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Hard Currency: Arturo Vega's Silver-Dollar Paintings

A master iconographer for an era of irascible iconoclasts, Arturo Vega understood the potency of symbols as both the visual language by which power could reify itself and the metaphoric idiom that allows us to question and confront the authority of those very same representations. He was able to brand a moment that resisted the corporate culture of commodities and trademarks, allowing us to buy into something that was inherently subversive to the patent acquiescence of consumerism. Yes, he created the emblem that made a bunch of unruly and unapologetic delinquents truly iconic, but as an artist his entire oeuvre has been potently double-edged, barbing the mundane and quotidian semantics of pictorial and written language with a kind of street-level vernacular critique that transformed the benign into the thorny and the common into the extraordinary. A master communicator who wholly embraced punk's mandate of directness with a terse lexicon and acute articulation of unswerving, matter-of-fact honesty, Vega was also a consummate mediator. The very legibility of expression that made his work so "easy" to read was conversely predicated on how the brilliantly bad translation of terms can proffer unlikely and contrary meanings: understandings that reveal themselves in the misreading. Employing, and in many ways inventing, the fundamental precepts of the punk aesthetic—a DIY approach to creative practice that relies heavily on handmade adaptations of what is accessible—Vega's appropriation and mutation of the secondhand made him a post-modernist long before such strategies became art-world theory. With this in mind we might say his silver-dollar paintings are both immediately comprehensible and gradually dubious, unmistakable gestures that are ultimately about the mistakes we all make in the process of apprehension, a subtle tracing of that sad little bit of slippage of significance measured in the loss, like water between our fingers, every time we grasp something.

Predicated on our near-pathological habit of misunderstanding, or perhaps our penchant to take everything at face value, Arturo Vega's silver dollars demand that we imagine the flip side of the coin and come to acknowledge the less-certain truth that the inherited terms of our reality are also very much a coin-flip. A sustained body of work that Vega began in the early 1970s and would return to throughout his career, numbering more than 80 works in all, the paintings are deeply disquieting in their insistence. They are the epitome of passive-aggressive gesticulations, at once a request and a declaration, a statement of ownership and of need. As such, they constitute a kind of urban argot, idiomatic of a world in which money is the tangible embodiment of systemic inequality. Likely these palms outstretched with that mighty dollar were a sign of the pride and desperation Vega first registered growing up in Mexico during the crisis and bloody turmoil of the student revolts of the '60s—the demands for a fairer world and the aspirations for a better life so brutally thwarted that he left for the United States. But more surely they were the signal of an equally profound social dis-ease he learned from his roost in his adopted home of New York City, where just such a show might be performed endlessly along that skid-row stretch of the

Bowery where his apartment famously stood. The signification remains as ambiguous as the parlance of our metropolitan hustle: the flash of cash, the come-on, and just as surely the beggar's hand asking for help.

Arturo Vega speaks to us in mixed messages because he understands confusion as something more deliberate than accidental. While culture resorts to ambivalence as a matter of not quite being able to make up its mind on things, Vega suffered far less from doubt than from an abiding duality. He took the same test we all do, and his was more exacting than many, coming from where he did: he found an America in decline and a New York in freefall. When it came to the questions that really mattered, he never saw it as a choice between one answer or another but always checked *all of the above*. This is the virtue of his art, why it speaks to so many in so many different ways that remain simultaneously personal and universal, and above all emotionally complex. In a time of profound aesthetic nihilism, Arturo Vega managed to deliver his critique of society as an act of indubitable optimism and love. He could curse the world for all its evils with a smile, damn the whole thing as an act of unmitigated love. Vega did so in his art because he had a poet's sense of semiotics wrapped up in a radical's heart of abiding social empathy.

Vega's capacity in these pictures to snarl and smile simultaneously is predicated on his capacity to embrace the capitalist illusion of happiness while querying its darker agenda. Built of silk-screened acrylic paint on canvas, rendered in a silver-patina monochrome that reeks of the black-and-white copy machine image thefts and reproductions endemic to punk art, and often fitted out with flags from Latin American nations that speak to the imperialist thrust of America's manifest cultural destiny, the hands and the flag patterns are merely the frame for the real subject of the dollar coins. This currency is the thematic focus around which those other human and geopolitical concerns inevitably orbit. Here we receive the full psychological weight of cash-in-hand that only marginal economies can give you. It is not the simple happenstance of any loose bit of change, but that monetary signifier that bears most clearly the official stamp of America's globalizing hegemony—that eagle, which has played so significant a role in Vega's art since the mid-'70s and which he borrowed to brand the Ramones as a singularly American band. For the post-Vietnam War condition in which so many young people could suddenly see how political strife and national identity were manifestations of a capitalist machine—a machine whose power was vested in its uncanny ability to reduce itself to a glossary of logos—Arturo Vega's silver dollar is money and state minted as a metaphor for self—the failing promise of hope rendered in that last tease of possibility: all you need is a dollar and a dream.