



THRIVING ARTISTS: Otis (left) and Abaroa are two rising stars

MEXICO'S NEW WAVE

Local artists are finally emerging from the long shadows cast by the likes of Kahlo and Rivera

BY MALCOLM BEITH

BACK IN THE EARLY 1990S, Mexico City artist Eduardo Abaroa was hardly an international name. He showed his abstract sculptures—made from everyday objects like metal, cotton swabs and mirrors—in borrowed houses and sold them to friends. His work, like that of many other young Mexican artists, was often overlooked by the country's state-run museums. "Contemporary art had no space back then," says the reserved 34-year-old. Now, almost a decade later, Abaroa's life could not be more different. He lives in a spacious apartment-cum-studio in one of Mexico City's hippest neighborhoods and flies around the world visiting galleries where his art is on display. His pieces are selling faster than ever before, for around \$3,000 apiece. "I used to be very angry with people who saw art as a career," says Abaroa. "But then I

said, 'Well, what are you going to do? This is how it is.'"

After decades on the periphery, the Mexican contemporary art scene is finally establishing itself on the international art circuit. Thanks to a surge in popularity from four major Mexican exhibits in the past year—in New York, London, Berlin and San Diego—it's now difficult to find a major metropolis that doesn't have at least one established gallery mounting new Mexican art. Early next year, Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art will attempt to outdo the recent big shows with its survey, "Made in Mexico." The movement has reached "critical mass," says Betti-Sue Hertz, who curated the recent San Diego Museum of Art show "Axis Mexico: Common Objects and Cosmopolitan Actions." The combined effects of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the end of the Institutional Revolutionary

Party's 71-year stranglehold on power and the influx of private money into the fine arts are giving Mexico's contemporary artists newfound creative and financial freedom. They have finally begun to emerge from the shadows of great Mexican modernists like Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo.

The new wave of Mexican artists work in an eclectic mix of styles, themes and media. Yoshua Okon and Miguel Calderón have made names for themselves by staging and videotaping car thefts—effectively mocking the capital's ineffectual police force. Monica Castillo's video "Dancer's Self-Portrait" follows the choreographed movements of a painted ballerina. Domingo Nuño's manipulated computer images in the series "Shanghaied Acrobatics" reveal his childhood love of Mexican comic books and newfound interest in Japanese animé. Teresa Margolles's installation "Tongue" features a

A 'THRILLING UNPREDICTABILITY': Rossell on the ultrarich (left), Okon and Calderón's crime video



Mexico's new art clearly has youthful energy, and is both patriotic and global-minded



ECCLECTIC: (Clockwise from top) Alýs's 'Sleepers II'; Castillo's 'Dancer's Self-Portrait'; Nuño's 'Acrobatics'

real one, severed from a dead teenage drug addict. Alex Hank prefers his tongue in cheek, producing "Crime," a huge glitzy sign that he says has no particular social message. Others have turned a critical lens on the country's huge class divides; in her glossy, wildly colorful photos, Daniela Rossell captures members of her own social class—the ultrarich—in all their tacky glory.

It may not suit everyone, but Mexico's new art clearly has youthful energy. Whether socially conscious or simply esthetically intriguing, these works manage to be both patriotic and global-minded. Even depressing photos of harsh Mexican life carry a thrilling unpredictability, reflecting a country teeming with cultures, colors and music. *Mexicanismo* doesn't even have to mean Mexican anymore—works done in Mexico by Britain's Melanie Smith, Belgian Francis Alýs and Spanish-born Santiago Sierra are included in so-

called Mexican shows. Even German *über*-photographer Andreas Gursky will display a recent photo of a Mexico City landfill at the Boston show.

The current contemporary-art movement really got started in Mexico City in the mid-1990s. Frustrated with the conservatism of state-run museums, Okon and Calderón opened an independent exhibition space called La Panadería, sparking the establishment of similar galleries in Guadalajara, Monterrey and Tijuana. The use of new media—including video and digital tools—attracted younger artists and the eye of international sponsors.

Around the same time, NAFTA brought "a flood of new products and ideas" into Mexico, says Abaroa. With the signing of the treaty, average Mexicans could buy products they had previously only heard about, like foreign art magazines and the latest CDs and tapes. Jaime Ruiz Otis's installations feature

IBM stickers salvaged from local export factories. His art "wouldn't have been possible without [NAFTA]," he says.

The change in government in 2000 provided another boost to the new movement. Though the PRI never censored art—in fact, it set up cultural institutions and doled out art grants—its near-monopoly on financial support meant it decided whom to promote abroad. The bureaucrats tended to look toward the past, organizing grand surveys like "Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries," which featured 3,000 years of Mexican art up to and including Rivera. Under the PRI, contemporary artists like Gabriel Orozco had to leave the country in order to gain recognition. By contrast, the National Action Party, or PAN, government has so far proven willing to support new talent. It has poured its clout into major surveys of contemporary art, including "Mexico City: An Exhibition About the Exchange Rates of Bodies and Values," which debuted in New York last summer and moved on to Berlin in the fall.

With growing recognition has come increased value. Fernando Clamont of Christie's auction house in New York has noticed a sharp rise in sales of Mexican contemporary works, which can now sell for as much as \$25,000 each. Although most

buyers are foreign, the movement's biggest patron is Eugenio López, the CEO of Mexican juice company Jumex and owner of one of the most envied collections in the world. By some estimates, he sponsors as much as 30 percent of all Mexican contemporary art. Other Mexican companies like Televisa, Corona and Bancomer are following López's lead, sponsoring exhibits and expanding their own collections.

Perhaps the only question that remains is how long Mexican art will stay hot. Some worry that the current fascination is just one of the art world's many passing fads. Others are concerned that the PAN—sensing just how globally hip Mexican art has become—is growing more controlling. But for now, Mexican artists are enjoying their popularity and freedom. As another up-and-comer, José Davila, puts it: Mexico City is "the New York" of Latin American culture. Actually, it's the Mexico City. That has cachet enough. ■