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A Mexican Artist Is Ready to Be Discovered, Again

Cisco Jiménez will bring his complicated vision of Mexico to Art Basel Hong Kong.

By Ray Mark Rinaldi

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The artist Cisco Jiménez is hardly a newcomer, yet he will be presented as an emerging artist in the Art Basel Hong Kong Discoveries section. "Heels and Stones and Some Fossils" (2022), one of the works to be displayed, shows a diagram-like approach. MAIA Contemporary

PUEBLA, Mexico — At 52 years old and with nearly three decades of exhibitions behind him, Cisco Jiménez is far from new to art making or the gallery scene, and in Mexico, where he lives, he is something of a living legend, breaking into the fine art world during the graffiti movement in the 1990s and sustaining a career ever since.

Yet, here he is, set to show this month at Art Basel Hong Kong in the Discoveries section, an area of the fair where galleries pitch the up-and-comers they hope will break through with collectors.

It is a funny thing, Mr. Jiménez acknowledged, and one of the quirks of the international art business, which has handed him both highs and lows. His exhibitor, Mexico City's MAIA Contemporary, understands that his fame does not fully extend to the Asian markets. So the setup introduces him to a new audience, but with the urgency of being one of the next big things it should know about.

"I will be presented as an eternally emerging artist," he joked, though making clear that the staging makes some sense. "It's a totally new experience for my work. I will have to confront a new public and from a distant context in all the senses."



Mr. Jiménez, 52, who maintains a studio in Cuernavaca, produces works that are specific to Mexico, referencing Latin American politics and current events, drug violence, the influence of U.S. pop culture and colonialism. MAIA Contemporary

Geographically, that distance extends all the way from Art Basel to Cuernavaca, in the state of Morelos, where the artist has long maintained a studio. But there is a cultural separation as well because his work is so specific to Mexico and full of references that define contemporary art here: Latin American politics and current events, drug violence, the pervasive influence of U.S.-made pop culture, and how so much of what happens today can be connected to the colonial upheaval that began five centuries ago.

Throughout his career, Mr. Jiménez has been making this portrait of Mexico, using common artist tools like paint, pen, clay and carved wood, but also a multitude of discarded objects he collects on the street: old shoes, children's toys, rusty saws, chipped plates, cheap religious totems and boomboxes. Mr. Jimenez uses lots of boomboxes.

He has conceived thousands of individual works, acrylic paintings, weavings, hand-chiseled sculptures and more that link together as a picture of his country as a whole and of Cuernavaca, in particular.

In his view, those places are defined by their contradictions — the things that show on the surface and the different truths that lie underneath — and his art illustrates that idea, sometimes literally. His paintings often unfold as anatomical or archaeological diagrams, with schematic cutaways that peel back layers allowing viewers to see the inconsistencies inside. There is a sense of a stable exterior, but a tumultuous core.

He often paints or draws internal views of stomachs, hair follicles or other organs. One example would be his 2014 painting “Triperío,” which the artist intended to capture the essence of being Mexican. It is merely a comic book-colored rendering of intestines with various bubbles of foods traveling through it bearing labels like “chilaquiles con pollo” and “huevos con chorizo.” People truly are what they eat, he explained.

Mr. Jiménez does not avoid vulgarity; his anatomical studies often include sex organs and they are usually exaggerated. Nor does he shy away from political commentary; among his most recent works is a series of fake ceramic handguns. The artist conceived the pieces and commissioned Indigenous women in the nearby state of Guerrero to fabricate them using centuries-old pottery techniques from their region.



Mr. Jiménez' “Turntable with a (Muestreario) of Organic Forms” (2020), featured at Art Basel Hong Kong, is one of thousands of acrylic paintings, weavings, hand-chiseled sculptures and more he has produced since emerging during the graffiti movement in the 1990s. MAIA Contemporary

Both the grotesque and the shocking have serious aesthetic purposes. They draw viewers close, where they then encounter Mr. Jiménez' more refined social observations. The guns, for example, are meant to show how people in Guerrero, now the site of frequent narco-violence, find ways to survive and maintain their lifestyles.

Those boomboxes are symbols of the affluence that Mexicans see across the border with the United States but that is often unattainable because of economic conditions at home. When he was a young adult, listening to bands like Talking Heads and U2, images of boomboxes were everywhere in the media, but he could not afford one himself, he said.

That desire formed him, and the metaphor has lingered in his work. For another recent piece, he collected old boomboxes and answering machines and gave them to other ceramists in Morelos to replicate in clay.

“He returns to the same preoccupations, the same symbols, and reuses them over time,” said Tobias Ostrander, a veteran of the Mexico City art scene and now the adjunct curator of Latin American Art for the Tate museum in London. “But they might mean different things at different moments.”

Other images and objects that recur in Mr. Jiménez' work include volcanoes, which can symbolize virility and power; sacred objects from both Catholicism and pre-Hispanic religions that have contributed to the deep divide in modern Mexican identity; and the wooden boxes that shoeshiners carry, which for the artist represent the resilience of people who find some way to make a living even when situations are bleak.

“As an artist, I take all this energy, materials and objects and, with a few changes, they are transformed into artworks that contain a rich variety of lessons and meanings,” he said.



Boomboxes, like this ceramic replication, play a big role in Mr. Jiménez' art, symbols of the affluence that Mexicans see across the border with the United States but often unattainable because of economic conditions at home. MAIA Contemporary

It is perhaps that repetition, or maybe his willingness to take his work in crude directions, that has challenged curators and critics to take him seriously at times.

"He's an interesting figure that has come in and out of visibility in terms of interest in his work over the past 30 or 25 years," Mr. Ostrander said.

Mr. Jiménez said he had gotten used to that fluidity and learned to adapt. His original success rode on a wave of wealthy collectors during the original dot-com boom and fell when the bubble popped. "I've had to reinvent," he said. But he stopped worrying about making money and decided it was best to just make art.

At present, his career is at a new peak. In addition to showing at art fairs, he is the subject of a retrospective in the city of Puebla's Museo Amparo, one of Mexico's most prestigious showplaces. The exhibition, curated by Mr. Ostrander, includes hundreds of works and traces his entire professional output.

The artist said that he was enjoying the moment and the attention, but that he was more interested in securing a legacy these days than building up sales.

"He's not passive with the work, but he's passive with the art world," Mr. Ostrander explained. "He wants to sell to make a living, but he's not out to be the most famous artist in the world."