

Five Portraits and a Full Service Window

By Itala Schmelz

The work of Yoshua Okón coincides with an artistic strategy that bloomed in the 90s and is directly related to the increasingly effective incorporation of the video camera into art of conceptual origin. This artist is part of a generation that began making political and social art unlike that of the rebellious '60s and '70s—not necessarily left-leaning, more cynical, less ideological. It is also interesting to note that Okón is not exactly an everyman's artist. On the contrary, he is a scion of the privileged elite whose members are educated abroad and are in touch with the international trends that have shaped Mexican art.

Okón's approach could also be called the "genre of provocation." His work feeds on the early essays of Dada, and is at home with the ambiguities of French writers Deleuze, Derrida, and Foucault, who sought to attack the discourse of power and dominant models of identity from within, transversally, with gestures, winks or interventions: an action without the pretense of placing one discourse in counterpoint to substitute another. In transcending the dialectic of modernity, postmodern artists, rather than create something new—the tendency of other "isms"—prepared themselves to review the context and work from the signifiers and imaginary symbols that culture is charged with, as a new critical model.

Okón has grown bolder over the years. For his opus to work according to his hypothesis, he exposes himself increasingly in his cinematic adventures. Without being documentaries, his works give us a fascinating anthropological perspective on a complex society. Instead of a scientific approach, it is an artistic strategy, though in both cases is based on the same resource: observation. The artist, comfortable in the role of anthropologist, makes portraits of various groups, revealing the specific idiosyncrasies that underpin them. The art of portraiture (or caricature) requires an eye for physiognomy, but above all, the ability to capture psychological dimensions so as to express the inner identity of the subject.

The multivisual language of his narrative uses video in a three-dimensional manner: projectors and monitors become the building blocks of an audiovisual narrative, sculpting what is traditionally a single dimension. Each of the five pieces that make up the exhibition is itself a portrait. Through the complex interplay of projectors and monitors deployed throughout the museum, Okón builds his portraits by revealing the absurd and the grotesque in human nature. The artist has his characters represent themselves, ridiculing them to get at their essence. His intelligence cuts through to the childish side of people or social groups, activating a lyrical mechanism in which actors who are not actors "play" themselves—in the spirit of a reality show—and, although he has them act within a logic that in fact humiliates them,



succeeds in getting them to willingly play the obscene game of representing themselves.

One striking feature of most of his works is that they reference class conflict and racism, a nexus of social dissonance where differences annoy and sting. Yoshua Okón is more European than most Mexicans. The uneasy relationship between the white minority and the brown majority speaks of a country divided into social classes with racial undercurrents. He confronts this conflict that disturbs us so much yet is taboo to talk about. Beginning with the contempt that dark Mexicans often feel for themselves, the relationship is one of both admiration and resentment toward white people—the rich, the educated, foreigners, people who do not eat hot peppers, beans or tortillas. Faced with this rejection of identity, white Mexican artists interested in learning about their country have attempted to address the issue in various ways. Yoshua, meanwhile, is cheeky and provocative, cynical enough to stand in front of the “other” in an awkward position, where he reveals the residual racism within us all, which despite a liberal education leads to unconscious aggression toward those who are different.

Bocanegra (2007) is a multi-channel documentary about a group of Mexican Nazis. The artist enters a dangerous game here. In a country where the phenomenon of racism has more to do with skin color than Aryan or Jewish ancestry, we find a motley group of neo-Nazis interviewed by a light-skinned Jew. Here, the self-proclaimed admirers of the superiority and purity of the Aryan race, as proclaimed by Hitler, are clearly of mixed race. Okón enters into contact with these characters and gradually begins to lead them into an erotic masturbatory relationship with their collection of objects. Far from assuming the position of the victim, this post-Holocaust Jew mocks the swastika that is printed on a pair of underpants.

Would Jewish grandparents who survived the Nazi genocide understand their grandson making a documentary film like *Bocanegra*? What intellectual twist does the artist require to recover a sense of humor and in turn engender a critical sense? Because the cast caricatures itself, the artist shows these characters in real life, beyond the documentary. The fetishist delirium over the swastika and German army paraphernalia reveals a naive and ignorant view of Nazism. Their fanaticism makes them insensitive to the horrors delivered on behalf of the superiority of one race, a shameful chapter in the history of the twentieth century.

