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The Bite of the Print

Be careful—Artemio Rodríguez's demons are alive
By Ben Ehrenreich

It's easy to miss La Mano Press, hidden away as it is among the factories and warehouses that line North Main Street just east of the Los Angeles River. And inside the corrugated metal building, it's almost as easy to miss Artemio Rodríguez among the giant gray machines that crowd the studio floor.

Rodríguez is not tall. He's 34 but looks younger, despite a neatly trimmed mustache and beard. His nervousness peels off a few years. When sitting, his legs bob with agitation. When standing, his light eyes almost hum. None of this is surprising if you're at all familiar with his work—linocut and woodcut prints crammed to bursting with goats and fish and monkeys, lovers entwined, palm trees, cactuses and creeping vines, serpents and putti, crouching nudes, one-eyed deer, farting monsters and scowling suns, mushroom clouds, skeletons, endless demons. With so many worlds bubbling within, sitting idle must be an extraordinary act of containment.

By contrast, the machines that surround Rodríguez are silent, still and almost impossibly sturdy. They are Vandercook proof presses built in the 1920s. "These are some of the few that remain," he says in accented, slightly hesitant English, his pride overcoming his shyness. There are two big presses in the room, as well as a couple of small letterpresses, drying racks and a screen-printing table cluttered with books. The Vandercooks each consist of a long, flat metal bed about waist-high, topped at one end by a cluster of wide metal cylinders. A hand crank and foot pedal jut from the side. The machines bear as much resemblance to the lone Macintosh hidden away in the back room ("We use it mainly for making proofs for silk-screens," Rodríguez says apologetically) as a steam locomotive does to a Toyota Prius.

He whisks the dust off a small block of linoleum with a toothbrush and pries open a small tin of ink. It took him a single afternoon, he says, to carve the linoleum plate, which depicts a woman's grinning skull in a plumed hat and fur stole. It's a copy of José Guadalupe Posada's Día de los Muertos icon "La Catrina," interpreted with a strange combination of delicacy and boldness. Even in relief, the bones look brittle, the plumage billows.

Rodríguez scrapes a little ink onto a pane of glass with a palette knife, spreads the ink over the surface of the linoleum with a small rubber roller, places a sheet of paper over the plate, trips a foot pedal and turns the hand crank. The cylinders roll out with a satisfying clank, pressing the paper tight against the linoleum. When they've rolled back into place, Rodríguez peels the paper off, revealing a perfect impression of the lines he'd carved. La Catrina's empty eyeholes beckon; her stole wriggles as if it's made of worms.

Making art this way, Rodríguez explains, "is like an invitation to look into ourselves

as human beings. Do you want to keep . . . on the road of doing conceptual or digital creations that are alive only in the white box of the museum space or on the screen of your computer? Or do you want to do things that you can keep alive and feel with your own hands?"

Artemio Rodríguez was born in the small town of Tacámbaro in the central Mexican state of Michoacán. His father was a farmer and construction worker who, like most of the men in the family, spent half of each year north of the border, picking tobacco and oranges in the fields and orchards of North Carolina and Florida. The U.S. meant new clothes and television sets for Rodríguez and his siblings, but it also, they knew, meant months of loneliness and toil for their fathers and uncles. "I wasn't attracted at all" to the other side, he says. "I was like, 'I don't want to go to work, to be a slave.'"

When Rodríguez was 21, his older brothers, who had migrated to Los Angeles, offered to pay a coyote to smuggle him across the border. Rodríguez was living at home; he had won a scholarship to study agronomy, but extracurricular activities—mainly politics and poetry—intervened, and he never finished his degree. He had discovered printmaking through a man named Juan Pascoe, who ran a small press out of an old adobe hacienda in the middle of a sugar-cane field at the edge of Rodríguez's hometown.

