This publication accompanies the exhibition *Claiming Space: Mexican Americans in U.S. Cities* which was organized by the Stanlee and Gerald Rubin Center for the Visual Arts at The University of Texas at El Paso, September 4—December 13, 2008.

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OPPOSITE: Julio César Morales, *Informal Economy Vendor #2*, analog and digital media rendered with vinyl, 258" x 192", 2007.

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CLAIMING SPACE:
MEXICAN AMERICANS IN U.S. CITIES

Contents

An Introduction to *Claiming Space* 6
Kate Bonansinga

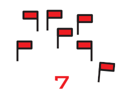
Imagining World Cities 9
Víctor Manuel Espinosa

Claiming Space, Claiming Identities: The Artists Speak 20
Mónica Ramírez-Montagut

Artists' biographies 34

Exhibition checklist 36

Noah MacDonald/Keep Adding, *Stare Well*, house and spray paint, dimensions variable, 2008.



Installalation view of *Claiming Space*, Stanlee and Gerald Rubin Center for the Visual Arts, 2008.

An Introduction to Claiming Space

Claiming Space: Mexican Americans in U.S. Cities showcases the art of a new generation of artists of Mexican descent who are responding to a globalized world, where technology and urban life dominate. It bridges two of the curatorial strengths of the Stanlee and Gerald Rubin Center for the Visual Arts (Rubin Center) at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP). First, it is a small-group exhibition where each of the artists explores a similar idea, in this case, how personal identity connects to urban space. Second, the artwork is custom-made for UTEP because it responds to the cityscape of El Paso, the Chihuahuan Desert and/or the U.S./Mexico border.

My co-curator, Mónica Ramírez-Montagut, and I first envisioned *Claiming Space: Mexican Americans in U.S. Cities* during summer 2005 when we were fellows at the Smithsonian Institute for the Interpretation and Representation of Latino Cultures (SIIRLC). We were interested in researching Latina and Latino artists who apply sophisticated technologies to create concept-driven and abstract art.

We found many artists, and invited five of Mexican descent, a focus that the Rubin Center at UTEP is uniquely qualified to explore due to its location on the U.S./Mexico border and to its sophisticated population of students, 80% of whom are Mexican or Mexican American. Most of them hail from the El Paso/Juarez metroplex, one of the largest bi-national urban environments in the world. Mexicans are the largest immigrant group in the U.S., and the artists in this exhibition reflect concerns of immigrant artists from many countries and in many places who mark, map, represent or interact with the places and people of their local landscape. Thus, the implications of the show are larger than its subject.

Ramirez-Montagut describes herself as "born in Mexico, architect and curator, with an experience of Latino culture that has little to do with folklore and much more to do with a perceptible attitude of survival, adaptation and achievement." This is also true of the five artists exhibited here. All are internationally known and create architectural-scale paintings or sculpture that respond in untraditional aesthetics to the generalized urban environment, either its buildings

or its neglected spaces. Two of them, immigrants themselves (Vargas-Suárez UNIVERSAL and Julio César Morales), read the urban environment as a static structure that comes to life through the spontaneity of migratory activity. Nicola López is from a family who was in New Mexico before it became part of the U.S., and represents the chaos of contemporary urban growth and decay, making no specific reference to her ancestors. Neither do the final two (Leo Villareal and Noah Mac Donald), who are from immigrant families and engage the urban setting as their testing field for unpredictability and random systems. All of the artists address decomposition and reinvention, deconstruction and reconstruction. They expand our understanding of the communities that we call home, and, by extension, of ourselves.

The two essays in the following pages are complementary and further illuminate the impetus of the exhibition. In the first, Víctor Manuel Espinosa, a valued colleague from SIIRLC 2005, explores the city as a place of immigration and a contemporary loci of power, where art by Mexican Americans born in the 1960s and 1970s, such as those in *Claiming Space*, has shifted away from the rural polemic, the religious iconography and the representational imagery that defined Mexican-American art just a few decades ago. In the second, Ramírez-Montagut encapsulates in-person interviews with each of the artists, where she asked of them, "Are immigrants better prepared to cope in a globalized world because of their bilingual, bicultural status?"

The planning and programming for *Claiming Space* harnessed the talent of multiple curators, its execution required the energy and ideas of its featured artists, as well as UTEP art students who assisted and learned from them. Mónica Ramírez-Montagut and Víctor Manuel Espinosa were driving forces. UTEP President Diana Natalicio and Dean Howard Daudistel have been supportive of the exhibition, from incubation to execution. Rubin Center staff, including Kerry Doyle, Daniel Szwaczkowski and Beverly Allen worked tirelessly. SIIRLC encouraged the curatorial concept. The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, National Endowment for the Arts, the Texas Commission on the Arts, and the City of El Paso Museums and Cultural Affairs Department have all assisted financially. *Claiming Space* could not have existed without them; they all have my deepest gratitude.

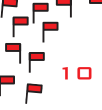
KATE BONANSINGA
DIRECTOR
STANLEE AND GERALD RUBIN CENTER
FOR THE VISUAL ARTS

Nicola López, *Drawn and Quartered*, woodblock on mylar, ropes, aluminum armatures, dimensions variable, 2008, special thanks to Tandem Press.

IMAGINING WORLD CITIES

VÍCTOR MANUEL ESPINOSA

Events during the spring of 2006 suggested an end to the days of second-generation Mexican Americans trying to close the door behind them. It had not been that long since Cesar Chavez's United Farm Workers set up a "wet line" in 1973 along the Arizona/Mexico border to try to block Mexican migrants from entering the country. And even more recently, in 1994, 31 percent of California's Latino voters had favored Proposition 187, legislation that would have cut off government services to children of undocumented immigrants. But now a new closeness between generations has become possible as Mexican migrants and U.S.-born descendants of Mexican migrants alike joined forces and protested together in more than one hundred U.S. cities, demanding regularization of more than eleven million undocumented workers. The eventual participation of three to five million immigrants in those marches, rallies, boycotts, and other symbolic actions in more than 200 cities around the country created the hope that the relationship between generations of immigrants is healing.



High school students from border area tour *Claiming Space* installation with artist Noah MacDonald, 2008.

Social forces that would impose a nation-building project promoting homogenization and cultural purity as the norm undergird the complicated relationship between generations of immigrants. Mexicans, like all the immigrants who have constructed this country, have lived a contradictory process of integration or cultural "assimilation" on the one hand, and a process of social exclusion and cultural segregation, on the other. Descendants of Mexican migrants born before the civil rights and Chicano movements of the 1960s were raised in a much more hostile social context that forced immigrants who aspired to social mobility to assimilate into mainstream society. The hegemonic process of subject making demanded the adoption of Anglo-Protestant core values. Immigrants had to learn English, renounce the Spanish language, and transform their Mexican culture into a family heirloom. While many Mexicans found ways to resist and preserve their ethnic identity, the melting pot ideology was also adopted by many who wanted to become "American" and saw the economic boom that followed the World War II as a promise of social mobility. The world-wide economic recession of the 1970s made it evident that the American dream only came true for a minority. Some Mexican Americans soon realized that the color of their skin would forever keep them from being seen as "real" Americans. They were only second-class citizens. For many years Mexican Americans were trapped in the middle of a double exclusion: they were not welcome by "real" Mexicans on either the northern or the southern side of the border.

From this perspective, the artistic Chicano movement could be understood as a desperate attempt to recuperate and preserve Mexican culture. Claiming and retaining a space of difference and ethnic reaffirmation became the best way to resist social exclusion and cultural oppression. However, both the dominant melting pot ideology and the immigrants' movement of resistance were constructed following similar notions of culture as a homogeneous entity; this is why the Chicano version of Mexican culture may seem too romantic and essentialist to our more postmodern eyes.

