

Romeo Galdamez: "Piel por Fuera"

by Colin Fraser

Travelers to Latin America quickly notice it's different from the anglo-saxon north. Arrival in a Latin American country is an assault on all the senses, from the complete colour palette concentrated in a few square meters, the competition of car horns with the simultaneous competitive harangue of street sellers, to the choking smell of diesel fumes mixed with the sweet sensual smell of the tropics. In addition to this heady onslaught, one can be shocked by the contradictions for which Latin America is famous. Within meters one can either barter with a poor campesino to save the equivalent of a few pennies or buy a Coke in a 'supermercado' where the bill is calculated using the latest bar codes and scanning devices. Invited to someone's home, one enters the concrete floored 'sala' where one sits on a plastic covered couch. One notices the framed religious icon on the wall of the virgin Maria, the infant Jesus, or one of the handful of Latin American saints. Tucked around the frame are family photos. Perhaps one photo in this family shrine is of someone in military uniform. One wonders, depending on the country one is in, how many of his countrymen he has killed, or whether he himself is dead. Or one notices the

strong resemblance between the colouring and high cheekbones of the people in the photos to the depictions of the slaughter of their ancestors in murals in the local museum.

This and much much more is the raw material and inspiration upon which Romeo Galdamez calls. His work is complex and contradictory as is the environment around him and the place he comes from. Indeed some of his serigraphs have up to 100 colours, which is understandable and even necessary to communicate the ideas he is exploring.

The layers of colour upon colour are like the superimposition of culture upon culture in Latin America, with remnants of culture and colour insistently refusing to disappear.

Romeo likens viewing his work to viewing a pyramid from the top. It helps to understand that many of the pyramids and ceremonial platforms in Latin America were built one on top of another. That is to say that as one culture superseded the previous

one it renovated or build a complete new pyramid using the previous one as an armature. That practice continued with the arrival of the Spanish who built their churches and monasteries on top of, or using the materials



from, the existing religious or ceremonial constructions. So this analogy works in at least two ways. As a pure analogy what is on the top platform is closest and what is on the ground plane is farthest away, with what is in between represented by the various intermediate platforms. In this way the past and present can all be seen at the same time. The

other analogy is not what is visual, but what is known. Inside the pyramid are multiple smaller structures representing past cultures and past knowledge, like the annular rings of a tree mark, and form a bridge to events in the

can be literally translated as 'outside the skin'. He divides art and artists into two categories. The 'piel por fuera' school uses the exterior environment as inspiration. Socially and politically motivated art would fall into this

category. The other school he calls 'piel por dentro', or 'inside the skin'. This is a more introverted, psychological and self-analytical art. Furthermore, Romeo believes art in northern climates is generally 'piel por

dentro' while 'piel por fuera' predominates in the tropics. Of course like any theory there are exceptions and art which is both at the same time.

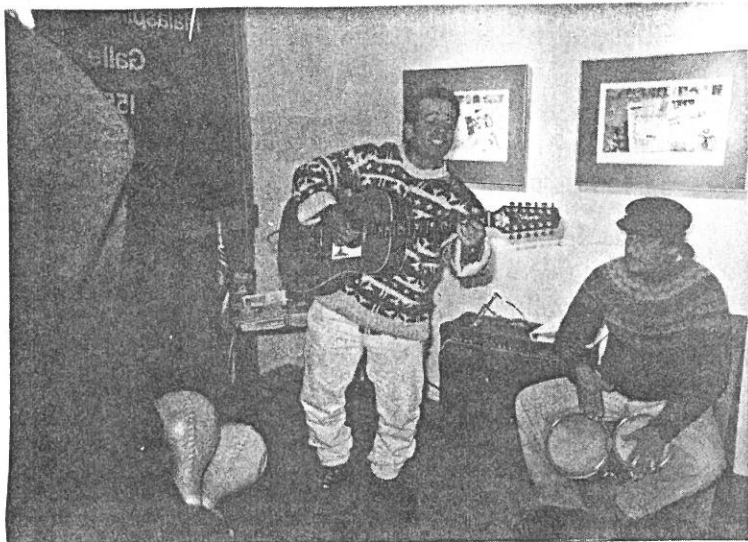
The art of Romeo Galdamez is not only socially and politically involved in theme but also in method of production. That is to say he produces multiple images and as such are less expensive and more accessible than one-of-a-kind works. He also produces post card size images which are still more affordable and could be perhaps found tucked into the frame of a "Virgin de Guadalupe" in a humble Latin American home. Romeo not only produces postcards but in many of his works can be seen tied-up letters and envelopes which not only

refer to his long involvement in mail art but also to repression ("tied-up-ness") during the years of civil war in El Salvador.

The events of the early seventies in El Salvador were instrumental in the formation of Romeo as an artist. Events and images from this period became part of a series of work he calls 'grafica testimonial'. The works from this series are a testament not only to the hopes and aspirations of this period of social struggle and unrest, but also to the repression and suffering which resulted.

Romeo took a strong interest in the 500th anniversary of the 'discovery' of America and produced a series of prints based on this theme. In this series, one can see multiple images of North American 20th century consumer culture juxtaposed with images of pre-columbian icons and peasant women carrying their children as did their ancestors before the arrival of Columbus or whoever.

Today Romeo finds himself coming full circle. After years of exile, he returns frequently to El Salvador. He has executed a series of public murals and will soon have a retrospective of his work there. Some of these pieces will surely contain images of, or will have been produced in Vancouver as he continues his artistic voyage of which malaspina Printmakers Studio is only the latest stop.



past. What is served by these analogous devices is not only the history of Latin America as seen by Romeo, but also the history of his own life. Indeed, his work is almost cinematic, a screenplay from which each observer can extract his own movie.

As those familiar with Romeo's own life know, the climax of his movie-life almost came too soon, during the beginning of the civil war in El Salvador. That event precipitated his move to Morelia, Mexico, where he now teaches and produces serigraphs. These years of teaching have enabled him to develop methods of explaining his work, such as the analogy of the pyramid. He also analyzes his art as belonging to the 'piel por fuera' school, which