

The Arts

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Two for the show: Local artists shine in New York

By Robert L. Pincus
ART CRITIC

NEW YORK — A version of the Mexican flag, installed inside the Whitney Museum of American Art, is also visible from Madison Avenue. People may wonder why and if they know the flag's iconography well, their level of curiosity will likely rise.

Artist Marcos Ramirez has subtly altered that flag. In his version, dubbed "Democracy," the snake is rising up to bite the eagle.

The 39-year-old artist, who works in both San Diego and Tijuana, is one of two locals — the other is Roman de Salvo, 34 — in what is arguably the highest profile sampler of contemporary American art: the Whitney Biennial.

On view through June 4, the show, which features 97 artists, has an eventful history. Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney initiated it in 1932 and it has been annual and a biennial at differ-

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EDUARDO CONTRERAS / Union-Tribune

Artist at work: Marcos "ERRE" Ramirez — who constructed a small-scale version of the monumental "Toy an Horse" that was displayed at the San Ysidro border crossing during inSITE97 — has two works in the high-profile 2000 Biennial Exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Artists

Neither ever expected to be in the biennial

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ent moments during its long life. This year's version, which takes up nearly all of the museum and its exterior, is the 70th.

Ramirez's second contribution takes a cue from a classic American picture of the late '50s in the Whitney's possession: Jasper Johns' "Three Flags" (1958). Instead of committing the American flag to canvas, the sculptor uses a section of the fence dividing Tijuana from San Diego. He has cut a portion of it to resemble the stars and colored the rest, on one side, to mimic stripes. The painted side faces a little bricked-in triangle of soil meant to evoke Mexico. On the other side is an equal size plot of walled-in dirt that represents the United States.

"If the critics like the work, that's good, of course," says Ramirez, over breakfast near the Whitney, "but if they don't, that's OK. I have a standard of quality that is my own."

Visitors will also be hard-pressed to avoid works by the other San Diego artist, de Salvo. The artist's set of seven clocks hovers in the lobby, high above the reception desk. "TIC (Time in Cities) Headquarters" has the name of a large city (New York, London, et cetera) below each rectangular timepiece, just as you might find in a corporate headquarters or metropolitan newsroom. But instead of marking time in far-flung metropolises de Salvo's make you grin: Each comes equipped with a long second hand only.

His other project is a serving dish for an entree at the museum's restaurant. "Face Time" resembles a laptop computer, though the bottom portion is a serving dish and the upper section a mirror.

"There is a certain momentousness about the occasion," observes Salvo, during an interview in New York, "the momentousness of being in New York, in a biennial, at a millennial moment."

It's become an art-world ritual to second-guess the curators at any Whitney biennial, bemoan its inability to represent the gamut of American artists and, in some years, to savage the results. However, as much as it's disparaged, the biennial is always popular with the public, heavily covered by critics, and is perennially a destination for art world professionals from across the United States and beyond.

As de Salvo aptly put it, "Anything that claims so much for itself is bound to be picked on."

Defying the odds

Neither Ramirez nor de Salvo ever expected to be in the Whitney Biennial. Perhaps no artist does. But time has proven that living outside New York decreases anyone's odds dramatically.

For the first time in the show's history, however, outside curators did the choosing. This proved fortuitous for both Ramirez and de Salvo, since one of the people that new Whitney director Maxwell Anderson turned to was the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, Hugh Davies.

No one curator among the group could get an artist into the 2000 biennial. (There was an elaborate voting process.) But to everyone ex-

cept Davies, they were unknowns. As he explains the process, Davies introduced them to the others and the high quality of the art did the rest.

"No one was a regional advocate," Davies emphasizes. Still, he can't hide his joy at both artists having made the cut.

"I'm enormously proud that we have two young artists representing our region," Davies declares. "I consider it a bonus that one artist literally has a foot in Tijuana and a foot in San Diego. Marcos is a bicultural guy, which is a harbinger of things to come in our region and our country."

Switching focus to de Salvo, Davies adds, "When they (the other curators) first saw Roman's work, they flipped. Frankly, everyone was excited to discover a talented new artist."

Wit and commentary

Both artists seem a touch overwhelmed with the idea of being in the biennial.

"I never saw (a biennial)," says de Salvo, "but of course I know it was a big deal to be in one. It's one of the big three biennials: Sao Paulo, Venice and the Whitney. One person told me it's a bit like the Oscars for artists."

