

FRIEZE

Duchamp in the Desert: the Surrealist Synthesis of Raul Guerrero

At Kayne Griffin Corcoran, Los Angeles, the artist's paintings of the Sonoran desert span millennia of cultural references

By Jennifer S. Li | April 2020



Raul Guerrero, 'Sonoran Desert - Flora, Fauna, Artifacts', 2019. Courtesy: Flying Studio, Los Angeles

When Raul Guerrero was growing up in Southern California in the 1940s and '50s, the US–Mexico border was more porous than it is today, and he would often drive with his family across the Sonoran Desert – a habit the artist continued into adulthood. The septuagenarian's latest body of work, 'Sonoran Desert: Flora, Fauna, Artifacts', comprises surrealist paintings that, in places, evoke the crisp sure-handedness of René Magritte and, in others, the dreamlike filigree of Leonora Carrington. It unfolds through the loose construct of a road trip, albeit a non-linear journey that explores the artist's multivalent Mexican–American identity and disparate artistic and cultural influences.

On weekly childhood visits to Tijuana, Guerrero was exposed to both Mexican folk handicrafts and cheap marketplace kitsch. At home in Southern California, there were Hollywood movies, surf culture, low riders and beatniks, as well as the art of John Baldessari and Ed Ruscha. In the 1970s, he was schooled in the mostly white, Eurocentric tradition at Chouinard Art Institute (now CalArts). *A Desert Road* (all works 2019) envisages Guerrero's cultural heritage and art-school pedigree as a roadside duel between a traditional Yei Bi Chei, the spirit god of the Navajo nation, and a classical nude. The Yei Bi Chei wears a grimacing wolf mask as he shakes a gourd rattle at the languorous Venus. Like the trail of ants marching across the bottom of the canvas, Guerrero shuttles between seemingly opposing aspects of his experience, synthesizing European and Indigenous, Mexican and American, traditional and avant-garde influences.

In a series of spinning circular paintings inspired by Marcel Duchamp's 'Rotoreliefs' (1935/1953), Guerrero activates symbols from the prehistoric Hohokam and Mimbres societies, who once lived in portions of the Sonoran Desert. Inverting the Duchampian attempt to enhance the two-dimensional into three, Guerrero's spinning works distil two entities into one. In *Mimbres: Road Runner and Coyote* and *Mimbres: Tortoise and Hare*, each symbol is reliant on the other for meaning: the tortoise is only slow because the hare is fast. As the paintings spin, the hunter is no longer discernible from the hunted, the beginning indistinguishable from the end.

At four and a half metres long and nearly a metre wide, *Apache Trail* unfurls like a vast comic strip. A petroglyph-like coyote gives chase to a roadrunner against a sparse landscape of cacti and roadside litter; a billboard advertises a hamburger and fries. In the centre, an idiosyncratic message in a bottle signals Guerrero's interest in the transmission of information between people and cultures across time. The Apache Trail, today a popular scenic tourist drive, was originally used by the Apache people to cross the Superstition Mountains, before it became a stagecoach road and, finally, incorporated into Highway 60. Guerrero's anachronistic references all return to the origins of the American West, though sometimes in strange, circuitous ways.

Canyon de Chelly, Arizona, which almost fills the gallery's back wall, records a pseudo-artefact Guerrero made while at Canyon de Chelly National Park in 1989. In a nonchalant gesture, the artist rearranged some colourful stones into a smiley face, which he then captured in a photograph. Thirty years later, however, Guerrero has come to believe that he was channelling his Indigenous ancestors. Behind his monumental painting of this act lies a humble wish: that someone might one day encounter the rock smiley face, like that message in a bottle, and carry on the cycle of cultural transmission.



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