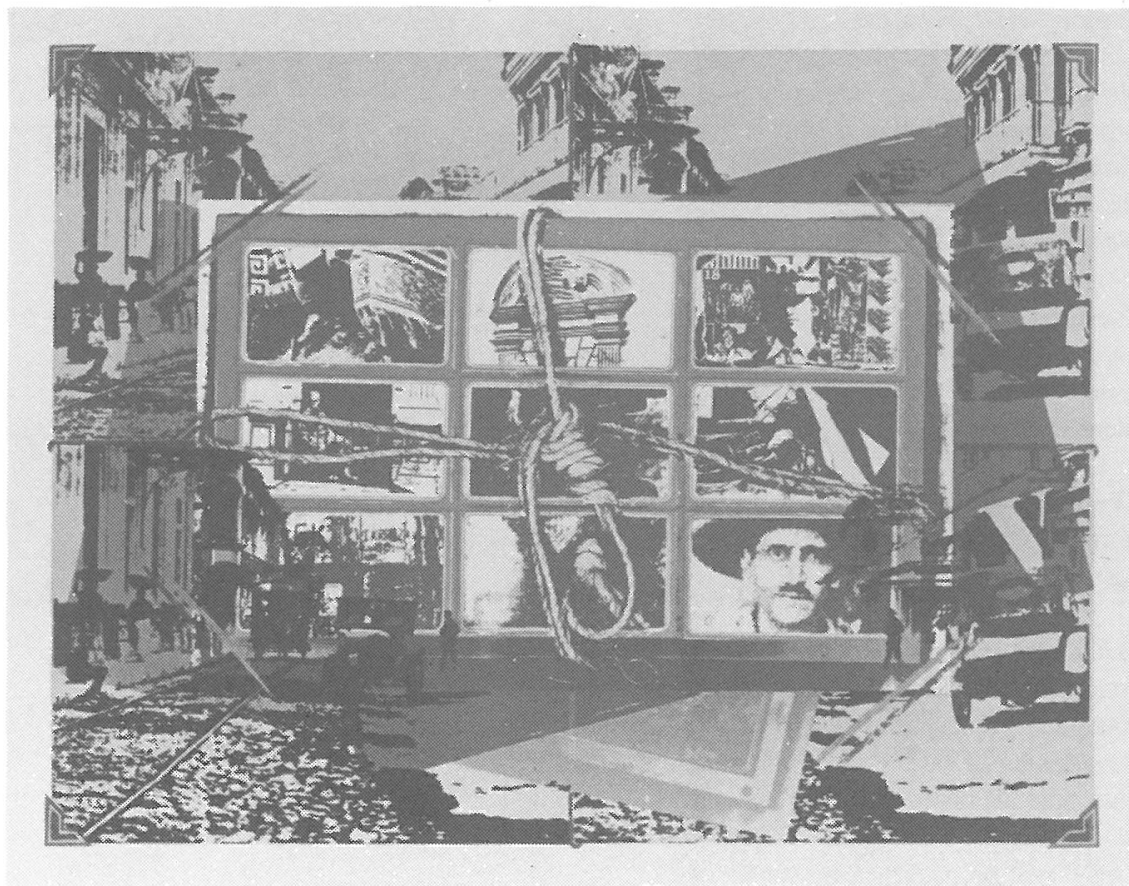


CHOP

Quarterly Newsletter of the Malaspina Printmakers Society



Profile: Jesus Romeo Galdamez

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"From the skin out...contradiction, compromise, communication..."

The works of Jesus Romeo Galdamez are not an easy read. They are filled with iconographic imagery which is almost completely foreign to Canadians, presented in a manner vaguely reminiscent of '60s and '70s Pop Art. Familiar yet unfamiliar, they speak of an extraordinarily complex culture which seems, amazingly, to exclude us completely!

