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The power of light: aluCine 7th Toronto Latin@ Media Festival's Uncontrolled Reflections

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The Power of Light: aluCine 7th Toronto Latin@ Media Festival's *Uncontrolled Reflections*

Curated by Hugo Ares, Guillermina Buzio and Jorge Lozano

Shift Gallery

23 March – 23 April 2006

review by Richard Fung

29
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Apart from news of political turmoil and natural or manmade disasters, Canadians receive scant media coverage from south of the Rio Grande. The cultural competence of non-Latinos may stretch little beyond the now almost clichés of Frida Kahlo and Gabriel García Márquez — perhaps Shakira or *Amores Perros* for the hip. So *Uncontrolled Reflections*, the installation exhibition of aluCine 7th Toronto Latin@ Media Festival, is as much a window as a mirror, revealing a rare view into contemporary art practices from the Spanish-speaking Americas. This places a heavy burden on curators, viewers and critics alike. What does it mean to present art under the sign of Latino? How might the label of an identity enhance or narrow our framing and understanding of art? Does it over-determine interpretation?

Working mainly from a call for submissions, the curators have chosen eight installations by seven artists. These span a wide geographical breadth as well as a range of artistic histories and influences. The word “uncontrolled” in the title signals a strategic selection that foregrounds transnational migrations, not only of people but also of ideas. Between birthplace and current location, the artists map out an urban network that includes Buenos Aires and Montréal, Barcelona and Mexico City, each locale representing a specific *mestizaje*, a unique commingling

of cultures and circumstances. In a diasporic framework, the exhibition demonstrates that Toronto and Manhattan are indeed Latino cities.

Uncontrolled Reflections contains mainly video projections and single-monitor installations in the pared-down format that currently predominates in the global art world. But there are gestures towards a genealogy of Latino/Latin American art practices and their social and political contexts in several pieces. The various wars of independence fought against Spain in nineteenth century Latin America were fuelled by the resentment of local white elites against the Spanish-born ruling class. When a change in rulers arrived, the indigenous and African masses rarely benefited, and Europe

Tracy German and Marta Cella, *A Scaled Down Universe*, 2006. Courtesy: the artists.



reviews



Above: Rubén Ortiz Torres, *Estudios para un Muralismo Virtual*, 2006. Courtesy: the artist.
Below: Claudia Bernal, *Chamanika Urbana*, 2006. Courtesy: the artist.

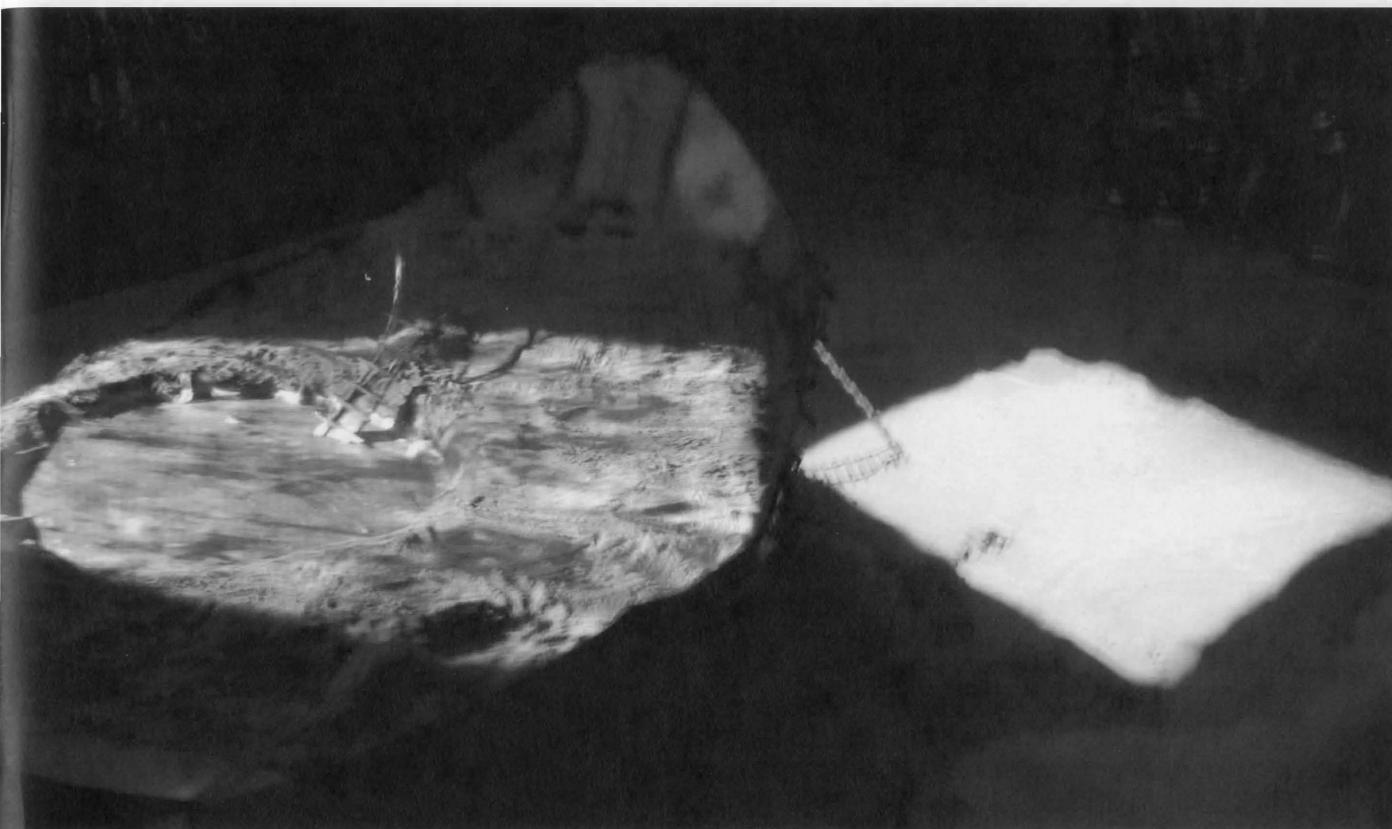
continued to provide the benchmark for art and culture. One of the legacies of the Mexican Revolution of 1910, however, was the affirmation of continuities to an indigenous Mesoamerica. In the 1920s, Mexican education minister José Vasconcelos hired artists Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros to paint the now famous public murals lauding the history of oppression and the revolutionary spirit of the Mexican people.

