



▲ February 17, 2009 in Reynosa, Tamaulipas, Mexico, 9' 8" x 20', 2010 (oil on linen).

THE HORROR IN BEAUTY, THE BEAUTY IN HORROR:

The Paintings of Rigoberto A. González

John Pluecker*

The wind rustling through the long grasses and mezquite trees. A heron alighting from its perch on a log partially submerged in a river. Songbirds chirping away in the bare branches of a tree in February. A mother searching for a way across a river and into an uncertain future. Two *corrido* musicians playing in an open field. A *concha* sweetroll reflecting the light off its yellowed surface. A mother wailing at the killing of her son. A decapitated head with the mouth covered with duct tape.

The work of Rigoberto A. González begins in the land, the water, the plants, and animals of his beloved home territory: those parts of Texas and Tamaulipas that straddle the sinuous route

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of the Río Bravo/Rio Grande just before it reaches its mouth in the Gulf of Mexico. Yet, in much of his work, human figures crowd the foreground, surrounded on all sides by the landscape; these humans are frequently engaged in violent acts or suffering their fallout. González's work is complicated and serious; his paintings lead us into a larger discussion about art history, regional realities, contemporary violence, and the all-too-human experience of great suffering.

Despite its contemporary political content, his work is grounded in the textures and context of painting, in the history and challenges of the most traditional of artistic mediums. From his first forays as an artist, González has been interested in the dramatic effects of the baroque period; these are the techniques and strategies that enable them to depict the intensities of light and deeply emotional representations of form and anatomy. Specifically, González builds on their techniques of extensive line drawing and preparation prior to painting: studying horizon lines, vanishing points, doing a detailed analysis of perspective and form. He often spends months on his initial sketches, meticulously mapping the larger works before beginning to paint. This detail-oriented process also led him to a deep investigation of anatomy and the structure of the human body, clearly visible in his paintings.

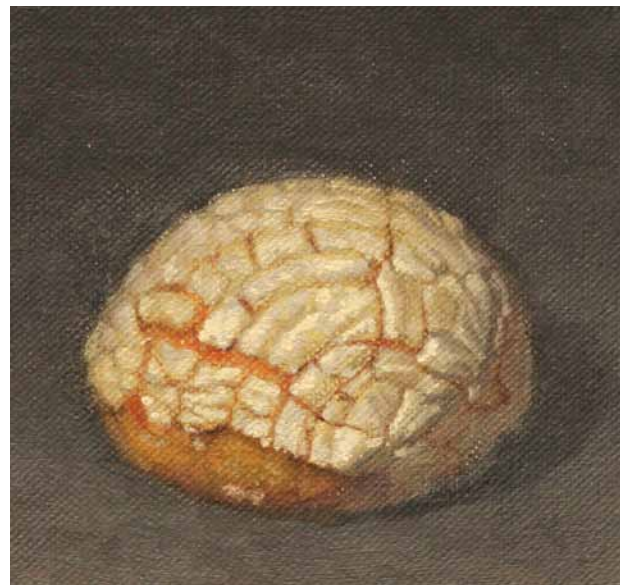
González is obsessed with the techniques used by painters from the baroque period, and he harnesses them to great effect in his obsessively detailed paintings: the lowered horizon lines of Velázquez, the intensity of light in darkness from Rembrandt, and the variations of color in human skin from an artist like Francisco de Zurbarán. The artist thus consciously contextualizes his paintings of the contemporary conflicts in Mexico within a longer genealogy of the conflict that leads the viewer to think about wars long since past and their depictions in art, such as Titian's *Allegory of the Battle of Lepanto*.

