

# Notes on Looking

Contemporary Art in Los Angeles

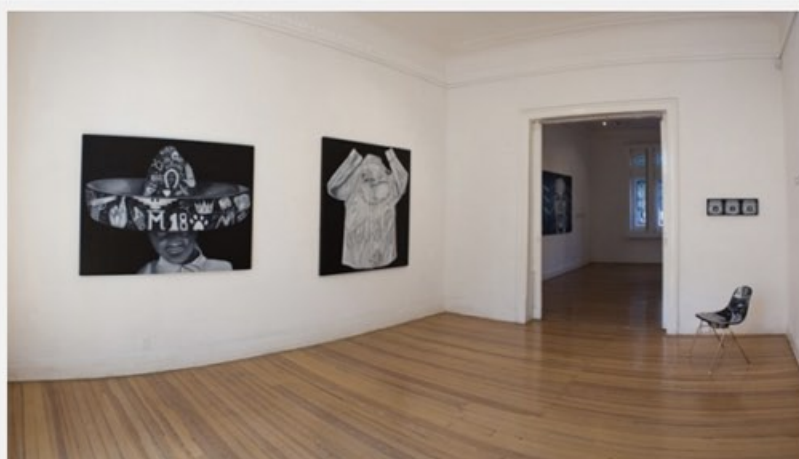
## Mexico D.F. Part I: LA/Mex Connection: Barry Wolfryd, Yoshua Okón, Gabriel de la Mora y Edgar Orlaineta

Posted on January 2, 2012, by Carlyn Aguilar



LA and Mexico City are like cousins, related and connected, and one really special way is through art. Both cities are bursting with culture and both have art scenes that are dynamic and thriving. Some (lucky) artists have a relationship to both and so while I was in DF, I decided to look for these links, *como un miembro de la familia*, and find the connections.

One such artist came to mind: [Barry Wolfryd](#). Barry was born in Los Angeles but then moved to Mexico DF in 1975 and has continued to live there ever since. Luckily I got to see his solo show *Transferencias* at Ethra Gallery in Colonia Juarez during its final week. First of all, Barry is wonderful to talk to because he switches between English and Spanish like a true master of Spanglish. And if that's not enough, his slang in both languages is purely Angeleno and Chilango. It's pretty impressive *guey!*



As you walk into Ethra, a beautiful two story gallery, 20 large black and white paintings stare you down... and I really do mean that, as the theme that runs throughout the show is dark and violent: narcos and gang culture. However, Wolfryd cleverly and playfully takes icons from Mexican and American culture, adds the reality of violence by using its symbols (such as tattoos, graffiti and weapons) and then humorously reminds us how these exact symbols have infiltrated our everyday lives and pop culture. The graffiti might tell you a message or what group a person belongs to, but it's mixed with all the other gangs' tags, merging into one big gang that shouts out a whole new meaning. Wolfryd plays with this message by putting all these symbols on a teddy bear, Cantinflas, El Santo, even John Wayne (dressed as a Salvatrucha). New roles are passed out, unmasked, tattooed and made visible. In one painting a table is perfectly set for what is going to be either a grand meal or a grand duel. Silverware has been replaced by machine guns, scissors, ice picks, nails, knives, bullets, and fingers... Would Martha Stewart be impressed? (I think so, especially now that she knows what inmate life is like.)

Wolfryd uses black and white paint to show this duality between the two realities that live together. One reality is transferred to another and because this is so subliminal in our culture, at the end of the day we don't even realize it. Narco corridos are being hummed while passengers wait for their combi, kids walk around urban cities with a "gangster look" because it's cool. So then we begin to wonder what's the problem if John Wayne is dressed as a Mara Salvatrucha. It all seems to make sense.



From Barry Wolfryd's solo show "Transferencias"; Photo by Daniel Lara



While wondering around Colonia Roma (which is a great place to wander, by the way) I luckily found [Yoshua Okón's](#) video-installation *Pulpo* (Octopus) at the Casa Rafael Galván. If you went to the Hammer in Westwood a few months ago, then you also got to see this wonderful piece. I was so happy to be able to see this video again, first in LA and now here in DF. (Speaking of the LA-Mex connection, Yoshua was born in Mexico City and received his MFA at UCLA.)



Barry Wolfryd watching Yoshua Okón's video-installation "Pulpo" at Casa Rafael Galván in Mexico City

Okón's video is a simple, ironic and humorous remake of something complex and tragic: the Civil War in Guatemala (set off by a CIA-led coup that lasted for 40 years). But his replay of events does not take place in Guatemala, or even what looks like Guatemala, but rather in the parking lot of Home Depot in Cypress Park, CA. The actors (veterans from the actual war) are dressed in jeans and black or white t-shirts (to show opposition) and they carry invisible binoculars and guns. They roll around in shopping carts and trolleys, bypass pedestrians and weave between cars (trying to park or leave). They face off in groups, using the sheds as barracks. In the background, the Home Depot sign reads "California's Home Improvement Warehouse" and "Rent me hourly at..." The audience watches the four simultaneous videos being projected on all four walls while sitting on turned over Home Depot buckets. The video is somehow familiar for those of us who live in LA and daily see these same men waiting to be picked up for construction or gardening jobs. Who is the victim? Who is the combatant? Who is creating the war for self-interest? Once again, Okón's work borders on a sociological experiment that brings up a lot of interesting questions and perspectives.