Despite Pascoe's encouragement, Rodríguez was largely self-taught. "Nobody else was doing it," he says of the traditional methods toward which Pascoe had steered him. "There was nobody to follow." The books he studied were filled with images of medieval and colonial Mexican woodcuts, and Rodríguez's early work betrays that heritage—a full cast of angels and demons, and lines so fine it's hard to believe they are carved and not drawn. Only later would he discover Posada's playful social satire, his thousands of dancing muertos and cackling calaveras, and the radical printmaking tradition he helped to spawn: the bold, almost socialist-realist broadsheets that proliferated in the decades after the Mexican Revolution.

Except in the fields, there was no work in Tacámbaro for a dreamy university dropout, and Rodríguez knew that a farmer's son from the provinces had little chance of breaking into the class-bound Mexican art world. So despite all of his childhood misgivings about the U.S., he flew to Tijuana to meet the coyote. "I was like, 'Well, nobody knows me there, so I can be free to do anything I want.'" And, he adds with a quiet laugh, "in a way it was true, for a little bit."

He moved into a small apartment in Van Nuys and worked with his brothers painting houses. Everything was huge. The supermarkets were filled with unimaginable quantities of stuff. The houses he painted were large and spotlessly clean. There were no books in them, he recalls, but lots of TVs and too many cars in the driveways. "The main thing I remember was being very impressed by how much waste there is," he says, "and also the feeling that you are nobody, no?"

On weekends he'd take the bus to East L.A. to use the printing press at Self-Help Graphics, the community art center. When he'd been here for a year, he engraved a plate he called "¡Qué Tragedia!" It's a lonely nightmare vision of American prosperity. In place of asphalt, a stream flows down a suburban street, culminating in a whirlpool. Fat white men in baseball caps push naked corpses downstream with sticks. The corpses are skinny, all ribs. They have dark hair, devil's horns and tails. More devils, also naked, watch from the banks and weep.

During his first year in L.A., Rodríguez completed a series of linocuts based on the traditional Mexican lotería deck. (Lotería is a bingo-like game in which, instead of numbers, players are dealt cards bearing stock images: the tree, the devil, the sun.) It began as an exercise in nostalgia. Living far from home, he says, made him appreciate aspects of Mexican culture that he had never taken the time to notice—everything that contrasted with the fast, shiny, money- and self-obsessed land in which he found himself. But the project expanded to encompass a full cosmology, a deck for a game of chance that contained within it the entire universe of his imagination.

Some of the cards are playful—a tiny naked man rides an ostrich through a field of cactuses; a monkey strums a guitar as a winged devil (or a horned angel?) whispers in its ear. Some, like "El Mojado" and "La Migra," don't appear in any traditional lotería decks. (The two form a single image of a thin, mustached man running barefoot over furrowed earth, pursued by a flat-topped immigration officer who is part horse, part motorcycle, part man.) Elsewhere a soldier stands atop a heap of corpses, tears coursing down his face; a man sits alone on the moon, a cup of coffee steaming on his knee as he stares longingly at the Earth above him; a beautiful mermaid holds a glowing human heart above the sea as fish lick at her tail; drunks vomit in a graveyard; a serpent whispers in Eve's ear; a goat laughs at Adam.

Rodríguez moved to East L.A. to be closer to Self-Help. He began selling his work there and decided to risk quitting his painting job. He found an old German letterpress for $250, spent another $250 to move it into the garage of his shared apartment. No one in L.A., or anywhere that he knew of, was doing the kind of work he did. The galleries, he says, weren't interested in prints that didn't have Ed Ruscha's name at the bottom. Being Mexican in an art world dominated by white MFA stars didn't help. "They see that it's black and white, it's a print, and the first name and last name are Hispanic, and they're like, 'No, no, no.'"