This important moment in Mexican — and international — art serves as the starting point for two projections by Mexico City-born, San Diego-based Rubén Ortiz Torres. In *Estudios para un Muralismo Virtual*, the artist engages photographs from Siqueiros' own archive, now housed at the Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros and made available online through An Image Bank for Everyday Revolutionary Life (<http://www.e-flux.com/siqueiros>). Image Bank commissioned Ortiz Torres among several international artists to respond to the archive. In Ortiz Torres' video study, a continuously morphing montage of posed nudes, gruesome corpses and snarling dogs, many familiar in their painted form, is projected into a corner of the gallery, echoing Siqueiros' celebrated manipulation of space. But the diminishment of scale, the transience of video projection as opposed to the permanence of wall painting, and the placement in a small private gallery instead of a large public institution domesticates and deconstructs Siqueiros' oeuvre, injecting a note of ambivalence. In this pastiche, Ortiz Torres enacts a post-modern strategy of foregrounding the chain of representation through the various relations of painting, photography and video, and thereby undermines notions of authenticity and

aura. The installation further prompts us to think about these media and their uses in engaging and mobilizing masses of people.

Extending the artist's exploration of the mural, available technologies, and a people's art, the witty *Manhattan Project* traces a genealogical line forward to graffiti, an art form with specific demographic associations. The video projection documents a moving van, its back fitted with a screen onto which a 3-D image of an elaborate graffiti signature, morphing and spinning, is rear-projected. The truck cruises the iconic streets of Manhattan tagging the city, as it were. In a further riff on the territorial imperatives of graffiti, Ortiz Torres projects his tags onto city walls already claimed by signatures. Positioned side by side, *Estudios* and *Manhattan Project* provoke interesting questions about appropriation, context and site-specificity.

By the 1970s and 80s, art inspired by the syncretic spiritual practices born of the collision of pre-Columbian, European and African religions became familiar in American galleries and museums — the altarpieces of Chicana artist Amalia Mesa-Bains, and the santería-inspired body work of Cuban-born artist Ana Mendieta come to mind. The only work in *Uncontrolled Reflections* that links to this strand of Latino art is *Chamanika Urbana*, by Colombian-born, Montréal-based Claudia Bernal. A video of the eponymous urban shaman is projected onto a shawl of white feathers suspended above a ritualistic assemblage of stone, corn and gourds filled with what appear to be offerings in little cloth bags. The materials and layout suggest a pre-Christian ceremony, but the shaman is filmed on a busy



Tracy German and Marta Cela, *A Scaled Down Universe*, 2006. Courtesy: the artists.

