

Benjamín Serrano

Origins of Bi-cultural Dialogues In Tijuana

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In the last 20 years, Tijuana has positioned itself as a symbol of the bi-national Mexican-U.S. dialogue in contemporary art known as the Tijuana Art Boom. Elsewhere, this production has consolidated itself as a proposal linked to the understanding between the two countries and a reference point and continual presence in the international art circuit. In the city itself, it is experienced as prolific activity, both by local artists and because of the innumerable bi-national, international, and national events hosted here.

In the 1990s, anthropologist Néstor García Canclini published a well-known book, *Culturas Híbridas* (Hybrid Cultures), in which he conceived of the concept of hybrid using Tijuana as a starting point. Sometimes, despite this, we overlook that this artistic boom is not the product of spontaneous generation: before the 1990s, artists with regional importance and others with international exposure had already settled in Tijuana. In the mid-1980s, under the tutelage of artist Felipe Almada, more than 20 artists lived bi-nationally, in a merger of cultures, in the Nopal Centenario (Centennial Cactus) Collective. Figures like Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Marco Vinicio Gonzáles, Papoleto Meléndez, among many others, coincided in Almada's time. Other precedents are unknown before that nationwide. However, most of the artists from Tijuana and

California, as well as a large number of California museums and galleries, tell us that someone preceded all of them: Benjamín Serrano. Serrano was actually the first bi-national artist. In the 1970s, he created an artistic language that was the product of a bi-national experience and held shows in the best known centers in California, in institutes and museums in the United States, and in several galleries in Europe.

This does not mean that there had not been art that connected the two countries on the border before. If the visual mother of Tijuana is photography, as renowned Tijuana photographer Pablo Guadiana says,¹ we have numerous examples. These include the Parker brothers, Joseph and Francis, whose photographs made known the nascent Northern Territory of Baja California, from the Tía Juana ranch to False Bay in San Quintín, Baja California, around 1870. Another is photographer-businessman R. W. Magruder, who photographed tourists visiting Tijuana in the early twentieth century when they wanted a postcard, dressed up as bandits or Mexican revolutionaries, as a souvenir and something to share when they went home. And on the Mexican side, we have the prolific

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documentary work of Kingo Nonaka, who photographed nascent Tijuana society—not the tourists—between 1924 and 1942: guilds, unions, popular fiestas, lodges, and associations.

The singular thing about Serrano, however, is that he was the first artist trained as such, born in Tijuana, who enjoyed a prominent career in the United States, living and working in his native city.

Benjamín was born in Tijuana in 1938. He began his art studies at 15 in San Diego, California. In 1957, he enrolled in the School of Arts and Letters of Guadalajara in Jalisco, which he only attended for a year because he found the atmosphere very conservative, but at the same time he frequented Manuel Fernández's atelier. From 1959 to 1962, he studied at the San Carlos National School of Visual Arts in Mexico City. He returned for a year to Tijuana, but, unsatisfied with what he had learned until then, he decided to go to Paris. He studied there from 1963 to 1965 at the National School of

Fine Arts and attended the atelier of Paul Cavigny, frequented by a large number of artists. It was there that he struck up his friendship with Francisco Toledo. In this formative period, Serrano acquired formal and conceptual techniques from different schools of art, like that of the Mexican school of painting and the European surrealist and geometrism schools.

Given the proximity of Los Angeles and Santa Barbara, Benjamín was familiar with the work of David Hockney, Ed Ruscha, Andy Warhol, and John Baldessari among many others. For the almost 10 years he spent away from Tijuana, Serrano returned twice or three times a year for family get-togethers or to go to special events. During those stays, he would visit the Ferus Gallery, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), and other centers. Fortunate as few Mexican artists, he managed to keep up a close connection with the United States and Europe that allowed him to always be aware of the international artistic expressions in vogue.

In 1963, the magazine *Art Forum* reviewed a collective show in San Diego, highlighting Benjamín Serrano's *Self-Portrait*.² From then on, he began to participate bi-nationally in collectives and contests. It was in one of those contests in which he participated as a judge that Eudora Moore, a curator of design and crafts, first saw his work. Its originality and perfect unity of art and manual work surprised her. Since



▲ *Malintzin and Her Maintenance Team*, 210 x 420 cm, 1985 (oil on canvas). Serrano Banuet Family Collection.



▲ *Man's Imaginary Sins*, 75 x 42.5 x 37.5 cm, ca. 1973 (mixed technique, painted wood, and metal). Jean K. Wickersham Collection.

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she was one of the key figures in developing Californian modernism (1954-1976), which dealt with the debate among craft, industrial innovation, and art, she thought it was a good idea to invite Benjamín to participate in the 1971 Design Triennial that she curated, organized by the Pasadena Art Museum. He contributed a work that was unique in style, was corrosively conceived, monumental yet homey, and organically fashioned, *The Archangel Gabriel with Adam and Eve, Holding the Wings of Masturbation, God in Command, and the Hand of the Virgin, Too*. Quite logically, after Benjamín Serrano entered this circuit, he received invitations to exhibit at the International Conference on Design in Aspen, Colorado, where, together with Robert Rauschenberg, he represented art.