Romeo's beautifully printed serigraphs first wandered into my sphere of vision about three years ago. I recall being left somewhat visually overwhelmed in an underimpressed way. What was this clutter of images? Eyes jaded by a decade of more TViet Nam are drawn to the familiarity of guerillas loping through some generic jungle, weapons poised/posed for the propagandist photo-op; faces of long-dead heroes and victims once made famous for their respective fifteen minutes by ABC and CBC confront the viewer, their once-familiar names now elusive: Marti? Sandino? Central to all, the ubiquitous native peasant carries on, tired and oppressed, in the midst of cultural, social and visual chaos. If this was political art, I recall thinking, it was pretty lightweight; if it wasn't political art, then it was mostly just pretty, what you might expect from a politically correct Andy Warhol stuck on fast forward circa 1980 with the entire Ink Dezyne palette and a dozen one-man squeegees.

Then there was Romeo himself: cheerful, soft-spoken, overly polite, he seemed the antithesis of the fiery Latino sociopolitical crusader we had all become familiar with, Fidel and Che for example. Although I did not realize it at the time, Romeo himself represents the very essence of what he identifies as a central element in his work, contradiction.

The next time I encountered Romeo and his work was in conjunction with two exhibitions in Vancouver in October 1992. Malaspina Printmakers Gallery hosted "Serigraphs - Retrospective" while Fifty-Six Gallery hosted "America/500/Latino". On October 22, Romeo presented a slide-lecture to students at VCC Langara, as he had done almost three years previously, complete with original prints spread all over the studio. This time I listened very carefully to the translator,

trying to grasp nuances that might be lost from Spanish to English. Romeo began by establishing a context, not so much of contradiction as of contra-distinction: "Someone once remarked that there are two kinds of artists - those who work from the skin outwards, and those who work from the skin inwards, that is, from interior sources." Romeo mentions this because his impression, albeit limited, of the Northern artistic sensibility is "skin inwards"; he on the other hand, works from the skin out. His sources are in the streets, the markets and people, the vibrant colors, clutter and structures thereof, everyday objects and images which, when collected, organized and presented as a serigraph may offer the viewer some clue as to the nature of the interior of what he calls a "visual pyramid". In another analogy, Romeo compares looking at his work to looking at a wall covered with posters and graffiti. On one level, it is just a wall covered with junk, but to the interested social observer it becomes a compilation of the past - ideas, information and communication, a minute cultural chronology of images and messages, lost and found. In Romeo's most recent serigraphs, overtly political images are not apparent. When we speak of this later, he agrees, pointing out that when he began channelling imagery from the street into his work, political propaganda was evident everywhere. Working now in Mexico, imagery presented to him is much more apolitical; contradictions are more likely to revolve around social and economic axes.

Later the same day, Romeo presented his slide-talk and prints to MPS members and guests. Convinced now that the "political artist" title was a misnomer, I listened carefully to Romeo's explanation of his work, rather than to the translator, hoping that with my slight acquaintance with Romance languages I might sense something else about the basic underlying structure of his work and ideas. During this session and a subsequent two-hour interview, three tenuous word-threads seemed to tie his ideas together, like one of the mysterious packages in his prints: contradiction, compromise and communication. And although Romeo uses these words in describing aspects of his

imagery, his processes and his purposes, it becomes clearer in retrospect that these words could also describe the phases of his artistic development.

Romeo tends to gloss over the events of his life: born in El Salvador in 1956, studied in El Salvador and Brazil, now lives, works and teaches in Morelia, Mexico. What he omits mentioning in the casual presentation of his work are some critical and understandably still painful events. After completing his education in Brazil in 1978, he was appointed to a prestigious position in El Salvador directing a publishing house for the Ministry of Education. Shortly afterwards he was arrested by the army for "allowing" leftist propaganda to be printed in his shop, allegations he denies, although he admits his sympathy for the leftist cause. He "disappeared" for three weeks, during which time he was subjected psychological and physical torture. He was transferred to a prison for political detainees, from which he now reckons he had about a one-in-twenty chance of coming out alive. He was held up to the public by the media as an example of a traitor to El Salvador. Three months later, after an international campaign by artists and Amnesty International, he was tried and convicted, and offered the "compromise" of exile.