For spectators, living with real time is painful, so we always expect the artist to shield us from that feeling. This is why many of us will ask ourselves how a sort of reality show could be considered art. In *White Russians* (2008), Okón portrays a group of impoverished Americans with the same attitude he expressed toward Mexicans in works such as *Orillese a la orilla* (1999-2000) or *Lago Bolsena* (2004)—without guilt and without mercy. The aesthetic style of misery has been replaced by a confrontation with the sordid, which leaves the public confused. Four projections in one room reconstruct the angles of a trailer home inhabited by white people stuck in the badlands of the American Dream. The work exposes the world just outside the California Biennial by juxtaposing the ultra-hip contemporary art crowd with the trailer trash who live in the outskirts of Los Angeles.

These social opposites interact while drinking White Russians, the favorite drink of Ms. Atkien, the motor home's hostess. As the hours go by, the alcohol helps loosen inhibitions. The event portrays the two groups as they become transposed in the same space/time under the direction of the artist. Just as contemporary hyper-realism implies the replacement of

the real by an identical copy, Okón designed and tested events that are repeated every 20 minutes with his hosts, until fiction merges with reality. The tinge of falseness here is what makes *White Russians* so realistic and turns it into an invaluable social document.

Sympathy, empathy and a certain ironic contempt lead the artist to place his subjects in extreme situations. For example, in *Hipnostasis* (2009) he changes the context to create a surreal image. He asks six old men who spend their days lolling on Venice Beach to pose for his camera, feeding them beef jerky as a metaphor for their leathery old bodies. These former hippies or ex-beatniks, now beach bums, parked themselves on the beach back when the yuppie lifestyle triumphed and peace and love went out of style. Like sea lions bathing on sunny rocks, even the way they eat evokes animality. The ever-present sounds of the wind and sea submerge spectators in a hypnotic state.

The exhibition includes two more portraits: *Hausmeister* (2008) is a vignette that pays tribute to that uncomfortable character who is a part of every museum. In it, a museum guard wears an old uniform and looks through a hole in the wall like a rodent defending its burrow, arguing and gesticulating in an unknown language. And finally, in *MAVI* (2008) the artist shows the faces of 130 women named Maria Quispe, all photographed at an old photo studio in Peru over the course of 40 years (the artist acquired more than a million pictures from this studio). These Maria Quispes evoke the female workers of the *maquiladoras* or the housekeepers who work in rich neighborhoods. Their name evokes the presence of indigenous peoples and peasants in the city, and represents the beauty of women of color at their purest vs. the perversion of the city and miscegenation. The mostly ordinary features fuse in a mosaic of elusive faces, defining a racial type that is linked to a single name and social stratum.

The exhibition closes with *Full Service Window* (2009), an interesting proposal that gives the exhibition its title. The artist installed an office in the exhibition hall of the museum to serve the public. Museum goers could get an appointment with him to discuss the show or ask questions. Normally, such offices are staffed by nameless, faceless bureaucrats who thwart our relationship with power, entangling us in webs of paperwork. In this case, by contrast, Okón opens a window overlooking the space where the live performance is being staged. From behind a desk, the artist re-presents public service. This insertion of the reflexive into the realm of the expositive, by changing the specificity of the exhibition hall, gives the show an unexpected twist. Does the single point of access to the artist, placed at the same level as the five portraits in the exhibition, suggest that Okón has made a sixth picture, a self-portrait?

Itala Schmelz (Mexico City, 1968) studied philosophy (1988-1992) at the UNAM. Served as director of the Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros or SAPS (2001-2007), where she designed a contemporary art program with the participation of some 50 artists from Mexico and around the world. At the SAPS she also developed exhibitions based on the legacy of David Alfaro Siqueiros, such as *Matrices fotogénicas* (2002), *Siqueiros abstracto* (2001) and *Siqueiros sónico* (2004). Since 2004 she is member of Curare, a critical space for the arts. Her essays have appeared in magazines such as *Luna Cornea*, *Art Nexus*, *Exit y Trans*, as well as catalogs and newspapers such as *Reforma* and *La Jornada*. She is Director of the Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil since May 2007.