

**YOSHUA OKÓN
COYOTERÍAS**

Opening March 19th - April 22nd

The relationship between the artist and his subject is a complex one. Particularly in the domains of photography and film or video, the responsibility of the artist to fairly or ethically represent the person portrayed remains a topic of heated debate and discussion. When Diane Arbus focused her lens upon the misfits and outsiders that so fascinated her, some questioned whether her intentions were sympathetic or callous. Robert Mapplethorpe's depictions of the black male body provoked accusations of fetishism and even racism. The genre of documentary film has been criticized repeatedly for the ways in which it can be manipulated so that subjective perspective masquerades as objective truth. This highly charged terrain revolving around issues of power and prejudice both within cultural production and the culture at large is at the heart of Yoshua Okón's work.

Okón creates video installations that explore controversial social and political issues—immigration, colonialization, labor, class, gender—by focusing on particular groups that have been marginalized or disenfranchised from mainstream society. But Okón's approach to representation falls outside the realm of the documentary to be more aligned with surrealism and the absurd. Exploring conventional viewpoints and assumptions, he intends his work to "invert the gaze," as he has described it, so that the experience becomes more about the audience and the process of viewing than the groups or individuals who appear in the work. Rather than straightforward portrayals of the concerns that impact his subjects' lives, he enlists his participants in theatrical and deliberately confusing scenes that appear to be entirely fictive but nonetheless call attention to the realities of their daily lives. In fact, more than mere participants, Okón's subjects are often pulled into specific aspects of producing the work so that they function as active collaborators instead of passive sitters.

The earliest work included here, *Cockfight* (1998) features two young girls—each on a separate screen arranged to face one another—yelling crude insults and provocations at each other. At once shocking and humorous, the improvised comments are inspired by the types of offensive remarks commonly directed at women by men. By upending the gender dynamic within a distinctly theatrical space, the intimidation and aggression of the language is reduced to an innocuous word play. For the series of photographs *Parking Lotus* (2001), Okón worked with security guards in Los Angeles to underscore the intense solitude and extreme focus required for their jobs. Asked to sit and meditate in a lotus position, these often overlooked figures become transcendent, held aloft with inner peace. *Coyotería* (2003) is a recasting of Joseph Beuys' infamous work from 1974, *I Like America and America Likes Me*, in which the artist lived in a New York City gallery with a coyote for three days as a commentary on the Colonial history of the United States. For Beuys, the coyote was a creature that straddled different cultures and different time periods, and *Coyotería* suggests current day understandings of the coyote as a figure that is both benevolent and dangerous, operating in an ambiguous space where ethics and boundaries are murky. In the work, Okón enlists a "coyote" (someone hired to mediate between ordinary citizens and bureaucratic institutions) to act out the aggressive canine while the artist, covered in a synthetic blanket with patterns alluding to Native American cultures, plays the role of the shamanistic Beuys. The dynamic between the two characters becomes a microcosm of the tensions between cultures and between humans and nature that is the central narrative to the history of Western civilization.

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