

Joshua Okón

Modern Culture at the Gershwin
Hotel

Dressed for school, two bourgeois-looking Mexican adolescent girls confront us seductively in a video. They spew forth all sorts of obscenities and sexual phrases more appropriate to street workers. This 1998 video installation by Joshua Okón was shown as part of *Cockfight*, his most recent solo exhibit in New York. The works confront, most directly and in the classical style of the founders of La Panadería, the collision between the two faces of Mexican society: On the one hand, the rich class with its affectations and rigid social structures, and on the other, the proletariat with its animal instincts and the only weapon it has to get even with the rest, namely, language.

Apparently, the actresses in the video are some friends that the artist met at a party. After a few drinks he took them to his studio to act out all sorts of insults and obscenities in front of the camera. True or not, the piece's context and the atmosphere perceived in the video are too powerful to be ignored. The girls' behavior in the video suggests that they had not prepared for the scene. On the contrary, it seems as if they hurled themselves into it the best they could, with a minimum set of instructions, in the style of Warhol's "Factory" movies.

The strangeness of the situation—to be able to yell the most unimaginable insults before the camera—generates a curious and subtle unease and discomfort in the adolescent girls, who are truly engaged in coming up with the most imaginative insults they can muster. Coarse language is a formidably creative sport in Mexico, full of verbal twists. The winner is the wittiest and most ingenious, and the loser the one who's unable to rebuff the attacks with the same level and intensity. In the case of the rich girls, the video becomes a humorous game on the shallowness of content and behavioral social patterns. Maybe it goes beyond what Okón originally expected. His work always seeks to desacralize, to make sure that in the process the viewer feels uncomfortable.

On the other hand, in the video *l'artiste Mexicain (The Mexican Artist)*, done a couple of years ago for a show in France, we see only the character's back. His pants are pulled down and he's fully engaged in fornication; the soundtrack is a woman's ecstatic voice moaning in French. The explanation given for this piece is that it was done to demystify the artist's exotic background, particularly of the Mexican artist who travels to Europe. In fact, the piece is a burlesque commentary on the attitudes from both sides of the ocean regarding the bohemian artist and his adventurous life, and also the inevitable mention of *machismo* as an exportable good. But the video also finds a perfect match with another artistic stereotype that originated precisely in France, thanks to someone called Rimbaud—that of the *enfant terrible*.

Okón relishes in his own anti-solemnity, an antidote that has been useful to many artists of his generation to counteract the rigid attitudes toward art and society that have been imposed for so long in Latin American but that remain an open invitation to parody.

Pablo Helguera



Joshua Okón.
Cockfight,
1998. Video
Installation view.