Today, the new immigrants face a multicultural project that offers the right to be different if they do not want to assimilate into white Anglo-Protestant values, but they must then stay in their ghettos or ethnic enclaves. In other words, immigrants must not try to be culturally versatile because infidelities, impurities, or double identities are not tolerated by nation-states. Thus the new generation of Mexican-American immigrant artists, like immigrants in general, is claiming spaces and constructing multiple identities that respond to more fluid notions of culture. The artists in this exhibition belong also to a generation marked by three new social and cultural realities: a more radical age of globalization and migration, a massive settlement of Mexican immigrants in the U.S., and the emergence of world cities and transnational social spaces. To understand their work we must consider the social processes and cultural contexts in which it is produced.

MEXICAN IMMIGRANTS IN TIMES OF NEOLIBERAL GLOBALIZATION

We live in an age of migration. Today there are more migrants than at any previous time in history. About 200 million persons currently reside outside the country of their birth, and almost one of every ten persons living in the more developed of the world's regions is an immigrant. This intense transnational movement and turbulent circulation of people is both a consequence of and a driving force of a new age of globalization. Access to cheap and flexible migrant labor is a structural necessity for the accumulation and expansion of capital in the most developed societies. In countries such as the U.S., Australia, and Canada, one wave of migrants has constantly been replaced by the next wave.

Mexican migrants, since the nineteenth century, have been encouraged to move across the U.S./Mexican border according to the needs of capital and policies of the nation-state. In the last twenty years, this migratory flow has increased dramatically in response to the intense economic and cultural integration of the two countries. However, at the same time that the U.S. government has facilitated the cross-border circulation of capital, commodities, and information, it has strongly fortified the physical border with Mexico. The repressive technologies used by the U.S. government have not reduced immigration flows but have affected the lives and human rights of millions of immigrants. Since October 1994, for example, when the U.S. government began to reinforce and militarize the Mexican border, until September of 2006, more than four thousand migrants died attempting to cross into the U.S. through the desert.

At the cost of great hardship and after more than a century of transnational movement between the two countries, Mexican migration to the U.S. has become the largest sustained migration flow anywhere in the world. The Mexican-born population in the U.S. has grown from less than one million in 1970 to 11.5 million in 2006. In the same year, the total number of people who identified themselves as Mexican reached 28 million. Those numbers mean that one out of every ten people born in Mexico now lives in the U.S. Mexican immigrants and Mexican descendants compose 66 percent of the entire Latin American population in the U.S., which has become the largest minority group, surpassing African-Americans. This means that in 2006, more than 34 million people age five or older used Spanish as the primary language spoken at home, making the U.S. one of the largest Spanish-speaking communities in the world, surpassed only

by Mexico, Colombia, Spain, and Argentina. Today it is possible to live in some North American cities without speaking much, or any, English. In some segments of the labor market it is even a requirement to speak Spanish in order to get a job, which has forced some non-native speakers to learn Spanish.

While there is no accurate way to count undocumented populations, according to some estimates, in 2006 there were 6.6 million "illegal" Mexicans living in the U.S. In light of the above-mentioned statistics, for the first time in history, Mexican-born migrants have most likely surpassed, or at least equaled, the number of Mexican Americans. This strong Mexican presence explains, in part, why the Chicano writer Rubén Martínez believes that "Chicanos" and "Mexicanos" from his generation have much more in common now than they did thirty years ago. But more important to understand the Mexican cultural presence in the U.S. is the emergence of a transnational social space that connects thousands of Mexican localities with practically every corner of this country.

Julio César Morales with technical assistance by David Goldberg, *Tactics of Reassembly*, analog and digital media, 10-minute loop, dimensions variable, 2008.

Julio César Morales, *Informal Economy Vendor Mix #1*, Type C photographic collage, 20" x 30", 2008, Courtesy of Queens Nails Projects.

THE TRANSNATIONALIZATION OF MEXICAN MIGRATION

For more than a century, Mexican immigrants have been constructing enduring social, economic, and cultural transnational ties between the two countries they navigate. Thanks to an intense transborder circulation of people, information, artifacts, images, and cultural symbols through those social networks, immigrants have been able to keep alive and reproduce a transnational social space that transcends the two nations.

This transnationalism from below has been produced, facilitated, and reinforced thanks to massive access to new communication technologies. Air travel, visual and sound recording systems, cell phones, calling cards, the internet, and especially digitalization technologies, have intensified the transnational circulation of people, images, sounds, and voices. Furthermore, a growing market for Mexican goods and cultural products has made it easier for the new generation of Mexicans living in the U.S. to have intense, emotional, and imaginary contact with their localities of origin and with many of the cultural elements that previous generations left south of the border.

previous pages: Leo Villareal, *Untitled*, LED lights with cellular technology, dimensions variable, 2008.

While technology has affected all social groups by reducing distances, shrinking spaces, and transforming the sense of time, its ability to create the sense of physical and emotional ties to more than one community has particularly affected immigrants and displaced populations. This political and cultural simultaneity has strong implications for both societies, including the people who stay home but are affected by migration flows. At the same time that Mexico is living an Americanization, or Chicanization, of thousands of rural and urban localities, Mexicanization, or Latinization, has also transformed important segments of many North American cities.

IMMIGRANTS AND ARTISTS IN WORLD CITIES

The 2006 protest forced many people to recognize how millions of "invisible" immigrant groups are drastically transforming U.S. cityscapes. By that year there were more than 36 million foreign-born persons living in the U.S. One third of those immigrants arrived in the 1990s. Together with their children, they account for more than 70 million people who are mainly concentrated in the cities of Los Angeles, Houston, Chicago, Miami, New York, and the borderland of El Paso/ Ciudad Juarez, the largest transnational urban space in the world. The Los Angeles urban area now has more Spanish speakers than any other place in the world except for Mexico City.

The term "world cities" may bring to mind consumer access to ethnic food, world music, exotic religious congregations, and artifacts from around the world. But the term world city also includes a less immediately visible layer of cultural complexity created by immigrants. For instance, the experimental work by Noah MacDonald, a descendant of Mexican and Irish immigrants, demonstrates better than any sociological urban theory how the arrival of every new group of immigrants to the city adds a new cultural layer that intensifies and enriches the history of many neighborhoods. MacDonald's obsession with graffiti techniques to transform old colonial abandoned buildings into installations perfectly distills the process of layering that is essential to urban migration.

The cultural diversity and social density that immigrants have brought to some cities has made it harder to construct total descriptions of multilayered and multicultural urban spaces. The first impression that contemporary cities have produced in the mind of visitors, immigrants, and ethnographers is a confused, but homogeneous and never-ending urban mass. From the perspective of a driver crossing the different fragments of the city though a highway, all the streets, avenues, businesses, neon signs, and billboards seem to be replicated ad infinitum. However, from the perspective of urban dwellers inside the privacy of their homes, their neighborhoods, their work places, and their hang outs, the city becomes a multiplicity of small cultural

and social worlds, an immense and chaotic collection of urban fragments without any apparent order. For a regular urban dweller, the only way to imagine or conceptualize a world city, or any urban metropolis as a totality, is from the inside of an automobile running at 65 miles per hour through one of the arteries that connects all the fragments, segments, enclaves, and spaces of the chaotic urban mass. This seems especially true in some North American cities where the automobile and the highway are two of the most important and concrete icons of American urban life.

