

## In Tijuana, art venues try to 'fill a vacuum'

By Sandra Dibble  
STAFF WRITER

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TIJUANA – The setting is serene: white walls with white tile floors, rooms where the daylight filters softly and classical music whispers. Few people here know about this cloistered space on a quiet street in Colonia Davila where bold shapes and colors fairly leap from the walls.

This is where Petra and Jens Herrmann have launched their quest to let the collecting world know about Baja California's growing circle of contemporary artists.

“We're convinced that their work is at an international level, only that they're not yet recognized,” said Jens Herrmann, a native of Germany who moved to Tijuana with his wife to open Galeria H&H.

While a flourishing of the visual arts has brought Tijuana a growing reputation in recent years, many of these artists struggle financially. Commercial art galleries have stepped in to fill the void, working to sell their work at home and abroad.

Today, there are three galleries, signs of the expanding cultural life in this city of 1.5 million people. Across from the Tijuana Racetrack, La Caja celebrated its first anniversary this week. Nearby, in the upscale Chapultepec neighborhood, Arte256 opened last September.

“They've come to fill a vacuum,” said Pedro Ochoa, former director of Tijuana's Cultural Center and currently cultural attaché at the Mexican Consulate in San Diego. “They can establish a different dynamic, they can help Tijuana artists enter new circles where they aren't that well known.”

On Thursday, H&H opened a new exhibition of sculptures and assemblages by Tijuana artist Ricardo Sanders, “100% Mexican Beef.” Its previous show featured 29-year-old Mexicali native



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Petra and Jens Herrmann in Galeria H&H. Daniel Ruanova's "Imperio MMV" is in the background.

Daniel Ruanova, whose most recent pieces evoke aggression and violence.

Ruanova's "Private Garcia," is a fluorescent red figure. And toy weapons form the dancing warlike figure in the piece titled "Emiliano y sus Aires de Grandeza" ("Emiliano and His Grandiose Airs").

With the gallery promoting his pieces, "they're opening up new possibilities" said Ruanova. "This allows me to dedicate 100 percent of my time to my work."

### **Universal outlook**

Alvaro Blancarte, a painter and teacher who has mentored many Baja California artists, says the H&H's arrival was a step forward for the state's arts scene.

"There's been no gallery in Tijuana with a project like theirs," said Blancarte, who has also exhibited there. "They have a universal outlook, I tell them, they are German Mexicans."

On a recent weekday afternoon, the Herrmanns bustled about, speaking to each other in German, meeting with a new artist who is preparing to show her work.

Petra, 59, is from Cologne, trained as a sociologist. Jens, 63, is a medical doctor from Hamburg. They grow animated and intense when they speak of their work with artists. Both share a lifelong love of art, and their living quarters upstairs are filled with paintings from around the world.

Jens Herrmann's previous career, as a public health physician for a German government agency, took him to Yemen, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Ethiopia and Peru. They lived in El Salvador before moving to Mexico six years ago to open a gallery in La Paz, Baja California Sur.

"Tijuana is by accident the place where we ended up," said Jens Herrmann who studied in London and speaks fluent English. "It could have been Singapore, it could have been Bombay; Tijuana was finally the choice."

Proximity to the United States was a key factor in their decision to move here, facilitating contacts in the U.S. art world. The gallery's aim is to project its artists far beyond Tijuana. They rely on the Web and outside contacts, and already they have presented their pieces at art fairs in Los Angeles and Cologne, and have been invited to Art Miami in January 2007.

Tijuana has taken some getting used to, they say. "Some of the groups are rather closed, and you notice that," said Petra Herrmann. "On the other hand, there are a lot of young people, open people, and that makes the dynamic of the town," Petra Herrmann said.

### **Tijuana art galleries**

#### **Galeria H&H**

Ave. Estéban Cantú 2651, Colonia Dávila

#### **Galeria La Caja**

Tapachula 1-B, Colonia Hipódromo

#### **Galeria Arte256**

Mérida 256, Fraccionamiento

Chapultepec

“It's so lively, and compared to some trends that we saw in Europe, they are much, much more expressive, aggressive.”



