

## René H. Arceo

b. 1959, Coxumatlán, Michoacán, Mexico



"Human, social, and sometimes political commentaries are the common themes addressed in my prints. I feel that as a member of a given society the artist should, in a nondogmatic fashion, artistically react or respond to social and/or political accounts and events taking place in our world today. This wouldn't be in place of, but rather in addition to, expressing other universal concerns and feelings and artistic explorations.

"My feeling is that artists must reflect, in lesser or larger commitments, their own time and place."

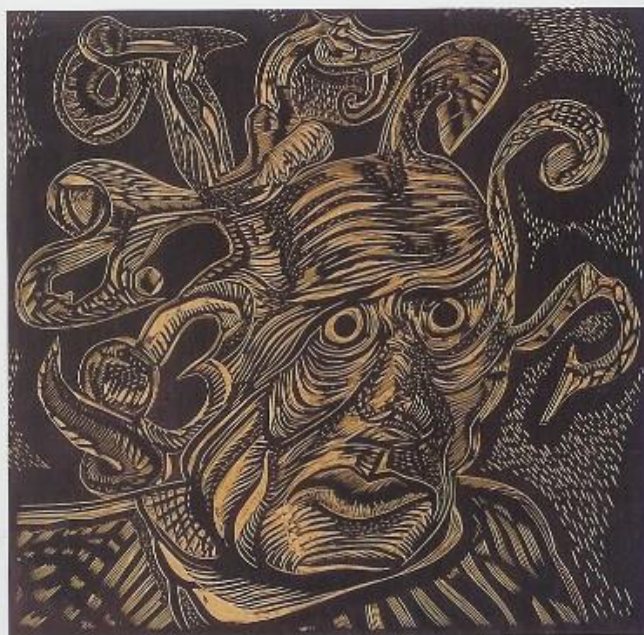
*René H. Arceo*

**B**orn and raised in Mexico, René Arceo relocated to Chicago in 1979 to study at the School of the Art Institute. There he received his B.F.A. in 1985, along with a teaching certificate. Exhibition of his works began in 1984, and, to facilitate such activities for himself and his fellow artists, he cofounded Galeria Ink Works, the first alternative art gallery in the Pilsen area. From early in his career Arceo was drawn to printmaking; he cites such artists as Alfredo Zalce, Alberto Beltrán, and Leopoldo Méndez among his influences (along with muralists Jorge González Camarena, Fernando Leal, and Xavier Guerrero). This specialization led him to cofound the Mexican Printmaking Workshop, the only Mexican printmaking collective in the Midwest. He began to teach art immediately upon graduation, joining the staff of the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum in Chicago in 1986.

"In most cases," Arceo observed in 2000, "my works evolve as a product of a spontaneous act, the act of drawing lines on a surface, [lines] which evolve into shapes and forms defined in the spontaneous process of creating them. That is, most often while creating art, I do not begin with a specific idea or concept I want to address. Rather, it evolves out of the markings made spontaneously."

*Local Artists in Purgatory* pays homage to *retablo* painting. Arceo's commentary on sin and responsibility merges contemporary events and people with traditional religious elements from Mexican culture. The linocut print is divided into three distinct areas. At the bottom, artists Marcos Raya, Alejandro Romero, Carlos A. Cortés, Mario E. Castillo, Héctor Duarte, and others appear in purgatory, atoning for their sins. They stand solemnly in rows between the flames, some hands clasped in prayer. The orb in the sky above is dark, and the sweeping diagonal lines add movement and a sense of quiet drama to the scene.

A large figure on a cross draws attention to the central area of the print. Rather than the Savior of traditional *retablo* paintings, the figure represents the indigenous people lost over the centuries to the encroachment of Western values and greed. At the top of the print, architectural landmarks from Arceo's adopted city of Chicago are built on the crossbeam of the crucifix. The cross warps under the weight of the twisting build-



*Chaos at the End of the Millennium*, 1995, linocut print, 12" x 12"

ings, symbols of Western "progress" constructed figuratively on the backs of the poor. Swirling lines emanate from the sun and suggest the bluster of the Windy City. They convey a sense of intensity or chaos that makes the darkness of purgatory seem quite peaceful in comparison. The artist's masterful use of line becomes an expressive element that also successfully unites the diverse elements in this image.

