

Dan Cameron

Hiding in Plain Sight

Although artists are frequently reminded that creating work that is somehow ahead of its time is key to being remembered by posterity, the downside to this prescription is the unlikelihood of that same innovative work being understood and recognized in an artist's own time. The harsh reality—which is no less painful for being a shopworn cliché—is that most art that does become recognized during its time is more than likely a stale and derivative version of some other art that came before it, while truly breakthrough ideas, techniques and forms often languish for years before genuine recognition takes place. No matter how many curators, collectors, gallery owners and art critics roam the cities in search of the new and untested, the unfortunate truth is that few people who are deeply invested in the art system genuinely welcome challenges to the status quo that might, in the process of being assimilated, undermine some of their own long-held positions.

Arturo Vega is a classic case of an artist who had stumbled onto something vital by the time he became known as a creative force in the downtown New York scene. The twist to the story, however, is that in Vega's case, the thing he became known for gradually overshadowed the thing that he came to New York to become, which was a painter. Deeply influenced by Andy Warhol, but also politicized by his personal experiences in Mexico City prior to becoming a New Yorker, Vega does not appear to have felt neglected in his art, if only because his application of a visual artist's thought process, lexicon and toolbox to the building of the Ramones' legacy is the kind of exposure and contact of which most visual artists, even today, can only dream. If one also takes into account that the New York downtown punk scene of the late 1970s was very much beholden to the 1960s in terms of its apparent anti-materialistic principles, it is entirely understandable that in making a vital contribution to a musical movement that had more than a touch of revolution in its DNA, Vega might even have felt for a period of time that the paintings he made were primarily relics—objects of luxury that had little place in a milieu in which brash attitudes and street smarts seemed far more valuable assets to possess.

One of Vega's most significant mentors in Mexico was the artist Pedro Friedeberg, who developed a very particular version of psychedelic art that was heavily indebted to graphic art and industrial design. In fact, Friedeberg's success presaged Vega's own, insofar as it was not Friedeberg's paintings that made him a financial success in those heady years, but instead his invention of the hand chair, a simple yet ingenious design that could be adapted, copied and licensed for mass production, so that a small army of designers and decorators who had no idea of his name (or his art) made Friedeberg a financially secure individual at a time when most fine artists of his generation found it necessary to teach, publish or perform an array of odd jobs simply in order to maintain their practice. Even as a visual artist, Friedeberg was more recognized as a printmaker than as a painter, at least until recent years saw scholarly interest in his paintings increase. Finally, as Friedeberg's closest artis-

tic friends and collaborators in Mexico were fellow European expatriates—sculptor and theater artist Mathias Goeritz and filmmaker Alejandro Jodorowsky—it is likely Friedeberg also imparted to his protégée both the importance of collaboration with like-minded artistic souls and the probability, if one was to realize one's innate artistic gifts, of self-exile.

That the punk movement of the 1970s preceded the East Village gallery scene of the 1980s was both fortunate for Vega as well as a hindrance, since by the time art galleries finally appeared that might have taken an interest in his paintings, Vega had already established both a reputation and an income stream as the “fifth Ramone,” and for years his paintings took a definite backseat to his graphic production. This was unfortunate both for him and for us, since the context of appropriated imagery and mechanical production that emerged in the neighborhood by the mid-1980s appears, in retrospect, tailor-made for the kinds of imagery in which Vega specialized, of which the silver-dollar paintings are perhaps the most vivid examples. Gracie Mansion, International with Monument and Nature Morte, to name a few, featured artists who adapted Warhol's silk-screened techniques through the application of conventional painting skills, producing a hybrid style that felt like a deliberate rejection of the highly expressionistic modes of painting that had ruled the Soho galleries at just about the time the Ramones were breaking into the national spotlight. In particular, Vega's silver-dollar works seem very much like precursors of the gritty black-and-white photographic imagery that David Wojnarowicz began to produce in the late 1980s, once his AIDS-positive diagnosis convinced him that he would never express everything he felt he needed to as an artist if he continued to rely exclusively on painting. In this sense, the historical predicament that Vega-as-painter represents is doubly problematic, since not only were these paintings never seen by a public that might have been predisposed to appreciate them, but even those artists who might have been his closest artistic allies were, in all likelihood, unknown to him, and he to them.

Now that some of the lingering art-historical questions raised by Arturo Vega's paintings from the 1970s and 1980s are beginning to be addressed, it might also be possible to suggest that the timing, for once, is on his side. Because they exist in serial form, Vega's paintings from decades ago seem ready-made for an artistic era in which production trumps individual expression—in other words, the present moment. Because of Vega's position as an outsider within American culture, it seems almost inevitable that the burgeoning scholarly and market interest in lost or missing chapters of Latin American modernity seem poised to provide a more international context for his work. Because his foundational artistic collaborations were with musicians, the inter-media paradigm that is driving much of 21st-century work has begun to enhance, rather than deflect, the meanings within Vega's paintings. And because of the growing general awareness of the gradual waning of America's unilateral power in a multilateral world, within Vega's ambiguous image of the hand displaying the coin of the realm—is

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the hand offering the viewer the coin in a spirit of generosity and sharing, or has the photo been taken an instant before the hand shuts tightly?—it is possible to discern a sour note of political dissatisfaction with a world in which anyone's ability to achieve one's goals seems to be indirectly related to the amount of capital one can apply to making it happen. Vega might have come to the U.S. without any conventional form of artistic patronage, and he may even have prospered in a cultural milieu where such support systems seemed at once remote and obsolete, but it wasn't until his death that the impetus to take a new and much closer look at his artistic achievements became evident.

In contrast to colorful myths about the figure of the overlooked genius, the forces of revisionist history are both systematic and entirely lacking in sentimentality. What truly matters to the hordes of young and hungry artists bursting onto the art world today is that the version of art history that they end up embracing match their own creative needs. For every Damien Hirst, whose artistic star burns intently for a fleeting instant, then fades into crass irrelevance while his coffers swell, there also exists a Charles Burchfield, the affable and self-effacing painter of wildly animated landscapes who died in near-obscurity in the mid-1960s, but is now justifiably celebrated as one of the most potent American artists of the 20th century. Apparently the artists of Burchfield's day simply didn't need his example as much as today's artists do, for reasons that are less compelling for their own sake than for their apt illustration of one of art history's most ironclad rules, which is that as long as there are dedicated individuals willing to champion artists like Arturo Vega, whose time might once have appeared to have come and gone, meaningful art simply remains as fresh and compelling as it was on the day it was made, still waiting for us to meet it halfway.