

Interview with Ruben Ortiz Torres

Karen Moss

KM: The range of your artistic practice has included drawings, paintings, photographs, installations, videos, films, and perhaps most notably during the past decade, the production of customized objects, especially those in your Power Tools Series in the late 1990s and *La Zamba del Chevy*, 2000—how exactly did you arrive at the concept and form for *High/Low*?

ROT: Essentially, it is a scissor lift like those used by preparators, the workers in a museum that is outfitted with hydraulics similar to those used in low-rider pick-up but it is bigger, with more hydraulics. It starts out as an open cube and then it opens up and unfolds up to a height of 21 feet. Then it spins around and dances, so it becomes a kind of spectacle/performance. It will be chromed and finished in a rainbow jumbo metal flake painted finish. I was also thinking about how it can function as a kind of “portable monument”—it clearly alludes to Russian Constructivism/Productivism...

KM: Yes, the the art historical references are clear—at first it looks a bit like a Sol Lewitt *Open Modular Cube*, then it coalesces into a soaring, spiraling tower—like Brancusi’s *Endless Column* or perhaps more like Vladimir Tatlin’s *Monument to the Third International*....

ROT: Yes, and it is also like a DNA double helix spiral. Initially, I made collages of different hypothetical permutations of the lift using bright colors and figures with different, often quite extreme and humorous forms such as ***Title of Drawing, date Image #***. Conceptually, I wanted make an object that was playful and cool, but would also reveal the labor processes inherent to the museum.

KM: Do you see it as an institutional critique, or a way of honoring those who work with in the museum? Or both?

At Cal Arts I studied with Michael Asher and we had ongoing discussions about institutional critique, entertainment and spectacle. He would argue that entertainment cannot by its nature have criticality, however, I would respond that spectacle functions as a language that can indeed be critical and revelatory. I’m interested in the idea that spectacle has mutable meanings, such as iconography/symbols in the Church: certain images dominate/impose yet people interpret them differently—one cannot control audience reception, so this is itself a kind of customization.

Customization is also a language unto itself. When you adapt, transform the essence of the original is still there. For instance in customized cars, the Chevy is still there, but allows for a different cultural discourse. Avant-garde art is a series of progressive reactions where one destroys the norm and re-makes them again. I’m working with a different model, using popular culture, transforming everyday objects, and one could say this falls into spectacle, but spectacle with a political statement. However, the dogma of leftist position is ultimately very pure and purantanical, too stoic for me.

KM: *High Low* seems to evolve from your interests in customized objects that began in the 1990s with works in the Power Tools series, most particularly, the customized leaf blower—could you comment on the conceptual relationship of this your newer work?

Conceptually, it is related to my Power Tools series especially the customized leaf blower, *Herramientas de Alto Poder*, 1999 (Image #) It was important to me that this mundane, crappy object that is used by gardner/laborers be painted in metallic flake paint and be gold-plated—it relabour the fetishization of objects, commodification, and value and it is humorous and ironic. The kind of sensibility of self-deprecating humor sweetens the appeal—it still makes a political

commentary, but is more of a deconstruction rather than a critique. It unfolds and reveals itself, but it does not moralize.

KM: It seems to me that as the pun in the title implies, *High/Low* is simultaneously an everyday industrial machine steeped in car/customization/popular culture and a monumental, performative artwork. However, like your recent paintings that are included in the *Phantom Sitings* exhibition at LACMA, on a purely formal level it also evokes a Los Angeles “finish fetish” aesthetic...yours objects are quite seductively beautiful. What is the role of this seductive aesthetics and do you enjoy (or even fetishize) the craft involved in the production of your work?

ROT: Yes, but I need to find a balance between aesthetics and content. Seductive objects are against the logic of capitalism and make an argument about the role of aesthetics. Finish fetish comes into play again and is renewed in moments of contradiction in modernity: it is about functionalism and spirit, color and texture.