Nicola López's critical approach to urban life, however, reminds us that the celebration of these two urban icons ignores how in almost every city in the world the construction of highways has destroyed many immigrant neighborhoods and displaced poor urban dwellers. Optimistic discourses on globalization insist that living in a global city is like dwelling in many parts of the world at the same time. However, the fragmentation of social life and the sense of emptiness and solitude produced by a metropolis can also create the sensation of dwelling nowhere. We inevitably confront those contradictory feelings when trapped in one of Lopez's urban maps, in which cities seem fascinating but terrifying at the same time. Her artistic work obligates us to consider the less exciting and more asphyxiating elements of urban life. In fact, many immigrants living in larger cities complain that they live confined by an enslaving daily routine that traps them into a never-ending process of coming and going between home and work, work and home. The fragmentation of the city can confine immigrants in small worlds, cultural niches, or ghettos. Some seek refuge in private enclaves that help escape the emptiness of macro urban spaces transformed by voracious developers into inhospitable environments. In fact, thanks to technology, the centers of different world cities tend to be closer to each other than they are connected to some of their own margins, fragments, regions and even nation-states. A disciplinary process constructs this confined life that forces immigrants to move inside of specific spaces imposed by capital, by racialization, and especially by the use of surveillance technologies. Closed-circuit television and security cameras have been increasingly used to fortify both wealthy neighborhoods and panoptic malls. Surveillance cameras have also transformed the street into a dangerous place where undocumented immigrants can be detained and deported.

Noah MacDonald/Keep Adding, *Stare Well*, house and spray paint, dimensions variable, 2008.

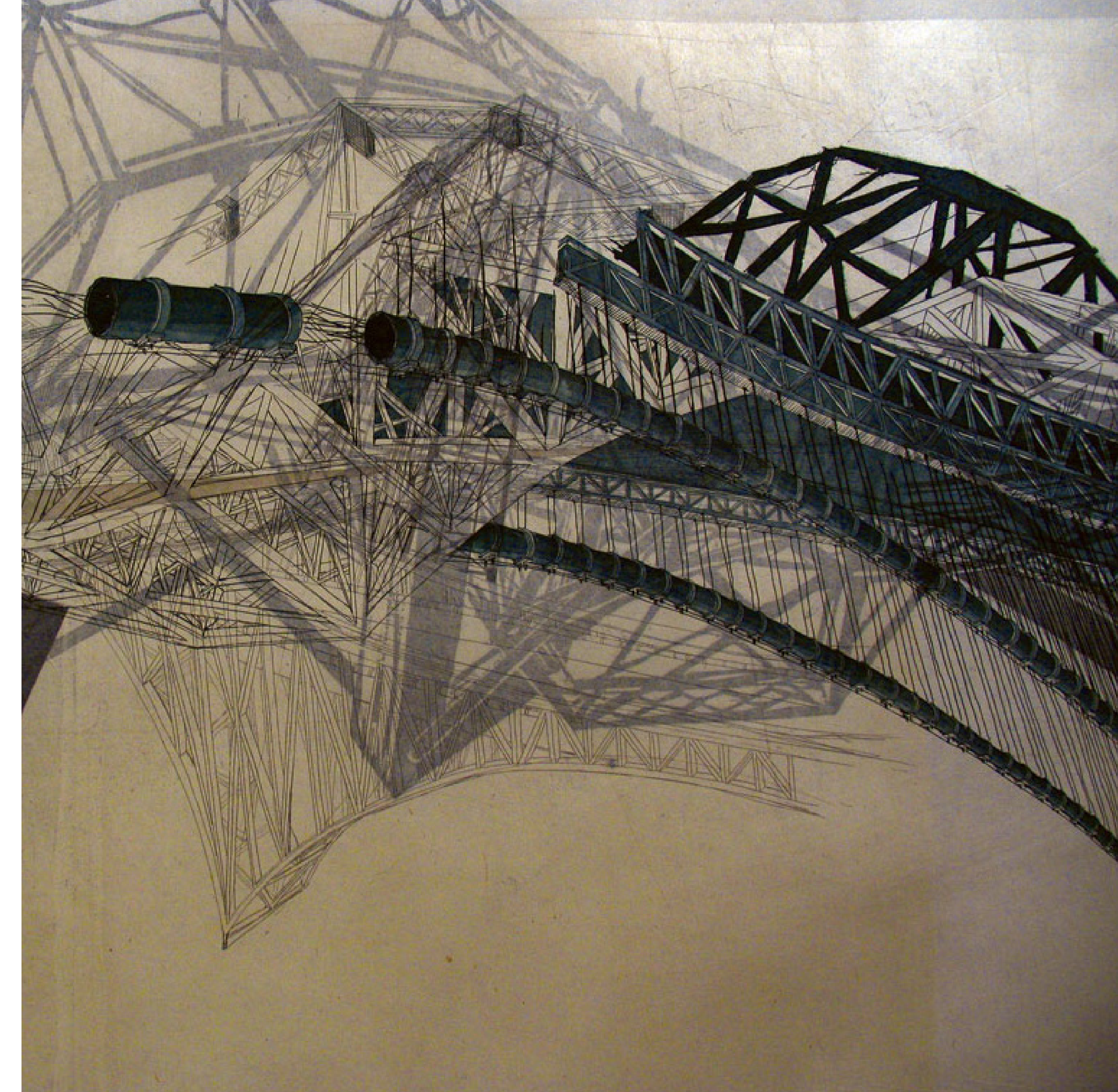
Nicola López, *Impossible Reach #3*, detail, intaglio and woodblock on paper, 24" x 113", 2008, published by Hui Press, Maui, Hawaii.

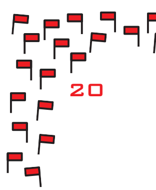
Another artistic response to world cities, while still far from simple celebration of technology, nevertheless reappropriates it so as to find order in urban chaos and beauty in industry. For Vargas-Suárez UNIVERSAL for example, air travel impacts the way he perceives and represents not only urban space and world cities, but also outer space. The satellite images, geological maps, and video movies of arterial routes in his work offer one of the most compelling and abstract representations of urban dynamism and the complexities of immigrant enclaves. Similarly, Leo Villareal uses images from biology and other sciences to find alternative ways to feed our impulse to make sense of the dynamic and chaotic aspects of cities. The art produced by both Vargas-Suárez UNIVERSAL and Villareal fascinates the viewer with its recollection of two essential urban experiences: getting stuck in traffic jams and being immersed in masses of people crowding the streets. Villareal's art also offers a hallucinatory way to find order in the random kaleidoscopic visions produced by city neon lights. Both artists create optimistic and seductive art that conceives the city as more than a fragmented space hostile to community life. Their visions parallel the daily life of immigrants in its quest to claim and transform urban spaces, put down roots and build a sense of community in a variety of ways, from playing soccer in public parks to celebrating religious rituals on the streets.

Mexican street vendors are another good example of how immigrants claim and transform urban landscapes. By transplanting the informal economy into the centers of global capitalism, pushcart vendors have made more palpable the extreme economic and spatial polarization produced by neoliberal globalization. In Julio César Morales's series featuring the "informal economy exploded vendors," digital images of carts blown up and dispersed into fragments underscore the fact that they are not merely curiosities for tourist snapshots. Street vendors' improvised designs and constructed carts made using found parts and recycled materials also prove that immigrants are more than passive witnesses of urban environments; they are also creators and cultural interpreters. The presence of street vendors also points out that when we talk about cities, it is more precise to talk about specific contexts, urban fragments, segments of global/world cities, or even "third world" enclaves in the first world.

