

Q&A: Artist Ruben Nieto

By Tina Aguilar

The State Fair of Texas isn't the only attraction found near Fair Park this month. "Pow! La Revolución!: Paintings by Ruben Nieto" at CentralTrak - the University of Texas at Dallas Artists Residency - adds to the buzz. This collaboration between UT Dallas' Center for U.S.-Mexico Studies, Arts and Technology Program and Multicultural Services resonates with a revolutionary spirit. CentralTrak provides a location where artists live, create and exhibit. The center invites the community to participate in intellectual conversations about the arts, bridges a range of disciplines, invites artists from many countries, and promotes innovative creative theories and processes.



Nieto's paintings symbolize his ongoing creative revolution, and the Mexican-born artist spoke with me this week about his work for the Art&Seek Q&A:

Tina Aguilar: Tell me about CentralTrak?

Ruben Nieto: On one side we have four grad students at UTD, who are MFA's and PhD's, and on the other side we have four students who are visiting artists from all over the world. They can stay for two weeks or eight months or a year. As a grad student you apply and submit your portfolio and there's a committee, they review your portfolio and then they select you. They let you know if

you are selected or not, and you are here for the length of your degree. I am the only one that is an original member from the very beginning.

T.A.: This space was created two years ago?

R.N.: Two years, yeah. We started in April, 2008.

T.A.: As a UT Dallas arts and technology Ph.D. candidate, where are you with your recent work?

R.N.: The idea of this comic series is from my comic book references. You know, I grew up reading comic books when I was a kid, American comics mostly more than Mexican comics, and I was always fascinated by that.

T.A.: And how did this influence progress with your art background?

R.N.: I studied fine arts and got my BFA degree in traditional fine arts like hyper realistic, real traditional painting, and then engraving and photography, everything. You know, in Mexico the system is a little bit different - it's five years of just fine arts. The idea of working with comics has been cooking for at least 10 years. I always wanted to do something with comic books. The time came when I realized that I started approaching comic books through a friend who collects them. I realized that comic books don't make sense to me as an adult anymore.



T.A.: How are you approaching this reality in your work?

R.N.: I am approaching comics from a formalistic perspective, and I am interested in the aesthetics, not so much the narrative. And with the comics, if I place or if I remove the text and put it in a different context, that text still makes sense. How can I create something that makes sense to me? I deconstruct the comic books and re-contextualize with a pop look into a contemporary style. What would Andy Warhol be doing today if he had a computer and Photoshop? I try to follow his tradition of mass producing and the idea of the Factory and the idea of why make it harder for you if you have people that can help you. The idea is what matters; not so much who builds the sculpture, who helps to create the installation, or who makes the painting.

T.A.: What does that mean for your process?

R.N.: I started doing a lot of research on that, you know, because for me it was hard being trained in fine arts. It was like: No - I have to do my paintings.

T.A.: Make your own creations?

R.N.: Yeah, it took me a while to resist that idea of letting someone else touch my canvas. I work on the image first, and so every painting has between three and five, eight different comic books. I select different pages from those comic books, and then I use the computer. I manipulate them using Photoshop. I don't use filters so much, but I cut, copy and paste little parts from the comic books. Then I create my own imagery. So once I have the final image on the computer, then I say, "OK, I can make a print and call it digital art, but I wanted to go back to the idea of making an original, an oil painting." I realized it was going to take me a while to paint. Then I started looking for assistants and the idea of how you become an art director. How can you start directing your own work and make it happen? So it's my way of challenging the art world and what is art today.

T.A.: How did you find your helpers?

R.N.: I was looking for local assistants here, and I couldn't find anyone. I looked and found some people in New York or Florida, but they were real expensive. And a friend of mine, who happened to be in China, said I am here and can look over here. So we started researching, and we found galleries, we found workshops, folks who do that; they assist other artists. So I finally said I have to give it a try and I wanted a challenge and do it a Warholic way.

T.A.: What is that exploration like for you?

R.N.: I work on the image the way I want it, and this is not going to change. Of course, the translation from digital to analog, I mean there's going to be some variations in texture and everything. So in the beginning with my assistants, four or five guys depending on the painting, we got to know each other. I had to explain to them what I wanted, like in terms of the background. Some of the backgrounds looked flat like a digital print, and I didn't want that graphic quality. So I tell them, "OK, we need to change the background." I am trained in fine arts, and I know how to mix colors. I used to create my own pigments, go to the mountains and look for different ones and create my own pigments from minerals and mix them with oils. Based on that I went back and said, "OK, I want you to mix these components with this and the oil." And the beauty, well, we are in 2010, so the oils that you can find here, you can find them in Mexico; you can find them in China. You can use a specific blue or burnt sienna.

T.A.: You're not sending these materials because they can acquire them?

R.N.: Yes, I e-mail back and forth to them, and I tell them. I explain what to do so it doesn't look flat, and that's how I direct and create these backgrounds. In other words, we go back and forth and back and forth and when I have it the way I want it they send it to me and then I finish. I add all the little components, little things. I correct things or decide to change a color. Many people were asking, "So, you're letting the Chinese guys do the painting and do what they want?" I said, no, no, the image is set and it's done by me. There

are no changes; it's just a translation. I am directing them, telling them what color to use, what to do in the background, so they are not changing the image you see on the computer. I want people to see the hand stroke; it was done by hand, not by a computer.

T.A.: These colors are vibrant. Some look like marker on the canvas.

R.N.: Yeah, that's the idea. And then if you look at it from far away it looks like a digital print. Many people think that's a digital print on canvas, but no, it's an oil painting. It's great, and like any old artist working with assistants, I can focus on the idea and what I am trying to communicate. On top of using comic books, I use real photographs that I create and manipulate to create these abstractions in the background. So it's a mix of digital art and painting and asking what does it mean to create from a digital medium and go back to an oil painting. It's my idea of doing something I that I really enjoy, and it's a lot of fun. At the same time, it's like a fresh perspective. It's nothing new, you know, it's been done before. But at least it's my perspective.