

Adrian Esparza

By Becky Hendrick



Adrian C. Esparza, *Here and There*, 2002, Serape (Mexican Blanket), plywood and nails, Dimensions variable

It has been nearly three decades since Jay Rosen observed that the arts of the twentieth century, written as well as visual, were becoming packages of disconnected stimuli without meaningful coherence. The current art world seems to be paying a great amount of attention to thirty-something artists for whom the idea of disconnection from meaning is contemporary arts orthodoxy. An unprecedented number of MFA graduates have been subjected to art school curricula that often emphasize theory as the starting point for creative work. The result is an abundance of hit or miss efforts that, on close examination, value irony and contradiction over other potential meanings.

These young practitioners respond to the Nowits' rapid-fire change, confusion, instant information (and misinformation) in a language so private, derivative and piecemeal that it is often uncommunicative. Much of what we are seeing by artists of this generation displays such a multiplicity of media and styles, references, quotations and borrowings that, even if it satisfies, demands be too much to be comprehended. What is increasingly difficult for the viewer to discern is the significance of this wholesale conformity that requires so much and often rewards so little. Yet, it can be worth the effort. From the clever, we hope to identify the smart; from the smart, we hope to identify someone making something that matters.

El Paso artist Adrian Esparza typifies the young practitioner who employs numerous voices, varied visual dialects and wide-ranging media and combinations. His paintings, drawings and sculptures defy categorization, save the generic catch-all term postmodern, and are best deciphered through their relationships to each other. What makes Esparza's work stand out from the current anything goes mentality of many artists of his generation is a psychological disequilibrium embedded in and submissive to formal concerns. His art, given repeated and sustained attention, is ultimately inclusive and surprisingly comforting despite its anxious edge.

Esparza studied art at the University of Texas at El Paso and later earned an MFA from California Institute of the Arts. Since graduate school he has continued a series of oil paintings begun in the mid-1990s in which surfaces of banal materials are photo-realistically reproduced. At first glance these seem like nothing more than routine student explorations of nontraditional materials and resemble trompe l'oeil paintings done by other artists. *95% Seems Awfully Close*, an early work of this type, presents a large rectangular plank that is divided and reassembled into four extreme triangles, with the surfaces apparent grain sealed in a golden varnish. The realization that this is in fact a laboriously painted illusion, accurately detailed down to the discoloration of wood filler in the slightly imperfect seams, ups the ante to what would otherwise be one more student discovery of a necessary yet predictable lesson.

Esparza returned to his native El Paso from Los Angeles in 2000. In re-acclimating to the realities of life on the border, he has questioned and to a great degree rejected his uncomfortable relationship with postmodern theory. At Conduit Gallery in Dallas and an upcoming exhibition at the Cue Art Foundation in New York City, the artist continues to expand and expound on the work begun a decade ago. His paintings of faux wood surfaces are becoming more complex and now resemble cut pieces of scrap lumber. He draws and prints on handkerchiefs, pillowcases and bed sheets with complicated retro-psychedelic patterns. He dismantles, edits and reassembles unglazed cast ceramic figurines. He creates formally austere wall compositions made of tourist shop fabrics and colored yarn. What unifies these bodies of work is Esparza's devotion to the ordinary, counterbalanced by his compulsive and methodical artmaking processes. Through the synthesis of material and formal considerations, these pedestrian objects and media rise to the extraordinary.

In the preface to the play *My Dinner with Andr*, Andr Gregory observed that an artists ideal creative life evolves along chronological lines. In his twenties, he learns the craft in all its aspects, techniques and materials. In his thirties, the artist acts with great passion, expressing and exploring all manner of ideas in every possible way. In his forties, he asks questions and, if he is lucky, that is all, thus preparing for a maturity when he can bring an authentic voice to what the decades have shown him to be important. Esparza's conceptual borrowings, particularly in his drawings and ceramic sculptures, may prove to be a transitional part of his development. He is now beginning to incorporate and integrate aspects of these series into a complex and more distinctly original mode of working.

Esparza's use of commercially cast ceramics is a modest tribute to a grandmother who taught decorative ceramic craft classes at a local detention center. In the hands of this CalArts graduate, the result has a psychodynamic quality which is discovered by us rather than imposed by the artist. Esparza describes these mutations clown upending into a bird, a two-headed turtle bearing a column of fruit, etc.as the creation of an exaggerated flatland of equality. The artist has recently begun

incorporating small tattoos of intricate patterns painstakingly lined in glazes of plastic-inspired pastels. He is also experimenting with projections of line drawings onto the matte-white surfaces of small sculptures..

The juncture of high and low esthetics and, more importantly, the transformation of one to the other, is best realized in Esparza's wall pieces. At first glance, these read as color field paintings that evoke Kenneth Noland's geometry and Mark Rothko's poetics. The work of Agnes Martin and Robert Rauschenberg also comes to mind. This expansive effect is derived from a couple of strips of rough wood, Mexican serapes and a handful of nails! Representative of this ongoing series is *Here and There*, which was purchased by the Dallas Museum of Art for its permanent collection. Esparza participated in *DMA's Come Forward* exhibition, a survey of emerging artists in Texas. In *Here and There*, a serape hangs on the wall next to its own translation, revision, reconsideration. The mass-produced blanket, with its bands of garish color, is connected by a single, suspended thread that curves up toward its larger companion. Vertical strips of cheap wood define the picture plane whose horizontal field of delicate lines travel back and forth between anchoring rows of common nails.

This piece possesses a self-contained singular beauty in all its aspects. There is something conceptually satisfying, even thrilling, in the way the woven blanket creates and deconstructs itself into infinity. The installation of this work, like the creation of so much of Esparza's art, requires precise attention, time and tedium. Its form, intention, content, materials and process are held in a delicate equilibrium. The formal resolution of its parts gives it a subtle yet powerful complexity. Although this continuing series of serape meditations originates in the cross-cultural language of the border, the resulting evocation of high Modernism's high achievers invites this work into a more inclusive and universal esthetic conversation.

Esparza's art tends to be impersonal: the faithful reproductions of wood grain, the labor-intensive freehand drawings of elaborate patterns, the manipulated cast figurines and the thread paintings reject spontaneity and disguise the evidence of the artist's hand into a mechanistic appearance. It is this impersonality and sense of

detachment that ultimately serves the formal attributes of the work. Through this odd union of detachment and passion, we witness the questioning of values which Modern art has always questioned: relationship, dualities, contradiction and wholes. In the serape constructions, Esparza gives us a portrait of a bicultural, multi-lingual artist (including the language of art) who has absorbed the traditions and lessons of high Modernism and incorporated them into his own cultural circumstances.

Though not overtly personalized, *Here and There* is especially evocative in its biographical implications: its low-art Mexican serape embodies Esparza's childhood, the location of his past as well as present life. The sophisticated abstraction of multicolored threads can be interpreted as a representation of the larger world of art history and theory, and even the universal. Which part is here and which is there is left for us to ponder since both elements are necessary to construct a whole, yet function as independent and equivalent partners.

Esparza admits that the content of his work is an afterthought to process, and that his artmaking decisions are primarily formal in nature. What resonates through all of his work, though seemingly unrelated, is a point of fragile tension that sets metaphor in motion. Border bric-a-brac is transformed into formalist sculptures. Elaborate drawings are committed to quotidian fabrics that exist outside of arts traditions. The unweaving of a tourist souvenir translates into a sensitive and poetic modernist (de)construction that reaches assumes the properties of abstract painting. This is irony and paradox in service to meaningful form.