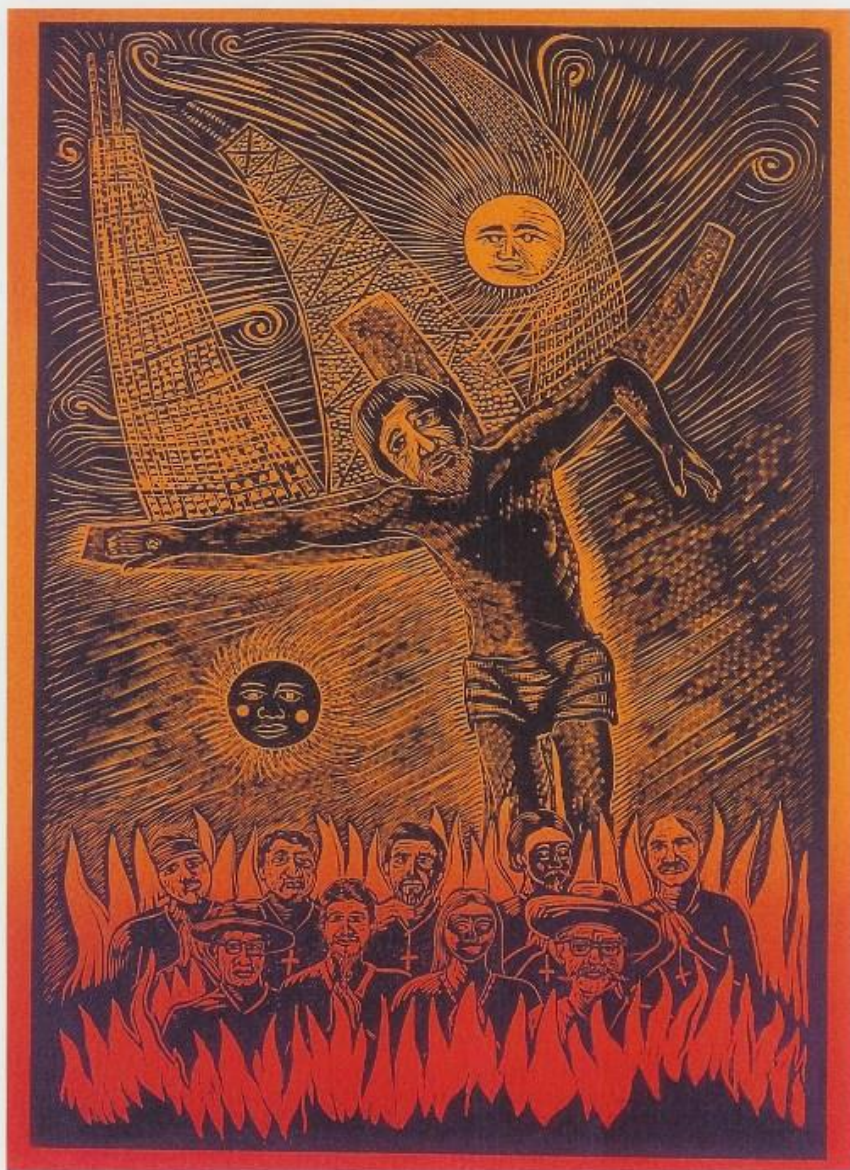
Arceo interprets the worldwide turmoil during the last decades of the twentieth century in *Chaos at the End of the Millennium*. In particular, the artist is concerned with the suffering caused by the civil and ethnic wars in Latin America, Europe, and Africa. Arceo sees deep contradictions in the choices leaders have made: "The planet yields enough food to feed the world population yet nations in Africa are starving to death. Big budgets are allocated for war and invasions while very little goes to solve issues of education, literacy, homeless[ness], and hunger in 'the richest country in the world.'"



