

Weird Things

Opening Reception for Garden of Angels

Marcos Ramirez has known about the graveyard for a long time, because his mother and grandmother are buried there. The artist gives the graveyard's name, starts to spell it, then the phone connection to his home in Tijuana goes dead. When the call resumes a minute later, he suffices to say that the graveyard is "on the road to Tecate."

One day he happened to wander into what he came to realize was the children's section. What he found were many graves that had been decorated not only with religious icons but with "world icons of the new age" — commercial items made in America and Japan: Pokémon dolls, Hot Wheels cars, Mickey Mouse and other Disney-inspired toys.

How did that strike him? "It struck me enough to go home and get my camera and come back."

The 41-year-old Ramirez returned several times to take shots of particular tombstones. "Because the sun hits them at various angles, each one required two or three sessions." It wasn't a ghoulish or morbid activity

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if taken in context, he says. In Mexico and elsewhere, photographers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries were paid to make postmortem images for grief-stricken parents. "They used to dress up their *angelitos* — little angels — and bring them to the photographers' studio. The mother would have her picture taken with the baby in her lap, dead." He sees himself as part of that tradition. Still, during one session in the graveyard, on the Day of the Dead in November, Ramirez held back. "On that day I didn't take a lot of pictures, just a few long-range shots, because it was crowded, and I wanted to have respect for the mourners." The photos he couldn't resist taking were those of a group who had brought along a musical trio. "They were playing *norteño* music, giving a serenade to the kid. They were playing Mexican sad songs and Mexican kid songs."

On that day he also saw lots of people in the act of making what Ramirez calls their "installations," using the mass-marketed childhood playthings.

Ramirez's own installation, consisting of the first 7 of a planned 25 or so pieces that will complete his "Garden of Angels," are ready to go on display this weekend in La Jolla, where they'll be through the middle of August. Each one is a photo mounted inside a light box similar in size (30 by 40 inches) to an actual tombstone. Most of them will hang

on the walls; others will be freestanding, "so that when you look at them, you will see them as if you were in the graveyard. The whole idea is to bring you into the place."

And yet the show is the opposite of somber, by design of the artist. The photos themselves are bright with the lollipop colors of the toys. The light boxes are sheathed in metals of baby blue and pink and yellow — colors of the nursery. The light itself is a symbol of the divine, of eternal life, says Ramirez. He has included only one photo that offers a general view of the graveyard.

Looking at the other photos, close-ups, one isn't immediately aware of where they were taken. "The place looks more like something out of *Alice in Wonderland* than a graveyard," says Ramirez, who also goes by the name of "Erre" (the initial of his last name, as spelled in Spanish). "But that's the interesting part. Supposedly Mexicans can deal with death. It's said we almost enjoy it. The graves are part of another long tradition: we make altars and all these things, paying homage to the dead. But now the tradition is changing. It's mutating to include new elements that aren't from our own culture. The graves are a hybrid."

Have there been different reactions to the pieces on either side of the border? "Well, not many pure-bred Americans have seen the images yet. Only Mexicans — and they all react the same way. They understand that these graves are something peculiar to the region. They see that, somehow, even these pieces are 'border art,'" says Ramirez, one of whose best-known installations is *Trojan Horse*, a 30-foot, two-headed wooden horse at the San Ysidro border crossing. "They understand that all these contradictions, like the use of the commercial objects on the graves, are what happens in a place like Tijuana."

Do kids' reactions differ from the reactions of adults? "Well, the only kids who have seen the pieces so far are my own. I have two and my girlfriend has one, ages 9, 11, and 12. And none of them really reacted, because they are used to me doing weird things. We'll see on the day of the opening how other kids react."

— Jeanne Schinto

**Opening reception for
"Garden of Angels/
Jardin de Angeles"
by Marcos "Erre" Ramirez
Friday, July 12, 6:00-8:00 p.m.
Quint Contemporary Art
7661 Girard Avenue, Suite 110
La Jolla
Free
Info: 858-454-3409**



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