# **OUTSIDE THE LINES** [Transcending borders, vibrant Tijuana artists head for creative frontiers]



"Dejalos en paz" reflects the intensity and dramatic imagery that characterize Mely Barragán's mixed-media paintings.

One in an occasional series on Tijuana's rising arts scene.

### By Robert L. Pincus ART CRITIC

something good is afoot among the artists of Tijuana — and the dynamic effect is reverberating along both sides of the border.

"Tijuana art is exciting, vibrant and young right now," says Betti-Sue Hertz, curator of contemporary art at the San Diego Museum of Art. "There's an identifiable group of artists under 30. They have a sensitivity to aesthetics and a social awareness, and they're putting the two together."

Judging by recent and upcoming shows, Hertz is only one of many curators plugged in to this surge of energy and ingenuity. The creations of Torolab, a freewheeling collaborative of Tijuana artists, architects and designers curated by Toby Kamps, recently filled the floor and walls of the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego. And the Luckman Gallery at California State University, Los Angeles just featured nine of Tijuana's more impressive emerging artists in a show called "PinturaFresca" ("Fresh Paint").

Next year, a spectrum of Tijuana artists will be in two downtown San Diego venues: Petar Perisic and Ken Miracle have co-curated a show that will open in January at the Flux Gal-



Daniel Ruanova's elaborate "Implosion de un cuartito" typifies his labor-intensive approach to the craft of painting.

lery and the new COVA Gallery.

These young artists — now making their presence known in solo exhibitions at Tijuana's Cultural Center (also known as CECUT) and other local spaces — are producing photographs, paintings and installations that display vitality and originality. There's a can-do spirit that seems to mirror the improvised nature of the city itself.

# Local artists are being showcased as never before

"Like Swift's floating sky-city of Laputa in 'Gulliver's Travels,' Tijuana seems to defy the ordinary laws of gravity," writes popular urban theorist Mike Davis in his book "Magical Urbanism." "With an estimated 1.3 million inhabitants (1999), it is now larger than its rich twin, San Diego, as well as San Francisco, Portland and Seattle. Yet its formal economy and public budget are barely sufficient for a city one-third its size."

"The city is growing into its adolescence — we are building its character now," says Cárdenas Osuna, the galvanizing force behind "Torolab: Laboratorio of the Future in the Present," which was the group's debut in an American museum. "We're living a real frontier life."

There is no commercial-gallery scene for the city's serious artists, yet they survive and create, acting as their own promoters. CECUT has been mounting solo exhibitions of their work with great regularity in the last couple of years.

For Davis, "La mona," the giant nude by Armando Muñoz that doubles as a building, is a symbol of that can-do spirit. Only in a frontier city — one that is creating its wide-open future — could such a thing get built. In most towns, building permits and zoning regulations would have undermined its construction. And not content to coast on that achievement, Muñoz has another body-building in progress: a mermaid, along the main highway in Rosarita.

This freewheeling atmosphere also serves as a catalyst for other artists, like Muñoz, whose art ranges far afield from their training.

Daniel Ruanova, whose solo exhibition appeared at CECUT in September, is a self-made artist. Although trained in graphic design, the 25-year-old is wholly immersed in the craft of painting. So much so, in fact, that he is making artwork in which touch matters as much as image — in which touching the painting is actually encouraged.

After the piece is done, he scrapes away the image and transforms the removed paint into a kind of wall sculpture. "Childrens Shootout" refers more to the original look of the piece, though the commentary about violence in video games takes shapes in the object alongside it: thick blocks of paint that form the shape of a rifle.

In July, another Tijuana artist in her 20s, Tania Candiani, assembled a provocative show about women, obesity and the contemporary obsession with thinness. As part of that exhibition, she constructed a small, pink room in which a refrigerator, suspended above the floor, seemed like an altar. The furniture consisted of such pieces as a fat chair with nipples and a coffee table with a support structure fashioned from doll parts.

Another artist trained in the graphic arts is Mely Barragán, 25, and her paintings carry traces of that education in their self-assured line and design. The images, full of faces with searching eyes and an assortment of resonant symbols, push beyond style and design. They are passionate, searching pictures that manage to create a bridge between her history and her life - and ours. (Interestingly, Barragán, who is engaged to Ruanova, seems to bridge the border, since many of her collectors are from the United States.)

Like Barragán, Candiani is part of an artistic couple. Her husband, Julio Orozco, 34, works in several photographic media, including videos and sepia-toned photographs concerned with aged, abandoned Tijuana movie houses.

# Life with forefathers

Those artists and others of promise — including Jaime Ruiz Otis, who makes sculptures from materials he salvages from the waste of maquiladora plants — may seem to have spontaneously ignited the Tijuana scene. But their emergence isn't that simply explained.

Painter and sculptor Benjamin Serrano, who died in 1988 at age 49, was enthusiastically collected in San Diego. He lent credibility to the notion of a Tijuana art scene. So did the late Felipe Almada, a Tijuana native, assemblagist and painter who

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Marcos Ramírez's reputation grew in the '90s with such inSITE artworks as "Toy an Horse," his two-headed equine metaphor for the border region's sociocultural traffic. 1997 file photo

studied abroad, showed regularly in Mexico City and provided studio space, a gallery and moral support to such now-established artists as Hugo Sánchez. (Almada died in 1993.)

The accomplished veteran painter Alvaro Blancarte, who divides his time between Tijuana and Tecate, has been a mentor, formal and informal, to many of Tijuana's younger artists — a point many are quick to acknowledge. Such painters as Ruanova and Barragán cite his unwavering belief in Tijuana as a future art center, and his encouragement is pivotal to their careers as artists.

The triennial exhibition in-SITE — a cooperative project between organizations in San Diego and Mexico — has brought artists to Tijuana from far-flung locales, and has been a catalyst for the increasing cosmopolitanism of the city's art.

The homegrown success story of these exhibitions is Marcos Ramirez (also called "ERRE"), who made his debut seven years ago with a deeply affecting, satirical installation for inSITE94. Wryly titled "Century 21," it was an exacting amalgam of the makeshift houses that fill the poor colonias of Tijuana. But this domicile, sitting on the plaza of the CECUT, brought a gritty sign of life to the site of culture.

For inSITE97, he was even sharper, constructing a large, two-headed horse visible from car windows on the Mexican side of the San Ysidro border crossing. Could there have been a better metaphor for how influences and paranoia travel in both directions at the San Diego-Tijuana border than "Toy an Horse"?

The new art being made in Tijuana transcends political borders by virtue of its intelligence and abundant vibrancy. Although rooted in their city, the artists' outlook is global (some were educated both in the United States and Mexico). And Ramirez, 40, who has also spent time in San Diego, was the first Tijuana native to be selected for last year's prestigious biennial at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art.

Amid widespread concerns about international travel and delays at the U.S.-Mexico border, the growth of a U.S. audience for Tijuana art may also be slowed. But the promise of Tijuana's emerging artists seems sure to transcend these social barriers of our moment.

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Tania Candiani, whose recent show included a striking pink room and body-inspired furniture, is among Tijuana's vital young artists. Peggy Peattie / Union-Tribune