

CURATED BY ISRAEL ALEJANDRO GARCIA GARCIA + ALBERTO AGUILAR

CHICAGO CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS

EL MATERIAL NORMAL MONUMENTAL

Edra Soto - Jorge Lucero - Rafael E. Vera - Maria Gaspar
Alberto Aguilar - Victoria Martínez - essay written by Cecilia Vargas



Is it the making a home from scratch?

When we think of home, we think of a place where we live, a place where we have memories, a place where we have a sense of belonging. But what if we think of home as a process, as something that is constantly being made and remade? What if we think of home as a space that is constantly being contested and negotiated? What if we think of home as a place that is constantly being challenged and transformed? What if we think of home as a place that is constantly being made and remade, as something that is constantly being contested and negotiated, as a space that is constantly being challenged and transformed?

Co-curated by Alberto Aguilar
and
Israel Alejandro Garcia Garcia

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Maria Gaspar, *Oblation For Another Parade (Remains)*, 2008-2013, Plastic, latex adhesive, Brown spray paint, Dimensions Variable
Alberto Aguilar, *Linea Similar (Normal)*, 2013, Industrial poster paint on paper, 18" x 24"



Alberto Aguilar
Linea Similar (Panorama), 2013
Industrial poster paint on Day Glo paper
36" x 96"



Alberto Aguilar
Linea Similar (Monumental), 2013
Industrial poster paint on Day Glo paper
232" x 81"

Is it like making a feast from crumbs?

– Cecilia Leonora Vargas

Garcia Squared Contemporary¹ hosts *El Material Normal Monumental*, a group exhibition featuring six contemporary Chicago Latino Artists: Edra Soto, Rafael E. Vera, Victoria Martinez, Jorge Lucero, Maria Gaspar, and Alberto Aguilar. Israel Alejandro Garcia Garcia and Alberto Aguilar co-curated this show with the thought – or rather the imposed criteria that the artworks are compact or easily transportable, while still retaining this ‘normal’ to ‘monumental’ transformation. These curators present artworks that ride the balance between what is there and what is not, while providing a glimpse – or even a kind of ‘memorable panorama’, of Chicago contemporary practices.

These contemporary artists have inherited numerous ideas and approaches from their predecessors in the arts and culture. Art precedents include the readymade, the fuzzy line that separates art and life, the minimal

object/gesture/action, as well as formal methods such as collage, sculpture, assemblage, installation, and ceramic coil made forms. The artworks included may have originated from minimal, ordinary or everyday objects, materials or gestures – yet when fully realized each artwork delivers a ‘monumental’ effect.

Here, I will try to make some connections about their commonalities.² All of the artists in this exhibition are of Latin descent³, reside in Chicago⁴, have gone to art school, and are currently art educators (teachers, professors, teaching artists).⁵ Their art practices share some similarities as well: conceptually heavy and utilizing the required medium to realize their ideas. They also seem to work within the form of a series – following a specific research interest. Each of the works presented here are from these types of series⁶.

¹ The only gallery owned and operated by Latinos with an emphasis on International and National Latino contemporary works in the Kansas City Crossroads Arts District.

² For now, I would like to note the artists and their works are also quite different from each other.

³ Although there are vast differences and nuances between Latin cultures, there are also some things they share in the Latino experience. These artists further share the Latino experience within the United States (some have moved to/away from Chicago within the past decade or so, most have been reared here).

⁴ Lucero is an exception; he was raised here and has since moved down state. Without a doubt he retains a strong connection with Chicago.

⁵ I too fall into this group, although my role in art/education is as an administrator and curator.

⁶ Some artist’s work on a series one at a time, some have multiple strands going on at any given point – or pick one up and then let it rest while they investigate another. And sometimes they cross over, intersect into each other or are braided together.