From Yoshua Okón's video-installation "Octopus" at the Hammer



From Yoshua Okón's video-installation "Pulpo" at Casa Rafael Galván

If you went to the [Museum of Latin American Art](#) in Long Beach in the spring/summer and found yourself in the Project Room, then you will remember [Gabriel de la Mora's](#) elegant and beautiful exhibition *Frágil/Fragile*. De la Mora lives and works in La Roma and I was able to visit him in his studio to see his most recent work. Upon walking into his studio, there was Gabriel with an assistant, wearing heavy gloves and cutting through a new painting. Surrounding them were three more very busy assistants, all completely focused and precisely working with little bits of hair and Post-It notes. It was an incredible moment to witness- art making in action!



From Gabriel de la Mora's show "Frágil/Fragile" at MOLAA; Photo courtesy of OMR Gallery

When I saw his work all over the studio, I understood why his last show was called *Frágil/Fragile*: Strands of fine hair knotted into sculptures, tiny Post-It notes sticking up from reams of paper, super delicate lead from pencils stand erect from a base, ultra fragile burnt paper in a sculptural form sits quietly in a plexi-box. And next to all these works in progress are sheets of paper for data collection. This explains the intensity and focused attention of the assistants. Every strand of hair is accounted for, every knot, every moment; Total precision and rigor is part of the process.





"Revólver" at Casino Metropolitano; Photo courtesy of Paul Brauns

My last stop was a visit to the [Casino Metropolitano](#), a privately owned establishment, on Calle Tacuba in the Centro Historico. There I met with curator Gabriel Mestre, who explained how in 2002 he created a non-profit art agency, [Artenacion](#), which puts together national and international contemporary art exhibitions and collaborations, holds projects for artistic research and publishes text. This agency is independent and autonomous and does not collaborate with big institutions, which makes it cutting edge, more spontaneous and exciting. This is why I loved it immediately.

As we entered the huge open space, many artists were preparing and installing for the exhibition *Revólver*, a closing event for the entire November program at the Casino Metropolitano. The main theme was music, hence *Revólver* (The Beatles), which included musical performances, performance art and classes. As we walked around from installation to installation in this huge space (several rooms of art!), Gabriel Mestre talked about the different artists involved in the show: [Negative Youth](#) (a collaborative that describes themselves as: "*Organizamos fiestas y conciertos en la Ciudad de Mexico. Por siempre frescos.*"), [Tobias Bernstrup](#) (performance piece), musician/composer [Dorit Chrysler](#) (and her Theramin piece), TRYO, Ricardo Alzati, [Los Lichis](#), [Domestic Fine Arts](#), [Taka Fernandez](#) (who was painting a mural for the show when I was there), and [Edgar Orlaineta](#), who many Angelenos might know. (Edgar recently had an amazing solo show [Solar Nothing at Steve Turner](#) not too long ago, inspired by Charles Eames' 1958 Solar Do-Nothing Toy. It was a great exhibition that I failed to mention previously and so it's perfect that I talk about his work now!)

Edgar's piece for *Revólver* looked like an exhibition within an exhibition, as his work took up the entire wall of one long room. Several framed graphic prints were reminiscent of New Wave posters from the 80s. They are familiar and nostalgic, but as you get closer to them you realize that they are not from the 80s but from now and they do not represent any specific band or musician. But the elements and symbols all seem to remind you of that time. I have never met Edgar but it seems like I always just miss the opportunity. It happened in LA and then again here in DF as Gabriel let us know that the artist had just left 5 minutes before we arrived.



Edgar Orlaineta's art work at Casino Metropolitano; Photo by Daniel Lara

Unfortunately we couldn't attend the opening of *Revólver* the next day. But I'm sure it was a success! *¡Felicidades!*

*Carlyn Aguilar grew up on the East side of Los Angeles as a 1<sup>st</sup> generation Mexican-American. After living abroad for 10 years in 5 different countries, she realized that LA was where she wanted to be more than anywhere else. Carlyn plays many different roles throughout her day: In the morning she works as a bilingual Speech and Language Pathologist for LA county and in the afternoon she is an art lover and writer. She also often collaborates on art projects with her artist husband Daniel Lara. Carlyn received her BA in English from UCLA, her MA in Postmodernism: Literature and Contemporary Culture from the University of London, and a postgraduate diploma from the London School of Journalism.*