González's work is relentlessly contemporary and local, driven by a passion for portraying the horrors of war and violence currently invading the Mexican side of the border, particularly in his hometown of Reynosa, Tamaulipas. Much of his initial work appears to be studies that laid the foundation for his more recent achievements in painting. We find detailed, well-executed paintings of *pan dulce*, tortillas, a goat head, and other foods and objects found in daily life along the border. These are attempts to elevate everyday objects to another kind of status, to awaken the viewer to seeing the intricacies and beauty of the often overlooked. These studies attain an additional poignancy when placed alongside the se-

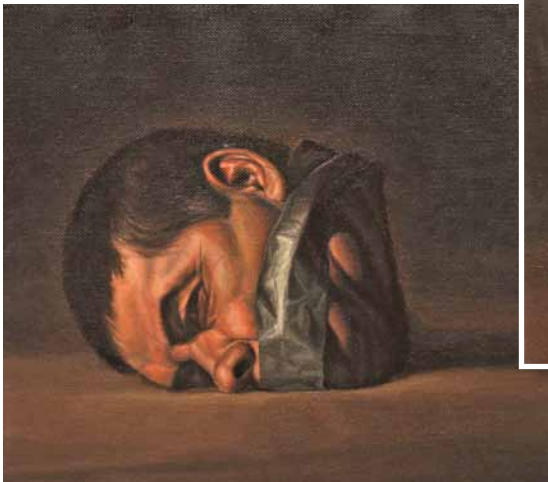


▲ *Tortillas*, 20" x 24", 2005 (oil on linen).

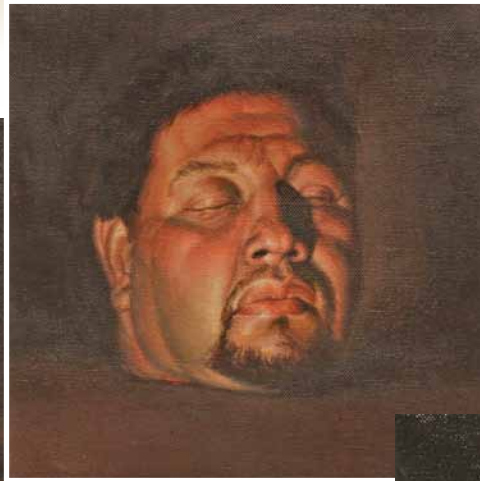
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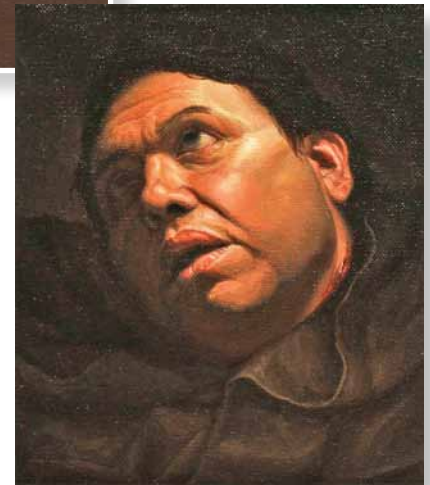
▲ *Mexican Sweetroll*, 14" x 12", 2005 (oil on linen).



▲ *So that They Learn Respect 2*, 20" x 24", 2007
(oil on linen).



◆ *So that They Learn Respect 5*,
20" x 20", 2007
(oil on linen).



▲ *So that They Learn Respect 4*, 18" x 16",
2007 (oil on linen)

ries of paintings of heads detached from their bodies. Images and stories of beheadings fill the daily papers and the Internet along the Tamaulipas border; González began to pay attention to the aesthetic qualities of these images and their relation to other classical paintings of beheadings of such figures as John the Baptist, thus connecting contemporary tragedy with Biblical stories and classical artistic depictions of violence. His baroque style allows the viewer to encounter these heads in new ways, even to (uncomfortably) marvel at their beauty and technical execution. This often-unsettling mixture of horror and beauty is one of the important effects of the images, one that they have in common with their historical predecessors.

In his best-known works, we find intricate tableaux of scenes of violence or suffering, often drawn from actual experiences or stories of González's friends and family or contemporary news reports on the on-going conflict. In order to begin to sketch and to paint, González organizes reenactments of the scenes, using individuals from the border region, often people who have fled from the violence on the other side of the border to the U.S. These reenactments are a kind of conceptual performance themselves, adding a depth and richness to the final paintings; as the viewer contemplates the faces of the individuals depicted, one thinks about the lives of these people, imagining them. When we find out the backstory of the images, we are implicated further as we consider our own relationship to the images.

