

The New York Times<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/12/nyregion/a-review-of-pre-columbian-remix-exhibition-at-the-neuberger-museum.html>**ART REVIEW | WESTCHESTER**

Pre-1492, Artistic Notions Worth Borrowing

By Martha Schwendener

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If modern art was characterized by the shock of the new, recent decades have seen an obsession with recycling. History is treated like an archive from which images and objects can be borrowed, appropriated, and repurposed — just like in popular music, where sampling was born, and which is alluded to in the title of “Pre-Columbian Remix: The Art of Enrique Chagoya, Demián Flores, Rubén Ortiz-Torres, and Nadín Ospina” at the Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College.

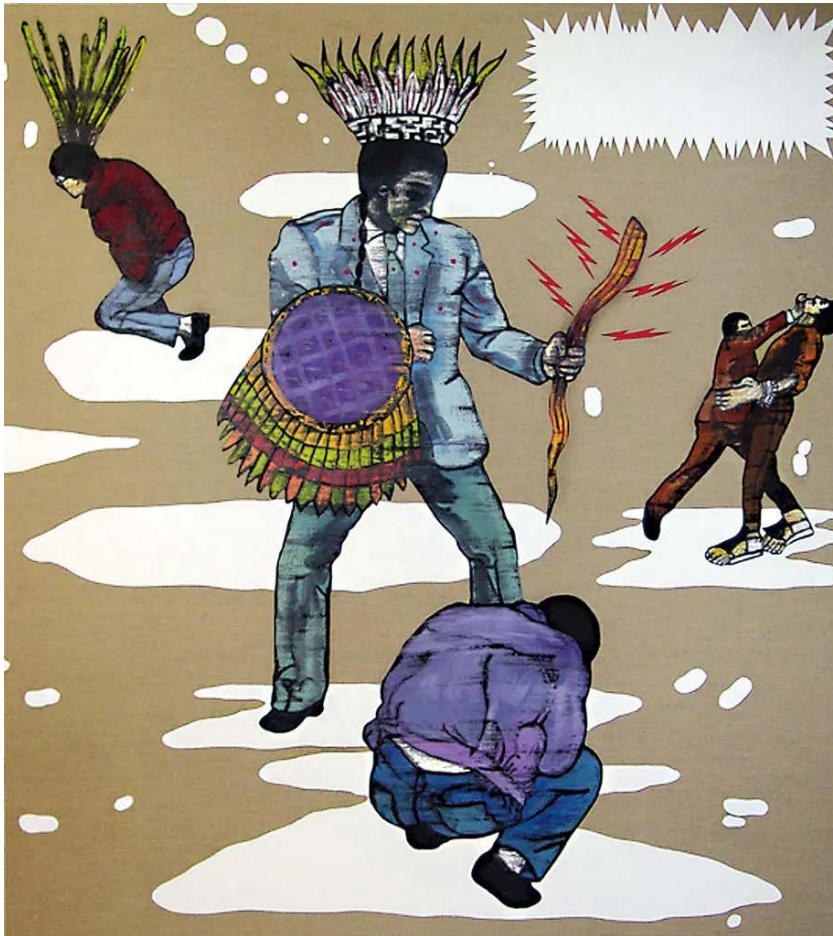


Detail from Enrique Chagoya's "The Adventures of the Bioethicist Cannibals" (2001). Courtesy of Kay Coates

"Pre-Columbian Remix" includes work by four midcareer contemporary artists who borrow images, objects and motifs from the Incan, Aztec and Mayan peoples who lived in Mesoamerica before the arrival of Christopher Columbus in 1492. And while it would have been nice to include the work of at least one woman and some younger practitioners, "Pre-Columbian Remix" has some fine, even brilliant works.