In conclusion, the response of immigrants and artists alike to new urban realities explains in part the paradox of why the most provocative artistic expressions produced by Mexican descendants do not reaffirm their Mexican origin, but instead claim spaces in a global arena. In the past, claiming space required ethnic reaffirmation. But today artistic strategies and sources of inspiration come from an intermingling of cultures, collective memories, and personal experiences that are not limited by nationalistic notions of culture. Today, artists are claiming spaces with unexpected combinations of experiences, recycled images, sounds, and noises produced by new technologies, re-appropriations of scientific knowledge, industrial artifacts, and popular cultures. These artists cannot be classified with de-historicized modernist frames that conceive of nation-states as containers of artistic and cultural production. Since this art transcends nationalistic approaches, no one "national art" or "national culture" could easily encompass this work. As this art celebrates hybridism and cultural impurity, it also keeps its distance from some types of ethnic art easily exoticized in global markets driven by commodified notions of cultural authenticity.

This art is political, like its Chicano predecessors. But now the political confrontations are taking place in a global as well as a national arena. The latest art critiques neoliberal globalization by warning us that the destructive urban strategies used by the global market create disposable commodities and exploit "disposable" undocumented people. The vibrant work in this exhibit exemplifies the possibility of artistic agency in the construction of alternative ways to imagine the city.





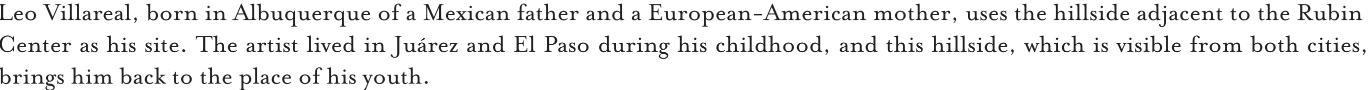
UTEP students assist with installation of Leo Villareal's, *Untitled*, LED lights with cellular technology, dimensions variable, 2008.

Claiming Space, Claiming Identities: The Artists Speak

Mónica Ramírez-Montagut

Between October 2007 and April 2008 Kate Bonansinga and I met with each of the five artists in Claiming Space. *We learned more about their artistic practice and shared with them our curatorial vision for the exhibition. Following are synopses of those discussions and how they relate to some of the current theories about immigration and identity.*

Leo Villareal



Leo Villareal, born in Albuquerque of a Mexican father and a European-American mother, uses the hillside adjacent to the Rubin Center as his site. The artist lived in Juárez and El Paso during his childhood, and this hillside, which is visible from both cities, brings him back to the place of his youth.

"Being bicultural makes you fight and figure it out. It made me strong."[1] For Villareal, participating in two cultures and understanding that "things are not static and have multiple layers" was indispensable for developing his artwork based on interactive telecommunication. His work explores light, light groupings, or fields of light. Computer programming enables him to design complex patterns for those lights and to create new dynamics. His untitled work in *Claiming Space* is a series of units that create a network of fluctuating patterns. Each light turns on an off at random intervals determined by computer software that is communicated to the light source through cellular technology. The lights are clustered around a shallow cave in the hillside, fanning out from this orifice.

"I create stimuli. Not verbal, not dealing with language and images, it's more like a flickering line that you respond to. The rhythms, the mimicking, and the synchronization are visually interesting, and *anyone* will respond. ...There are a lot of layers that play into the patterns..."

Villareal describes his work as compressed fields that expand, "like a computer file expands, and if the data is corrupted then the sequence changes..." His interest in "changing spaces" is based on the introduction of an element that disrupts the dynamic of the space and encourages a new interaction by the spectator. For him, the relevance of the experience relies in "responding together and experiencing together, which is different than virtual reality, where the experience is more individually based. That is why the works are more like environments; they can be experienced in a group."

Who is this group that Villareal is referring to at the Rubin Center? Perhaps he is referring to the Mexicans of Ciudad Juárez, the Mexican-American students of UTEP and the Americans of El Paso, all of whom will all be able to experience his light field. Villareal's work explores different layers of meaning and uses sophisticated software to keep changing and fluctuating.

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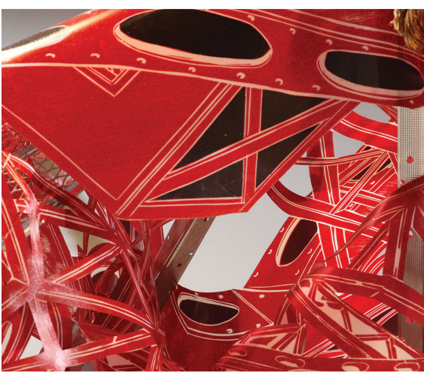
[1] All quotes from interview with Kate Bonansinga and Mónica Ramírez-Montagut at the artist's studio, New York, N.Y., on October 16, 2007



Nicola López, *Drawn and Quartered*, woodblock on mylar, ropes, aluminum armatures, dimensions variable, 2008, special thanks to Tandem Press.

Nicola López

In the work of Nicola López we can trace a similar expansive attitude, made evident in the multiple layers of materials in her drawings. López, whose grandparents came to the U.S. from Spain through Mexico, explains her family's history as "The border crossed us, we did not cross the border."[2] This diverse family background feeds López's work.

"My parents encouraged my enthusiasm to continue traveling in order to enjoy other cultures. My travels in Mexico were easier than they were in other countries because of my background. I was less foreign…Regarding cultural heritage, I think everybody has this issue and it is interesting to see how it informs your reality and how you identify yourself, that is, how far back you go in your family history to identify yourself."

From López's statements one could infer that identity is not fixed, that there are several options, either imposed or decided. When she is in Mexico and people ask her if she feels American, Lopez hesitates to answer "not really," but under those circumstances she does not feel Mexican, either, since she was not born in that country. "So the sense of belonging shifts and I don't feel of the place when I am in Mexico. Sometimes I feel that I am a New Yorker, even though I was not born here. Other times I feel I am New Mexican, where I was born."

The spontaneity and unpredictability of the shifts in defining an identity are similar to issues of urban planning that Lopez finds compelling. While discussing her work, Lopez explains that she is fascinated by the transformative capabilities of cities:

"What interests me is that the urban environment is alive, it grows, changes and evolves. So often there is urban growth without planning which interests me. I guess it has to do with the fact that now 50 percent of the population actually lives in urban settings. My work is about underlining those systems."

López's multilayered and expansive drawings inhabit corners, ceilings and walls of the gallery space. The renderings maintain an industrial atmosphere with references to factory chimneys, bridges, and network of roads that unite and tie the composition, while simultaneously insinuating some kind of sprawl. For López, roads both connect and rupture. She explains:

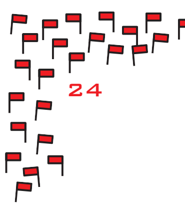
"The Jeffersonian grid across the U.S., with the railroads and cars was directed at connecting…and ended up covering the earth. Optimism and utopianism were the goals. This order intended to dominate nature and to ensure that everybody could access the entire country, so this was seen as something positive and inclusive. But the way it was done and what it is today is problematic, …it places us in an inflexible grid with blank spaces in between."

For López the roads are where she finds the ambiguities, the complexities and the potential for creating new environments:

"Some of the roadways in my work don't get you anywhere, and I somehow identify with them. They are just growing, they are like biological organisms, like roots or tentacles hanging on."

López asserts that her work reacts to the environment. Her interest in the connective tissues of cities may be a reaction to a globalized world where connectivity, like the Internet, is a characteristic aspect of the culture. This connectivity and the migration of knowledge and people are modifying how identity is located: it moves away from the "blank spaces" to the connective webs. In a global world, identity is trans-local, blurs specific territories, and expands organically through web-like relationships like those that are the subject of López's installations.

