

Phantom Sightings: Art After the Chicano Movement “Adrian Esparza,” Pg 140-143

By Rita Gonzalez



Adrian Esparza, *Baby Chihuahua*, 2007, ceramic, 10 x 7 x 4 inches

Working in El Paso, Texas, Adrian Esparza quietly transforms the material and symbolic transactions that constantly take place on the U.S.-Mexico border into objects that verge on abstraction but retain the trace of their domestic function, whether decorative or practical. In his sculptures and collages, Esparza recuperates the personal connections once held with castaway objects. The element of recycling and the handmade quality of craft surface continually in Esparza's artworks. For instance, inspired by the way his grandmother sutured together broken objects with frugality, in pieces such as *Baby Chihuahua* (2007) he has hewn together kitschy collectibles from hobby kits to create perverse yet adorable concoctions.

Esparza was first drawn to the serape, a colorful woven blanket that, due to its simplicity and utility, has connotations as a desirous and collectible textile in some regions and as a mass-produced tourist souvenir in others. While struggling to come up with work for his thesis exhibition at the California Institute of the Arts, Esparza turned

to the blanket that he had used during the months spent working in his studio. As in his subsequent work, he decided to recycle the materials that made up the object by carefully unraveling the yarn and then creating a new abstract pattern onto small supports. The outcome simultaneously evokes the modernist impulses of color-field painting and the postmodern repurposing of mundane craft objects.

Continuing to refashion serapes since the completion of his graduate studies at CalArts in 1998, Esparza has become more assured with the materials and has created more intricate and complex patterns. In *One and the Same* (2005), Esparza playfully takes the color palate of the serape—one that originally developed out of the colors available from plant-derived dyes—and charts the composition of a 1922 Audley Dean Nichols landscape painting, *View of El Paso at Sunset*, a work that Esparza knew from the collection of the El Paso Museum of Art.

In recent collage works, Esparza stitches together castoff T-shirts and posters, hanging them as an immersive installation on the wall. He purchases the posters from chain stores like Wal-Mart and Spencer's Gifts, combining them into unorthodox juxtapositions of military recruitment tools, music fan culture, and religious iconography. Esparza was drawn to the posters when he unexpectedly happened upon, as he says, "what appeared to be an abandoned teenage sanctuary from the late 1970s" at an open house in El Paso. He cuts the posters in strips and weaves individual pieces of two or more to create new, textured patterns and startling combinations of imagery. While Esparza has linked these works to the personal cobbling involved in quilting, he has also referred to the individual components as pixels. Thus, the distortions that arise out of pairings such as the Virgin of Guadalupe with heavy-metal band Iron Maiden function like the materializations of hiccups in satellite or fiber-optic transmissions. Esparza carefully choreographs this inadvertent espionage of individual signs and symbols.

Since so much of Esparza's work involves an almost compulsive pattern of repetition and determinedness, it is sometimes unclear how much of the element of chance comes into play. Yet his suggestion that the forms that occur in his work are inspired by "architecture, landscape, and alien forms that may rise over the horizon at any moment" indicates the playfulness and unanticipated eeriness that Esparza welcomes.