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"Moctezuma's Revenge" at ASU Art Museum Exposes Mexico's Underground Drug Culture

KATHLEEN VANESIAN | MARCH 20, 2014 | 4:00AM



The timing could not be any more perfect for "Moctezuma's Revenge," the current exhibition of work by multimedia artist Eduardo Sarabia at ASU Art Museum. Curated by ASUAM curator Julio César Morales, the expansive show deals with Mexico's notorious underground drug culture and the deadly havoc left in its wake.

On February 22, Joaquín "El Chapo" (Shorty) Guzmán Loera, the elusive kingpin of the Sinaloa drug cartel – one of the world's most feared and wanted men – was busted in Mazatlán by Mexican authorities. Guzmán had been on the run for over 13 years after escaping from a high-security prison in 2001 by hiding in a lowly laundry cart. The purported romance, required subterfuge, lavish material excess, and brutal violence connected with the *narco* lifestyle, epitomized by Guzmán and cohorts, is artfully captured in coded form by Sarabia, who created work in a variety of media for the museum exhibition during a one-year residency at ASU.

Yes, in the artist's eyes, the real Moctezuma's Revenge is no longer a tourist joke about the consequences of drinking tainted tap water in Mexico, a curse visited upon the unsuspecting by the spirit of the defeated Aztec emperor slaughtered by *conquistadores* at the time of the Spanish Conquest in 1521. It's been replaced by the country's global command of illegal drug smuggling and dealing, a scourge much worse than a couple of days confined to your bathroom. It's estimated that since 2006, more than 100,000 men, women, children, and babies have been killed in the crossfire of raging turf battles waged unsparingly by Mexican drug cartels, not to mention the victims of its primary products.

INFO

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"Moctezuma's Revenge" continues through April 26 at ASU Art Museum, 10th Street and Mill Avenue in Tempe. For more information, call 480-965-2787 or visit www.asuartmuseum.asu.edu

Born and raised in East L.A.'s rough-and-tumble Boyle Heights barrio by Mexican parents, Eduardo Sarabia, who now makes his home in Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico, is no stranger to the international art world. Among other high-profile exhibitions, he's taken part in New York's 2008 Whitney Biennial, "Phantom Sightings: Art After the Chicano Movement" at Los Angeles County Museum of Art (2008), and the 51st Venice Biennale (2005).

Sarabia's forte is appropriating traditional Mexican folk art forms – honed to perfection over centuries and inextricably embedded in Mexican culture – to deal

with an insidious facet of present-day Mexican life, one once shrouded in mystery and still feared by all. Whether ceramics, stone carving, weaving, painting, or even ritual dance, Sarabia's art operates on multiple levels simultaneously, its often tongue-in-cheek narrative connections to Mexico's formidable historical past and highly conflicted pop culture present woven seamlessly throughout the work.

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And nothing says high-rolling, trigger-happy drug dealer like a ridiculously expensive pair of custom-made snakeskin cowboy boots, a symbol of high status and power among *narcotraficantes*. So prepare to be greeted at the museum's entrance by a set you can't miss. Sarabia's boots are carved from Mexican cantera stone, stand 7 feet in height, weigh 4,000 pounds, and feature smiley-face snake heads on their insteps, a more than passing reference to the bloodthirsty Aztec god of war, sun, and human sacrifice, Huitzilopochtli. These same boots, decorated with more malicious serpents, appear front and center in illustrated form in a pre-Columbian codex-like painting in the show, surrounded by marijuana leaves, and relate to the artist's real-life search for Pancho Villa's hidden gold stash using a map owned by Sarabia's grandfather. The painting features people who popped up unexpectedly during his treasure quest, including machine gun-toting *narcos* guarding illegally growing stash and locals who wanted to know what the artist was really doing in their neck of the woods.

Interestingly, Pancho Villa, a rapacious general in the Mexican Revolution who ultimately was assassinated, is now considered a full-fledged Mexican folk saint in a pantheon of dubious dead characters the artist freely co-opts in other work, including Jesús Malverde, the patron saint of drug dealers in Sinaloa.

