

## Empire

Adam Lehrer

Whenever I hear an artist or critic label an artist's work as being "ahead of its time," my internalized cynic screams "HACK!" Nevertheless, that is the only way to describe Arturo Vega's artistic output. There are critics who would seek to separate Vega's fine art work from his graphic work with the Ramones, but the truth of the matter is the artist considered both bodies of work to be equally important, and so we should examine them with equal scrutiny. Vega cannot be assessed without the Ramones. Examining the visual phenomenon he created with the band is far more fascinating than analyzing any single object could ever be.

Like many New York artists of the late 70s and 80s, Vega's output hints at influences in Warhol and Pop Art while also presenting ideas that place him in line with the postmodernists of the Pictures Generation. Arturo moved from Mexico to New York in 1971, nine years before Richard Prince ushered in the era of postmodern appropriation art with his first solo exhibition at CEPA Gallery in Buffalo, New York. Vega, who drew influence from Warhol, appropriated much of his imagery from folk art, newspaper clippings, and commerce. Had his career gone a different direction, Vega could have very well found his work considered alongside the revolutionary artistic movement defined by the likes of Prince, Cindy Sherman, Robert Longo, Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine and others. His *Insult* paintings and their use of color to abstract and redefine the meaning of obscenities and harsh language remind the viewer of Kruger's juxtaposition of images and politically charged text, as well as some of Ed Ruscha's text paintings and drawings. His supermarket signs force the viewer to question the strategies and mental manipulations of branding iconography, much like Warhol did before him with the Campbell's Soup Cans and Prince did after him with his re-photographing of Marlboro ads. So how do we discuss the seismic alterations of the language of visual art that occurred as Pop Art bled into postmodernism and The Pictures Generation? It has to be through the Ramones.

It's interesting that while fine art photographers of the era like Mapplethorpe, Peter Hujar and Sherman often took jobs doing fashion photography, Arturo took a full-time job with a rock and roll band. That speaks volumes of the mindset of most conceptual artists versus Arturo. So much of conceptual art requires the artist to remain chilly and distant towards their subject matter, with an attitude of "Sure, I'll do some fashion for this department store; it'd be interesting to see how my critiquing of fashion becomes an ad for fashion critiquing ads for fashion." Multitudes of meta layers follow. With Arturo there is no irony. He loved the Ramones with all of his heart and every image he created for the band was done with utmost sincerity. Many artists since Vega have come from rock and roll or non-fine art backgrounds and achieved great success in the fine art world. Raymond Pettibon, currently the subject of a career retrospective at the New Museum and solo show at David Zwirner, designed flyers and record covers for his little brother Greg Ginn's band *Black Flag* and record label SST. Gee Vaucher, who now exhibits with Jack Hanley Gallery, designed all the graphics and iconography surrounding the late 70s anarchist punk rock collective Crass. Even Los Angeles-based artist Cali Thornhill DeWitt saw his career get a massive boost last year when Kanye West chose him to design the graphic scheme for *The Life of Pablo* tour merchandise. Working with musicians has proven to be, at the very least, great bio material for

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contemporary artists. But it's possible that the myth of the Ramones, and Arturo's place within it, has simply overwhelmed the myth of his larger artistic body of work. One of Arturo's more eye-grabbing paintings depicts the ultimate icon of branding: Jesus H. Christ. His logo for the Ramones, however, is certainly in the top 10 with Jesus in terms of recognition. Arturo wasn't a great artist despite the Ramones, or because of the Ramones, he was a great artist who did great work for the Ramones and outside of the Ramones.