For example, in *Contraband and Betrayal*, we see three male figures who are about to kill and perhaps dismember a mostly nude male figure in the foreground. Once again in this painting, there is a lowered horizon line that makes the figures loom even larger in the foreground. One man looks menacingly or even jokingly at the camera with a knife in his hand, a trickster daring the viewer to watch what is about to happen. The de-robed male under attack is also entwined with a mezquite tree to which he has been bound, in a recreation of a crucifixion scene. Once again, animals—in this case an owl and a dove—monitor the scene. As in many

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In the same way, in *Pick-up*, six men are caught in the act of kidnapping a man and woman. The colorful folds of the figures' clothing add numerous dimensions to the works and provide a yellow focal point on the belly of the man being kidnapped. As in the previous work, there are animals and symbols (in this case a street dog about to be hit with the butt of a rifle and a car with its headlights on behind the scene). These ancillary objects and animals are deeply symbolic for the artist, and he plans them out ahead of time to create a narrative effect in the works. As in many of his works, above the scene a dark and ominous sky threatens, as if a storm were brewing, the light reflecting and diffracting as if a storm had just passed through or were about to. The environment is not peaceful; it appears to roil with



▲ *Contraband and Betrayal*, 6' by 7', 2007 (oil on linen).



▲ *The Weeping Mother*, 6' x 5', 2009
(oil on linen).

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▲ *Slaughtered Goat Head*, 16" x 12", 2008
(oil on linen).

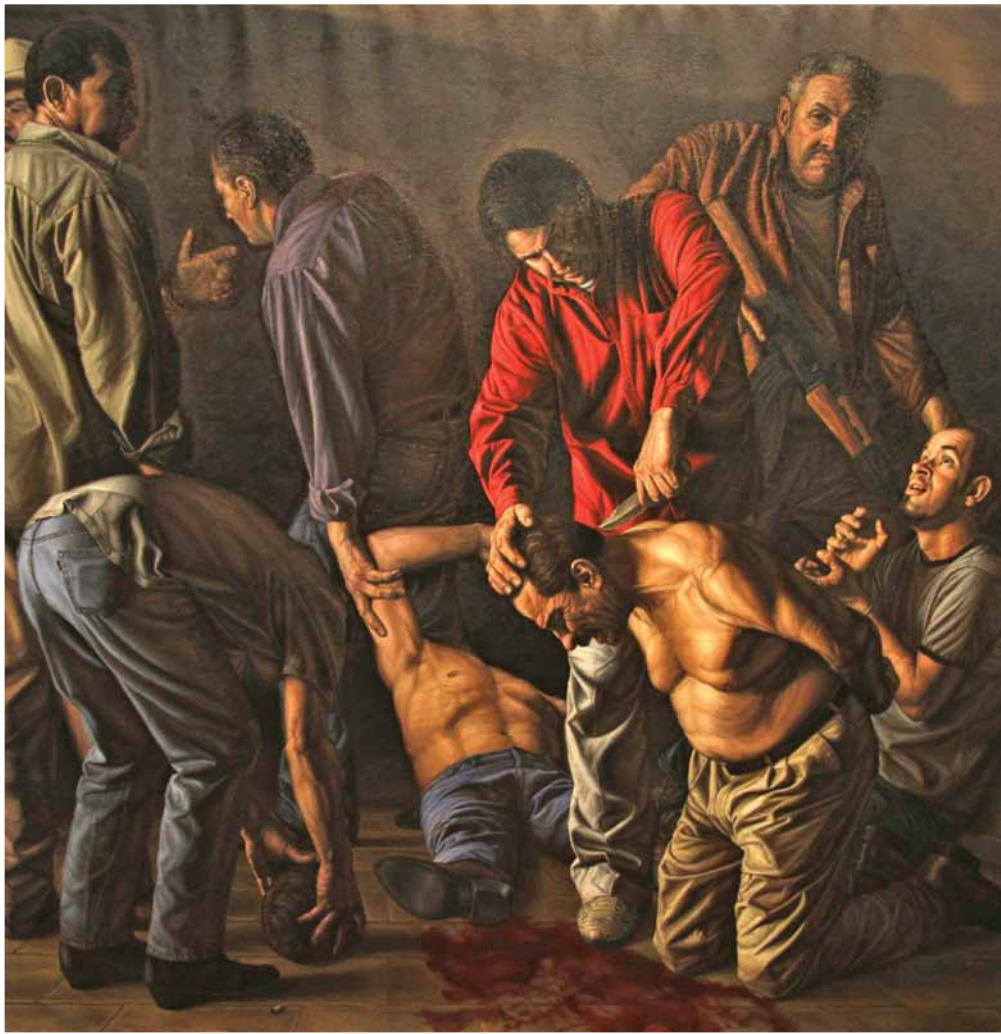
rage at the violence it is witnessing. Just as with the severed heads, the effect of the painting is disquieting: a roiling mix of complicity, appreciation of beauty and absolute horror at the scene depicted.