Within these events were born the elements of which Romeo speaks when discussing the development of his work. He is driven to define and resolve contradictions, particularly those that plague the social structure of Central America. As usual, his analogies refer to art. He compares, for example, the nature of the painting process to that of printmaking when explaining his choice of serigraphy as a medium. "It is important to involve people. A painter works alone; he comes out of his studio once in a while to look around. It is an exclusive process. A printshop is inclusive, many people working together, exchanging ideas, helping one another. The doors are always open. A painting can have only one owner, it has limited access. A print can have many owners or be shown in many places at once to many more people. Painting is bureaucratic (in the Central American sense) while printmaking is democratic. Ultimately it involves the contradiction of values and self-interest of individuals versus the collective interests of a co-operative society." Most of this is old hat to printmakers, most recently the sort of old hat usually seen on pseudo-Marxist heads. Nevertheless, in a politically volatile society, contradictions in class values do translate into class-conscious social forms, whether it is the

galleries one goes to or the newspapers one reads. Even the choice of an art-making medium, as is Romeo's point, necessarily has social connotations.

Romeo presents his concept of social contradiction in terms of the street reality he sees every day. Traditional hand-made Mexican crafts are displayed side-by-side with cheap Taiwanese imports. Impoverished peasants are surrounded, literally, by colonial luxury; all that changes for them is the identity of the colonizers and the type of invasion they prefer. The "new world order" remains very much the same as the old. To try to imagine some future beyond the obvious disparities, to try to live and create within social contradictions, inevitably introduces concepts of compromise. This is not to be confused with moral ambivalence, the so-called "bourgeois compromise" of the existentialists, or the compromises foisted on the disenfranchised by intervening super-powers ("heads we win, tails you lose..."). Romeo tries to describe his sense of positive compromise by making another analogy to art: "In painting, even more so in serigraphy, once something has been done, you cannot erase that image, although you can try ... in reality, it stays there; you just keep fixing it ... and it can't matter how long it takes." As an artist - a word which he says he doesn't particularly like - Romeo sees part of his function within the milieu of social contradiction as being the seeker of creative compromise. To this extent, the "fixer" of contradictions (which in Romeo's prints start out by being reduced to "fixed" images, one of many double entendres which surface in our interview) becomes a contributor to a new or renewed cultural identity, which in turn will probably require further fixing. And, as Romeo points out, this is hardly unique to Central America; it is just more "urgent". Just as Taiwan moves into Mexican homes, he smiles, Mexico moves into California and Texas. The point is well taken - whatever political measures are undertaken to keep Mexicans south of the border for example, their culture flows over the Rio Grande and the Calimexican border as if they didn't exist, right up to Canada as a matter of fact.

As I speak with Romeo, the inherent logic of his visual pyramid begins to show itself. Just as serigraphy lends itself to potentially endless layering of images working towards a coherent "final" image, which itself is only one of many