Mexico City street where his smoke ritual, akin to a smudge, is presumably performed for money. *Chamanika Urbana* celebrates the endurance of indigenous identities and culture, but hints at the conditions of poverty that necessitate its petty commercialization.

Also replete with symbolic references is *A Scaled Down Universe*, a collaboration by Toronto filmmaker Tracy German and Argentina-born, Hamilton-based Marta Cela. The most elaborate in the show, the installation includes a large metal ship-

like structure covered in pictograms, a miniature pool on its deck and little metal ladders connecting it to an area of sand. Three 16mm film loops, flickers of colour and abstract patterns and a close shot of a woman's bare feet walking along rocks, are projected onto the sculpture. But where *Chamanika Urbana's* ritualistic references ultimately bring us back to the social, *A Scaled Down Universe* depicts a strictly interior journey.

The remaining installations in "Uncontrolled Reflections" are all male

self-portraits. In *Chamber Piece*, Buenos Aires-born, Barcelona-based Gustavo Caprín gives us a black-and-white video in which the artist's body mimics gestures from a book of classical European painting. We may see in it a homage to the conceptualism of early video art or a paraphrase of Oscar Wilde's witticism about life copying art. But made by an Argentinean artist living in the former imperial centre (if Catalunya may be so positioned), the video tempts a postcolonial critique about the criteria and process by which art and artists are measured.



Above: Gustavo Caprin, *Chamber Piece*, 2005.
 Courtesy: the artist.
 Centre: Gustavo Daniel Kortsarz, *A los 40*, 2005.
 Courtesy: the artist
 Below: Oscar Muñoz, *Narciso*, 2005.
 Courtesy: the artist.



Approaching 40, Gustavo Daniel Kortsarz decided to document the process of aging by taking daily pictures of himself. The photographs revealed little but when he was editing them, he became fascinated by the disintegration of the image. *A los 40* features a split screen image. On the left is a montage of close-ups of the Argentinean-born, French-based artist, clothed and unclothed, hair and beard slightly longer or shorter, tired-looking here, alert there. On the right is the same portrait but with the image breaking up and distorting.

In *Narciso*, by California-based Oscar Muñoz, a white sink fills the frame. On the surface of the water floats a portrait of the artist outlined in coal dust. The image is still at first, but as the sink slowly empties, first the shadow and the drawing that casts it begin to merge, then the likeness contorts until the lines of powder crumple into a scribble and is sucked into the drain. The reference to Narcissus falling into the pond enamoured of his own reflection is ingeniously invoked, but the piece is like a visual haiku, rich in signification.

Also by Oscar Muñoz, *Re/trato* is on its surface similarly a meditation on time and natural processes. But in the context of Colombia, it is hard not to read into it a darker premise. A small monitor mounted on a table features a grey field with a glass of water partially visible in the bottom left corner. A hand dips a brush into the water and proceeds to paint the portrait of a man, but the surface being stone or some other porous material, as fast as one section of the face is completed, the rest evaporates, forcing the painter to continuously and endlessly redraw the image. To apprehend the face being drawn, the viewer must combine the memory of the always just-vanishing brushstrokes with the ones being applied, leaving the features ever slightly shifting. In his artist's statement, Muñoz describes *Re/trato* as being about "the changes and needs of seeing oneself in the other." However, the hundreds of people who have been

kidnapped, killed or disappeared in Colombia's low-grade civil war inevitably haunt this piece.

Re/trato unwittingly provides us with a metaphor for the Latino presence in Canada: always in the process of construction, always changing through shifting patterns of immigration, always in negotiation with the dominant constructions of ethnicity and race, always in the process of recognizing and renaming itself. Since Latin American immigrants first started arriving in Canada in the 1960s, they and their descendents from countries with vastly different cultures, histories and economic and political circumstances come to suspend their former national identities, or at least hold them in tension with the diasporic pan-ethnicity of Latin American or Latino. A problem with pan-ethnicity, however, is that it can lead to a loss of specificity and encourage conflation and stereotypes. In the context of Canadian multiculturalism, it is easy for Latino to devolve into salsa dancing and ponchos. With their ambitious artistic agenda and their insistence on contemporary practice, aluCine is not only reflecting processes and dilemmas of identity and community formation, but also helping to shape them it.

Richard Fung is a Toronto-based video artist and writer. He teaches at the Ontario College of Art and Design.