

THE TRUTH OF THE REGION: "LA REALIDAD:"
RECENT WORKS BY HECTOR RUIZ

LARA TAUBMAN/Hector Ruiz catalogue essay
Heard Museum, Phoenix, Arizona/ July, 2005 – June, 2006.

The power of memory and how it recalls individuality begins in such basic experiences as the ability to link internal ideas to external manifestations of those ideas. Memories as simple as an old toy or a street can set off a chain reaction of thoughts that snowball into issues as broad as nationalism, identity politics or a body politic to name a few. These recent works by Hector Ruiz encompass the broad, complex and often painful world particular to the Arizona and neighboring Mexican landscape. United States and Mexican border issues, immigration, conflicts of gender and sexuality, urban development oblivious to the needs of the individual and the landscape, create a combinative world that is seen through Ruiz's own emotionally critical lense instead of through a universal one.ⁱ

Having grown up in the border states of Texas, Arizona as well as the country of Mexico, Ruiz consciously chooses to reside in Arizona because it is the most conservative of the border states. He prefers the conservatism because it is matched only by a rigorous activism that attempts to protect Mexican immigrants. Interminable debates of nation and rights are central to the life of any Arizonan. The fluidity of culture and peoples that are an effect of the border reinforce ongoing tensions such as nationalism versus cosmopolitanism, fragmentation versus unity, group mentalities versus individual ones and a host of others.

Uncanny in its historical reflection, the same set of clashes existed in pre- and postwar Germany at the turn of the twentieth century. A country faltering within its own fluid borders, its people felt their national, thus personal, identity slipping away in the face of internationalism, urbanism and industry. The vitality inherent to polarization, however, gave birth to the German Expressionist movement that became such a crucial facet of twentieth century Modernism. Although late nineteenth and early twentieth century Germany's search for one nation/one identity is notably less complex than the United States' Mexican border issues of today; there is a comparable rift in identity experienced by both Mexicans and Americans in addition to the difficulties that originate from the continuous social readjusting necessitated by globalization.

Lightly referencing many of the various schools and artists from the thirty some year period of German Expressionism, Ruiz draws a singular inspiration from the artist Max Beckmann. Beckmann, the German Expressionist who defies many of his contemporaries with an insistent individuality, develops his own language through paintings and prints using tense, conflicted compositions, broad, black lines, and densely inhabited surfaces that bow with the tension of their relationship to the two-dimensional background.

More contemporary artists who emerge in Beckmann's wake also create fertile ground for Ruiz. In the late sixties and nineteen-seventies, Phillip Guston's strong, choppy lines and, use of black as a color, (in such a way that it is an unmistakable nod to Beckmann) makes way for his subject matter of bodies, body parts and heads.ⁱⁱ In the nineteen-eighties, Jean-Michel Basquiat also makes reference to both Beckmann and Guston, with his abundant use of bodies, its parts, animals, archetypal symbols, figures and densely packed surfaces.

Undoubtedly these influences transform into a hybrid mixture when seen in conjunction with nineteenth century Mexican political cartoonist Jose Guadalupe Posada's works. Posada's cartoons are ubiquitous stylistically and are still used in modes of Mexican popular art today. The cartoonish, raw, woodblock print style of skeletons lampooning reporters and political figures parallel the vision of the aforementioned artists who drive toward the truth at breakneck speed. Like his forebears, Ruiz uses truth as a weapon or tool employing the "...ancient, traditional and deep-rooted foundations..." of his Mexican, Native American and American background to wrench back the veil of over-development, the sterilizing effects of globalization and the havoc wreaked by border conflicts.ⁱⁱⁱ

After graduating with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Arizona State University in 1994, Ruiz quickly sought out alternative forms of art making and thought. He traveled extensively in India and Asia, where he co-opted ancient spiritual texts such as the Bhagavad-Gita and forms of Buddhist thought to help lay the groundwork for ideas that have fueled his current work.

Woodcarvings and wood block prints are his chosen mediums and benefiting from the advantages of being self-taught in these skills, Ruiz's woodcutting abilities concisely express his artistic intent. He is able to create and resource personal, visual statements and language through themes and repetitive images as well as to make

strong reference to craft in a way that transforms the strictures of "folk" art into a forceful regional language.

ⁱ West, Shearer, *The Visual Arts in Germany: Utopia and Despair, 1890-1937*. Rutgers University Press, New Jersey, 2001. p.77.

ⁱⁱ Rainbird, Sean, ed., *Max Beckmann*, Storr, Robert, "The Beckmann Effect." Tate Publishing, London, England. 2003. p. 42.

ⁱⁱⁱ West, Shearer, *The Visual Arts in Germany: Utopia and Despair, 1890-1937*. Rutgers University Press, New Jersey, 2001. p.34