

## Carlo McCormick

Arturo Vega & the Fine Art of Invective

Come-ons and put-downs, shout-outs and catcalls, the urban argot of the street corner and schoolyard is an aggressive mode of communication based upon the impolitic. Like a chorus of curses, when Arturo Vega's paintings scream at you, snide and surly, you know you're no longer in that polite place where we contemplate art—you're back out there in the ugly world of affront and confrontation. Brutally honest and frighteningly direct, the language-art of Vega's insult paintings is not simply provocative—it is reactive. Yes, they accost the viewer with a deadpan brutalism, but they also address art itself, for here is a supremely successful "commercial" artist showing off his subversive chops as if to reflect on that watered-down gruel of meatless mannerisms from which the art world takes its empty sustenance. A vernacular of vulgarity decidedly more contemporary than classic, Arturo was in fact calling back the lost rambunctious voices of culture at a time before art seduced in hushed whispers and instead yelled loud and throaty just to be heard over the mob.

Like the bawdy theatrics of yore, from the Greeks through Shakespeare and onto the Theaters of the Absurd, of Cruelty and of the Ridiculous, Arturo plays well to the peanut gallery because his art is an insult to the elites, a voice of the people intoned by the criminal, the scoundrel, the predator and pervert that lurks on the margins of society. And yet it feels even more ancient than that, reminding us that if language was invented to communicate, the most likely things we might ever want to say to one another was either 'do you want to fuck?' or 'fuck off!' Vega's curse paintings harken back to the curse steles of our earliest cultural roots, where upright stones or slabs were inscribed with the foulest execrations and imprecatory verses. Society learns to wash its cultural lexicon of the very worst, but the sentiments remain, each age reinventing new disparagements, humiliations and jibes to express the animosities and tensions by which longing and domination churn our emotional strife. Yes, we may read the same words Vega employs on the walls of our sleaziest and dirtiest public toilets, but look carefully at the literature we can't go back and correct—the graffiti left in situ upon Pompeii or the inscriptions on the acorn-shaped missiles the Romans and Picentes hurled from slingshots that would describe who to wound and where on their bodies such an indignity should occur—and there can be no denying that language and art have long collaborated to articulate our ongoing mutual detestations.

If Arturo Vega's paintings here are intentionally lowbrow in tone, they are conversely stylish and smart in manner, just seductive enough in appearance that their aspersions bait enticements the way school kids have a way of acting out dramas of minor violence upon the very people they have a crush on. Arturo addresses us with tongue in cheek and cock in hand, a fight-or-fuck demeanor balanced on a degree of ambivalence, coyly desirous and disdainful like a Mona Lisa smile, leaving doubt behind to take on these disembodied missives. Is 'Love Me Tender' a pop culture quotation, the pleading of a hound dog or a cynical piss take? Or 'Hey You Fag,' sounding at once like the pre-assault hails of fag-bashers, the inverse identity politics of queer culture and the made-you-look barbs of juveniles, all these possibilities deserving of an equally ambiguous response. These are the castoffs and empty expletives of speech's imbecilic impulse brought to the uncomfortable zone of fine art, made symmetrical, concrete and composite, and most perfectly for Vega, powerfully iconic, quite literally s-p-e-l-l-e-d o-u-t for us.

A master of the quotidian, with an alchemist's touch for turning the mundane into the highly meaningful, Arturo Vega's distillation of clarity out of chaos and formidable articulation of the feral and fierce into terms of impeccable finesse made his graphic work with The Ramones a paradigm of cultural synesthesia. His