[2] All quotes from interview with Kate Bonansinga and Mónica Ramírez-Montagut at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center on October 17, 2007



Julio César Morales

"Latin America is not *in* Latin America anymore" asserts Néstor García Canclini[3]. Similarly, street vendors are not in Mexico anymore; they are in Los Angeles, San Francisco and Chicago to name a few American cities. The grandson of one of these vendors, artist Julio César Morales, created a series of photographs, vinyl drawings and videos titled *Informal Economy Vendors* that destruct and reconstruct images of these immigrant or Mexican-American salesmen that work on their self-designed pushcarts. These vendors' unregulated and spontaneous commercial activity carves them a place in the urban fabric, "they create a new social space in the city while also connecting to a version of the public life they left behind".[4]

The vendors venture into "new places" and expand their normal routes into new neighborhoods. The vinyl rendering of the deconstructed and rearranged pushcart and operator emphasizes an urban phenomenon that tends to be invisible. Morales picks up on that invisibility:

"My work takes more from natural forms of cultural phenomena and strategies of urban Latino centers, such as informal economies, vernacular architecture, and music subcultures in which I attempt to translate these phenomena through an abstract documentary aesthetic. I believe that social-based art practices have always been unnoticed and also ahead of their time."[5]

Fascinated by the social, urban dynamics of explosion/expansion and the coming together of contradictions, Morales remembers the origins of Tijuana: "you see the whole thing explode and then try to come together."[6] Morales' strategy is to highlight the fluctuations of social and cultural practices in order to update the Latino identity.

Regarding a piece for the exhibition *Phantom Sightings* at LACMA titled *Migrant Dubs* Morales explains: "Essentially, it's about the translation of culture [...] It's not about adapting to the culture, but translating the culture and creating your own way to come to terms with it. In a way it's how they negotiate being Latino, and at the same time being in this modern contemporary environment."[7] He himself has done such negotiations. Morales agreed to represent the U.S. in the Istanbul and Singapore Biennials; but in the San Juan Triennial he represented Mexico.

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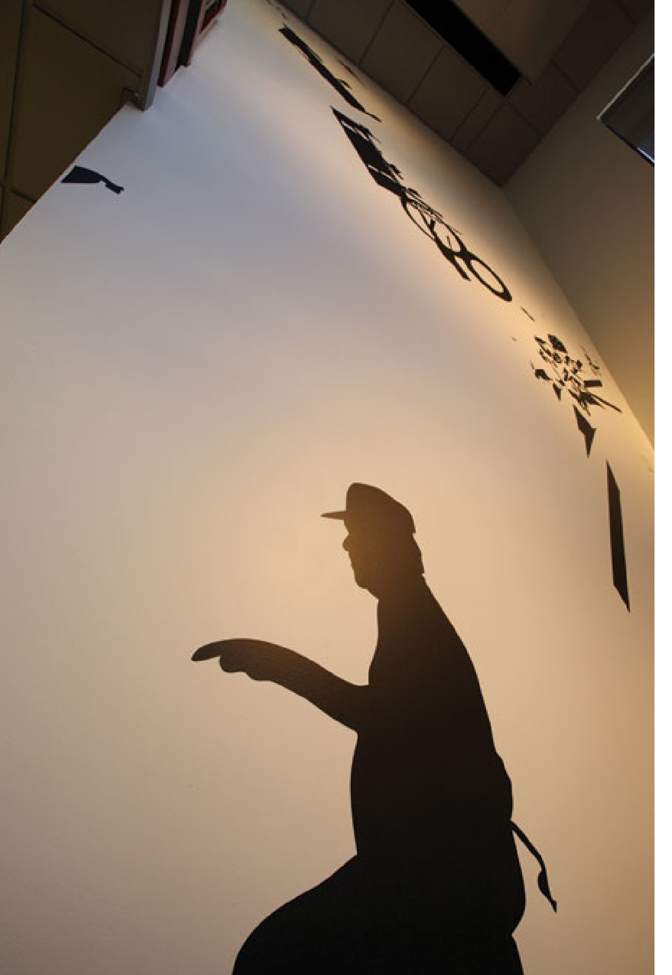
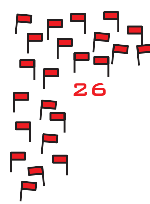
[3] Néstor García Canclini, *Latinoamericanos buscando lugar en este siglo* (Buenos Aires: Paidos 2002) [All quotes transletd from Spanish by Mónica Ramírez-Montagut]
[4] Rachel Teagle in *Cerca Series* exhibition brochure. Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego. October 7 to November 14, 2004.
[5] Julio César Morales in *Phantom Sightings* editorial of LACMA Members Magazine, March-April 2008. p. 3
[6] All quotes from interview with Kate Bonansinga and Mónica Ramírez-Montagut at the artist's studio in San Francisco on April 18th, 2008.
[7] Julio César Morales quoted by Agustín Gurza in LABoyz Welcome to LACMA for *Los Angeles Times* on March 29, 2008. http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/la-et-culture29mar29,0,7104524.story



Julio César Morales, *Informal Economy Vendor #2*, analog and digital media rendered with vinyl, 258" x 192", 2007.



Vargas-Suarez UNIVERSAL

Similarly, Vargas-Suarez UNIVERSAL has negotiated with his identity within the art world system. For the 2nd Moscow Biennale he represented Latin America, in the U.S. he is considered either a New Yorker or a Latino, in Latin America he is categorized as Mexican, and in Europe as American. He can navigate all these waters because, among other things, he is perfectly bilingual. "I do not have a Mexican accent when I speak in English so therefore I am told 'Eres Gringo'. I do not have a single native tongue, both [Spanish and English] are my native tongues at the same time." [8]

[8] All quotes from interview with Mónica Ramírez-Montagut at the artist studio in Brooklyn on November 19, 2007.

He considers being bilingual necessary to better survive in the U.S., to adapt:

"Being bilingual makes a big difference in the experience of this country. Plus it has prepared me for traveling. It does not matter where I travel, Latin and English languages help me get a better grasp of other languages. For example, the pronunciation of Russian is more similar to Spanish than to English. I understand how other languages work. The last two years I have been able to explain my work in two different languages, helping that dialogue become very fluid and congruent."

UNIVERSAL describes his drawings based on patterns of lines and geometries as a "signal that goes back and forth" as does his English and Spanish. He creates images that take into account the topography and architectural features of the city where he will produce his drawing. He uses some of the contours he finds on maps and floor plans and enters a vertiginous trance-like state to create his compositions. The large scale of the work creates an environment ala *Matrix*. "Doing my line work and making the complicated gestures is something I equate to writing", he explains.

UNIVERSAL, as his professional nickname states, is interested not only in the local features of a site but also in cutting-edge science and technology that allows for the new images—topographical, aerial, even spatial—to take place. New images achievable through advanced technology allow him to have access to references well beyond this planet. Lately, the topography the artist has been investigating is that of Mars. He gathers Martian photography that is constantly being downloaded to various websites.

"Visually, they are beautiful images. I use them to source my own geometric compositions by looking at topography and seeing its contours. However, I am less interested in the existing landscape of Earth, than I am in the "new" new world."

Those new world images are analyzed by scientists who are discovering that wind patterns, sand, and soil do not behave the same way on Mars as they do on Earth. UNIVERSAL explains, "On Mars the soil is fine and water gets trapped underneath it, so there is no open water, but rather bridges of soil over water." Water has a different personality on Earth than on Mars, just as the artist's work is perceived differently if seen as Latino, Latin American, Mexican or American. They are all real and truthful in their own context.