Chief among these are the photographs and prints of Mr. Ortiz-Torres, who was born in Mexico but now teaches at the University of California, San Diego. "The Past Is Not What It Used to Be," a series of photographs, often printed to look like vintage 19th-century archaeology and anthropology images, shows how pre-Columbian art has been used

around the world to structure and decorate shopping centers, amusement parks and other kitsch-heavy landscapes. “Splash, Nassau, Bahamas” (2003), a blue cyanotype print, features an amusement-park water slide built in the shape of a pre-Columbian temple, while “Montezuma’s Revenge, Seville, Spain” (2007), a black-and-white salt print, features a spinning amusement-park ride with strapped-in people screaming under the grimacing synthetic (probably plastic) head of Montezuma.



Demián Flores's "Self-Defense: Tlálloc" (2006). Courtesy of Demián Flores and Casa Lamm, Mexico

Even more mundane — and hence, unsettling — examples of consumer culture inspired by sacred pre-Columbian precedents are evident in Mr. Ortiz-Torres's “Un Poco de su País, San Bernardino, CA (Paco’s Dream, San Bernardino)” (2007), a hazy salt print featuring a man pushing a shopping cart outside an electronics store in which corporate-brand logos are juxtaposed with decorative pre-Columbian motifs; and “Popol Vuh Coat Check, Los Angeles, CA” (2007), a gelatin silver print that suggests a variety of complicated cultural associations: Popol Vuh is not only the name of the Mayan creation story, but also an avant-German rock band formed in the late '60s — indicating how pre-Columbian culture has often functioned as shorthand for “exotic” or “psychedelic.”

The codex, a folded-book technique used both by Mayans and Europeans, is remixed with the contemporary comic book in the work of Mr. Chagoya. “El Canibal Macrobiótico (The Macrobiotic Cannibal)” (1996) tells in a few short, satirical panels painted with acrylic on traditional Mexican amate paper — which existed in pre-Columbian days and was often banned after the Spanish conquest — the story of Jim Starr of the Border Patrol, who is dedicated to fighting the “Wetback Menace.” “Codex Espangliensis: From Columbus to the Border Patrol” (1998), another codex-cum-comic book, gains greater significance displayed alongside objects in a nearby showcase: paper facsimiles of the Mayan “Codex Borgia” from the pre-Columbian late-1400s, the colonial-European “Codex Azcatitlan” from the late 1500s, and German comic books from the late 1970s and early 1980s featuring Superman.



Rubén Ortiz- Torres's “Apocalypso, Campell, CA” (2007). Rubén Ortiz-Torres and Galería OMR, Mexico

The paintings and sculptures of Mr. Flores and Mr. Ospina are not as nuanced or interesting. Mr. Flores uses an idiom popularized by David Salle and other painters in the 1980s, in which appropriated and familiar-looking imagery, often drawn from popular sources, is layered and juxtaposed to create new associations and meanings. One interesting note, however, is that among the superheroes, anonymous soldiers and businessmen are images taken from Oaxacan street art.

Mr. Ospina's works are the most obvious: he combines pre-Columbian sculptural figures carved in stone or cast in gold with the heads of cartoon characters like Mickey Mouse, Goofy, or Bart and Homer Simpson. You can argue that cartoon figures are as powerful, mystical and recognizable as their pre-Columbian predecessors, and represent a new era of cultural domination in a supposedly "post-colonial" age. But they read pretty much as one-liners. (An essay in the catalog mentioning the French theorist Jacques Lacan's ideas about identity only adds to the complication of reading pre-Columbian art through a European postmodern lens.)

The fact is — as many pre-Columbian scholars have pointed out — much contemporary Latin American art functions as a "pre-Columbian remix" in the same way European artists are still riffing on Masaccio and Michelangelo. What the four artists here have in common is an overt interest in pre-Columbian objects and themes. But they serve only as representatives for a much larger population of artists, both professional and otherwise, for whom pre-Columbian culture is both in their blood and in the artifacts and images that populate their daily landscapes, even when colonial and later cultures tried to erase it.

"Pre-Columbian Remix: The Art of Enrique Chagoya, Demián Flores, Rubén Ortiz-Torres, and Nadin Ospina" is on view through July 14 at the Neuberger Museum of Art, 735 Anderson Hill Road, Purchase. For more information: neuberger.org or (914) 251-6100.

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