So, in the 1970s, Serrano's work was shown in the most important venues in California: the Museum of Santa Barbara, the Baxter Gallery, the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena, the De Young Museum in San Francisco (where he inaugurated the contemporary art section), and the Craft and Folk Art Museum in Los Angeles. And with the exhibit "Ancient Roots/New Visions," his work, chosen as the cover art for the catalogue, traveled the United States, showing in Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Washington, D. C., and New York.

It could be said that the force of Serrano's work makes itself present in three dimensions. The first is in the strategy of appropriation, in which he takes elements from different artists and historic moments of art and makes them his, like in his *Untitled* (mouth and Coca-Cola). Because of this, we can say that Benjamín is perhaps Mexico's first post-modern artist, who for the first time utilizes this strategy, so common in today's art. The second is the theme of his works: religion, sexuality, and authority, seen through a filter of irony and biting critique, a form of expression distinctive of bi-culturalism, as in *Malintzin and Her Maintenance Team*. This makes the works agreeably irreverent, to express it as an oxymoron. This was also something novel in Mexican artistic culture. Before Serrano, no other artist had combined these topics frontally without being crude or discourteous, and he achieves this through his mastery in the use of humor and sarcasm. And the third dimension is the unity of "high culture" (the fine arts) and folk culture. His works, for example, are nourished by clay figures of Ocumichu, of Atzompa, of wood carvings, and of ornamented, multicolored wood in colonial churches (see *Man's Imaginary Sins*).

All these decisive dimensions of Serrano's work are a clear construction of his geographical and cultural condition, where

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The good, the bad, the sacred, and the evil
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he was born and developed. We now understand them as the result of the encounter of the cultures of Mexico and the United States, and, thanks to numerous studies that have typed them as expressions of transborder, post-modern, hybrid, *pochas* (Americanized Mexican), post-historic, or bi-national cultural expressions, we can assimilate them as a late-twentieth-century and transition-to-twenty-first-century phenomenon. What is more, I think that Serrano’s work is —to use the strictly military term, which I think he would love because of his fascination with authority— a “trans-pre-avant garde”: “trans-” because it comes after the known artistic avant gardes, and “pre-” because it is the predecessor to what has been called “trans-border,” which in the 1990s was the forefront and one of the vogues in contemporary art. All this because Serrano’s full language was consolidated in the 1970s.

This is clear from the exhibit “Benjamín Serrano: Transcendence and Avant Garde from Tijuana” that opened on August 10, 2012.³ For the first time ever, this exhibition brought together the artist’s sculpture, paintings, engravings, and personal documents. The show clearly arranges the works by decades, styles, and themes to give the visitor a guided appreciation, establishing the importance of the figure and the work of the artist who first situated border art on the international scene.

And as good border art, two values are important to underline in its relationship with the United States: the reception and presence of the border in Serrano’s work. Art critic Alfred Frankenstein wrote, “The Benjamin Serrano exhibition at the M. H. de Young Memorial Museum puts Mexican sculpture on the map for the first time since Cortes knocked Montezuma off his throne.”⁴ This categorical, forceful statement —whether true or not— demonstrates the acceptance of Benjamín’s work as a valuable, exceptional expression. He confirmed what Elsa Cameron, the curator of the De Young Museum, had noted when she first saw Serrano’s work during a visit to San Diego: she thought it unique and that it



▲ *The Archangel Gabriel with Adam and Eve, Holding the Wings of Masturbation, God in Command, and the Hand of the Virgin, Too*, 180 x 160 x 150 cm, ca. 1971 (multicolored wood, papier-mâché, and objects). Whereabouts unknown.

would do very well for inaugurating the museum’s contemporary program because of its connection with the baroque sculpture of the permanent collection. Ron Kuchta, editor of *American Ceramics* magazine, said about the show he curated for the Santa Barbara Museum:

Serrano’s art inspires a familiarity with the scenes and objects of Tijuana; it simulates its naïveté, charm, and madness, in addition to trying to interpret and express, often tortuously, the mind-sets that have created environments or actions proper to sexual traumas (like machismo), generated by religious beliefs, cultural lags and gaps, that a border city generates. His work also appropriates very amusing, habitual artistic interpretations, fraught with popular beliefs and superstitions of a previous culture, present and expressed in the lives and properties of thousands of human beings who live amidst the transition, amidst the confusion of the change of the kingdoms of Mexico and the United States of today.⁵

Taking all this into consideration, what is manifest is the recognition of the figure and the work of Benjamín Serrano as the axis of bi-national artistic culture. And despite his be-

ing unknown and sometimes forgotten, when we look at his work, we can easily recognize the common ground of ideas that show up in contemporary bi-national artists like, among many others, Einar and James de la Torre, Rubén Ortiz, Roberto Gandarilla, Hugo Sánchez, Gerardo Navarro, Hugo Croswhite, Charles Glaubitz, as well as in other Mexican artists like Germán Venegas, Rocío Maldonado, and Javier de la Garza, plus at least 20 more.

