

**Pathos Along a Contemporary Frontier:  
Border Paintings by Rigoberto Alonso Gonzalez**

William Rolland Gallery of Fine Art  
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The artworks of Rigoberto Alonso Gonzalez are compelling for their technical virtuosity, their grandeur, their pathos but perhaps mostly for their dramatic narratives which depict the reality of narco-cartel violence along La Frontera. This is not conveyed with a journalistic optic but with a carefully composed Baroque sensibility that is reminiscent of a Neapolitan aesthetic and reflects the influence of the Caravaggisti. But it also recalls the gritty realism of Jusepe de Ribera and the restrained but present color of Nicolas Poussin. Rigoberto Gonzalez is not only cognizant of his art historical precedents he is overtly reverential of them in a way that is neither simply emulatory nor anachronistic. There is an authenticity in his application of the Baroque aesthetic and a fluency in its visual idiom that can only be attained through a cultural immersion. This sincerity distinguishes these paintings from mere historic appropriation. For the Mexican artist, the Baroque is an omnipresent feature of the environment and inextricably woven into the fabric of the cultural imagination. More than a way of seeing, it is a way of being.

Born in 1973 in Reynosa Tamaulipas, Mexico, Rigoberto Gonzalez graduated from the University of Texas at Pan America in 1999 where he received a B.F. A. degree. He attended the New York Academy of art where he attained his M.F.A. in 2004. There he honed his technical skills and further acquainted himself with Social Realism. Like the Viceregal Baroque, Social Realism looms large in Mexican art history and it's rich mural tradition features some of the most iconic examples ever created. Artists like Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros informed a revolutionary sense of national identity that pervades the visual imagination of Mexican culture to this day. Their names are listed among the national heroes and their examples represent a patriotic call to arms for Mexican artists who by experience know the power such imagery has to inform the cultural conscience of a society.

Since before the Spanish conquest the region along the Rio Grande River has been a frontier demarcating empire. The interface of Spanish Viceregal and eventually Anglo-American hegemonies, this territory has been a region in which sovereignty has been less than self-determined. Historically, justice has been in short supply along La Frontera but tragedy has been ubiquitous. Wars of conquest, wars of revolution, civil wars, ranch wars, race wars, wars on terror, drug wars, cartel wars, trade wars and culture wars have all been fought in this territory. This is where the casualties are created and this where the consequences of catastrophic decisions made elsewhere are most keenly felt.

So perhaps it is not surprising that a young artist from Reynosa, Mexico currently living in Harlingen, Texas might feel compelled to address this contiguous tragedy with a heartfelt sensitivity that acknowledges the humanity of its victims. Gonzalez records a contemporary history of conflict between the narco-cartels as they vie for territorial control in house to house fighting which has left entire towns depopulated, tens of thousands of people dead and countless thousands more disappeared. His paintings are the visual corollaries to the

Corrido ballades which have for generations been sung by Mexican itinerate musicians chronicling the exploits of revolutionary fighters and banditos in an officially neglected history that, if not for these troubadours, would go largely unrecorded. Like all histories, these Corrido narratives can be partisan and, in a region of perpetually shifting alliances, this can place their singers at mortal peril.

Neutrality is not an option afforded by the combatants in a society where conscription, extortion, kidnapping and murder are commonplace. Nobody is immune from cartel violence which has touched every family along La Frontera. Hence, distinctions between perpetrators and victims are blurred. The cartel member's loyalty is forever in question and anyone might arbitrarily become suspect of having a rival affiliation. The law enforcement officer conducting an official raid on a criminal compound might also be affiliated with a rival cartel. The murderer of a woman's son might be her son as well. Nothing can be taken for granted and nothing may be what it seems. The only thing of which one can be certain is the reality of the human suffering.