Ultimately, the artist is fascinated not only by the new images but also by the new definitions that will arise from this new world. The fact that something we take for granted, like our views of waterfronts, can be completely different from what we expect opens up a lot of possible new definitions. A world with an unclear identity—based on the behavior of its soil, wind, water—is full of potential.

The artist explains his experience in different contexts and how it affects the perception of his work:

"The work becomes part of the context of the culture that interprets it. For example, if I am identified as a Latino artist the cultural references are artists like Jesús Rafael Soto or Carlos Cruz-Diez; if I am identified as an American artist the cultural references are Sol LeWitt or Peter Halley, as well as architecture and American abstraction. There are also associations with the Mexican muralists, the Bauhaus aesthetics, Japanese robotics and animation."

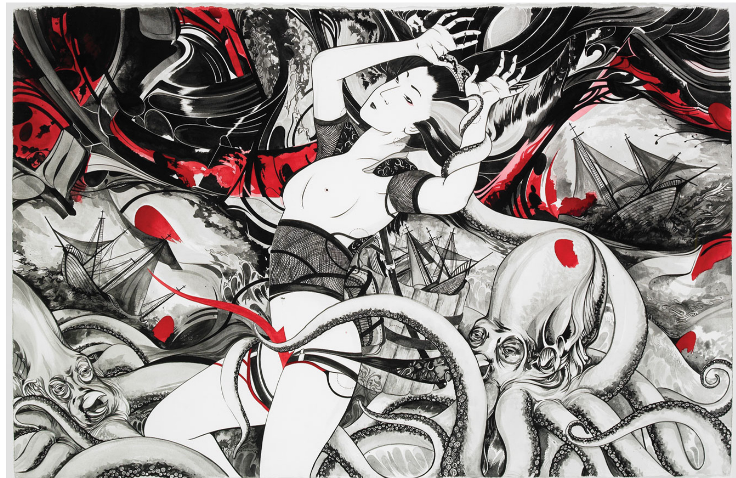
He concludes:

"I want the work to be multiple and multifaceted. As an artist it does not matter where you are from. It is beyond globalization. A lot of the process of being a contemporary artist has to do with the technology and communication."

Vargas-Suárez UNIVERSAL, *Search for Life: Aliens, Water and Surveillance*, earth, water, iron oxide, oil enamel, vaccumized aluminum thermal blankets, 168" X 480", 2008, Courtesy of g-module, Paris.

Noah MacDonald with Keep Adding and The Black Estate

Noah MacDonald, who is part of two collaboratives, Keep Adding and The Black Estate, uses computer software in order to make his work more expansive and multifaceted.[9] His highly abstract forms which incorporate historical and representative references of early trade and global markets, tend to be directly applied to architectural elements, such as walls and columns, in an attempt to address urban structures. The artist's early large-scale mark making followed risky graffiti strategies. "Sometimes we had to run from the police. The objective of our illegal activities was to leave a mark with style, to modify the surface of a bland, industrial space."[10] For the artist this practice was neither straightforward graffiti nor vandalism, but one he describes as a post-street activity.



Noah MacDonald/The Black Estate, *Sony Integration I*, water color on paper, 40" x 60", 2008.

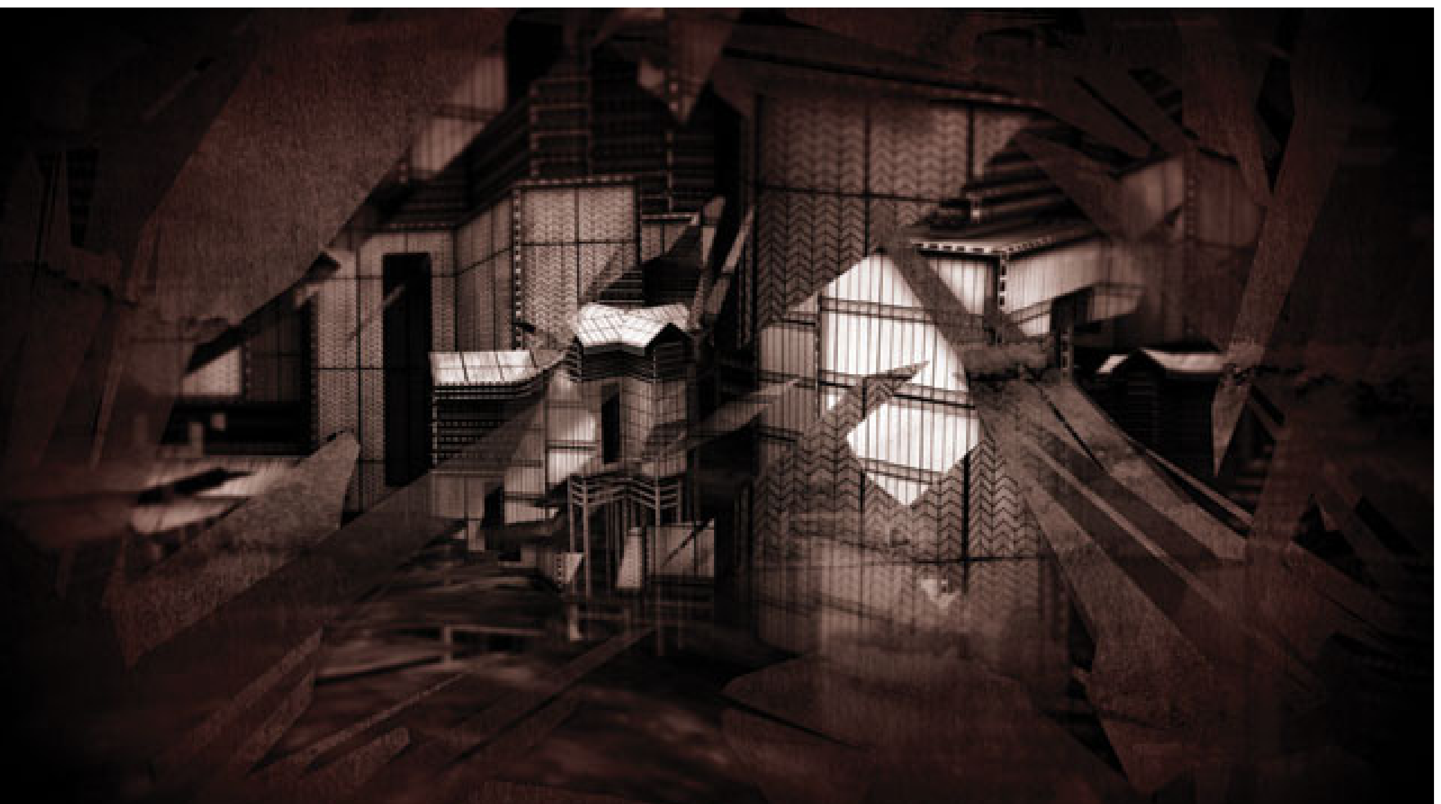
The precariousness of constantly verging on illegality, is most likely part of every immigrant's everyday life, even if of legal status. (Immigration laws seem fragile; since 9/11 everyone is subject to suspicion, which brings to mind the New York subway posters promoting "if you see something, say something".) In his book *Magical Urbanism*, author Mike Davis, a theoretician of the Latinization of the U.S., explains that in the case of Latinos, even if they are in theory applauded for their initiatives that contribute to the economy of the cities, they are in practice persecuted[11].

MacDonald's own identity, whether Hispanic, Mexican or White, is a matter of point of view. The artist's mother is of Mexican descent and his father is of Irish heritage, and MacDonald identifies more with his Hispanic family. He grew up in El Paso and Las Cruces, New Mexico and states: "I consider myself Hispanic but other people do not know this because of my last name. They think I am white. But Mexicans do not consider me to be Mexican, either."[12]

Because MacDonald assigns his work to a collective he empties the Hispanic or White context that his phenotype or last name would contribute. "I want the work to be viewed as artwork, with no names to associate me with a white person or to perceive me as Hispanic. I want to avoid directing the reading of the image". He creates an environment that "will not tell you what to think or what to do".