Although his art can seem, at first, like witty one-liners in the Duchampian mold, it is much more than that. His is the work of an inventive tinkerer, performing unexpected twists with ordinary materials and creating subtle social commentary along the way.

His clocks speak to our obsession with the globe as a marketplace and the notion of time as money. De Sal-

vo's timepieces tick along happily, while supplying no information about time. His trays speak to the way identity is intimately tied — perhaps narcissistically tied — to our technological devices. Face time, a digital-age phrase for time spent with real, live human beings, is replaced by time with one's self in "Face Time."

"My thinking, in many cases, is anthropological," says de Salvo. "I try to look at how technology transforms lifestyles, in ways we like and don't like."

"Ideally, public art would be a good arena, because I would like to invigorate daily life and everyday places, but its mechanics are too cumbersome."

De Salvo favors museums over galleries because they have niches where people might not expect to find art. At the Whitney, the lobby and the restaurant fit his bill.

"This is something that worked in my favor," de Salvo says of the biennial, "since I was not competing for gallery space. I have good feelings about these two projects. Whatever happens, I feel that I did my best. I have no anxieties."

Ramirez — who also goes by "ERRE," the Spanish pronunciation of the letter "r" — smiles broadly when asked about his inclusion in the biennial.

"I thought it was impossible for me to get in, because it was only for American artists, strictly defined."

Getting into the show is something he likens to "the Santa Claus effect." "I came in through the chimney rather than the front door."

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Duo in spotlight
at Whitney Biennial

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Turning to the included works, he cites Johns as having the "guts" to turn the American flag into a painting, "to take it off its pedestal and bring it down to eye level." Ramirez's "Stripes and Fence Forever (Homage to Jasper Johns)" grew out of his thinking about the artist's flag paintings. He turns the American icon into object, meditating on how the creation of a fence between Mexico and the United States tarnishes the Stars and Stripes.

"I feel that a nation whose economy benefits so much from the work of Mexicans should start giving back," says Ramirez, "and help the Mexican economy. I also raise the question of who is an American; we all live in the Americas."

Of his take on the Mexican flag — installed high on the walls of the Whitney so it can be seen from the street, Ramirez says: "It's my proposition for a new flag. If this piece was exhibited in Mexico, that could mean jail time. I can only exhibit it in the United States."

The piece is critical of the state of Mexican society. The snake becomes Ramirez's metaphor for the populace, which he believes must wrest control of the country from politicians, if Mexico is ever going to achieve any measure of democracy.

The artists' backgrounds are a study in contrast. Ramirez, a native of Tijuana, trained to be an attorney at the Universidad Autonoma de Baja California. He gave up that profes-



DEBBI MORELLO / Union-Tribune

Thin as a second: Artist Roman de Salvo holds a nearly invisible, long, thin second hand like the ones he used in his clocks for the Whitney show.

sion and largely taught himself the skills he needed to become a sculptor. De Salvo, who grew up in Reno, came through highly regarded American art schools, earning a master's of fine arts six years ago at UCSD.

But the artists' commitment to the region connects them. So does the abundant recognition each has achieved close to home.

Both artists were in the invitation- al exhibition that encompassed sites in San Diego and Tijuana, inSITE94.

Ramirez made an impressive return in inSITE97 and last year he had a solo exhibition at the downtown space of the Museum of Contemporary Art. His outdoor work for that most recent show — a giant steel heart in camouflage pattern titled "Acorazado" — remains on view outside the museum. Currently, works by de Salvo are featured in "Off Broadway: New Art From Downtown San Diego" at the same

location.

The Whitney isn't the only place, outside San Diego, at which each will be exhibiting in the coming months. Ramirez will have a solo exhibition at Los Angeles' Iturralde Gallery in May. De Salvo is prepar-

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ing a project for a museum in Giverny, France.

Ramirez, who is intimately tied to the Tijuana milieu, declares, "I like the energy of Tijuana. I tell other artists it's an advantage. We need to take the negative image of the city and make something positive of it. Only culture that do that."

"You can get your work out into the world. It is shrinking because of the net and other media, even as those media widen our world."

"Also, I don't want a nomadic life. I want my kids to grow up here. My father is here. Family is important to me."

De Salvo — who lives in the Golden Hill area with his wife, Diana — says: "I never figured I would stay in San Diego after grad school. But I got into inSITE94, Mark Quint gave me a (gallery) show and I was picked by the Museum of Contemporary Art for 'Common Ground' (in 1995).

"I started to get support in the community and I value the kind of community I became part of in San Diego. I see no reason to throw it away."