In 2001, after a move to Berkeley, a marriage, a divorce, a move to Mexico and then back to Los Angeles, Rodríguez and his girlfriend, painter and graphic artist Silvia Capistran, founded La Mano Press. The idea, he says, was "to have a place and an organization that isn't dependent, [so] we don't have to ask permission to anybody." They began offering workshops. Within a year they'd published their first book, a monograph on Posada. A year later they moved La Mano from a small room at Self-Help to its current site in Lincoln Heights. Since then they've published three more books: "Puro Muerto," a collection of artwork inspired by the Day of the Dead, "The King of Things Lotería Card Set" and "American Dream," a 10-year retrospective of Rodríguez's work.

The latter's title is simultaneously earnest and satirical. Like his story and his artwork, it suggests notions that have no place within the narrow clichés of the debate on immigration—that people still come here for reasons grander and vaguer than brute material necessity; that the American dream is more than an empty con and violent hustle, though it is also that; that the quiet kid painting your dining room has more on his mind than your baseboards, and just may use his lunch break to fill a sketchbook with all the torturous beauty of the world.

Lately, Rodríguez has been moving beyond paper and ink: His designs decorated an old Impala lowrider for a show this fall at the Oakland Museum ("La Catrina" graced the hood). He worked with Belmont High School students to design the graphics for a

video game about Latin American history, and he's started a skateboard business with two friends. Sitting in front of the Mac in La Mano's back room, Rodriguez clicks open a jpeg of a skeleton in a superhero's cape and tights, one of a series that he'll silk-screen onto skateboards. "This is Super-Muerto," he says. "I like the chones," he giggles, and zooms in on the figure's underpants—the business is called Puro Gallo, and Super-Muerto's crotch is speckled with tiny skeletal roosters.

But it's his low-tech work that has brought La Mano the most attention. More than a dozen people enroll in each of La Mano's workshops, and a small but growing number of local artists have been finding their way back to traditional printing techniques. Lisa Fischman, the chief curator of the University of Arizona's Museum of Art, which has several Rodríguez prints in its collection (the L.A. County Museum of Art has five), sees his work at La Mano as part of a resurgence—on a small, subcultural level—of interest in techniques and technologies that were on the verge of extinction a few years ago. "Maybe this is the balance on the high-end digital work," Fischman says. "This is the other side of the spectrum."

Part of the appeal, speculates Daniel Gonzalez, a Rodríguez protégé who recently opened his own studio a few doors down from La Mano, is printmaking's suitability as a "medium for protest." Picket signs left over from last spring's immigrant rights marches are propped among the Vandercooks at La Mano. The slogans are standard issue ("USA Wake Up"), but the images are not. One is printed with Rodríguez's linocut of a skeletal rider shooting at a skeletal runner from atop a skeletal horse. With Rodríguez's usual eclecticism, it suggests a late medieval "Saint George and the Dragon" updated by Posada and dragged across the Rio Grande into Patriot Act-era America. Another depicts Uncle Sam surrounded by allegoric images: Fear is a fish biting at his crotch.

"There's not very much that's still shocking these days," Fischman says, "but the honesty with which [Rodríguez] approaches his subject and the sharpness of his satire on the United States is. He's supposed to be one of the voiceless ones, but obviously he's got a lot to say."

Little monsters swarm everywhere in Rodríguez's prints: standard-issue gargoyles but also four-armed satyrs whose legs merge with the clouds, snails with human faces, winged pigs, little men whose bodies become bicycles. For a good part of last year, a strange dog-like creature with a huge toothy grin was painted in stark black and white across La Mano's corrugated metal walls. When he is asked about these critters, Rodríguez's English grows shakier than usual. "They are like representations of minorities," he says, his voice rising slightly on the last syllable as if he is unsure of the word, as if he means not just Mexicans or the undocumented, but all of society's downtrodden and excluded. "Minorities are seen as ugly people, as monsters," he goes on. "So for me it's that: OK, we're little monsters, we're little ugly creatures, but we are alive and you have to be careful." Their message is the same, he says with a laugh that is for once not nervous at all, as that of "El Feo Feliz" ("The Happy Ugly One"), the waggish fellow whose image was emblazoned on La Mano's exterior: "I'm ugly, and what?"