The artist represents the political struggles as tentacles rising from the head of this hapless figure, evoking the mythological goddess Medusa and her head of snakes. In this case, the elements are ambiguous but frightening as they swirl ominously around the figure, suggesting war, poverty, and the uncertainty of the future. The figure looks battle worn, with stunned eyes and deep lines revealing the wrinkles or bare musculature of his face. He becomes the victim, bewildered at his inability to control something that is so much a part of himself. A dark "halo" surrounding his jumbled head draws attention to the intricate detail in the snakelike elements. The background pattern further directs the viewer's attention, while the artist's varied use of line intensifies the sense of chaos and distress in this dynamic work.

Arceo's initial association with the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum evolved over the years as he assumed greater responsibilities. Between 1996 and 1999 he was Special Projects Director, a capacity in which he organized short- and long-range video and publishing projects, directed performing-arts collaborations with partner institutions, and organized a binational art and culture conference, among other activities. At this writing he is the citywide visual arts coordinator for the Chicago public schools. His solo exhibitions have included *Graphic Works* (El Rebozo, Oak Park, IL, 1990), *René H. Arceo: Obra Reciente* (Palace of Culture, Tlaxcala, Mexico, 1992), *René Arceo: Recent Works* (Randall Shapiro Art Gallery, Oak Park, 1995), *Parangaricutirimicuaru Y2K* (Jumping Bean Café, Pilsen/Chicago, 1999), *René Arceo: Retrospective* (La Llorona Gallery, Chicago, 2001), and *Los Hilos del Alma* (Expressions Graphics, Oak Park, 2001). In addition, his work has been seen in more than three dozen group exhibitions, among them *11th International Festival of La Raza* (Tijuana, Mexico, 1995), *Día de los Muertos* (Oak Park Art League, Oak Park, 1996), *Dix Linogravures sur la Paix* (Galerie du Conseil Québécois de l'Estampe, Canada, 1997), *La Lotería* (Casa de Los Tres Mundos, Granada, Nicaragua, 1998), and *Alas de Papel* (Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Mexico City, 2001), as well as the traveling exhibition *The Peace Portfolio* (1997). His works are included in such public collections as those of Purdue University Galleries, Lafayette, IN; the Laumeier Sculpture Park in St. Louis, MO; the Autonomous University of Tlaxcala, Mexico; and the National Museum of Print, Mexico City, as well as private collections in Mexico and the United States.

(PV)



*Local Artists in Purgatory*, 1996, linocut print, 17.5" x 12"

#### Reviews and Commentaries

"Arceo is foremost a printmaker. He uses direct application methods like linoleum and wood blocks. The images are roughly carved, giving them the look of folk art, easily recognizable as within Mexican tradition. His figures, too, are familiar ones: withered, round-eyed old women in traditional woven clothes, straw-hatted field workers, and party revelers for a Day of the Dead celebration. The traditional subjects, though, are planted in an obscure world, amid swirling currents and abstract backdrops. They drift in a world that no longer connects to them. Technology and urbanization are Arceo's two prime villains, stealing traditional culture from the artist's kin. . . . Hispanic culture survives for Arceo's subjects, in memory. Their distant stares look out on an encroaching, unidentifiable world."

Ted C. Fishman, *New City/South Loop*, 7 December 1989, p. 8

# Contemporary Chicana and Chicano Art

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*Principal Authors*

**Gary D. Keller  
Mary Erickson  
Kaytie Johnson  
Joaquín Alvarado**

*Contributors*

Arturo J. Aldama  
Pat Villeneuve  
Henry Quintero  
Gema Ledesma

*Photographers*

Craig Smith  
Marilyn Szabo

Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingüe  
TEMPE, ARIZONA