

NIGHT & DAY



VISUAL ARTS

WOOD CUTS

In Tijuana's "100% Mexican Beef" exhibition, Ricardo Sanders' works are executed in high relief in wood ... cut with a chain saw. Visual arts critic Robert L. Pincus takes a look.

ART REVIEW

MIXED MESSAGES

Variety of media make these exhibitions an interpretive exercise

By Robert L. Pincus
ART CRITIC

September 21, 2006

Teeth get your attention in Ricardo Sanders' art. So do eyes, because both are oversized.

They look doubly dramatic because these teeth and eyes, along with other features of the figure, are executed in high relief, in wood, with a chain saw. And as the method suggests, Sanders, who lives and works in Tijuana, is intent on creating work that emphasizes rawness over refinement and emotion over elegance.



Figures protrude from the surface of Ricardo Sanders' images. Some of them, as in "It's a Beautiful Day to Kill You", look as if they originate in some dark cartoon. Galeria H&H

This is a first solo exhibition in Tijuana – or in the region – for the artist, a native of Guadalajara who did some of his training in Germany. The selections in his show at Galeria H&H, "100% Mexican Beef," are a hybrid of painting and sculpture; they are mounted on the wall and pictorial, but rife with texture. The relief elements in plywood sit atop a jute or burlap surface on which he paints words and fragments of words.

The imagery veers toward caricature, suggesting influences such as Dubuffet, Keith Haring and contemporary cartooning in the Matt Groening mode. Sanders' overriding passion is for social commentary with a sardonic streak.

"It's a Beautiful Day to Kill You" may look cartoonish, but as its title declares, the content is symbolically loaded. There is a profile of a semi-human form in red gripping a green gun, as if he is aiming the barrel at someone or something beyond the picture's edge. Then, there's a painted panel within the picture, depicting a similar face, pointing a gun at the viewer. On the burlap background is a floral pattern suggesting either a landscape or wallpaper – a backdrop that is absurdly decorative in this disturbing context.

This piece is a tight exercise in black humor. Its subjects appear so enthralled with their weapons, so intent on using them, that they seem comically possessed.

Most of the other socially critical works don't have as much bite. "The Telemarketer" is funny, in a sneering way. The lone figure looks as if his work has made him deranged. He's surrounded by the word "statik" (German for static). His ears are swollen red appendages and he's excreting blood, in the form of red twine, from his rear. But Sanders' cartoonish likeness doesn't convey true anguish so much as a comic version of suffering.

The artist's grotesque beings often work best when he's least concerned with a specific message. Among the most persuasive selections is "Frustrated Art Work," which is apparently about the difficulty of making art, but the strange, embryonic form at its center lingers in the mind.

DATEBOOK

"100% Mexican Beef," wall works and an installation by Ricardo Sanders
Through Sept. 30; Galeria H&H, Avenida Esteban Cantu 2651, Colonia Davila, Tijuana; Free; 011-52-664-900-6133 or

Repeat appearances

The present changes the past in John Rogers' new pictures, which fuse digitally manipulated advertising images from the 1930s and 1940s with lushly painted surfaces. It's safe to say that no one who designed these images decades ago could have envisioned what the artist would do with them.

"Enigma Variations" is Roger's title for a fourth solo exhibition at the R.B. Stevenson Gallery. It is a departure from his 2003 show, "Architectonic," which featured meticulous sculptures installed to evoke an imaginary city.

Rogers, a professor emeritus at San Diego State University with a long exhibition history, has frequently explored architectural imagery in his pictures too, but that is not the case here. His sole subject is men in hats – more specifically, heads in hats. A small number of them – four to be exact – recur in variations.

They get bigger and smaller, retain their original shape and take on distorted dimensions. Mostly, they appear in neatly arranged grids. But there are exceptions, like "Structure 2," in which the versions are vertical stacks reminiscent of photo-booth strips.

Rogers' palette is often lush, and achieved with a combination of printing and painting. The black-and-white works use encaustic wax, which gives them a more velvety surface.

Though the human presence is central to this body of work, the repetitions make the subjects appear less than fully human, a set of archetypes rather than individuals. Rogers accents their anonymity by adding sets of numbers below some heads, in the style of routing sequences that appear on checks.

This body of work teeters between an exercise in skillful, tasteful design and an exploration of the ways that repeating an image creates mysteries not intrinsic to the original. Neither dimension entirely wins out and the tension between them isn't resolved enough to make these variations on a theme completely convincing.

DATEBOOK

**"Enigma Variations,"
mixed-media pictures by
John Rogers**

*Through Sept. 30; R.B.
Stevenson Gallery, 7661
Girard Ave., La Jolla; Free;
(858) 456-5620*

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