At a glance, we can see the variety is evident through this virtual checklist of the artworks included in the exhibition. Edra Soto's piece is an installation of ceramic sculptures. Rafael E. Vera provides directions which when realized create a replica of his sculpture made of cinderblocks and a pillow. Victoria Martinez creates a site-specific wall piece/installation with her signature look⁷; materials can include drawings, fabric, text and found objects. Jorge Lucero's *one page (folded) collages* are presented directly on the gallery wall. Maria Gaspar presents two pieces from her *Brown* series. One is a re-appropriation of her *Oblation For Another Parade (Remains)*, created from yards of papel picado⁸ that has been made *Brown* with brown latex paint, spray paint and rubber. The other piece is *All Most True*, a durational sculpture that is inflated and deflated every 5 minutes. Alberto Aguilar's 3-dimensional piece is an assemblage from his *Domestic Monuments* series. He has created a monument within the gallery using objects from a Kansas City resident. Aguilar also provided signage for the exhibition; they read 'El Material Normal Monumental' and 'Una Memorable Chicago Panorama'.

Taking a closer look –

Edra Soto's piece is an installation of small clay sculptures that are a part of the series called *Figure*. Each sculpture is a representation of a shell that has been created from a single coil of clay. The works that make up the series *Figure* are different presentation methods of displaying the shells. They have been exhibited on shelving attached to the backside of a stairwell, in a medicine cabinet, and on shelving reminiscent of church votive stands. Although the tiny sculptures are seemingly the same, our perception of the work shifts with each of the various contexts.

These minimal works present the viewer with the basic form of the spiraling coil of clay that creates utilitarian handmade ceramic pieces such as the cup, plate, bowl, teapot and vase – items we could encounter at a 'communal gathering'⁹. The shells can be packed into a box and easily transported, and when installed they command a larger space. Instead of contemplating the singular sculpture, one is confronted with a mass of these clay shells. Displayed together the shells carry a greater impact.

⁷ Fiber arts that can at times be dimensional or come out into the viewers space, but for the most part function within the language of painting – wall installations that are difficult to explain, as they sit in more than one space at a time.

⁸ Papel picado is a Mexican folk art tradition of intricately cut tissue paper.

⁹ This has been mentioned on Edra Soto's website.

The shell in its organic and/or mythological form provides protection for the interior being. Soto sites her childhood memories and religious upbringing as inspiration. And she has referred to the shells as iconic objects, and as symbols of the Caribbean souvenir – or as a memento. In this way her work alternates how we might see the different iterations of the Figure series as monumentalizing a specific memory and/or concept – possibly even many at one time.

Rafael E. Vera's piece *Untitled (Concrete Tower)* is a column of concrete with a pillow dividing the top rows of cinderblocks. This work is a part of a series where Vera plays with metaphor, the 'heavy' material of concrete contrasting with the 'light' materials of pillows, sheer fabric, or comforters. He has formulated a visual language and is speaking through it. Within this series Vera uses the readymade object, but it is the combination of things that are assembled, and it is within the context of this body of work in which these everyday objects become something else.

In the preparation for this exhibition Vera created directions for the installation of his piece. At this point the work is suspended in its conceptual form. One trip to the hardware store, and time to follow through on the direc-



Edra Soto
Figure No. 7, 2012
Wood, clay, neon lights
54" x 36" x 21"

tions and – voila – the work has been transported in its smallest form from Chicago to Kansas City.

Vera's sculpture, *Untitled (Concrete Tower)*, confronts the viewer physically. This piece is historically connected with Minimalist works¹⁰ – it uses the building block from architecture, yet it remains human scale. It is a tower, a column¹¹ or the stand in for a tall adult – it confronts the viewer's body, slightly looming – it is an undeniable and powerful presence.

¹⁰ Especially Tony Smith's 6' steel cube *Die* (1962), a work that sits between the Architectural and pedestal scale; it is human scale (and deals with phenomenology).

¹¹ Implying the potential interminability like that of Constantin Brâncuși's *Endless Column*.



Rafael E. Vera
Untitled (Concrete Tower), Year
 Concrete and Satin
 80" x 46" x 46"

Maria Gaspar
*All Most True (Durational Sculpture
 inflated and deflated every 5 min)*, 2011
 Plastic, thread, steel armature
 20' x 12' x 5'

If we see Rafael E. Vera's *Untitled (Concrete Tower)* as a body we see that it is divided. The part below the pillow functions as support, holding the pillow, but the part above the pillow weighs heavily on the pillow, squishing it. The pillow is about the level of a human head – like a cloud...like having your head in the clouds, but the weight of the blocks are keeping it down (keeping it from floating away? - into a dreamland...keeping it grounded by gravity?). The metaphors allow the viewer to play a part, to assign what the forces are that uphold, weigh down, and what the light (hearted?)

does. One might wonder about how it sits between two worlds, two cultures?