In his mural sized painting entitled "Balacera en Reynosa, Tamaulipas, Mexico (Shootout in Reynosa, Tamaulipas, Mexico)" the artist depicts the aftermath of a violent encounter. Beside the deceased lays his assault rifle and his mother kneels over him in a mournful Pieta as she is consoled by other family members who share her grief. The victim's equation with a Christ figure is not precluded by his status as perpetrator. The artist does not proffer judgment for the death is no less tragic for the culpability of its victim because this is mitigated by untenable circumstance. Loitering at left are the law enforcement officers whose identities, and perhaps affiliations, are as much concealed as revealed by their paramilitary uniforms. At right are the musicians commemorating the event so its significance will not be forgotten. In this tour de force of composition and drama, Gonzalez combines the folk optic of the Corrido with the tradition of the European history painting to create an image of grandiosity befitting the scale of its tragedy. At once theatrical in its compositional contrivance yet appallingly real in the events it depicts, this commanding painting ennobles its subjects by placing them in a quasi-Biblical context that recalls the most ambitious narratives of Baroque tradition. At once contiguous with historic precedents yet unmistakably contemporary in its optic, the painting draws on tradition without slavishly repeating it to create a temporally syncretic aesthetic that is both vital and pertinent in the current era.

In paintings like "Por andar con la gente equivocada. (Because he belonged for the wrong group)" and "Levantón" (The Kidnapping) the artist shows the reality of kidnapping and torture in the manner an artist of the Baroque era would depict the martyrdom of saints. Likewise, his paintings depicting decapitated heads recall the martyrdom of John the Baptist and Carravagio's portrayals of the consequences of Salome's treachery and Herod's venality. Decapitation has a long history within the Mexican indigenous context as well and is a prominent image within the religious and art historical canons of the Mayans and the Aztecs. But the paintings also recall more contemporary images of Wahhabist beheadings in the Middle East and how these have been used as a propaganda tactic to instill terror in regional populations. The appearance of these gruesome dismemberments in a contemporary Mexican context is not a coincidence as these tactics have been emulated by

the Mexican cartels and prosecuted with equivalent malice and frequency much closer to home. With titles like “Para que Aprendan a respetar” the paintings convey the alleged motive for such atrocities through which cartels inspire terror if not respect.

While aestheticized, the violence is not sanitized for its beauty and its horror is displayed with an elegance that is lyrical in composition yet graphic in detail. These paintings are undeniably visceral and overtly sentimental yet the artist displays a clear-eyed objectivity that is neither maudlin nor exploitive. They do not glamorize violence nor do they valorize its perpetrators. Like the religious paintings on which they are modeled, the artist presents them as devotionals for moral and spiritual contemplation. They are an incitement to virtue through horror of vice intended to at once convict the viewers’ conscience and invoke an ethical imperative.

In his paintings entitled “La Ribera del Diablo (The Devils Riverside)” and “Crotalus,” Rigoberto Gonzalez points to the hazards of immigration and the awesome hostility of the landscape. Along that part of the river, on the Mexican side, it is called the “Devil’s riverside” because of all the deaths that occur there. There heaven and hell are said to be very close together. While not entirely impenetrable, the Sonoran desert extracts a heavy price from any who would attempt to traverse it and rattlesnakes are not the most hazardous of its dangers. Merciless heat, treacherous terrain, the scarcity of water and human predators more fierce than any canine coyotes all threaten the lives of those who are motivated by desperation to venture through this inhospitable land. Here, hunted by Border Patrol and human traffickers alike, the immigrant is prey that is as likely to provide a feast for vultures as they are to reach a promised land whose security and opportunity seems to forever lay over a distant horizon. The infant depicted in “Anchor” is an Christic icon of that hope for a better life for the next generation if not the present. Yet its future too is uncertain as it lays abandoned in perilous surroundings. The title of the work implies the stigma the child will endure should it be fortunate enough to survive its current peril.

Rigoberto Alonso Gonzalez is an emerging contemporary master of the conflation of the Mexican Baroque and Social Realism whose conscience and talent provides a patriotic example like those great Mexican artists who preceded him. His artwork is undeniably culturally pertinent, socially relevant and charged with political implications, yet it avoids the pitfalls of pedanticism or mere partisanship. While unmistakably Mexican, Gonzalez’ narratives invoke a universal humanity that transcends nationalism or cultural specificity. His paintings provide a benchmark for the ambition skilled figurative representationalism can achieve when an artist knows why to paint as well as they know how to paint.

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