alejandro works in the stark black and white that is not particularly favored by his contemporaries. “It is out of vogue, but there is something about it. It’s immediate, but what’s more is that when you ‘put something in black and white,’ it’s supposed to be true.” The fact that newsprint is a strong metaphor for unquestioned, unexamined Truth is why many of his paintings incorporate newsprint as texture—and as a method to manipulate the viewer.

He is gearing up for his largest and most politically and artistically ambitious work to date: a one-hundred foot mural that spans two countries and countless ideologies. The project, “Convergence: Portable Labor and Convenience,” was born of the intent to capture distinct yet resonant voices on both sides of the border on an invisible yet Leviathan force in Southern California and Mexico: migrant workers. Alejandro hopes the project will literally paint a multidimensional portrait of the relationship between migrant workers and border towns, the communities they abandon, and the communities to which they flee—a relationship that is by turns, symbiotic, parasitic, and exploitative. Implicit to the project is the notion of devaluation of culture and individuals in deference to a global economy, which gives way to resentment and cultural hegemony.

For this project, Alejandro is bringing together 20 artists—ten working in Southern California, ten working in Mexico—along with filmmakers, writers, and assorted documentarians to record the event. The project is equal parts installation, happening, and political event, with the results culminating in the display of the finished piece March 21 of this year.

When completed, the two sections of canvas will be conjoined on the US/Mexico border at Mexicali. For probably only a few hours. The captive audience will largely be comprised of border traffic, those souls stuck in an interminable, crawling limbo between the two countries. Part of Alejandro's agenda is to stroll amongst the stopped autos, soliciting opinions and thoughts on the work-a first-hand, forced reckoning with the message—about as intrusive as an art experience can get.

To be sure, there are elements of the guerilla and the subversive inherent to the project; yet despite the intellectual riskiness, Alejandro is getting much support on the south side of the border from sources that include the Center of Cultural Affairs in Mexicali, a public university, and many private donors.

Ironically but perhaps not surprisingly, the reaction has been considerably more tepid on this side of the border. Besides having support and sponsorship arbitrarily yanked, Alejandro has had to contend with ambivalence and ennui from members of the artistic community in Southern California.

He speculates the dismissive reactions are steeped in the notion that uniting artists for a mural isn't something cutting-edge or new: just two years ago, the Eye-Speak collaborative brought together minority artists in Los Angeles to record their impressions of the first year of the new millennium.

Alejandro doesn't really care if "Convergence" forges a new path or garners praise among his peers. He admits that the concept of artists sharing a physically contiguous canvas—even a huge, border spanning one—is not revolutionary, but bringing together people for the advancement of a common good is just something that doesn't happen enough," he says.

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