

John Lyons

On Arturo Vega and Latin American Flags

Who better to appropriate the U.S. presidential seal than an immigrant, an artist who left Mexico in his 20s and landed on the East Village? Adopting a new country requires taking the symbols, emblems and shields of a new nation and making them one's own.

Arturo Vega took the seal and refashioned it for posterity as the ultimate punk icon, the Ramones logo. But Vega's perspective on national emblems and logos comes into panoramic view in his series mixing flags—the logos of nations—with the image of an open hand with a shiny American dollar coin, eagle side up.

Vega resisted stamping interpretations on his coin series, or on any of his art. "I just found a coin," he told interviewers once, seated by a large image of his hand and the coin. "I said, Oh, what are we going to do with this? Let's take a photograph of the coin in my hand."

Later in the interview he said: "I also feel the artist doesn't have to know or understand what he is doing. I think that's more the role of a critic."

Vega likely had pretty good ideas about what he was doing. But you can understand why an artist defies defining his work. For sure, Vega's formative years in the tumult of Cold War Mexico would have honed his sense of the global potency of American symbols.

At the time, Mexico was run by a one-party regime, in power so long it was known as the "perfect dictatorship." By 1968 that party, the PRI, was cracking down on students inspired to demand greater freedoms by contemporary revolutionaries like Che Guevara (who would later become a kind of logo for revolution himself).

Mexican troops opened fire on a student march in 1968, on the eve of the Mexico City Olympic Games. At least 30 died, but it could be that the toll was several times that. Leaders dispatched gangs of clean-cut thugs to attack peaceful marches. In 1971, these gangs, called the *Halcones*, descended on a Mexico City march with bamboo poles and guns, killing dozens.

The government feared that the students, with their hair, their ideas and their more open sexuality, could become seeds of the kind of insurgencies taking hold across Latin America. Later, when Vega talked publicly about leaving Mexico, he sometimes showed slides of Mexican newspaper pages with headlines like "142 Artists and Drug Addicts Detained."

So Vega's move to New York was a move toward greater freedom of expression. But a Mexican artist would also have been aware of the U.S. role in backing repressive, often murderous, regimes across Latin America in countries such as Argentina, Chile and Brazil.

A complexity of perspectives on the U.S. emblem comes through in the coin series. Consider one work, where he places the flags of Sierra Leone and Brazil over his image of the open hand with the dollar coin.

Both Brazil and Sierra Leone have large populations of the desperately poor, many of whom can trace their ancestries to slavery. Seen through this lens of poverty, the hand behind the flag could be the desperate hand of the alms-seeker. Or perhaps the American coin is being held enticingly out of reach on the other side of the flags, which become barriers of nationality.

And what role did the U.S. play in these nations? Sierra Leone had been populated by freed American slaves seeking refuge. But cities like Freetown were largely left to their own devices, leading to a long, volatile history of coups, poverty, wars and disease.

In Brazil, the U.S. backed a 1964–1985 dictatorship that tortured political dissidents to death and sent a generation of artists, writers and musicians into exile. By the time Vega made these paintings, Brazil was opening up again, but it remained a deeply unequal, impoverished and volatile nation.

Perhaps ironically, as countries like Brazil and Argentina shed military juntas in the 1980s and eased restrictions on American music, the Ramones became huge. Cities like São Paulo were just getting their first rock-and-roll stations, and the Ramones went into heavy rotation. Bands who toured there won deep loyalty.

The Ramones achieved a level of fame in these new democracies that Vega and others in the U.S. always believed they deserved. On tours in Argentina and Brazil, frenzied crowds mobbed the Ramones, forcing precarious escapes in cars—scenes fitting for a band Vega knew early was big enough to make the U.S. presidential seal its own.