Chicago Gallery News
May 2013

Chicago's Young Artists: What does the future hold?

By KEVIN NANCE

Chicago is keenly conscious of its artistic history and reverent toward many of its elders, but it isn't always a hospitable place for younger and emerging artists. It's hard for artists of any age to break through the clutter, of course, but this is especially true for artists under 40. Our inability to see them clearly is understandable, up to a point; the past is visible in a way the future can never be. But while there's safety in venerating artists with substantial track records, identifying artists with the potential for significant careers is a risky business many are unwilling to undertake.

At *Chicago Gallery News*, we're sticking our necks out. We don't say that Mariano Chavez, Renee Robbins and Tony Lewis are the future of art in Chicago, but they are three artists of great promise, worthy of the attention of gallerists, collectors and the art-interested public. Of the three, Chavez is the most diverse in style, Robbins the most immediately accessible and Lewis the most intriguingly enigmatic. We'd like to introduce them in these pages as part of a new occasional series highlighting younger and emerging artists to watch. In future installments of the series, we'll look at younger artists working in sculpture, collage, new media and other modes. In the meantime, we introduce our first trio.

Mariano Chavez: Stranger in Paradise

In a typical Mariano Chavez artwork, there's a suggestion of narrative that's both comic and ominous. In *First Date*, a painting that depicts a group of prehistoric men encountering their hirsute would-be paramours, hell, pretty clearly, is about to break loose. Another painting, Mexican Vacation, pairs Tijuana tourist imagery—a cartoon taco vendor, a blanketed burro—with an iconic weeping Christ, along with the none-too-reassuring phrase "It is finished."

"There's always the idea of paradise in my work, but also the idea that there's going to be a tragedy," says Chavez, 39, who teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and owns an antiques store, Agent Gallery Chicago. "All of the pictures are setting something up, a story in which we don't know what's going to happen, but it's not going to be good. If I were making a movie, it would definitely be very Coen Brothers-esque, all about morality and human nature, with something bad going to happen along the way."

Chavez is primarily a painter, but also works to transform found objects, architectural fragments and other materials with color and repetition in a latter-day Pop/surrealist mode; in the process he suggests the transition of symbols from profound to banal and back again. Much of his imagery is drawn from his childhood in southwest Texas near the Mexican border, where his father was from. “Where I grew up, everybody is very religious, and the further south you go, it’s even more religious,” he recalls. “When I went to Mexico on vacation in 1993, when I was 21, that’s where I first felt this super-Catholic mysticism, the sense of the supernatural and the feeling of tragedy behind it. The mixture of all that stuff left a big impression on me.”

Inevitably, perhaps, much of Chavez’s art meditates on the ubiquity and meaning of Catholicism in the lives of Mexican-Americans, as symbolized by stickers of the Virgin Mary sold in bubblegum machines in Chicago’s Pilsen neighborhood when he lived there in the early 1990s. “I’m interested in how an icon passes through time and becomes a cartoon of its former self,” he says. “It’s like how Munch’s The Scream was a very powerful image and then gets appropriated in the form of an inflatable doll. There was a guy who gave me a last-rites cross that used to belong to a guy who passed away. For him, I think, it was a symbol of the passage from the material and the spirit world. But when you make something like that into a toy, as people sort of do, it diminishes its power, but doesn’t eliminate it entirely. That’s interesting to me.”

“What I love about Mariano’s work is the cross-pollination of religion and Mexican border-town culture,” says Tony Fitzpatrick, who included Chavez in *The Bus: 29 Hooligans from Chitown*, an exhibit he organized at Los Angeles’s La Luz de Jesus Gallery in April. “He doesn’t disparage religion; he makes you think about the power of symbols and images. There’s a memento-mori quality about his pieces that reminds us we’re all going to one funeral.

Renee Robbins: Voyager

Growing up in northern Indiana, Renee Robbins wanted to be a marine biologist. The ocean was a place where her imagination swam, picturing what things might look like there. “The ocean was always far away,” she says, “and at some point I realized I was more interested in the visual aspect of science than the actual pursuit of it.”

Now, looking at Robbins’s richly colored acrylic paintings, you feel you’re in the Beatles’ Yellow Submarine, its portholes offering fantastic views of undersea life in undiscovered corners of the ocean—

a submarine that occasionally travels into outer space, touring the galaxies, before shrinking to atomic size and weaving its way through the cells of plants. Considering the terrain and the distances covered—between, for example, representation and abstraction, and between the real and the phantasmagorical—it's a surprisingly smooth ride.

