

Leaving Her Mark With the Well Worn

By Martha Schwendener

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Art can, at times, have a bit of an audience problem. On the one hand, it wants to speak to the largest population. On the other, it wants to participate in conversations that only a handful of people are knowledgeable about — philosophy, say, or politics, or art itself. Betsabeé Romero, an artist born in 1963, who was educated in Mexico and Paris and now lives in Mexico City, has hit upon a solution.

“The car is by far the object that attracts the greatest aesthetic attention among people of all ages and social classes,” Ms. Romero says in a statement printed on the wall in her current exhibition, “Betsabeé Romero: Lágrimas Negras,” at the Neuberger Museum of Art in Purchase.

Using the car as an intermediary, Ms. Romero has created installations, objects and participatory art works. Sometimes this can get slightly gimmicky, but there are many works here that use the device to great advantage.



Betsabeé Romero uses cars or car parts in many of her works: “On the Other Side of Speed,” above left, with a tractor tire, velvet and electric light; and Moving Cities,” carved tires and textile imprints. Betsabeé Romero

She treats the car like a human body, and excels at dissecting its anatomy — especially the tires, which are made from rubber, a rain forest resource that was turned into an industrial product and obtained, in its earlier days, through low-paid or forced labor. (Hence the Lágrimas Negras, or black tears, of the title.)

Leaving this tragic history out of the artwork’s immediate equation, Ms. Romero often focuses instead on the creation of ingenious art pieces and situations that gently spur you to think about the origins, use and social relations surrounding objects and materials.

Tires are frequently treated like wood or leather, with Ms. Romero carving into their surfaces intricate patterns derived from pre-Columbian imagery or Iberian medieval Islamic art. Her “Trayectos Encontrados (Found Trajectories)” from 2008 used public transportation tires, incised with curling patterns and inlaid with gold leaf, creating a juxtaposition of the discarded and recycled with the materially valuable.

Ms. Romero also favors chewing gum, another everyday material related to rubber — and to Mexico, since chicle sap comes from a tree in the Yucatán. “Sendas de Chicle (Chewing Gum Way)” from 2008 is a tire carved with patterns and inlaid with prechewed yellowish gum, while “Trayectos Masticados (Chewed Trajectories)” from 2005 consists of tires flattened into long friezes, carved with intricate patterns and inlaid with colorful chewed gum.

Two particularly captivating objects — mostly because hyper-realism is perennially arresting — are “De Tuti Fruti (Of Tutti Frutti)” from 2006 and “De Carro y de Barro (From Car and Clay)” from 2001. In the first sculpture, which is suspended from the ceiling, a perfect facsimile of a tire has been shaped out of red chewing gum. In the second work, Ms. Romero has recreated another perfect replica of a tire, except from black Oaxacan clay — an allusion to the highly developed tradition of ceramics that flourished under the Aztec empire.



“Border Line,” a photograph. Betsabeé Romero

Larger tires, taken from tractors, connect art with farm work. “Simbolo Masticado (Chewed Symbol)” from 2005 is a tire carved with patterns and filled with colorful gum, while “Al Otro Lado de al Velocidad (On the Other Side of Speed)” from 2008 turns the rough agrarian workhorse into an object of beauty — or something close to it.

Car hoods take this social commentary in another direction. Unlike Richard Prince, who transformed car hoods into hybrid painting/sculptures, Ms. Romero uses the hood as an

ad hoc canvas. While Mr. Prince's hoods are linked with winking irony to white, working-class culture — an ugly form of late 20th-century primitivism that rarely gets remarked upon — Ms. Romero's "Milagro y Accidente (Miracles and Accidents)" series functions more like folk art paintings, or Surrealism in the vein of Frida Kahlo. One of the two hoods included here depicts a car crash and a religious vision involving the Virgin of Guadalupe.

Participatory art doesn't always translate well in the gallery. But a project Ms. Romero created for the Havana Biennial in 2004, "Ciudades que se Van (Moving Cities)," appears in video to fine effect. A carved tire is the central motif of the work, which the artist turned into a printmaking device. Rolling ink upon its carved surface, she provided free art to anyone who brought her a piece of fabric: a dish towel, a handkerchief or, in the case of one young man who leaned into the tire, an instant T-shirt appliqué. At the end of the video, the inked-up tire is bolted onto a car — one of those vintage ones still rolling around Havana, having dodged the reign of planned obsolescence — and is driven away, leaving a pattern on the pavement. Nearby is a related sculpture with carved tires and textile imprints.

Photography plays a role in Ms. Romero's work, mostly as a form of documentation for her participatory projects. But some of the works function well as discrete images, too. "Línea Fronteriza (Border Line)" from 1997 shows a car painted with roses pushed up against the border between the United States and Mexico. In the distance, barely visible, a border-control vehicle — it's hard to see which nation the car represents — drives along the desert hills.

Ms. Romero's canny observation about the car and its wide-ranging aesthetic appeal means that her work translates well to many locales; she has exhibited in France, India, Brazil, Spain, Ireland and Mexico, as well the United States. Being a smart global artist, however, means trying as best one can to engage the locals. Ms. Romero has done this in Westchester by purchasing a 1978 Cadillac El Dorado from one Al Bastone in the Bronx, and with students and professors, decorating the car with a fake leather "skin" tattooed with Asian patterns that pay homage to the recent earthquake and tsunami in Japan. The "Fukushima Car," as it is titled — referring to the damaged nuclear power plants in Fukushima Prefecture — is parked at the entrance to Purchase College of the State University of New York, where the Neuberger is located, about 30 miles from the Indian Point reactors.

"Betsabeé Romero: Lágrimas Negras" runs through Aug. 14 at the Neuberger Museum of Art, 735 Anderson Hill Road, Purchase. Information: neuberger.org or (914) 251-6100.

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