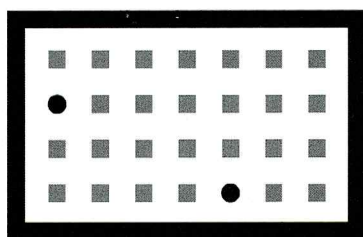


NARCISO ARGÜELLES

LUIS JIMÉNEZ & JOE RAMIRO GARCIA



U N T I T L E D
[ARTSPACE]

Narciso Argüelles

also works by

Joe Ramiro Garcia and Luis Jiménez

May 9 - June 28, 2008



Narciso Argüelles
La Citizen, Mixed media installation (detail), 2008

Border Identities as Cultures of Resistance

We, the Chicano¹ inhabitants and civilizers of the northern land of Aztlán from whence came our forefathers, [are] reclaiming the land of our birth [...] With our heart in our hands and our hands in the soil, we declare the independence of our mestizo nation...

Alurista, *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* (1969)

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary.

Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987)

The Chicano Movement of the late 1960s and 1970s corresponds to a time in U.S. history when modern Chicanos, particularly in the San Diego-Tijuana borderlands, sought a reconnection with their Aztec roots and to their homeland known as Aztlán. As a people who were indigenous to the Southwest for centuries before the arrival of the Spanish, and other Europeans, the dispossession of their land was marked by the “signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 when Mexico ceded to the United States land that became the present-day states of California, New Mexico, Nevada, and parts of Colorado, Arizona, Utah, and Oklahoma; land that had once included Aztlán.”² Even though the treaty promised U.S. citizenship to former Mexican citizens, including maintaining their property rights, within one generation the Mexican-Americans became a disenfranchised, poverty-stricken minority who felt like foreigners in their own land.

The subsequent physical borders that were set up to mark the U.S./Mexico territorial lines reflect an imaginary space where residents contemplate the abstract nature of “home” in a zone where migration, passage, and transition are the norm. According to one scholar, the idea of “home” differs from that of “house” because the latter exemplifies a concrete structure replete with edges, walls, doors, a roof, and so on.³ However, the idea of “home” is infused with abstract notions that signify rootedness or

domesticity based on personal or collective identity—which does not require a building. In one piece titled *El American Dream*, artist Narciso Argüelles exemplifies this concept by dividing the Untitled [ArtSpace] gallery in two, with one side representing Mexico and the other side representing the U.S.⁴ In this piece, the mock border check point signifies the physical and psychological barriers that crossers—from both sides of the border—face as they move across the margins. By delineating the space where the two nations supposedly meet, Argüelles effectively portrays the ambiguities inherent to the borderlands where cultures constantly encounter each other and hybridized identities are formed.

As a person who grew up on both sides of the Mexico and U.S. border, Argüelles sees his art as a way to affirm and document the daily lives of Chicano, Mexican, and Indigenous people through an exploration of identity. In *El Lowrider*, a 1969 Cadillac Sedan de Ville is placed in the gallery with a photograph on the hood of the car depicting a *cholo*⁵ as Popocatépetl and a Native American as Iztaccíhuatl. Both figures are contemporary stand-ins representing, in Aztec mythology, the doomed lovers who died of grief after losing each other. The mixture of pre-Columbian themes with modern adaptations of cultural identity outlines the trajectory of the Chicano Art Movement itself which, in the beginning, utilized iconic representations of Aztec roots to resurrect the lost land—Aztlán—emblematically.⁶ In the late 1970s, when the Chicano movement entered a less militant phase, the imagery and symbolism of the *pachuco*⁷ was infused into contemporary art and barrio life to instill pride in a new generation of Chicanos.⁸ As a symbol of cultural resistance, the *pachuco* (and later the *cholo*) asserted a new identity that did not derive from a lost origin. Instead, a new sense of cultural identity sprang from a type of “cultural cross-dressing” in which a simultaneity and multiplicity of identity were articulated on the street to locate a new economy of identity and power.⁹

As a former member of the internationally known Border Art Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo (BAW/TAF) from 1992-96, Argüelles continued the artist collective’s new outlook on the Chicano Art Movement begun in the 1980s. What the borderlands came to represent, at that time, was “not a physical terrain but an experience—the experience of living and moving between disjunctive worlds: Indian and European, Mexico and the USA, self and other, home and not home.”¹⁰ Partly borne out of a resistance to the racist representations of Mexican immigrants in the media, and the abuses perpetrated by Border Patrol agents and right-wing vigilantes, the BAW/TAF viewed the border as a metaphor for the Chicano experience.¹¹ As demonstrated by Argüelles in his piece titled *Los Targets*, anyone with access to the internet can play

the Border Patrol video game which targets and shoots Mexican immigrants. The apparent racial profiling and stereotyping of Mexican immigrants in the video game testifies to the continued violence carried out in this country against Mexican immigrants in both real life and the media.¹² By exploring unity and division, both in relation to physical and psychological borders (whether real or imagined), Argüelles' installation speaks to people of the Chicano experience for whom the border is "home" and a map is not required to establish a sense of self and community.

Shanna Ketchum-Heap of Birds
April 2008

¹Chicano/Chicana is "a term of self-designation for a politicized individual of Mexican descent in the United States. It came to prominence in the mid-1960s with the beginning of the Chicano civil rights movement [...] this term linguistically reflects the indigenous pre-Columbian roots of Chicano culture. (Richard Griswold del Castillo, Teresa McKenna, Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, eds., *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965-1985* (UCLA: Wight Art Gallery, 1991), pp. 361-2)."

²Jo-Anne Berelowitz, "The spaces of home in Chicano and Latino representations of the San Diego—Tijuana borderlands (1968-2002)," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 23: 323.

³*Ibid.*, 324.

⁴During the opening reception on May 9, a border guard will require visitors to obtain an identity card before passing through to the other side of the gallery.

⁵Cholo/Chola is "usually associated with contemporary life-style descendants of the Pachuco culture of the 1940s. Cholos and cholas follow strictly ritualized dress and behavior codes particular to Chicano youth-gang culture. (del Castillo, McKenna, Yarbro-Bejarano, eds., *op cit.*, p. 362)."

⁶Berelowitz, *op. cit.*, p. 323.

⁷Pachucos/Pachucas are "Mexican American zoot-suiters [who] were depicted as Mexican hoodlums by the press during the so-called Los Angeles Zoot Suit Riots of 1943. Chicano artists and scholars view the pachucos' defiance of assimilation as an early model of cultural resistance. (del Castillo, McKenna, Yarbro-Bejarano, eds., *op cit.*, p. 364)."

⁸Marcos Sanchez-Tranquilino and John Tagg, "The Pachuco's Flayed Hide: The Museum, Identity, and Buenas Garras," in del Castillo, McKenna, Yarbro-Bejarano, eds., *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965-1985* (UCLA: Wight Art Gallery, 1991), p. 102.

⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 101-5.

¹⁰Berelowitz, *op. cit.*, p. 333.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 334.

¹²Although Oklahoma is far-removed from the U.S./Mexico border, groups like Border Watch and the Minutemen and local lawmakers have taken on the issue of immigration, especially when House Bill 1804 was passed during last year's session of the Oklahoma