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ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

Einar and Jamex de la Torre use their provocative mixed-media sculpture to comment on the religious, social and sexual riddles inherent in their Mexican and U.S. biculturalism.



ANNIE WELLS / Los Angeles Times

Brothers Einar, left, and Jamex de la Torre, seen here in their San Diego studio, are in "Crossing Boundaries" at USC's Fisher Gallery.

Exploring the Boundaries

By LORENZA MUÑOZ
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Thankfully for artists Jamex and Einar de la Torre, Rudy Giuliani is not mayor of Los Angeles.

Their mixed-media sculpture takes an irreverent, thought-provoking look at some of Catholicism's most sacred symbols: the Virgin of Guadalupe and the crucifix. Those symbols are used to comment on sex, love, money, gender roles, power and commercialism. Nothing is too heady for the brothers to take on.

But like Chris Ofili, the artist who drew the ire of New York's mayor with his elephant dung-adorned Virgin Mary painting, the De la Torres don't set out to offend.

Not that they are always successful in that regard. In 1995 in an exhibition in San Jose, a visitor broke all of their work in the show.

"I'm not at all worried about offending," Einar said. "I can defend the work. It's a very funny thing about sexuality and interpretation. In Mexico, the



USC/Fisher Gallery

Detail of Aztec calendar, "Oxymoderno/Oxymodern."

sexuality [in the art] won't offend nearly as much as the image of the Virgin. The United States is a very puritanical country."

The brothers' subject matter pertains to their voyage of self-discovery, challenging their artistic creativity, trying to understand the conflicted existence of Catholicism in Mexico, the clash between genders and their own relationship to Mexico—their country of birth—and the United States—where they were raised.

The current status of their voyage can be seen at USC's Fisher Gallery in a show titled "Crossing Boundaries" (also featuring Stephen La Ponsie and Ronald Gonzalez). In the De la Torres' work, they are, as Fisher Gallery curator Max Schulz says, "pushing the envelope in daredevil flirtation with vulgarity and bombast."

Their art, thematically a cultural stew of Aztec mythology, Catholic dogma and populist symbols of modern culture, is created with a hodgepodge of media—blown and vibrantly painted glass, pieces of

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Brothers

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leather, bottles, fabric, metal and pottery, and some knickknacks they collect from trash bins.

In one of the show's largest installations, "El Clasico, Virgenes y Cruces/The Source, Virgins and Crosses," 30 crosses and Virgin of Guadalupe images are lined against two panels, one behind the other. But the actual virgin has been removed, leaving just the aura that surrounds her, resembling a vaginal orifice. The virgins, with names such as Lolita, Alma and Marta, are in front. The crosses, bearing names such as Fred, Tito and Alex, are behind, visible only through the orifices. If religion is the opium of the masses, the brothers say, then the Virgin is man's entry into paradise—spiritually and physically.

"We are saying that Christianity is so patriarchal and the power is the Virgin of Guadalupe," Einar said. "The world became so patriarchal because men are afraid of women's power."

But some are not amused by the De la Torres' use of women's sex organs as symbols of femininity. The brothers are playing on a theme that has for centuries portrayed women as virgins/whores, reducing their identity to sex and reproduction, said art historian Shifra Goldman.

"From a craftsmanship point of view I think they are stupendous," she said. "But I find it's extremely decorative and it has an implicit sexism in the work. There is an objectification of women when women become represented by their vulvas. The meaning and context of this are problematic."

The brothers' take on the ancient religion of their ancestors is just as irreverent as their Catholic observances.

Their Aztec calendar, "Oxymoderno/Oxymodern," is a contempo-



USC/Fisher Gallery

The De la Torre brothers' "Serpientes Y Escaleras (Serpents and Ladders)" at the Fisher Gallery.

rary kitsch look at the sacred stone, using wire and metal, decorated with the masks of popular Mexican wrestling figures. These gods eat glass hearts drowned in a black mole sauce. Where Catholics take in the consecrated wafer that represents the body of Christ, the Aztecs devoured human hearts.

"The two cultures have a symbolic cannibalism," Jamex said.

In "Petite Mort (Muertecita)/Little Death (Orgasm)," seen through another orifice carved from a Virgin's image, is a male sex organ and beneath that is a hand clutching money. Symbols of love for sale, the power of sex and the role between men and women.

In "Serpientes Y Escaleras (Serpents and Ladders)," a glass-plumed serpent, replacing Christ, is wrapped around the cross. Stabbed through its heart, the serpent is dripping blood onto a pile of wine bottles littered at the feet of the cross—symbol for what the artists say was an alcoholic father.

"We have desperately tried to think of all the possible angles to our work," said Einar, at 36, four years younger than his brother. "We touch on the orgasm, necrophilia, oral sex, every taboo you can have."

Indeed, the De la Torre brothers cross many boundaries.

"The way they work with glass is so confounding that you begin to think of what glass, as a medium, can mean," said Selma Holo, director of the Fisher Gallery. "This real exploration of the boundary between Catholicism, the religion of the conquistadores, and the Aztec religion—they deal with this in an unflinching way, and the result of the crossing of the boundaries is a syncretism that is both troubling and stunningly provocative at the same time."

'We Don't Do Anything for Impact'

But the brothers reiterate their intention is not to scandalize.

"We don't do anything for impact," Einar said. "Hopefully you can get past that and begin a dialogue. The moment somebody stops to look at your work you have won half the battle."

Their art—loud, graphic and controversial—is everything that the brothers are not. Traveling in a beat-up old van, the De la Torres are modest in demeanor and hippie-like in appearance, with long hair, wearing huaraches and paint-stained clothes.

Born of an American mother and a Mexican father, the brothers moved to California from Guadalajara in 1972. Their mother had divorced their father and they settled in Dana Point, where they enrolled in a public school, a far different experience than their years in Mexico in an all-boys Catholic school.

Growing up in such a predominantly white enclave, the De la

Torres never really fit into their neighborhood. Far removed from the maelstrom of ethnic politics, the brothers didn't identify themselves as Chicanos. Though they never felt discrimination, they always felt their heart and soul belonged on the other side of the border. Still, they understood that they were not totally Mexican.

"We always felt Mexican," Einar said. "But we were always looking at Mexico with eyes from the outside. You analyze things differently from the outside. You look at everything with a critical objective eye."

After graduating from high school they attended Cal State Long Beach and from there began their artistic collaboration. Although their styles are quite different, with Jamex the more subdued, less talkative brother, and Einar the more verbal, expressive one, they collaborate well. Jamex is more of a sculptor and Einar the painter.

For the last 10 years they have shuttled across the border between their homes and studio in San Antonio de las Minas near Ensenada. Their other studio and loft is in San Diego.

They have never really settled in either country, and that's how they like it—getting a dual perspective on their art and life.

"There is a richness in the ability to live with contradictions," Jamex said. "Sometimes it gets confusing, but mainly it's good."

● "Crossing Boundaries," through Feb. 26, at USC's Fisher Gallery, 823 Exposition Blvd., (213) 740-4561. Tuesdays-Fridays, noon-5 p.m.; Saturdays, 11 a.m.-3 p.m.

● Another show of the De la Torres' work, "La Conquista Continues," is at the Daniel Saxon Gallery through March 1. 552 Norwich Drive, West Hollywood, (310) 657-6033. Tuesdays-Fridays, 11 a.m.-5 p.m.; Saturdays, noon-3 p.m.