

Latino artists celebrate culture and community at La Esquina and all around town

By ALICE THORSON
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Recent months have seen an uptick in exposure for Latin American art and artists in Kansas City.

Many expect the momentum to grow with the September arrival of the new Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art director, Julián Zugazagoitia, a specialist in Latin American art who was born in Mexico.

"I am sure that Julián Zugazagoitia will bring a renewed international perspective to the

arts in Kansas City and will help to showcase the contributions of the Latino artists to the American culture and society," said Jacob Prado, consul of Mexico in Kansas City, when Zugazagoitia's appointment was announced earlier this year.

Add that to what's already under way in the galleries around Kansas City — a highlight is the big "Viva la Vida" show of area talent at La Esquina gallery — and you get a full picture of the energy and investment the community is making in Latin American art:

Prado inaugurated a new series of art exhibits and other cultural programs at the Consulate of Mexico at 1600 Baltimore Ave. Then in May, both the consulate and the Mattie Rhodes Art Gallery, Kansas City's longstanding venue for Latino art, opened shows inspired by the 200th anniversary of Mexican independence and the 100th anniversary of the Mexican Revolution.

The American Jazz Museum also is showing "Atlantic Diaspora," an exhibit about the musical and social influences of Africans in Mexico and the U.S. It's a rare collaboration between the Mexican Consulate, Mattie Rhodes and the jazz museum.

One of the most lively exhibits currently under way is the Urban Culture Project's "Viva la Vida," a group show celebrating life and community, curated by Jenny Mendez, director of cultural arts at Mattie Rhodes.

Featuring roughly 60 works by almost three dozen artists at UCP's La Esquina gallery, it's a handsome, engaging exhibition, dominated by colorful figurative paintings that allude to heritage and issues of importance to the community.



Jenny Mendez (left) is the curator of the "Viva la Vida" exhibition, which explores themes of life and community. She is joined in the gallery by participating artists Adolfo Martinez and Monique Gabrielle Maes Y Salazar.



"Matryoshka," by Shannon Carnahan, is one of roughly 60 works in the "Viva la Vida" show.



Luis Garcia's photography/graphic works, titled "Series ©," take aim at Arizona's recent immigration crackdown and other topics. The four-panel collage is part of the show "Viva la Vida," on view through July 10 at Urban Culture Project's La Esquina, 1000 West 25th Street.

It's also intense. For all the festive colors, a sense of tension percolates through many of the works on view. It comes through in "Waiting" and "Posing," two paintings depicting women in bright folkloric costumes by 2008 Charlotte Street award winner Adolfo Martinez

Coupled with the women's poses and stunted appearance, the costumes suggest that tradition can be a double-edged sword. Yes, it provides a sense of identity, but within the larger culture, it also can serve as a means to pigeonhole people and limit their opportunities.

U.S. immigration policy is the elephant in this community room.

Luis Garcia tackles it head on in his "Series ©" a set of four poster-style collages. With images, graphics and texts, Garcia defends the place of immigrants in America and protests discrimination. One piece singles out Arizona's new immigration law with the boldly lettered plea, "Amend Senate Bill 1070."

Immigration is the subtext of Darwin Arevalo's large, agitated abstraction. Laced with hints of knives and gun barrels, it bears the ironic title, "Bienvenidos (Welcome)."

Luke Rocha takes a nuanced view of American attitudes toward the country's changing demographic in his wall-mounted sculpture, "Congregation of Self Hypnosis and Su bliminal Worship." Rocha created the piece from found objects, including an old clock that he has fashioned into a white-painted wood chapel.



Robert Tapley Bustamante's "Freedom to Pursue our Dreams" sounds a recurrent theme in the exhibit.

Decorated with a small op-art spiral, it sits on a shelf in front of a black-and-white American flag with the stars painted out.

"Churches have a community aspect and make everybody welcome," Rocha said. "I'm of mixed culture. The flag represents being universal and the clashing of the cultures."

People — their emotions, yearnings, relationships and struggles — are the mainstay of "Viva la Vida."

In her painting "Metamorphosis," Alisha Gambino alludes to the struggle of the Tzotzil Maya, one of Mexico's indigenous peoples whose rights, she said, "are being stomped on now." Her image of a mother and two children, their faces nestled in the curling folds of her printed shawl, conveys a hope they will prevail.

"The shawl flying behind her echoes the wings of a butterfly," Gambino said. "The baby is kind of like a cocoon."

Gambino is one of the original members of the Guild of Latino Fine Arts, of which Mendez is chairwoman. The

exhibit features works by several other guild members — including Martinez, Damian Carrillo and Sue Moreno — and community-themed works by non-Latino artists.

Guild member Maria Vasquez Boyd turns in one of the exhibit's most arresting works with her "Live Lies Lie Down." Scratched out in capital letters into a coating of black paint she applied to one of the gallery's front windows, the phrase appears over and over, sounding an insistent admonitory chant.

Monique Gabrielle Maes Y Salazar takes up the theme of the disappeared in her mixed media painting, "Donde esta mi hijo (where is my son?)" depicting a woman in a wheelchair holding a blank-faced portrait in her lap. In the background, a ghostly crowd appears beneath a banner proclaiming "Que se Vayan Todos" (All of them must go). Behind them looms La Casa Rosada, the building where Argentina's president works.

Maes, who studied in Argentina, said the work was inspired by weekly protests against the government's refusal to acknowledge responsibility for the disappearance of 30,000 people during the country's "Dirty War" of 1976-83. The protesters are part of an association of mothers, she said, and "they all wear white handkerchiefs on their heads."

A white banner on the painting's left side bears the date 12-19-01, marking a popular uprising when the country threw out five presidents in 10 days, demanding "all of them must go," Maes said.

Closer to home, Jessica Manco found inspiration for her painting "Assembly" in her daily interactions with teenagers as a teacher at Paseo Academy.

Often, Manco said, "I spend more time with them than their parents (do). They've become inspiring to me as well."

The focal point of the painting, which depicts a Halloween assembly in a high school gym, is a young man wearing a skull mask. Manco painted the work as a tribute to a student she particularly admires.



"Assembly," by Jessica Manco, was inspired by her interactions with teenagers as a teacher at Paseo Academy.

"He's a very creative individual," she said. "He doesn't really care if he fits the mold."

Two large photographs printed on canvas by Israel Garcia celebrate family relationships. Soft atmospheric light, like an outpouring of love, bathes images of his grandmother making tortillas and his dad sitting at the kitchen table.

What is looking to be a Latin American art juggernaut will continue this fall, with a big show of Argentinean-born artist Ana Maria Hernando at Kemper at the Crossroads.

ON EXHIBIT

- The show:** Viva la Vida: A Celebration of Life and Community
- Where:** La Esquina, 1000 W. 25th St.
- When:** Noon to 5 p.m. Thursdays and Saturdays through July 10
- Artists discussion:** The artists will speak about their work at 5:30 p.m. Wednesday
- How much:** Free.
- For more information:** 816-221-5115 or www.charlottestreet.org