Yes, Tijuana is a place that has produced outstanding artists, but, in contrast with what has been said up until now, it is not

only in the last 20 years that there have been bi-national artistic dialogues. It is from the 1970s that in this land of fusion and hybrids, of codices from all over Mexico broken here and re-assembled there, that art has expressed itself so originally: through the work of painter, sculptor, and engraver Benjamín Serrano. He told us what he thought of himself, saying “Everything I have smelled, eaten, seen, heard, and touched has been my greatest influence. The good, the bad, the sacred, and the evil have been my teachers. My body is the tool that carries the artistic mind. My mind belongs to all.” **VM**

NOTES

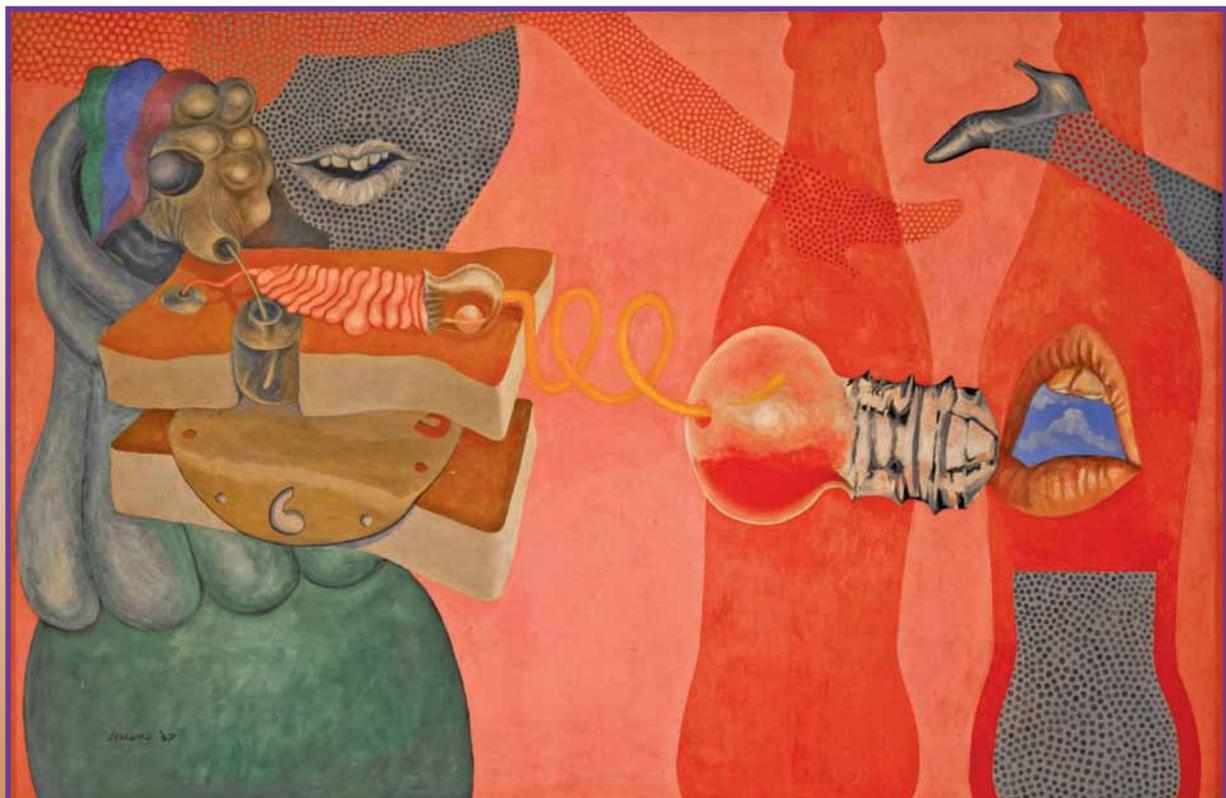
¹ Pablo Guadiana, “El fotoperiodismo tijuanaense,” *Obra negra. Una aproximación en la construcción de la cultura visual de Tijuana* (Tijuana: Cecut, 2011).

² For example, *La frontera interpretada: procesos culturales en la frontera noroeste de México* (Mexicali, Baja California: UABC, Conaculta/Cecut, 2005).

³ <http://vernissage.tv/blog/2012/08/20/benjamin-serrano-trascendencia-y-vanguardia-desde-tijuana-centro-cultural-tijuana-el-cubo/>.

⁴ Alfred Frankenstein, “Unique Mexican Sculpture. Surrealism and Satire,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 1973. Frankenstein (1906-1981) was a music and art critic, as well as a writer, professional musician, and a contributor to the *San Francisco Chronicle* for several decades.

⁵ Personal telephone conversation with the author, June 2012. In addition to being a magazine editor, Kuchta curated many art and ceramic shows and was director of the Santa Barbara and Everson art museums.



▲ Untitled (Mouth and Coca-Cola), 125 x 182 cm, 1967 (oil on canvas). Yeye González Collection.