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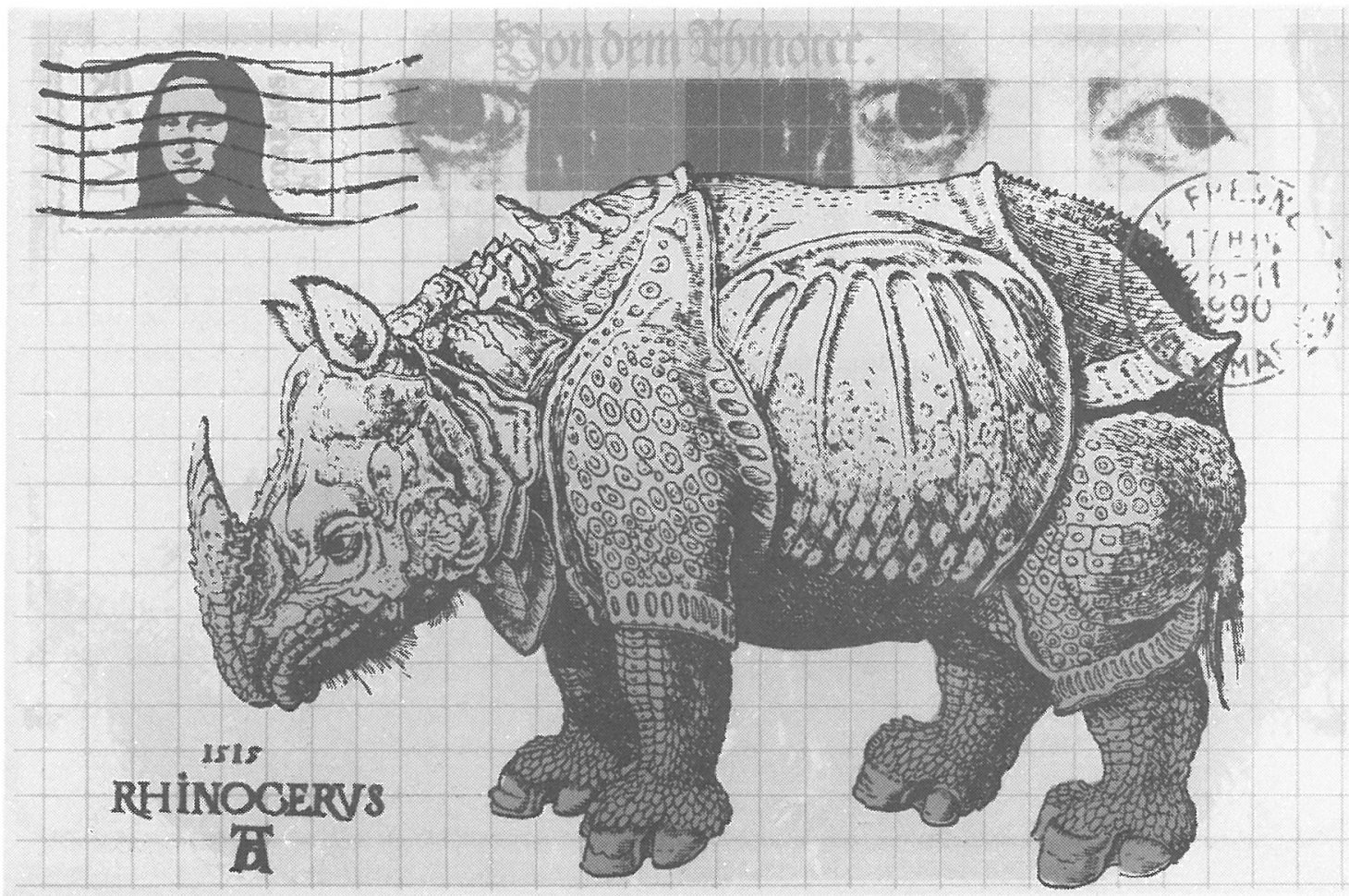
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possible final images, so the core of any cultural identity develops as an ongoing layering of influences, migrations, invasions and adaptations. What originally presents itself as contradiction must eventually result in positive compromise, or conversely, as has too often been the case in Central America, endless destruction.

For Romeo, a critical element of the contradiction/compromise process is communication. Despite deliberately choosing a medium which has traditionally been treated as second class, and by doing so clearly taking a stand "with the people", Romeo believes that his lower profile will be more than compensated for by the much greater accessibility that the public will have to his ideas through his serigraphs. This in turn encourages more communication, which in turn is the key to transcending traditional class boundaries. As an example of what he is proposing, he mentions an article about his work in Vogue magazine.

"Vogue?" I ask, incredulous. "Yes, Vogue." he answers, obviously amused at my question. "Most artists would not allow themselves to be associated with the magazine because of the values it represents. To me it is a forum to communicate with people I do not normally have access to. Maybe it will not change what they think of me, maybe it will even reinforce what they think of me, but at least it communicates to them" and here Romeo grins mischievously "that I am here."