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Artist Daniel Ruanova was recently displayed by H&H. The centerpiece of the exhibition was "Emiliano and his Aura of Splendor."

### Critical mass

Tijuana's art scene is an evolving one. “When I came here six years ago, many of these artists had not been out of Tijuana. There was kind of a hermetic seal,” said Betti-Sue Hertz, curator of contemporary art for the San Diego Museum of Art. “Over the past five years, they’ve become more sophisticated and worldly.”

The quality of the art is mixed, she says, but an artist class has developed within Tijuana's social structure, creating a critical mass inside the city and projecting a collective identity outside.

A handful of artists, such as Marcos Ramírez and Raúl Cárdenas of the Torolab Collective, have gained individual prominence far outside the region. But many are still striving to present their work to a broader audience.

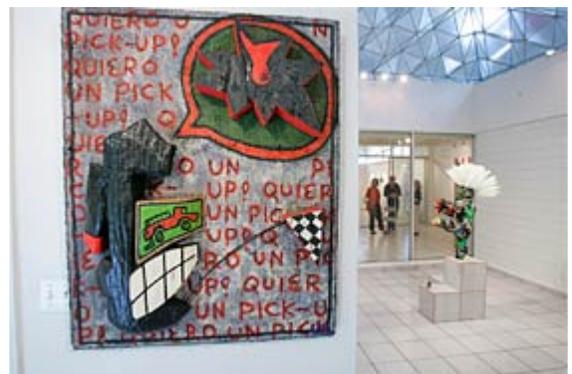
For years, local artists have relied heavily on public institutions for support, but independent efforts have been growing, and a series of projects have helped launch the works of many local artists on a larger stage.

The binational InSITE project has drawn an international spotlight to Tijuana since the 1990s. The Tijuana Sessions project featured the works of many artists at the ARCO 2005 art fair in Madrid. Tijuana Organic, a show featuring female artists from Tijuana, traveled to Manchester, England, and New York last year and now is in London.

Closer to home, the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, is currently featuring artists from the city in a major exhibition, “Strange New World, Art and Design From Tijuana.” The exhibition features 150 works by 41 artists, architects, designers, artist collectors and filmmakers, Blancarte and Ruanova among them.

“The visual arts are growing very fast in this city,” said Carmen Cuenca, InSITE's co-director and assistant director at the Centro Cultural Tijuana (Cecut), where she is heading efforts to build a new art gallery. But “the market is really difficult. You need people to start buying.”

While the Herrmanns' primary aim is getting artists known outside the region, the other two galleries have a more local focus. La Caja Galeria features its pieces at wine tastings and culinary events, as owners Ricardo Alvarez Cruz and Arturo Rodríguez



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Works by Tijuana artist Ricardo Sanders are featured in the current show at H&H, "100% Mexican Beef." Shown is Sanders "Quiero un Pickup."

say they want to build support within the community before looking outside. “We invite them to approach, to see, to know and to begin to get involved,” said Alvarez Cruz.

More commercially oriented galleries that also feature crafts and more accessible, decorative pieces are doing brisk business south of Tijuana in the tourist corridor between Rosarito Beach and Ensenada.

But the art galleries that focus on contemporary artists have yet to prove a viable business in Tijuana. Several opened in the 1980s and 1990s but did not survive. “They’d come to openings,” but otherwise, it remained largely empty, said Armando González, who ran a gallery in Tijuana for seven years, and now sells a broader range of pieces at his shop in Rosarito Beach.

The Herrmanns, who purchase most of the art they display, say they are not relying on walk-in business, but rather hoping to catch the eye of art critics and collectors outside the city. They say they have only sold 30 pieces so far, and have stayed open thanks to their savings and his government pension.

If they are not making money, that’s not their main goal. They are sustained by a vision: finding and nurturing artistic talent, and projecting it on a larger stage.

“We want to identify artists that haven’t seen the light of the world, and are not recognized because nobody is taking care of them,” Jens Herrmann said. “We want to lift them, and make them visible for the world, and then let the world decide.”

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