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Exhibition Review: Park City
In and Out of Context
Jamex and Einar De la Torre at Kimball Art Center
by Geoff Wichert

To be effective, satirical artworks must closely resemble the objects of their satire. Doing so successfully is both a weakness and a strength. The same flaws that mar the original and inspire criticism must inevitably appear in the mocking version. But then recognition comes quickly to the audience. For better or worse, we know vastly more about a good satire on first viewing than we would about a more entirely original work. Examples abound in the main gallery of the Kimball Art Center in Park City, where a spectacular collection of extraordinarily large, representational glass sculptures by the brothers Jamex and Einar de la Torre is on view through April 18.

Most of the works, numbering about twenty depending on how one counts, fit into recognizable formats. Here are figures, ornamental vessels, and architectural bas reliefs from archeological sites throughout Latin America. In each case the familiar conventions have been subverted by the addition of found objects, materials, and references that are both contemporary to the audience and recognizably out of context. The results may be autobiographical, recording the artists' world-wide journey in pursuit of the opportunities to work in an art form notoriously profligate in its appetite for expensive materials, exorbitant amounts of energy, and large crews of skilled assistants. They may realign the audience's geopolitical polarities, severing illusory political ties in favor of common humanitarian interests. Or they may speculate about the underlying human conditions that are masked by frenetic global activity, regardless of whether it's political, economic, or something else.

Most human inventions have been turned to use in art so quickly that in retrospect they appear to have been invented for, or even by, artists. If anyone painted, inscribed, or modeled before the well-known examples of cave art, their efforts have not survived. Glass, despite its evident utility in containers and architecture, was so precious in the ancient world that non-decorative examples of its use are virtually non-existent before the Renaissance. For the Egyptians, the Romans, and medieval Europeans, glass was the ultimate luxury material, the equal of gemstones and companion to gold. Sad, then, that following its apotheosis in the stained glass that glorified and made possible Gothic cathedrals, the nature of glass as an expressive material fell afoul of a newly emerging aesthetic convention.

Glass is a natural comedian. Its viscosity—the taffy-like way it behaves when molten—makes it an exuberantly self-expressive medium of brilliant colors and visible-but-inaccessible depths, its best trick transparency: now you see me, now you don't. With its natural affinity for graphic line, discreet, even pointillist color, and balloon-like, inflated shapes, glass is never more effective than when presented like a cartoon. Look at the human figures in the windows of Chartres, unsurpassed for 800 years.

But in the Renaissance, taste shifted in favor of crafty displays of control that denatured the medium and attenuated it to an empty vessel. No medium better displays the now-universal divide between the values of the cognoscenti and the pleasures of the hoi polloi. An extreme example of the former is Dale Chihuly's Olympic Tower in the lobby of Abravanel Hall. I can admire its splendor and price tag, but cannot decipher what it's about. No such problem with

"Bolivar's Burden," Einar and Jamex de la Torre's wall-hung relief, which seamlessly matches antique symbols of Latin American cultures with today's degraded versions.**|1|** In a few square feet of bravura glass crafting, they replace the ingenious Mayan picture-based language with the corporate logo version we wear on our bodies and possessions and from which we take so much meaning and value today. This they identify as a kind of cerebral colonization: our minds wrapped with chains forged by enforced trade under the guise of free enterprise. They also compare auto upholstery to skin, finding a bias against dark, indigenous genes and in favor of bottled blond hair, and draw from an image of a chained leg that is also a map of the Americas a lesson about revolutions and revolutionaries. As stated elsewhere by the British rock band The Who: "Meet the new boss / Same as the old boss."

Similar simultaneous readings and layered meanings co-exist in every piece. Ribald humor and popular entertainments alternate with whimsical reminders of the violence pervading every level of society today. In mainstream US media such informed critiques must be leavened—we say "balanced"—by broadening them until any distinction between actual perpetrators and victims disappears. Not for the de la Torre brothers,**|2|** though: the use of glass aside, their multi-dimensional visual operas belong to a vital, popular, trans-national but substantially Spanish-language artistic tradition that has always resisted the dictates of powerful tastes. As a visit to Long Beach California's Museum of Latin American Art will show, just as Spanish is the only language that is growing in the face of the extirpating power of English, so Latin American art gives a voice to people who have learned how much they have to lose in the face of domination by greedy, power-seeking interests who are indifferent to the populations that stand in their way.

This is why *Inter-Continental Divide* belongs in Park City and Utah. Our formerly immigrant population has more recently shown a confused propensity for doing battle among ourselves while selling our resources to alien parties who seek to strip-mine the land and replace what they take with radioactive debris. While we identify, in our viewing and reading habits, with multi-millionaires telling us to buy gold—their gold, as it turns out—at inflated prices, we may actually have more in common with the comically distressed figure in "Crossing the Desert," shown crucified on a saguaro cactus, or "Bethlehem Boy,"**|0|** made during a stint working in Pennsylvania, which likens the worker-victims of the rust belt to mythic, costumed super heroes. In the scheme of things, these subjects, like the millions of United States citizens put out of work by the investment and real estate crisis, have been sacrificed to maintain the privileged lifestyles of investors deemed too important to suffer the consequences of their mistakes.
It would be critical malpractice to leave the impression here that *Inter-Continental Divide* consists primarily of angry finger-pointing and bathetic self-pity. Nothing could be further from the truth. Generating awareness of those whose greed and insensitivity create large-scale inequality and suffering requires presenting worthwhile alternatives, and it is vigorous life and the rich, sensuous pleasures it affords that make up the vast, colorful warp on which the de la Torre's tapestry of human folly and foibles is woven. Life should not be treated too casually, these skulls and disembodied hearts remind, but like the human skeletons made into candied treats of the Day of the Dead, they also argue that death should not be taken too seriously. Or another reading, present at the same time, is that connecting with the sensuous, physical side of being is as important as spending time in the dry, elusive world of thought. Gazing around the gallery, one encounters a fiesta of sensuous effigies: fruits, flowers, brilliantly colored ornaments everywhere. This exuberance and lust for pleasure overwhelm any notion that it's too late for us. In the world of Einar and Jamex de la Torre all things coexist at once, and being aware of the prodigious multitude is part of what constitutes living responsibly.

Inter-Continental Divide, an exhibit of glass art by Einar and Jamex de la Torre, is at Park City's Kimball Art Center through April 18.