

Rafael Alvarez

The World within Four Walls



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The difference between handicrafts and art is sometimes difficult to define. When it comes to Rafael Alvarez it is even more difficult; even when we assume no difference between the two concepts, how do we define Alvarez's work? Is it object-art, collage or installation?

It is impossible to choose. If, in the exercise of their craft, magicians seek at the ends of the earth and in the depths of the sea materials scorned by or unknown to others, and if the gods speak the word or blow on a handful of soil to create worlds,

then where along this continuum do we place artists who, with nothing more than chunks of wood and everyday objects, design scenes in which they depict at will the lives of us all?

Each of Alvarez's compositions is a portrait, an anecdote relating a moment in Mexico's history and its attendant dreams.

Rafael Alvarez Díaz was born in Mexico City on August 4, 1947. When very young, he moved to Orizaba, Veracruz, where he attended primary and secondary school. Alvarez describes himself as an observer: of Mexican life, of the techniques of folk art, of color, of the taste for variegated hues and detail. His enormous curiosity has led him into many activities: from the buying and selling of antiques and rare objects, to the formation of an experimental movie group, including his role as production assistant at the History Theater of Mexico. Alvarez's

interest in the history of religion has led him to the particular study of everything related to Christian symbolism. Later, as a curious observer of the ex-voto technique, Alvarez has even created religious ex-votos (paintings or boxes of various sizes where he depicts a difficult situation that has already been resolved, and in which thanks are being given to some divine figure for his/her intervention); lay ex-votos (in which the local apothecary, for example, is thanked for favors received); and a strange anti-ex-voto, in which he depicts everything that, despite promises, candles and flowers, the saint never actually did.

Rafael Alvarez began as a miniaturist by chance. As a child, he was given a box of miniature toys, made of clay, vegetable fiber and tinplate. Many people asked him to sell them that present, but that did not happen. This tiny fantasy world was the reason the artist would begin 22 years ago to devote his time and avid interest to working with minuscule objects. He decided to place them within a confined space and the result was a type of object-art that aroused the curiosity and admiration of the general public.

Each of Alvarez's compositions, whether of an old-fashioned house or kitchen, of a shop or a toy maker's, of a *jarciaria*¹ or photo studio, is a portrait, an anecdote relating a moment in

Alvarez describes his work as “a synthesis of frustrations.”



Detail of a typical town shop.



A portrait of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Mexico's history and its attendant dreams, a narration of local character circumscribed within the semi-cubic space of a wooden box.

Alvarez's themes vary tremendously. They include the fall of Porfirio Díaz's dictatorship, Madero's rise to the presidency; the link between the photographer León Toral and Madre Conchita, controversial figures in President Alvaro Obregón's assassination in “La Bombilla” restaurant; the village store and Cristeros;² figures from show business (such as the box describing the meeting between Pérez Prado, the celebrated creator of the mambo, and Fellini), and the infra-world of the fetish. In June 1988, in his amazing *Box of Solutions and Testimonies* Alvarez even included a pine cross to keep vampires at bay, “witch oil” to give us power over the minds of others, a hummingbird to win that desired loved-one, a deer's eye to protect one against the evil eye and a place to note down the testimony of anyone who has, in good faith, made use of the box's services.

According to Rafael Alvarez, the visual arts do not have to be divorced from the other disciplines. He describes his work as “a synthesis of frustrations,” something which can be perceived in the experimental nature of his work. Very often Alvarez's boxes have a text pinned to one of the walls, summarizing

what is depicted in the box; for example, in some boxes of shops the text will read: “Credit available,” “No gossiping,” “I don’t serve braggarts,” and in his *Box of Solutions and Testimonies*, there is a text telling the story of a woman who resorts to witchcraft to win her husband back. The box of solutions gave Alvarez the idea of using the Saint Benito ribbon (the white one because—Watch out!—the red is to send a man away and the brown one to put him in a coffin in three days).

This interaction among the arts can also be noted in other activities Alvarez is involved in; for example *The Offering of Light*, a piece of performance art using Alvarez’s work, an interplay of lights and music dedicated to dead writers, which has been presented in Mexico City, where the music was played by the Coyoacán Symphony Orchestra, and Havana.

Currently Alvarez contributes articles to *México desconocido* (Unknown Mexico) magazine on Mexican culture, for example the olive green presidential train and cemeteries of foreign communities in Mexico.

Alvarez’s work, known across the five continents, has been featured in more than 15 collective exhibitions. Some of his creations constitute important items in places such as the Metropolitan Cathedral and the National Auditorium in Mexico City; the Centennial Museum in Monterrey, Nuevo León; and in the U.S., the Mexican Museum in San Antonio, Texas; the La Raza Gallery



Detail of *The Toy Box*.



Detail of the *Box of Solutions and Testimonies*.

in San Francisco; the Grass Roots Gallery in New York; in the Caribbean House in Santiago, Chile; as well as in Belgium, France and Japan.

To date Alvarez’s work comprises more than 2,000 pieces. Each is set in the present, but it could refer to any period, more so because standardization, technology and mass production are casting doubt on the status of object-art: a unique piece, created outside the dictates of the clock and the utilitarian, immediate feelings that motivate creation. As a profound admirer of Juan Rulfo, Rafael Alvarez agrees that Mexico is a beautiful country, built on rituals, loyalties and respect for one’s word, on traditions jealously guarded and passed on, which should be propagated to illuminate the dark areas in our perception of Mexican-ness. Otherwise cross-cultural trends and a short historical memory might allow those areas to be filled with ghosts. ■■

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NOTES

¹ A *jarciería* is a shop that sells cord, brooms and cleaning cloths (*jarcias*), among other things. [Editor’s Note.]

² After the Mexican Revolution, the Plutarco Elías Calles administration imposed restrictions on the Catholic Church to try to create a more lay state. This led to the Cristera Rebellion (1926-1929). [Editor’s Note.]