The communicative aspect of his ideology has developed into a major tangent - a collection of beautifully hand-printed postcards which Romeo explains is part of his involvement with an international mail art movement of some five thousand artists. And, he concedes cheerfully, they do bring in some quick cash wherever he displays them. But I am reminded when I see letters and parcels in his prints that this is no frivolous pen-pal club. It has been twelve years since Romeo left El Salvador, and he is planning to visit soon. "I expect"



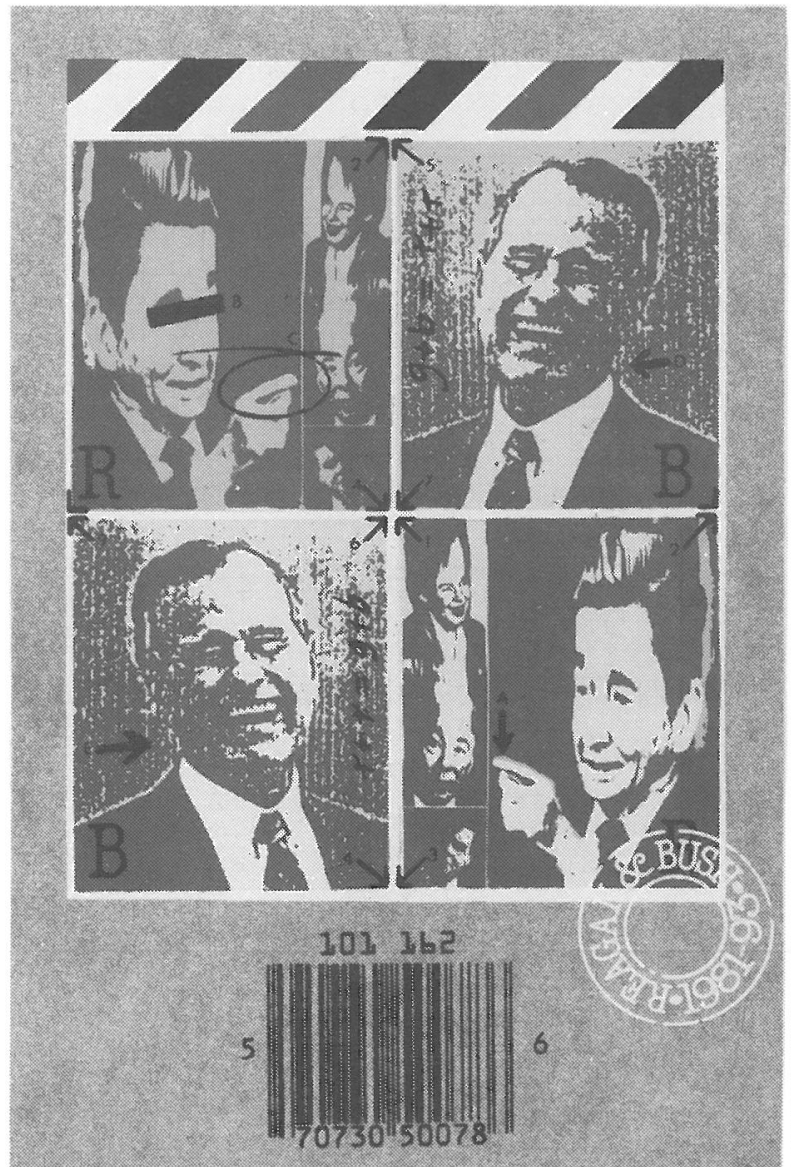
he says, his eyes following a blistering white Alaska Princess cruising slowly out of False Creek, "that things will have changed. I will probably start a new series..."

As our interview draws to a close, Romeo discusses his progress in Morelia. A small but growing group of ex-students have started a serigraphic movement in the city. When Romeo gets home he will have to begin working immediately on a large public mural. This too is a promising development. In one sense, it proves his point. "I came to Mexico with nothing. What people know about me they know because of my work. Usually these things are decided by who has connections, and," he concludes with obvious satisfaction, "I don't have any connections." With that, we finish our beer and leave.

A few weeks later, I came across a quote while looking for something else. It is from, of all places, Steppenwolf, Hesse's existentialist credo of 1929:

Man is not of fixed and enduring form. He is... an experiment and a transition...not yet a finished creation but rather a challenge of the spirit; a distant possibility dreaded as much as desired; the way towards it has only been covered for a very short distance and with terrible agonies and ecstasies even by those few for whom it is the scaffold today and the monument tomorrow.

Gordon Trick



PHOTOS - SAMPLES OF POSTCARDS BY JESUS ROMEO GALDAMEZ.