For MacDonald destruction is linked to construction, thus his environments that use decayed structures as a substrate are a positive reconsideration of the possibilities of reinhabiting and redefining a space. His art interventions contribute to the creation of environments that simultaneously preserve some original features, while encouraging new readings. Abstract and angular compositions of slabs or splinter-like volumes come together through a singular force similar to that of a great wave, one that sucks all the elements into a circular gesture and returns them shaken and transformed. These waves alter notions of Latino urban interventions into more dynamic and permissive ones in terms of flux, dynamism and exchange.

[9] In artist statement, DVD brochure for the exhibition *Wrekage* at the Center for Contemporary Arts in Santa Fe, 2006.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Mike Davis, *Magical Urbanism* (Verso; U.K. and New York, 2001) p. 63
[12] Phone conversation with Mónica Ramírez-Montagut. 11 August 2008.



Noah MacDonald/The Black Estate, *Reveal I*, HD DVD video, 10-minute seamless loop, dimensions variable, 2008.

In *Sony Integration I* an octopus is fondling a Geisha. Waves dominate. Some have materialized in the arms of the aquatic animal and others are engulfing ancient vessels on their way to Japan (or are they going back to Europe, or to the Americas?) All forces are converging in the figure of the Geisha that is struggling to keep afloat though she is nearly devoured by the sea (and the octopus). In the middle of this struggle, she is clearly identifiable, trying to maintain her identity, her demeanor and femininity, in spite of it all. However impurity and contamination are her imminent future.

MacDonald emphasizes cultural contamination by revisiting the legendary Japanese artist Hokusai's prints. Here, like in graffiti, visual contamination integrates disparities, incorporates contradictions, and threatens, all key elements for imagining participation in a global world. MacDonalds's work aims to renovate. In spite of the decayed urban sites and the Geisha/octopus struggle, the general tone is that of possibility, of starting all over again.

Nicola López, *Drawn and Quartered*, woodblock on mylar, ropes, aluminum armatures, dimensions variable, 2008, special thanks to Tandem Press.

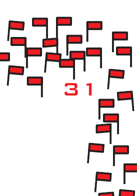
In Conclusion

On June 16, 2008 Charlie Rose invited three brothers to appear on his television talk show. Each is prominent in his respective field: Ezekiel Emanuel is an oncologist and renowned author on healthcare, Ari Emanuel is the head of a Hollywood agency that represents Martin Scorsese and Michael Moore, and Rahm Emanuel is a democratic congressman from Illinois and chair of the Democratic Caucus. When asked for a palpable reason for their success and ambition or, as Rose put it, "where does it all come from?" Rahm Emanuel replied, "The immigrant culture." He further explained:

"The immigrant culture: you have the sense that you are lucky to be in this country—this is a great country—, and that you have to leave your mark in some way on people's lives".

The Emanuel brothers remember their childhood vacations in Israel. They acknowledge a fear of failure and yet give the same emphasis to their ability to learn from mistakes and to take risks. Their youthful arguments were directed at claiming a position and sustaining it.

The Mexican-American artists in this exhibition do this, too. They feel better prepared for our current world because they can tap into the history, experiences and identities of at least two different cultures. Of course, the same question should be extended to any other immigrant group, like the Emanuels, who also believe the immigrant culture can be advantageous and formative. The intention of claiming a space of their own, not just any space but a better one, and "leave your mark in some way on people's lives" is also true for the artists in *Claiming Space* who achieved this through the use of sophisticated technology, the reconsideration of industrial culture and the use of abstract visual language.



The artists incorporate such multilayering of materials and meanings, as well as the multilayering of issues of identity and different identities. In their expansiveness, the work of these artists is somewhat spontaneous and adaptative, while exploring new territories. They all engage artwork at a larger urban scale, and in some cases, they journey to other borders and boundaries (Villareal), other cultures (MacDonald), or other worlds (UNIVERSAL).

Given this broad approach, what does it mean to be Latin American today? This is the question Néstor García Canclini addresses in his book on Latin Americans in this century[13]. He explains that in a globalized world of multiple layers, definitions and identities cannot be sustained on bipolar oppositions: from here or from there. "The intensification of migrations is modifying in many ways the location of the 'Latin American' ".[14] For Canclini, the Latin American identity is not self contained anymore; to start understanding it we must explore its different layers and its expansion on new territories. In a globalized world, individuals can identify with different cultures: "Regarding transnational interactions one same individual can identify himself or herself with various languages and lifestyles."[15] He also affirms: "Many of the literary constitutions of the Latin American nations were written from abroad"[16]. For many immigrants, the exercise of reconsidering from afar the meaning of their homes, their origins and sources, sheds light to issues of identity. One of the issues revealed by the artists is that national territories are not the setting for considering and elaborating on identities: a translocal distribution of culture blurs the boundaries of the territories. In a global world, "Mexicanness" can be found outside of the territory of Mexico, just as the center for Latino mediated popular culture can be found in Miami.

So, rather than discussing identity issues, we should be discussing strategies of identification, explains Canclini. Identification is more accurate because the concept allows for the inclusion of particular contexts and fluctuations, even identifying with two cultural identities, as is the case with several of these artists. In order to better understand issues of identification, Canclini

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[13] The definition for Latin America found in Dictionary.com reads: the part of the American continent south of the United States in which Spanish, Portuguese, or French is officially spoken. However, for Canclini, traits Latin American countries have in common are their historical debts, dependency and migrations. The author explains that the Latin American identity has always been a hybrid construction of the confluence of Mediterranean countries from Europe, the Native American and African migrations. "These constitutive fusions are broadened by interacting with the Enlgish-speaking world: the latter demonstrated by the large presence of immigrants and cultural products of Latin America in the U.S., and the insertion of Anglicisms in the electronic and journalistic languages." p. 69

[14] Canclini, p. 20

[15] Canclini, p. 41

[16] Canclini, p. 24

"...THESE ARTISTS LIVE FULLY PREPARED, PUSHING THE ENVELOPE, PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES, EXPANDING, INTEGRATING, INNOVATING, AND CLAIMING NEW SPACES WITH NEW IDENTITIES."
—MÓNICA RAMÍREZ-MONTAGUT

Leo Villareal, *Untitled*, LED lights with cellular technology, dimensions variable, 2008.

brings to our attention "maps of meaning"[17] that point out symbolic issues that are modified even if the geopolitical borders are maintained. In some cases, these maps show that local traditions are exalted within a global context, not a national one. The impossibility of basing an identity on a determined territory results in the search for different strategies of identification in some cases based on communication systems[18]. Reconfiguring visual culture that represents social, economic and political issues has the potential of identifying some common ground as well as considering valuable differences to achieve social and political cohesiveness.