"My work now goes from the micro to the macro, from marine life—sea creatures and plants, coral reefs—out into the cosmos, the stars and planets," says Robbins, 34.

"My images don't necessarily exist in nature, but they come from natural phenomena, different systems that come together in a work, like a constellation, or the molecular pattern embedded in the structure of a plant. I think they're a metaphor for how we make sense of ourselves and create a notion of identity."

Even though Robbins became an artist rather than a scientist, she retains a lively interest in how the world works. "I'm sort of obsessed with new discoveries in science, especially things on the nanotechnology level—the latest thing in mitochondria, say, or some YouTube video of a new creature that's been discovered," she says. In one recent painting, *Holographic Chamber*, she incorporated a carnivorous harp sponge, which has spiky white tendrils that look like the strings of a harp. "It's beautiful, but also menacing, in a very appealing way. That dichotomy between the attraction and the repulsion of it is pretty compelling, I think."

Robbins doesn't compare or align herself with the Chicago Imagists, but she does identify with their use of neon colors "and their pattern-making, as in Gladys Nilsson's work." Chicago painter Joyce Owens, who recently began collecting Robbins's work, says, "Renee's pieces are very organic. I think of it as looking at microorganisms and other things that we can't see normally that she makes visible. It's complicated work, but not difficult to look at. Some art is complex and you can't engage with it; hers is complex and accessible at the same time, which I think is great. I like seeing it in my house."

Tony Lewis: Breaking Down Language

Tony Lewis's graphite drawings on paper give the impression of having been handled a bit roughly; they're smudged, scumbled and distressed in a way that can seem intentional, even gestural. As it happens, both things are true. In Lewis's work, the planned and the accidental are indistinguishable, which is itself thought out in advance. More or less.

This odd indeterminacy in the work is echoed by its apparent subject, which seems to be the difficulty—perhaps the impossibility—of communication, specifically in the form of language, whose authority comes constantly under attack. Words (or parts of words) are suspended within the frame (often a grid of four pieces of joined paper), hanging and partial, sometimes crossed out and begun again, connected by drawn lines that sometimes organize themselves into misshapen thought balloons. The overall effect is that of speech trying haltingly, at times desperately, to articulate itself.

A cerebral, intriguingly austere, modernist aesthetic is in operation here. Its procedures are stark, its deepest meanings elusive, and intentionally so. Lewis, a 26-year-old recent graduate of the School of the Art Institute, offers a sort of skeleton key to several of his drawings in the form of a sentence from which many of the depicted words are drawn. But he doesn't want the sentence—a looping, elliptical epigram of his own composition, relating to the intertwined historical conceptions of "colored people" and "people of color," and the gap between the two—reproduced in full in this article, or indeed anywhere. "It's not a scheme to keep people from knowing it, more of a way to create a considerable distance," he explains. "Thanks for respecting and understanding."

A "person of color" himself (he's African-American), Lewis says much of his recent work has revolved around the mystery sentence, "trying to figure out what it meant at the time, what it means now," as he puts it. "My relationship, my attitude toward the sentence has changed to it quite a bit over time, and its meanings have shifted a lot. The sentence has a really weird quality to it. It's nonsense, on one level, but at the same time it's charged, and feels like it's supposed to mean something. It does tend to make sense, sort of, when you break it up into fragments and start moving parts of it around, which is what I do in the drawings."

It's unlikely that most viewers will "get" the work on what might be called its molecular level, but this is not a concern for Lewis. "For me, it's not a question of people 'getting it,'" says the artist, who's continuing a tradition that includes language-oriented conceptual artists like Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer and Glenn Ligon. "If viewers feel they 'understand' the work, that's fine, but it's essentially irrelevant, because the pieces are rooted in drawing as much as they are in language," Lewis says. "The work is just there. It's just the piece itself, the paper. And it's what's there that should prevail—that's the experience, whether or not you know the sentence that's being quoted. The sentence is just a structure to attack, to analyze, to break down, to see what happens to language when you put it to through the process of being broken down."

"The graphite [in Lewis's drawings] spreads everywhere and the work’s conceptual underpinnings, the interrogation of race, is metaphorically conveyed in the material contamination," says Michelle Grabner, a professor at SAIC. "Nothing is clean, crisp, nor clear in his large-scale drawings. And nothing is absolute in contemporary racial politics."

2021 S WABASH AVE
CHICAGO IL 60616
+1 (312) 226 2223