

On the Edges of the Empire

Carlo McCormick

Arturo's Empire, built of dreams from the rubble of disillusion, is a sandcastle bastioned against the deluge, a temporary refuge of the mind in fortification against the incessant assault of stupidity. The coin of the realm Arturo Vega minted was always an alternative currency, a negotiation around the Ponzi scheme of capitalism where honesty is always free, interest is never so much an amassing of wealth as the terms of engagement, and value is measured by what we give away. Having fled the slaughter of militarized intolerance and institutionalized corruption to set up camp on an island of urban blight in the land of broken dreams, Vega's ideal was never idealized, rather a dystopian utopia, a concrete resistance to the concurrent post-hippie flight of back to nature in a reclamation of the city itself. They called it Punk, which has its own historic potency, but looking back now it seems rather a trivial term for something that in its tough little heart was trying for something a whole lot more.

Arturo Vega's domain was constructed upon the margins of polite society just outside the bounds of corporation and commerce, similar in structures but contrary in ethos. Independent and exterior, his otherness was nonetheless central in its critical distance from big business; a DIY production of mock messages that derailed the semiotics of national identity, consumer desire, mass manufacture and corporate coercion. A microclimate unto itself, sustained by ingenuity and a trickster's wiles as the unruly jungle of feral biodiversity around it slowly got slicked up and priced out into a gentrified extinction, Arturo transformed his apartment in a living/working hybrid, in parts home, studio and salon, a dense cluster of difference that was haven for so many bands, artists, inveterate delinquents and cultural renegades. What he left behind in legacy of rock history and an extensive oeuvre of screen printed paintings are like the treasured artifacts of an un-civilization gone by, the gang colors for a tribe now far flung to a global diaspora, the flag of an anti-nation that has no place on any map but some of us still salute.

The retrospective account offered by *Empire* allows us some measure of his aesthetic territory, the methodology to his madness, and an insight into an underlying modus operandi that was forever lurking in gestures that the artist passed off as a far more casual practice, like a weekend painter who was secretly making bombs on the side. Through the signature series of his sign-like Insult paintings and the formalist leitmotif of his *Silver Dollar* canvases, both sly subversions on both the signs of authority and the authority of signs, the height of Vega's cultural relevance is bookended by his early and late work here, where his minimal and maximal tendencies are made distinct, the hope and pessimism articulate and symbiotic. He was a punk and a hippie, something no one can truly be with the grace he managed, but most of all he was a radical. Arturo Vega's supermarket sign paintings make evident his great debt to Pop Art, in particular Warhol's transference of the Duchampian found object into a kind of fetish object, but already show the impassible schism that would always lie between the acquiescent blank stare of pop appropriation and the critical politics of his postmodern mediation.

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Whereas Warhol might want to mimic the seductive packaging of consumer America to produce surrogates for our collective identity, Vega was far more interested in the vernacular of handmade local adverts, the fast and disposable screened signs markets would put up on a weekly basis to promote sale prices, complete with those all too personal touches of inadvertent misspellings and animal meat parts that can only find a happy home in the kitchens of the impoverished. That too is a huge difference—whereas most successful artists eventually come to dine at the plates of the very rich (Warhol himself was obsessed with money and fame to a pathological degree), Arturo found his society in the dispossessed. He made his home, not insignificantly, on the main street of skid row, the nether-land of those exiled to the single room occupancy hotel flophouses and soup kitchens at the very nadir of our social safety net, and he formed and reformed again over his decades there a community and family of those who came for no greater reason than that they could fit nowhere else in the mundane mainstream of middle America. Misery loves company, but Vega made it an ongoing festival of joy.

By the curious logic of some esoteric psychogeography that we've all unwittingly practiced a few times before, if you keep taking left turns you will likely end up back where you started. As a friend of Arturo's I would have to admit there were plenty of occasions where I thought he has making an erroneous turn, following a whim or a passion that seemed clearly the wrong direction, but he always found a new way around the same old obstacles, arriving back in art and soul upon the higher ground where he might forever survey his impossible empire: the sum of his orbit a geometry of chaotic symmetry with an irresistible gravitational pull. The lovely last gift of this exhibition is the final painting Arturo made for his friend Oliver's store in Little Italy. A rare article of faith from a true disbeliever, it offers that most quotidian (and flagrantly Latino) image of Jesus as a kind of psychedelic op portal to the transpersonal that lies within the social, words of wisdom rescued from cliché by that unique elocution of tongue-in-cheek "Life Isn't Tragic/Love Is Just Being Ignored." This is the kingdom Arturo Vega promises, and empire as imagined by those without dominion, a place next to him in that international arena stage lighting booth he ran like the Wizard of Oz, a land of vagrants and vagabonds, of beautiful losers and boundless leapers, a street that goes through time where the paupers are poets and the poets write the lyrics that kids around the world who don't even speak the language know the words.