

Root of Time: The Print of René H. Arceo

Themes reflecting social issues are frequently portrayed in Mexican printmaking and are current artistic *sui generis*. Printmaking differs from other artistic expressions which are often confined to limited socio-economic circles. Since the beginning of the 20th Century printmaking has become part of public life like a decisive epigram, expressing sharp social commentary and a synthesis of the ancestral Mexican iconographic force.

It is the artistic vigor of this genre that has enabled it to last beyond the journalistic immediacy. Let us remember the prints of José Guadalupe Posada published during the Mexican Revolution of 1910. These prints were harsh political and social commentaries which, even today, remain timeless works of art.

The prints presented in this exhibition by René Arceo have a dual social-aesthetic perspective where several currents converge. First, the viewer makes a connection between Arceo's work with the combative Mexican prints from the beginning of the 20th Century, like those of José Guadalupe Posada and Leopoldo Méndez. Second, the post-revolutionary artistic discourse of the muralists –mainly of the three great Mexican muralists: Rivera, Siqueiros and Orozco. And third, the artistic European styles that have nourished his artwork are evident.

Just as in the above-mentioned artistic tendencies, his works synthesize, in full dynamic compositions, narratives that resolve within themselves—at times telluric, at times controlled. They are social and cultural commentaries which transmit a sense of urgency while at the same time elaborate artistic creations that ask for the attention of the spectator.

It is not without cost that his work is impregnated with social themes; the history of Latino immigration to the United States is a continuous struggle for justice and respect. Frequently, the political reality stands firm in front of us and grabs us by our lapels, even when we may not want to see it.

Nevertheless, it is not mere didacticism that breathes within his prints, rather the iconic force of these images ask us to look at a slow pace to reveal its lyrical current within its many layers.

The “*Muchacha con rebozo*” that directs an intense look at us; the woman in “*Meditación*” that rests and retreats into an interior world; and

the indigenous “*Tarahumara*” that shows his knotty hands between the nervous flow of lines on his clothes are all figures with concentrated expressions that appear over a flat background, deprived of the elements. The emptiness from which the “Lacandon Boy” sees us accentuates his figure and echoes the precarious conditions in which the indigenous farm-workers live in Mexico and South America.

In other prints, on the other hand, forms mutate and cohabitate in space at the mercy of an astute handling of the line, generating intricate constructions, rich depths of details that evolve into new figures, expanding curves that form human profiles, animal and vegetable forms, and discernable objects. The musicality and the playful sense that those lines transmit, the impression of almost instinctive looseness in “Spiritual Dance” and “Central America” contrast with the gravity of “Guatemalan Women” and the indignant rage of “*Madre con rebozo*.”

It is impossible to avoid the underlying presence of pre-Hispanic elements in the shape of masks or sculptures (the parallel faces in “Bolivian Woman”), the omnipotent Mexican skeletons that Posada immortalized, and the Aztec glyphs in the splendid “*Alacran*.” The rich artistic tradition of the codex and low-reliefs sculpted in stone by the ancient settlers of our American continent are a fountain from which Arceo has known how to successfully soak without folkloric theatricality.

This show of prints testifies to the vigor of this genre among Latino visual artists in the United States. These artists are continually exploring their cultural roots while immersing themselves in the agitation of the present day. Arceo’s work, in particular, stands out not only due to his assimilation and knowledge of the printmaking tradition, but also because of his fresh and creative approach in how he creates his own language.

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