González's perhaps best known and largest work, the almost 10 by 20 foot tableau *February 17, 2009 in Reynosa, Tamaulipas, Mexico*, provides a trenchant critique of the contemporary Mexican political situation, along with a masterful depiction of skin and clothing with a complicated relationship to form, location, and border culture. In the center of this gigantic mural-sized painting, a woman mourns the death of a man lying prostrate in front of her on the ground, apparently a mother and her lost offspring. Around her, an entire cast of characters swirls: family members of the bereaved, neighbors, children, two *corrido* musicians singing and playing a guitar and an accordion, while federal police arrest and brutalize the supposed killers on the far left side. The painting's size and complexity have clear precedents in baroque art, which also favored these kinds of intricate, often posed scenes. And yet, it is clearly contemporary, not only because of the clothing choices of the figures, but also because of its inclusion of international corporate brands like

Sabritas and Coca-Cola; these logos are evidence of free-market, post-NAFTA capitalism along the border and remind us not to read these scenes in isolation from the policies of governments.

One detail that is easily missed is the way that Rigoberto A. González weaves a narrative between different works as individuals in one painting recur in another. In perhaps one of the most fascinating examples of this, a federal police officer in the Reynosa tableau reappears in another painting as a Zeta assassin readying a rival for his beheading. Through these narrative connections, the painter constructs an intricate map of the violence and the complicated allegiances and corruptions it has wrought.

After spending time with these artworks, I am left with an array of unanswered questions and churning emotions. Works of art that minutely depict suffering and torture can be evaluated in multiple ways: as exploitative, sensational, consciousness-raising, beautiful, horrific, political, etc. On the one hand, we could say that these are works of protest, which call for the audience to look deeply at terrible events and to examine their own consciences. In other words, we look at the painting, we experience shock or horror, and then we can move toward making some change. However, I don't want to be too optimistic about the potential of these works to create social change. As Susan Sontag has written, "The gruesome invites us to be either spectators or cowards, unable to look. Those with the stomach to look are playing a role authorized by many glorious depictions of suffering. Torment, a canonical subject in art, is often represented in painting as a spectacle, something being watched (or ignored) by other people. The implication is: no, it cannot be stopped—and the mingling of inattentive with attentive onlookers underscores this."



▲ *They Were Royally Fucked*, 7' x 7', 2010 (oil on linen).

I tend to agree with Sontag's criticism: we look, we observe, we are (in the best of cases) moved, and then we walk on. This is not to say that these works are not effective, but rather to question the very effect of art itself. What can art lead us to do? Or not do? Perhaps it can open minds that would have been closed to an awareness of human suffering in this long-running war. There is no doubt that González has labored to make us see in a new way. And yet, we look, we see, and life, in all its horror, goes on.

Recently, González's work has begun to receive well-deserved attention in solo exhibitions around Texas in all of the major metropolitan areas: Houston, Dallas, San Antonio, and Austin. Hopefully, it will continue to travel, especially to Mexico, the country of his birth, where it has yet to be fully exhibited. The art is powerful and raises more questions than it answers. We need art like this on both sides of the border right now, to make us uncomfortable and to point us back to these important questions about art, suffering, and war. **MM**

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