

Framed

Univision

Two Hispanic artists bridge that ugly gap between "us" and "them," and not because they're trying

By Christina Rees

The two young artists on display at 500X, Steve Cruz and Rosemary Meza, wear their heritage on their paint-and-wax-encrusted sleeves. Their two-person show is titled *The Passions of Santos, the Ecstasy of Malinche*, and

while plenty of people in my East Dallas neighborhood would know precisely who Santos and Malinche are, the majority of the viewers who step into the lofted art space on Exposition may not have a clue. White-bread Texas education—both the school and street kind—doesn't exactly overflow with Latin idioms and mythology, despite our proximity to Mexico. Unless you've spent some time in Spanish language classes with a particularly thorough instructor or spent hours in front of Telemundo, you're likely wandering around kinda numb and happy in your ignorance.

The character Santos, recognizable with his rotund naked torso and comically menacing wrestling mask, may resonate with a few more of the uninitiated than does Malinche, a Madonna-whore figure who looms with cautionary delight over countless Mexican-Americans. Like the Marlboro Man or Marilyn Monroe in the Anglo world, the über male and female symbols in Cruz and Meza's world are ripe for interpretation.

The danger in this exercise comes not from the subject matter, but from the artists' current audience: It's one thing to showcase incredibly sharp and instinctive visions of Latin icons at a community cultural center or during a lecture on ethnic art, yet another to bring it into the narrow, Euro-centric gallery world. There's a reason most art enthusiasts would rather gaze upon a David Hockney painting than a (Colombian-born) Ofelia Rodriguez sculpture. Unlike Rodriguez and her symbol-filled boxes, Hockney "speaks" directly to our ethnocentricity, or at least we like to think he does. Unchallenged, we "get" Hockney and his suburban Los Angeles laws.

On the other hand, there's a reason Pablo Picasso—painter of minotaur and Spanish wars—is considered by many of these same whitey art enthusiasts to be the finest artist of the century, if not all time. Put plainly, it's *referability* that gets Picasso in through that

guarded door. Universality and a sense of entitlement. While so many artists get mired in their own chosen or assigned ghetto—gender, ethnicity, politics, whatever—they automatically alienate themselves from anyone who doesn't share their concerns. Picasso, however, and every other recognized genius sidesteps that quagmire of threatening prejudice. He never ignored what he was (Spanish), but he embraced it only when it suited him and nearly ignored it when it bored him. And after all that, the highly ethnic *Guerica* is considered his crowning achievement. Sure, it's about the crippling horror of the bombing of a Basque village during the Spanish Civil War. But it relates the gut-wrenching impact of not so much a specific war as war itself: We see the bent and tortured victims, the wide whites of

wallpapered backdrops, the vacuous, cavalier looks on the girls' faces, the white-hot sparks coming off key body parts of Santos and company (butts, boobs, hips).

This seems the visual equivalent of depicting Superman or Troy Aikman as regular guys trying to get laid, hoping to convince themselves and everyone who passes by that they are superior, while their fame and power is mocked by the complexity of current gender twists and role expectations. The self-doubt that comes with courtship is the great democratizer of people (to borrow a phrase from novelist Nick Hornby): What do we really deserve, and in the end, do we want it anyway? The way Cruz interchanges and superimposes Santos' parts with girl parts brings up just how confusing desire and aggression can be, who's in charge here?

and for some god's sake, bodies aren't just bodies and Christ isn't just a messiah.

Well beyond Meza's envelope-pushing interpretations, it's her visual style that should stun the unwashed and the unprepared. *Gestural* is too weak a word for her figure-drawing ways, especially since the word's been warmed over in college art classes: Try "explicit," "baroque," "grotesque," "unflinching." David Cronenberg meets Lucian Freud meets Leonardo's figure studies. Meza's conte-crayon-and-pencil women have bodies that breathe and squirm on their own; their hands distend from their torsos with animal-like determination; their eyes gaze out at you with jarring awareness and serenity. Her men (yes, there are men, and babies) have penises that churn and roll toward some unnamed ominous goal. Babies take the milk from their

mothers' nipples with voracious mouths, and you can see it flow down their tiny throats.

Meza employs layers of information, each buried under the next and none less important than the last. Her nuances are as graceful as they are overwhelming. Light bounces off every fleshy surface with the ire and precision of Cubism, past and future movement is alluded to through spontaneous lines and guesses. You can see everything, every detail of her characters' physique: toes and toenails, teeth and gums—and yet all of it seems merely implied. The Body Electric as lowly organism, with the eyes the only sign of something beyond flesh and veins and sinew.

