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Artist's Stardom Didn't Come Out of Nowhere : Art: Raul Guerrero, who calls himself a "working-class artist," has long been known in San Diego. But his fame is growing and now includes a spread in "Vanity Fair."

By Leah Ollman | November 21, 1989

SAN DIEGO — He is modest, serious, private--not the kind of person you'd expect to see on the glossy pages of "Vanity Fair." But there he was last month, peeking out among the perfume ads and gossip, under the headline, "Hot Paints."

Now that the art world has become hopelessly star-struck, perhaps the magazine was a good place for local artist Raul Guerrero to be seen. His Los Angeles dealer thinks so. Guerrero, mildly allergic to marketing strategies and hype, just smiles.

"I'm a working-class artist," he said in a recent interview at his San Diego home and studio. "I'm in a situation where I need to make a living off my art, to continue my artistic quest."

That quest, begun in the late 1960s in Los Angeles, where he attended the legendary Chouinard Art School, has gradually but steadily assumed the characteristics of a successful career. Guerrero's third one-person show at Los Angeles' Saxon-Lee Gallery opened last month and continues through Nov. 25. He is one of 13 artists--and the only one living outside the L.A. area--featured in the inaugural exhibit at Pasadena's Armory Center for the Arts (through Jan. 31).

The current issue of the art quarterly, "Visions" carries a statement by Guerrero in its special section on multiculturalism and the arts. And next year, a fountain designed by the artist will be unveiled as part of the Hope Street redevelopment project commissioned by the city of Los Angeles. Other participants include architect Frank Gehry and artist David Hockney.

Guerrero's work is, indeed, "*caliente*," as Karen Smith exclaims in "Vanity Fair." But the artist, 44, is no overnight sensation. He has had nearly 20 solo exhibitions in San Diego, Los Angeles and elsewhere since his first show in

1974 and a healthy dose of attention from the press as well. One critic dismissed the inverted pyramid, flying saucer hubcaps, rotating Indian mask and other symbolic constructions in his first show as "irritatingly hip." Others since have labeled his photographs, paintings and constructions mysterious, disturbing, vital, intriguing, timeless, gentle, ironic and haunting.

Despite the extreme permutations in style that his work has shown, varying from severe conceptualism to lyrical romanticism, Guerrero said he has been following the same line of thought for the last 15 years. He's searching, he said, for a poetic reality that exists between an object or situation and the person perceiving it.

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"To illustrate reality is, in itself, not significant enough to achieve a level of poetics," he said. "There's a moment when you enter that realm, a transitory zone between fiction, what you imagine and what you perceive, based on your entire contextual history, your background, education, what conditions you to see."

Guerrero's interest in reconciling reality and fiction surfaces in perhaps its most accessible form in his paintings of the last few years. The suite, "Reflections on the Life and Times of a Venetian Jewess," conveys Guerrero's impressions of the textures, light and color of the Italian city as much as it restates certain cliches about the place, stemming from "what Hollywood fed me, what I read in books." The melange of expectations he brings to a place, he said, are as tangible as the direct sensations experienced there.

The Venetian series launched a trilogy, whose second part is the current series, "Aspectos de la Vida Nocturna en Tijuana B.C. (Aspects of the Night Life in Tijuana B.C.)." Each of these environments required a different attitude, he said.

"I set out to do places that were exotic, romantic, that offered the possibility of color, places that were a celebration of life, places that I had an affinity for."

Venice, he said, is "part of our collective knowledge as one of the grand cities of the world," while the bars and clubs of Tijuana summon more personal memories. Painting this series "was part of re-experiencing what I had done as a teen-ager, as a rite of passage, to go down to the Blue Fox."

Guerrero still sees work ahead for the Tijuana series, which was shown locally at the David Zapf Gallery and is now on view at Saxon-Lee in Los Angeles, but his third destination is already set: Iowa.

"It's part of my cultural heritage, since I was brought up in the U.S. It affected my psyche, because many of the dreams lived out in Southern California originated in the Midwest."

Though he has never been there, he expects his visit will be like "going back and delving into the historical side of myself."

Each of the locales Guerrero chooses poses a different structural problem, he said, and each calls for a different solution. An earlier series based on a stay in Mexico related to the "magic realism" of such Latin American authors as Gabriel Garcia Marquez in its combination of the imaginary and the concrete. The current trilogy draws comparisons in style to the loose, buoyant brush strokes of Matisse and the color-saturated romanticism of Delacroix.

Fundamental to all of his work, however, is a curiosity about symbols, myths and the cultural archetypes that strike deep in the viewer's unconscious. His passionate pursuit of these essential symbols led artist Ed Ruscha, who collects Guerrero's work, to believe that "he has some demons haunting him and he lets them out in his work."

Guerrero chuckled at the thought, then quickly sifted the comment for insights.

"I had never thought about it like that, and I think he's right. But I think he missed the angels hovering around me. I think what he meant was that I'm obsessed by it. I'm totally captivated by the creative act, the creative pursuit. I think about it all the time."