



Mitsy Ávila Ovalles, *Diva de Juárez: Todo un Señor*, 2004, mixed media, at Movimiento de Arte y Cultura Latino Americana, San Jose.

## 'Bustin' Out' at MACLA

**T**he exhibition *Bustin' Out* is a bold effort to crank up the heat in the art world, and light a fire under the tepid term "emerging artists." Curator Anjee Helstrup claims that, "the term has lost its novelty and fails to convey the fiery energy once evident when introducing new work by new artists." Helstrup has a point: Maybe we could come up with a term that's a little more exciting to describe the process by which an artist makes a mark on the art scene. Throw in some verbal pyrotechnics, and maybe a broader audience would sit up and pay attention to artists who aren't major brand names.

But then again, would that kind of hype really be doing the artists such a favor? Pulling a Saatchi and declaring certain artists to be the latest, greatest art stars is no guarantee that audiences will be duly awed by what they see—witness the (unfairly) virulent reaction to Damien Hirst, Tracy Emin and other talented "Young British Artists" anointed by the advertising mogul, and the sickening glee of the British press when Saatchi's warehouse full of their work burned down last year. Artists make an indelible mark not by curatorial fiat or PR puffery, but through a process that is about as fast-paced and exciting as

watching paint dry: a steady grind of learning, work and more work, ideas abandoned and begun again from scratch, and, well, a whole lot of waiting around for paint (or photo emulsion or glue or varnish) to dry. To suggest otherwise would negate all that effort, and risk reducing a hard-won career into a passing fad. Only very rarely does an artist suddenly "bust out," and this show is no exception—perhaps to the artists' credit. What we see here—particularly in the work of Mitsy Ávila Ovalles and Alejandro Oliva—are tantalizing hints of creative potential only beginning to unfold. In their work, these artists have provided more than enough reasons not only to pay attention now, but also to keep an eye out for them in the years to come.

Schoolgirl crushes and body image complexes peek through layers of glitter, scorched wood and drawings on food labels in Ávila Ovalles's mixed-media *retablos*. Gazing into these works is like seeing through the fog of nostalgia and layers of anxiety right into the heart of teenagedom, where identity crises and infinite possibilities strike an uneasy balance. How soon we forget the almost total identification with our teenage idols that Ávila Ovalles captures in *Diva de Juárez: Todo un Señor* (*Juarez Star: Total Man*), an ode to the Mexican music heartthrob Juan Gabriel. As with most teen idols, there has been much speculation about Gabriel's sexual identity—but Ávila Ovalles takes us back to a time when our imaginations could not be held back by such petty details. She has drawn her idol in a red coat with lapels like wings and a faint halo, and behind him she has scratched the words "No Tengo Dinero," the title of the 1971 song that made Gabriel famous. Beneath the gold glitter and dapper polka dots in the background are running horses and German shepherds, clever references to the famous horse petroglyph and infamous guard dogs of Juárez, the Mexican border town where Gabriel was born and now lives in a mansion his mother once cleaned. Yet this piece is not just an altarpiece to Juan Gabriel in particular or the cult of celebrity in general, but to Meso-American dream of the self-made artist who achieves success on his (or

her) own terms. *El Jale* is an ode to another Meso-American crossover sensation: corn, the key ingredient of New World crossroads cuisines. Ávila Ovalles serves it up here barbecued on a stick with hot sauce over a label for horchata, the cinnamon drink the Mayas made with cornmeal. In the background a lucky horseshoe hovers over the anti-Atkins admonition "don't be skinny"—a snappy comeback to the new religion of dieting that brings to mind the moment when America defiantly eats flan in Patricia Cardoso's 2002 film, *Real Women Have Curves*. This is zesty cross-cultural critique, with a generous helping of horchata humor that sticks to the bones and satisfies.

Angelica Muro also has some fun with conventional beauty standards in *Armpit Wax ... \$25*, which shows hairs torn out by the root alongside this wry, painfully obvious statement: "Warning! Waxing can be painful." *Finalist Interview* is another wickedly funny piece, showing an interview segment of a beauty pageant in agonizing slow motion. Muro doesn't miss a single instant of fluttering eyelashes, glossy lips gliding over Vaseline teeth, and eyes open wide with such exaggerated animation that they seem slightly deranged. There are several moments here when relentless perkiness makes these "scholarship program" contestants seem possessed by demons, and Muro wisely invites us to fill in our own running commentary by silencing the inane emcee hired to do the job. By comparison, *Make Me Pretty* fills in one too many blanks for the viewer. In this digitized image, the artist has turned a Barbie bust into a self-portrait dolled up with heavy makeup and girly pink accessories. But the differences between the idealized beauty standards we grow up with and the real ones we grow into are too self-evident here to provoke much further thought. Rather than forcing the issue with parody, Muro is at her best as a sharp-eyed observer who lets the ironies and inconsistencies of feminine ideals speak for themselves.

Oliva adds grit to Sol LeWitt in his photographs of stark, brightly colored buildings with minimalist facades enlivened by graffiti and grimy windows. *Coefficient may be overexaggerated, but it is still*

Oliva photograph where color plays against type. Here, sunny orange paint turns cautionary on a wall that has become a silent witness, with the scrapes and apparent bullet holes to prove it. This photograph is a reality check to every tourist shot of a quaint, colorful neighborhood, but also every action flick where violence is a gorgeous ballet.

*Bustin' Out* is interpreted perhaps too literally by Abraham Ortega, whose busy "Kustom Kar" babes painted in one-shot enamel might have benefited from some second thoughts. The glossy red lips and nails and hairsprayed-up-to-there bangs of *Pachua* are such dead ringers for a Nagel poster circa 1983 that they come across as nostalgic kitsch, and not much else. If a porn star grew a mermaid's tail and wound up on a lotería card, she'd probably look like *Sirena*. She has an "I Dream of Jeannie" high ponytail and Russ Meyer proportions, but there's no laugh track or outrageous title here to tell whether the campy humor of this piece was actually intended. Ortega clearly has a way with spray paint on metal, but here he's sticking too close to conventional hotrod imagery to really cover new ground as an artist. Once Ortega chooses his subject as carefully as he chooses his colors, as "Kustom Kulture" trailblazers like Ed "Big Daddy" Roth did, that's when he'll burn some serious rubber. No matter what the title of this show implies, no artist should be expected to go from zero to sixty in a gallery show or two. Ortega, Oliva, Muro and Ávila Ovalles have done what promising emerging artists do: give their audience something to look forward to, and get a headstart on the next stage of their career. The road ahead for all four offers enough artistic opportunity to last a lifetime, long after the novelty appeal of being a "new artist" has gone bust.

—Alison Bing