

american craft

New Horizons
for Ceramist
Kathy Erteman

Twin Cities
Crafts Abound
in the Land of
10,000 Lakes

A Century Ago
Omega Workshops
Led British Artists
to the Applied Arts



Right:
Gandi del Sur, 2008,
detail, mixed-media
installation, video and
music (h. 80 in., w. 24 in.,
d. 20 in.).

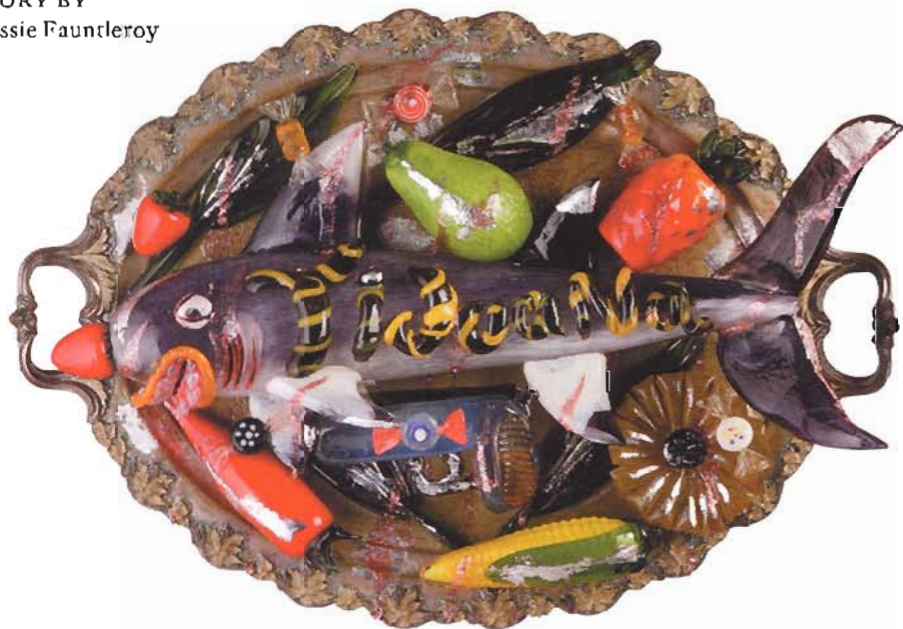
Below:
*Tijuana on a Silver
Platter*, 2005, blown
glass, mixed media
(h. 18½ in., w. 27 in.,
d. 8 in.).



de la Torre Brothers and Border Baroque

Museum at the National Hispanic
Cultural Center
Meso-America(nics)
(Maneuvering Mestizaje)
September 12, 2008 – August 16, 2009
Albuquerque, New Mexico
nhccnm.org

STORY BY
Gussie Fauntleroy



If ever there were a case where materials and their masterful use provide a perfect match—and metaphor—for an artist's concepts and themes, it's in the art of Jamex and Einar de la Torre. How better to convey the rich complexity and alchemic intermingling of border cultures than through mixed-media creations as multilayered, thought-provoking and engaging as the cultures themselves? "Meso-America(nics) (Maneuvering Mestizaje): de la Torre brothers and Border Baroque" brings such work to the Museum at the National Hispanic Cultural Center in an extensive exhibition put together by the museum's director and chief curator, Tey Marianna Nunn.

Jamex and Einar de la Torre were born (1960 and 1963, respectively) in Guadalajara, Mexico, finished high school in Southern California and studied sculpture and glassblowing at California State University in Long Beach. They currently divide their time between Ensenada, Mexico, and National City, California, working with equal creative fluency on both sides of the border, as well as pulling iconic imagery and ideas from around the world.

Similarly, in their art the brothers intentionally disregard conventional borders between dichotomous pairs such as "high" and "low" art and sacred and profane, and between deluxe objects and the detritus of everyday life. Virtually every assemblage and installation incorporates blown glass or cast-resin elements in sumptuous colors that shimmer, juxtaposed with an array of found objects, including plastic toys, snack food wrappers and old tires.

Messages presented through this juxtaposition are absorbed on a visceral as well as intellectual level. Just as an unfamiliar culture may initially feel like an undifferentiated sensory barrage of sounds, colors, textures and smells, these works take time to reveal their multiple layers. Each piece brims, in truly baroque fashion, with historical and cultural references, as well as universal themes, unsettling nuances and elements of sheer beauty. Detailed descriptions mounted beside each work and a catalog provide welcome insight.

The de la Torre brothers don't consider themselves glass artists per se. Instead, they see glass as one component of a rich visual language in which the qualities of glass—color, malleability and light—interact with a multitude of found objects. The brothers

might more accurately be described as three-dimensional collage artists. The act of combining glass with other materials gives them an agile means for addressing issues of current relevance, particularly those arising from the flow of humanity across borders around the world.

Central among these is the question of identity. Who are we when removed from the solid ground of a single ethnic background and history-infused sense of place? The Spanish word describing this condition is *mestizo*, which means mixture. In a graphically striking piece, *Mestizaje Defined*, 2005 (and in other works in the show), the brothers use mixtures of beans as symbols for the mestizo state. A clear, cast-resin frame contains 12 identically shaped low-relief faces, each filled with a different blend of beans.

Some faces contain predominantly dark or light-colored beans. Some are homogeneous, others, highly mixed. "In the end, we're all beaners; we're all mestizo. It's a cause for celebration," the artists declare. Yet with the bean-filled faces all bearing variations on a grin, the piece posits a surface cheerfulness for situations we know in reality to be fraught with issues of social hierarchy, privilege and discrimination.

Other themes running through the de la Torre brothers' work include historical perspective—who has the right to write history?—conquest, assimilation, sacrifice (part of a larger theme of pre-Columbian cultures and influences), religion, food, fate and the nature of time. One large wall piece, *Poca HantaVirus*, 2008, literally superimposes divergent views of cultural interface. Onto the surface of a massive and sternly intense representation of an Olmec mask is projected the animated Disney film *Pocahontas*. In the film, floppy animal ears and flowing dark hair represent the candy-flavored, Euro-centered (Americanized) vision of encounter. Meanwhile, the mask projects its own indisputable force, offering the viewer a disquieting firsthand encounter with the "other."

By contrast, the show's entrance piece, *Eastern Medicine*, 2008, uses the arresting appeal of color, symmetry, symbolism and detail in cast resin and blown glass to highlight other global connections—in this case, between Native American and Asian cultures. The work features the circle, as symbolic of endless cyclical time, and food, as

The de la Torre brothers combine glass with other materials as a means of addressing issues of identity.

central to human vitality, community and social structures. Corn, which plays this role among indigenous peoples of the Americas, is depicted and to represent Asian cultures there are small plates of (glass) mock food resembling the plastic models displayed in the windows of Japanese restaurants and shops. On a grander scale, *Colonial Atmosphere*, 2002, a room-size installation that also includes an Olmec mask, draws associations between the moon landing, religion and Western Hemisphere conquest. Yet small works such as *Crossing the Desert*, 2005, pack an equally powerful, if more direct, punch.

"Meso-Americhanics" may be overwhelming—best experienced in more than one viewing—as is the National Hispanic Cultural Center itself, with its art museum and visual arts program, performing arts, films, lectures, literary events and more. *Gussie Fauntleroy is a writer and editor in Denver, Colorado.*

✦ The bilingual catalog is \$22, nhccnm.org.

Right:
De Pilar of Empire/M. Pyre, 2004, mixed-media installation (h. 80 in., w. 24 in., d. 20 in.).

Below:
Colonial Atmosphere, 2002, mixed-media installation.