There is no shortage of blue and white talavera pots, for which Sarabia is famous, in "Moctezuma's Revenge." Dating to the 16th century, this ceramic ware came from Puebla and was available only to the Catholic Church (who was obsessively into covering entire churches with talavera tile) and wealthy *gauchupines*. No longer the sole domain of rich folk, talavera has become a classic souvenir toted home by tourists and imported wholesale into the United States. Sarabia's design motifs eschew the tried and true, however, highlighting instead the lures drug cartels use to suck into their ranks young "soldiers" between 14 and 20 – pills, syringes, joints, booze, adrenaline-fueled risk and money as represented by gaming dice, and buxom, usually unclad women, a curious staple appearing almost daily in Mexican newspapers. Images of goats, parrots, and roosters also appear, common drug code for heroin, cocaine, and pot, respectively.

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What appear to be ordinary graffiti-tagged bedsheets, tablecloths, or canvases hanging in the show are as delusory as the drug world itself.

They actually are intricate,

handloomed weavings Sarabia calls *narcomantas*, literally "drug blankets." He commissioned weavers in Guadalajara to create textile versions of *narco* signs spray-painted on sheets and hung on freeway overpasses to direct passing drug mules to their destinations. On occasion, the signs are employed as no-nonsense warnings to cartel rivals, punctuated by dead bodies dangling next to them. Beatles' lyrics are favored as encrypted messages, like "*El amor es todo*" (love is all you need) and "*Amor es la respuesta*" (love is the answer).

GALERIA JAVIER LOPEZ & FER FRANCES

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Sarabia gives us a literal window into the hidden world of drug lords overflush with cash in *The Gift* (2008), the exhibition's *pièce de résistance*. First seen through a wire-embedded window and consisting of an odd assortment of multiple ceramic objects and shipping boxes stacked on industrial shelving common to big-box stores (yes, they have Costco in Mexico), the installation was inspired by the strange, usually garish acquisitions *narcos* are wont to acquire and display as booty – quite flagrantly in recent years on Twitter and other social media. Some dealer favorites popping up online include bricks of cash, gold- and silver-encrusted assault weapons, exotic pets like lions, tigers and jaguars, jewel-pocked hand guns, expensive cars, baggies of *sinsemilla*, over-the-top houses in the mode of *Scarface*'s cheesy Tony Montana (labeled by the media as *narcotectura*) and, of course, big-busted party pretties. Sarabia's take is a latter day, high-tech Mexican version of those 18th-century European *wunderkammer*, or cabinets of curiosities, filled with strange objects to show off one's sophistication and wealth.

Each of Sarabia's objects, some of which appear to be half-submerged, is a story unto itself, with *sub rosa* references to kitsch, smuggled drugs, ill-gotten gains, illegal immigration, and Mexican mythology. An in-your-face allusion to killing *federales* (Mexican federal police) comes in the form of a reclining fiberglass officer on one of the shelves. He bears a close resemblance to Juan Soldado, a folk saint executed for raping a young girl in the 1930s but very popular in Tijuana. Be sure to look for the ceramic mermaids, with their amputated tails on show separate from their torsos; they resemble blond versions of 19th-century Mexican religious images of *la anima sola*, a female soul burning in the flames of purgatory, shackled arms reaching heavenward.

Not to be discounted are the artist's large-scale paintings of photos taken during his travels and used as paint palettes in his studio. Opaque swirls and globs of paint partially obliterate the photos' subject matter. Toying with illusion and reality, Sarabia makes it hard to tell whether these are actually paintings or merely photographic blow-ups of defaced photos. In the context of this show, the imagery takes on an unshakably sinister quality, as does the rest of the work in "Moctezuma's Revenge." Deceptively artisanal in form, Sarabia's folk art-like creations in this noteworthy exhibition pack a punch you don't see coming, one that lingers for a very long time.