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FIRST TAKE

Jens Hoffmann on

Mario Ybarra Jr.



OFFERING A FRESH PERSPECTIVE on the fusion of cultures, practices, and aesthetics, Mario Ybarra Jr. has reenergized everything from the commingling of street culture and fine art to the grassroots workshop and the artist-run gallery. He is one of a new generation of artists of Mexican descent who, in contrast to many of their forebears, do not reject their American identity but embrace both of the trajectories in their backgrounds equally. Since graduating from the University of California, Irvine, in 2001, Ybarra has developed a prolific artistic practice that emanates from his upbringing, producing what he calls "contemporary art that is filtered through a Mexican-American experience in Los Angeles."

Ybarra's biography is a key to understanding his work, which draws attention to forms of culture on the fringes of the mainstream and reveals hidden histories within the context of what he himself has experienced. He was brought up in Wilmington near the Los Angeles harbor, where he still lives. There he was not only immersed in the local Mexican-American culture but also encountered the politicized union dockworkers and their insignia, parades, and aesthetic sensibility. It is also worth noting that two artists in particular have been central to his development: He worked for a year as Rubén Ortiz-Torres's studio assistant, and Daniel Joseph Martinez was one of his tutors at UC Irvine. Both artists' skepticism about the idea of Chicano identity is clearly reflected in Ybarra's unhesitant approach to his work as an artist.

Opposite page, from top: Mario Ybarra Jr., *Brown and Proud*, 2006, acrylic and spray-paint mural. Installation view, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London. Photo: Marcus J. Leith. Mario Ybarra Jr., *For All I Know He Had My Friend Angel Killed*, 2005. Performance view, Art Basel Miami Beach, 2005. Mario Ybarra Jr. This page, from left: Paul Collins, *Mario*, 2006, color photograph, 20 x 20". Mario Ybarra Jr., *Fair Exchange*, 2006, mixed media. Installation view, Los Angeles County Fair,



Ybarra's talent lies in examining his surroundings in an almost anthropological fashion. Many of his installations reflect how Latino communities in the United States have appropriated elements of mainstream US culture and mimicked, altered, and even parodied it to make it their own. For "Alien Nation," an exhibition currently on view at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London (which I co-organized with John Gill and Gilane Tawadros), Ybarra painted a large mural, titled *Brown and Proud*, 2006. The piece is one part Diego Rivera and one part graffiti; it brings together two significant revolutionary figures, one from each of the artist's two worlds: Emiliano Zapata from Mexico and Chewbacca from *Star Wars*.

But earlier projects, such as *Cowboys on Broadway*, 2002, and *For All I Know He Had My Friend Angel Killed*, 2005, make clear the link between Ybarra's incisive analyses of contemporary culture and conceptual political art more generally, often resulting in humorous and insightful observations on the

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hierarchies of art and life. The former work comprised an undocumented "action" that involved cruising through downtown LA in a 1979 Chevrolet Monte Carlo that had been decorated by Ybarra's friend Angel Montes Jr. to boast of his obsession with the Dallas Cowboys. Montes had painted the car in the team colors and replaced the Chevy logo with that of the sports club. Plastic footballs covered the air valves on the tires, and the rims were adorned with blue stars—the entire enterprise turning on its head the city's much-lamented

lack of both a local NFL football team and a "real" downtown and making it, instead, a cause for celebration. *For All I Know He Had My Friend Angel Killed* was a series of readings and reenactments that Ybarra did in Miami Beach of some key scenes from the 1983 Brian De Palma movie *Scarface*. The performances, which took place during the 2005 Art Basel Miami Beach (not far from the movie's setting), were based on the cult around the main character, Tony Montana, among Latino teenagers in the United States and on the story of a Mexican-American friend of the artist's who had gone to jail for drug dealing.

More recently Ybarra presented *The Peacock Doesn't See Its Own Ass/Let's Twitch Again: Operation Bird Watching in London*, 2006, for the "Uncertain States of America" exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery in London's Hyde Park. This piece, made in collaboration with Ybarra's partner, Karla Diaz, consisted of an alternative bird-watching club, appropriately situated in one of London's largest green spaces. The room-size installation consisted of studies of the "birdlife" of London, in an extended sense: from hairstyles to found objects, museum displays to corporate design. An insightful glance into the otherwise marginalized world of bird-watching enthusiasts, this unorthodox version of a "club" allowed a diverse audience to contemplate the activities of identification, appreciation, and admiration, while positing a correlation with the reception of contemporary art.

Ybarra's practice does not stop with making artworks and staging actions or performances. His early collaborative project *Slanguage*, 2002–2005, was an art center for young adults in Wilmington that included a gallery space, an education department, and a workshop. In 2005 he and Diaz converted the New Chinatown Barbershop into a small art space in LA. He installed a full-scale reproduction of it, titled *Fair Exchange*, at the Los Angeles County Fair last year, and we can look forward to seeing it in London this fall, when it will again be re-created, this time at Tate Modern, for the exhibition "The World as a Stage," where Ybarra plans to use the space to host a haircutting competition. □

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