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# frieze

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# Pacific Standard Time: Imports and Exports

Western art and Mexican culture collide in the work  
of Eduardo Sarabia

BY TRAVIS DIEHL

Mexico's narcos have their front pages and their murder ballads; Eduardo Sarabia has given them a craft tradition. The artist is best known for incorporating the girls, guns and goods of the drug trade into more traditional motifs, in ongoing editions of plates, vases, tiles and paintings (and even a skateboard deck) that imitate the blue and white glaze of Talavera ceramics. Pot leaves and AK-47s embellish the spaces between topless women and tropical birds; outlaw iconography emerges from the shadows to decorate flatware of the kind that is both used daily in the home and hawked to tourists in dusty streets. Such is an uncomfortable reality for Mexicans who detest the violent cartel wars, and a shameful titillation for those north of the border for whom the outlaw flare of minor El Chapos has become Mexico's new kitsch export. To the point, Sarabia exhibits his narco-themed vases on wooden boxes silkscreened with the emblems of grocery chains, produce or even Apple and Sony, cinching the knot of commodity and art with a nod to Andy Warhol.

Sarabia was born and raised in Los Angeles; by the time he was included in the definitive exhibition of contemporary Chicana/o artists, 'Phantom Sightings: Art after the Chicano Movement' at LACMA in 2008, he had moved to Guadalajara. The boomtown atmosphere of Mexico's second city seems to compliment the social nature of Sarabia's practice. In 2006, he ran the Salón Alemán in a Berlin basement, serving his own label of handmade tequila to discoursing art-worlders and working-worlders alike, and later reprised the project for the 2008 Whitney Biennial. In Sarabia's take, though, the conviviality of so-called relational aesthetics is cut by the export-exoticism of institutional valuation. If the art world would accept his tequila as art, Sarabia seemed to say, he would give it away for free.

This distillation of Western art and Mexican culture bites both ways. Sarabia's symbolism – from pre-Columbian cultures through Pancho Villa to the drug wars – glances off key styles of European/Western colonial modernism. For his 2016 exhibition at the Museo Tamayo in Mexico City, 'Plumed Serpent and Other Parties', Sarabia installed dozens of sculptures of birds native to Mexico (such as the long-tailed quetzal, of Montezuma headdress fame) in patterns around paintings that depict birds perched on giant green stumps or revellers circling thick, thorny trees in the style of Henri Matisse's *Dance* (1909–10). Some of the dancers are masked with cardboard boxes. For his 'Painting Memories' series (ongoing with different titles since 2008), Sarabia blows up small photographs of friends and collaborators that he has used as palettes, so that their faces dissolve into acrylic smears. The paintings made with these palettes owe their graphic structure to the Mayan and Aztec codices, the fragments of which constitute a pictorial language of gods and man. Human sacrifice of the 15th century prefigures that of the 21st: in one painting, below a trio

of dapper narcos and a few workmen chiseling a big snakeskin boot from stone, Sarabia depicts an OXXO Styrofoam cooler – the same sort that one cartel used to dispose of severed heads.

This month, to coincide with the Getty's Pacific Standard Time LA/LA, Sarabia will mount his first show in his home town in almost ten years. So far, the artist's braided narratives have played out across discrete pieces – a vase here, a figurine there – but for an unorthodox survey at The Mistake Room in Los Angeles (where Sarabia is on the board), the artist is completing a video installation that will animate his previous works as 'characters' within scenes from Mexican and American myth. The gallery will be broken into sets, including the back room of a border patrol station, an ethnographic museum and – what else? – a bar. This time, the stories told there will be Sarabia's own.