Maria Gaspar presents a re-appropriation of her work *Oblation For Another Parade (Remains)*. This piece is a part of the *Brown* series.¹² Works in this series characteristically leave the space they inhabit dark,¹³ they use the color brown to take over or take back space, or territory. These works are often installations where the viewer is either located within or dominated by it.¹⁴

¹² *Brown* 'fabric' has been buried and brown plastic sheeting has cordoned off a space – where performers, all in brown, marched and performed throughout the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. (*Burying Brown*, performance, 2009 and *Oblation For Another Parade*, installation and performance, 2009)

¹³ Specifically it is a darker tone than the white washed walls of the 'white cube'.

¹⁴ A previous version of this piece displayed the work as a canopy.



Gaspar has used the site of 'the parade'¹⁵ as a metaphor to play with in a number of her works. The parade, in general, is a mobile location of 'Mexico'¹⁶; it's a presentation of traditional ideals, iconic national identity, it reflects the pride of being Mexican and displays patriotism. By using this metaphor Gaspar can address the public presentation of a shared cultural mythology, and the identity one personally identifies with – within that context.

The other work we see is *All Most True*, a durational sculpture that is inflated and deflated every 5 minutes. This work is created from yards of brown plastic sheeting,¹⁷ and three oscillating standing fans that intermittently operate.¹⁸ The brown 'fabric' reacts to the wind – it billows with strength,

resisting the forces against it, and it settles down into a slight flutter, and at times it's seemingly still. It performs a dance as it inflates and deflates – a dance with the forces it is up against. We witness the strength of the brown 'fabric' – as each of the pieces of the raw material have been tightly stitched together in order to give it the power to dominate and drive its own force, like a sail moving a boat.

The version of *Oblation For Another Parade (Remains)* featured here displays the work in a semi-geometric form, hung from the architecture of the space.¹⁹ Both pieces can be easily folded and transported in a car. Although, the folded form makes them somewhat smaller it takes at least two hands to carry each piece. When the pieces

¹⁵ She has specifically referenced the Mexican Independence Day Parade in her works.

¹⁶ Lucero has also referenced the concept of the mobile location of Mexico in his writing.

¹⁷ This brown fabric-like plastic sheeting has been buried and cordoned off a space – where performers, all in brown, marched and performed throughout the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.

¹⁸ This brown 'fabric' has a high sheen quality. One's perception of the fabrics color vacillates through various brown tones due to the reflective qualities of the material.

¹⁹ This piece is hung from the ceiling.

Victoria Martinez
*The Ghosts, The Boys, The
Lace, The Chase*, 2013
Mixed Media
72" x 65"



are in the gallery space they shift from just being bulky to commanding with their immense expanded form.

Victoria Martinez
The Chapter 7, Page 250 Layers, 2013
Mixed Media
36" x 65"



Victoria Martinez's work explores and analyzes experience and memory through site-responsive multimedia installations. The artwork Martinez presents in this exhibition is a site-specific piece²⁰ – an installation applied directly onto the gallery wall. It functions within a line of work that Martinez has been engaged with, which playfully reflects upon on, and responds to color, materials and space.

Martinez's work includes objects from the everyday: the readymade, as well as the crafted or altered object. She utilizes elements that read as remnants of the everyday and of celebration. Martinez intuitively and spontaneously plays with the raw elements, pulling from the languages of painting/murals and sculpture/assemblage, in order to create her works.

²⁰ This piece has been created in response to the context of the location.

The raw materials can be gathered, folded, stacked and easily transported. The artwork – the mixed media, wall hanging/assemblage is ultimately unfolded onto – and at the site. When the work is fully realized and expanded it directly confronts the viewer.

Alberto Aguilar and Jorge Lucero share a lot in regards to their philosophy and methodology. They engage in work, or a practice, that functions within the realms of art and pedagogy. While some of the other artists use the readymade in the works seen here, Aguilar and Lucero play in the blurred spaces between art and life – potentially pushing the boundaries between what is art and what it not.

