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What to See in New York Art Galleries This Week

By Martha Schwendener, Will Heinrich and Jillian Steinhauer

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Raul Guerrero



Raul Guerrero's "Mujer del Puerto" (1993-98) at Ortuzar Projects.
Credit Raul Guerrero/Ortuzar Projects, New York

Through Aug 3. Ortuzar Projects, 9 White Street, 212-257-0033, ortuzarprojects.com.

Ales Ortuzar, a former partner at David Zwirner Gallery, opened Ortuzar Projects this year with an intent to focus on international artists who have not had recent exposure in the United States. His third show features Raul Guerrero, a San Diego artist who fuses traditional Mexican culture with conceptualism, video and painting.

The earliest works here are a series of bright, radiating and psychedelic watercolors from the early 1970s that depicts objects like a teakettle and kif pipe. Mr. Guerrero shifted into more autobiographical territory with “The Rotating Yaqui Mask” (1973), a kinetic sculpture activated with a floor pedal that refers to Mr. Guerrero’s Tarahumara and Yaqui heritage from Northern Mexico. A slow, cryptic video portrays a shamanistic “Tribal Act” (1973), while a series of black and white photographs titled “Obscene Hand Gestures” (1973) documents gestures derived from Mexican-American street culture.

The most captivating works here, however, are Mr. Guerrero’s paintings from the mid-80s to the ’90s that mix Mexican folk art with tourist-market kitsch and the Southern California subcultures of surfers, low riders, pachucos, Beats and motorcycle gangs. The dark and deeply colored “Pre-Columbian Lovers” (1985), “The Pool of Palenque” (1985) and “Vista de Bonampak” (1984) include Classical statues, landscapes, Gauguinesque women and exotic animals. “Mujer del Puerto” (1993-98) features a heavy-lidded diva with the word “Fin” painted over her face, as though we are witnessing the final credits of a telenovela or epic film.

Mr. Guerrero’s paintings recall David Salle’s work from the ’80s, but unlike Mr. Salle’s more generic pastiche, Mr. Guerrero specializes in mixing iconic and ironic images from the Mayan and Aztec past with the mixed-culture, media-saturated present. Seeing his work for the first time now, when we need to be reminded about the fluidity of borders, history and cultures, is especially instructive and gratifying. MARTHA SCHWENDENER