The artists in this exhibition tap into strategies that engage art with the public, a sphere that is local as opposed to national. They are "Glocal"[19], a phenomenon consistent with a globalized world that incorporates the particular as opposed to national. These strategies also provide a space for difference, dissidence, innovation and risk. Their work elaborates a collective imagination that is intercultural and thus more democratic. "One lives within the local depending up on how one participates in globalization"[20] explains Canclini. With site-specific interventions, these artists live fully prepared, pushing the envelope, pushing the boundaries, expanding, integrating, innovating, and claiming new spaces with new identities. If Latinos, Mexican immigrants, Latin Americans living in the U.S. are already astute in terms of articulating transnational attitudes, they may very well be prepared for whatever is next, namely the Latinization of the U.S. or the vertiginous overload of information of the global world. In the words of Mike Davis:

"It is not a question of returning anywhere, but of claiming, or retaining, a space of difference within the Americas, the United States as well as Latin America."[21]

[17] Canclini, p. 91
[18] Davis, p. ix
[19] Canclini, p. 41
[20] Canclini, p. 48
[21] Canclini, p. 80

Artists' Biographies

Nicola López (b. 1975, Santa Fe, NM; resides Brooklyn, NY) points out the ever-present possibility of a breakdown in the over-built urban landscape. Alluding to the visual language of cartography, she creates a place that is both planned and improvised. The artist states, "There are moments in the construction of my world where buildings evolve according to plan. But there are also moments when a building precedes its own planning, expanding unpredictably." The artist earned a B.A. and an M.F.A. at Columbia University in 1998 and 2004 respectively. She attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Skowhegan, Maine, and the Escola de Artes Visuals in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. She was awarded a New York Foundaton for the Arts Fellowship in Drawing/Printmaking/Book Arts in 2005 and a Joan Mitchell Foundation MFA Graduate Award in 2004. Her art has been widely exhibited at venues that include Pace Prints Chelsea (New York, NY), Franklin Art Works (Minneapolis, MN), Museo de Arte Contemporáneo (Cusco, Perú), LA County Museum of Art (Los Angeles, CA), P.S. 1 Contemporay Art Center (Long Island City, NY), Arroniz Arte Contemporaneo (Mexico City, MX) and Museum of Modern Art, (New York, NY). López is represented by Caren Golden Fine Art (New York, NY) and teaches printmaking at Bard College (Annandale-on-Hudson, NY).

Noah MacDonald (b. 1976, Oklahoma City, OK; resides Marfa, TX) participates in artist teams that realize multi-media expressions, many of which have the potential to transform neglected urban spaces. Keep Adding (with Brian Bixby) earned a Creative Capital Grant in 2006 and has exhibited at Center for Contemporary Art (Santa Fe, NM), Festival of Animated Film (Stuttgart, Germany), amongst other venues. Black Estate (with Scott Pagano) has exhibited at the Harris Museum (Preston, England), Interfilm Short Film Festival (Berlin, Germany), Playground Audiovisual Arts Festival (Tilburg, Netherlands), Culturavj (Cordoba, Spain), and others. Black Estate is represented by Claire Oliver Gallery (New York, NY).

Julio César Morales (b. 1966, Tijuana, Mexico; resides San Francisco, CA) uses a range of media including photography, video, and printed and digital media to create projects that address the productive friction that occurs in trans-cultural territories. Since the mid-1990s, Morales has investigated issues of labor, memory, and identity, asking us to consider our stake in the global systems that produce them. In his ongoing series *Informal Economies* (begun in 2002), Morales studies customized vendors' carts in San Francisco and Tijuana, making photographs, rendering "drawings" on his computer, and then outputting digital images in a variety of formats. The artist has exhibited at LA County Museum of Art (Los Angeles, CA), San Juan Triennial (Puerto Rico), Singapore Biennial and the UCLA Hammer Museum, as well as many other venues. He has received awards from The Rockefeller Foundation, The ArtsCouncil/Artadia, and The Creative Work Fund. Morales earned his M.F.A. at the San Francisco Art Institute (San Francisco, CA) where he now teaches new genres.

Vargas-Suárez UNIVERSAL (b. 1972, Mexico City; resides Brooklyn, NY) conflates the landscape of outer space with that of the city in large-scale multi-media drawings that recreate the dynamism of urban environments and the complex, insecure space of the Diaspora. The artist grew up in Houston near NASA and studied art history and astronomy at the University of Texas at Austin. He has exhibited widely at museums that include Queens Museum of Art (Queens, NY), Hudson River Museum (Yonkers, New York), Jersey City Museum (Jersey City, NJ) Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico (San Juan), Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil (Mexico City, Mexico), Winzabod Contemporary Art Centre (Moscow, Russia) and at galleries in New York, London, Berlin, Paris, Monterrey, Boston, Miami and other cities.

Leo Villareal (b. 1967, Albuquerque, NM; resides New York, NY) uses video, sound and light to create sophisticated installations that are outgrowths of his ongoing research in advanced computer programming and the potential of random systems. Villareal grew up in Juarez/El Paso and went on to earn his B.A. from Yale University and his M.P.S. from Tisch School of the Arts New York University. Villareal has created site-specific works for Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art (Overland Park, KS), Albright Knox Art Gallery (Buffalo, NY) and for the federal courthouse in El Paso, Texas that is currently under construction. He has exhibited widely, including Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, Hirshorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, and Cleveland Museum of Contemporary Art. The artist is represented by Gering & Lopez Gallery (New York, NY) and Conner Contemporary Art (Washington, D.C.)

The Essayists

Mónica Ramírez-Montagut is curator at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, CT. She served as Assistant Curator of Architecture and Design at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum of Art from 2006–8. Ramírez-Montagut earned a degree in architecture from the Universidad Iberoamericana (UIA), Mexico and a PhD from Universitat Politécnica de Catalunya (UPC) in Barcelona, Spain.

Víctor Manuel Espinoza is a doctoral candidate in sociology at Northwestern University and is a specialist on immigration. He earned his M.A. in rural studies at El Colegio de Michoacán, Mexico in 1996. His essay "The Life of Martín Ramírez: War, Displacement, and Transcultural Art" was published in the catalogue for the exhibition *Examining Martín Ramírez: A Self-Taught Mexican Artist* at the American Folk Art Museum, Spring 2007.

Exhibition Checklist

All dimensions in inches, Height x Width
All artwork courtesy of the artists

Nícola López

Drawn and Quartered
Woodblock on mylar, ropes, aluminum armatures
Dimensions variable
2008
Special thanks to Tandem Press

Impossible Reach #3
Intaglio and woodblock on paper
24" x 113"
2008
Published by Hui Press, Maui, Hawaii

Noah MacDonald / Keep Adding

Gradient Ghosts I (variation)
Light boxes, Duratran prints, paint
Dimensions variable
2008

Stare Well
House and spray paint
Dimensions variable
2008

Noah MacDonald / The Black Estate

Reveal I
HD DVD video
10-minute seamless loop
Dimensions variable
2008

Sony Integration I
Water color on paper
40" x 60"
2008

Julio César Morales

Informal Economy Vendor #2
Analog and Digital Media rendered with vinyl
258" x 192"
2007

Informal Economy Vendor Mix #1
Type C photographic collage
20" x 30"
2008
Courtesy of Queens Nails Projects

Informal Economy Vendor Mix #2
Type C photographic collage
20" x 30"
2008
Courtesy of Queens Nails Projects

Informal Economy Vendor Mix #3
Type C photographic collage
20" x 30"
2008
Courtesy of Queens Nails Projects

with technical assistance by David Goldberg
Tactics of Reassembly
Analog and Digital Media
10 minute loop
Dimensions variable
2008

Vargas-Suárez UNIVERSAL

Search for Life: Aliens, Water and Surveillance
Earth, water, iron oxide, oil enamel, vaccumized aluminum thermal blankets
168" x 480"
2008
Courtesy of g-module, Paris

Anaglyph I
Ink drawing on digital print
19" x 13"
2007
Courtesy of g-module, Paris

Anaglyph III
Ink drawing on digital print
13" x 19"
2007
Courtesy of g-module, Paris

Leo Villareal

Untitled
LED lights with cellular technology
Dimensions variable
2008