Some of her colored-crayon drawings are as airy and delicate as watercolor, with the striation of muscle and bone acting as fragile anchors; some of her dark and sepi-scratched works are as assertive and dense as any smoke-choked reli-

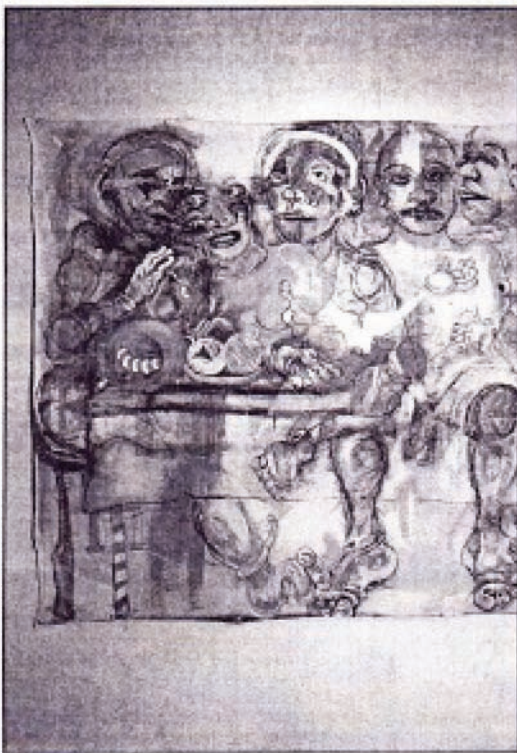
gious artifact. Her show-stopper, *Last Supper*, is a wall-covering monument on canvas depicting Jesus and his 12 disciples as non-gender-specific Malinches, each staring and groping and affecting the poses of other painters' variations on the theme. The figures are wise and dirty, knowing and repulsive. Instead of ever feeling amused or resentful of Meza's unconventional angle, you just accept it as a new kind of questioning reality.

These non-holy femmes seem about as real and valid as any Bible-painted vision of ethereal martyrs, so why not? Why bother struggling over subtext and sub-sub-references when you absolutely "get" the work to begin with? You couldn't miss the gut impact if you tried. ☐

The Passion of Santos, the Ecstasy of Malinche: Steve Cruz and Rosemary Meza. On display at 500X through May 2. 500 Exposition Avenue, Dallas. Open weekends. For info, call 214-828-1111.



Steve Cruz's comically sexual Santos; a detail from Rosemary Meza's ambiguous Malinches.



their eyes, and Ding! He calls it oil on canvas; the world calls it Masterpiece.

Cruz and Meza, too, transcend the specificity of their characters; Santos isn't just a crazy Mexican wrestler guy with a testosterone overload, and Malinche certainly isn't just some broad stroke of dual Latino sexuality. These two artists dose their art with generous allusions to that certain heritage, but use the human form and expression in the most universal way. We may not get the subtext, but we damn sure get the visceral gist.

In Cruz's rather comic-strip manner, power-myth Santos is reduced to Everyguy, suffering Everyguy's identity crisis: how to be larger-than-life and virile in a real, street-level world. The onetime actor-athlete-hero is shrunk to series-like panels, his erect pencil penis pushing through his wrestling briefs, while the neighborhood girls swish by with R. Crumb-like arrogance. Cruz's visual effects are intentionally simplistic and charming—the bright, rounded colors and

The comic-strip aesthetic makes the point even without Cruz's deft sexual insight: No one gets to be too cool anymore. There's always someone out there ready to take you and your ego down a few notches. Role model? Pop-culture king? Despite his bluster, manly facade, it sure ain't Santos, one-time Hero of Millions.

Rosemary Meza is one of those rarities—you may not have seen this crossover artist's work before, but it's been spattered throughout Dallas for a while now. Once you finally catch up, you won't forget it. Her subject-matter, Malinche, has been ducking and dodging and living with a questionable reputation for years. The press release simply describes the original character as a Madonna-whore defined by male lust, respect, and disapproval. Meza, in the stroke of inarguable giftedness, absolutely refuses that posit and proceeds to brain-scrape anyone who ever believed it in the first place. Malinche the myth isn't just Malinche the suspect female,