

World

DECEMBER 20 – 26, 2003

Vol. 18, No. 29

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People's Weekly World December 20 – 26, 2003 15

PEOPLE'S CULTURE

The 'L' factor: Icons of Latino art and politics

By Rubén José Alvear

NEW YORK – Latino art in U.S. culture, like Latinos themselves, cannot be easily categorized or narrowly defined. A bold new exhibit at Exit Art provides a box-of-chocolates sampling of a new generation of Latino artists which ranges from the humorous to the eclectic to the bizarre to the sublime. It also provides a glimpse at a new way of thinking about what it means to be an "americano."

The exhibit (which runs through February 15, 2004) features the creations of 31 Latino artists as

they pay homage to an array of great Latino icons from Jennifer Lopez to Lolita Lebrón, Cantiflas to Tito Puente, Frida Kahlo to Sammy Sosa, and even hip-hop MC Big Pun and the cartoon character Speedy Gonzalez.

In our media-manipulated and media-crazed culture, it is not surprising that J-Lo gets the most attention, not all of it flattering. She is represented variously as a trampoline, as cotton candy, and as an empty dress made of broken green glass collected from the sidewalks of the Bronx and the beaches of Ponce, Puerto Rico. The last piece,

by Milton Rosa-Ortiz, aptly titled Fama, imitates the shimmering green designer dress Jennifer Lopez wore to the 2000 Grammy Awards. The "dress," suspended in mid-air, evokes the mosaic reality of shattered dreams and polluted Latino barrios which are too easily obscured behind the alluring footlights of fame.

Another glimpse of this dual Latino reality is the Cesar Chavez icon created by Puerto Rican-born artist, Johnny the Whip. His image of a half-body Statue of Liberty holding a torch topped by a head of lettuce pays tribute to the millions

of nearly invisible farm workers whom Chavez sought to unionize and who still struggle today for recognition and justice.

The nearly mythical Communist painter Frida Kahlo is represented by Andrea Arroyo as a continuous eyebrow, made of Mexican rebozo fabric, which resembles a bird in flight. Another conceptual artist, Tamara Kostianovsky of Argentina, uses her own hair to render a portrait of Frida on plexiglass, which is only appears as an eerie shadow on the wall.

But the most disturbing symbol of the exhibit is the work of Nicaraguan artist Ricardo Miranda Zuñiga. In "Vagamundo: A Migrant's Tale," Zuñiga educates his audience about the U.S. government-sponsored terrorism at the Mexican border through an interactive video game shaped as a

paletera, a street-vendor's cart. The game's Latino icon, Cantiflas, must then dodge beer bottles and other obstacles to the social and economic success of the "American Dream."

In January and February, the second part of "L factor" will feature film, video, musical and spoken word presentations, including a discussion on Jan. 14 with Ernesto Quiñonez, author of "Bodega Dreams," and Edgardo Vega Yunque, author of "No Matter How Much You Promise to Cook or Pay the Rent, You Blew It Cauze Bill Bailey Ain't Never Coming Home Again."

Exit Art is located at 475 Tenth Avenue at 36th Street in New York City. Suggested donation: \$5. For information call: (212) 966-7745 or visit www.exitart.org.

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