Aguilar features a work from his series *Domestic Monuments*. He engages in a relational piece with a Kansas City resident that is until now, a complete stranger to him. The various works that are a part of the *Domestic Monuments* series deal with Aguilar and the individual who has allowed him into their home. The artist creates a shift, reassembles items within the home,²¹ playing, making a gesture, triggering curiosity, imagination and/or engagement. This work could not be accomplished without the process of getting to know the resident.

The *Domestic Monument* has been created from items that have been easily transported from the Kansas City resident's home to the gallery. The artwork is transported within the potential of the artist.²² Aguilar's actions in effect monumentalize the individual, the everyday life, and the domestic through the gesture of the interaction and the assemblage of objects – realizing the desired result.

Furthermore, Aguilar has created the signage for the exhibition in a traditional Chicago sign painting fashion. One of the signs for the galleries window features the exhibition title, *El Material Normal Monumental*. The other sign displayed reads 'Una Memorable Chicago Panorama', providing a bit more context – enticing the passerby to come in and investigate.

The traditional sign paintings are used in local independently owned stores, and the words used are picked from appropriate cognates.²³ This allows for both Spanish and English readers to comprehend the messages. Many of the other works relate to this point of being more than one thing, functioning in more than one space – and possibly even at the same time; being in-between two things, and/or a hybrid.

²¹ These are typically done within the individual's home – here the assemblage will be displayed within the gallery's space.

²² The 'work' travels via Aguilar's mind, body, concept – potential reaction to the individual and the domestic.

²³ It is related by a root word.



Jorge Lucero's work is often conceptually based and is realized in the media that is required for that particular thing – be it research, writing, collage, installation, or performance.²⁴ The works presented here are part of the *one page (folded) collages*, and the current display provides an accumulation of these collages, which are applied directly onto the gallery wall. The series was established with certain parameters that the artist must follow in order to realize the work. Lucero set restraints on the effort – one to three folds (of a sheet of paper torn directly out of a magazine), and not overly labored.²⁵

Mass quantities of such collages are made and the batches are scanned and then edited.²⁶ The ones Lucero identifies with are selected and thus the curating process sifts out the ones acceptable for display. The creative

process of the concept, the rules, and the follow through within the everyday – all the while seemingly effortless and endless, are reflective of Lucero's approach as a whole.

Lucero's *one page (folded) collages* can be stacked, piled into a car and easily transported. Subsequently the collages are installed directly onto the gallery wall functioning together as multiples, as a mass. The multiple is an approach shared by Soto and Lucero, although Soto uses the handmade form and Lucero uses the readymade. The sheer quantity of collages and shells produce power through their numbers.

Meanwhile Lucero's imagery is one that the viewer can engage with through our curiosity, imagination, and association. What is the final outcome of these disparate parts, how is

²⁴ ...or anything else for that matter.

²⁵ This is just to name a few. To see the full list of parameters visit his website.

²⁶ Lucero edits by picking which images to feature, not by changing the image any further.

Alberto Aguilar
Domestic Monument (Graciela
Hernandez Pecina), 2013
Borrowed objects
60" x 60" x 36"

Jorge Lucero
one page (folded) collages, Ongoing
Single magazine pages
Dimensions Variable



the image conjoined? What is this thing we see? How can we make sense of this hybrid image?

All of the artworks included in the exhibition fit the criteria of easily transportable while containing the ability to transform from the ordinary to the extraordinary. They have gone from the normal to the monumental. They have traversed the tenuous balance between materiality and presence – from what is there and what is not.

We can engage with these artworks, as they are curious and communicative, while leaving room for our voice – for our questions, for our associations, for our imaginations. In researching these artists I now understand them to have rigorous practices and I see their work as creating an impact directly with individuals. The merit of their work will continue to establish a stronghold of the Contemporary Latino Artist within the community.²⁷

Cecilia Leonora Vargas is a Chicago based curator and writer.

²⁷ Be that the local community, the Latino community, and/or the contemporary/arts community.



October 4 – December 27, 2013

Featured Artists:

Edra Soto
Rafael E. Vera
Victoria Martinez
Jorge Lucero
Maria Gaspar
Alberto Aguilar

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