

BORDER ART

Brownsville, Texas-Matamoros, Tamaulipas

Carlos G. Gómez*
Mauricio Sáenz**

The border, as many call it, is often seen as a negative entity, and for many the idea of good art being produced there is almost non-existent. The truth is that the dynamic energy of both Brownsville and Matamoros defines the area's art as constant change and invigorates it. The fact is that for many generations, artists from both sides who basically know each other and have often worked together in cultural exchanges has contributed to the color and health of the area's art.

FROM THE U.S. SIDE

The artistic movement in the last five years in Brownsville has increased with the influx of artists from surrounding areas, making this city the place to exhibit their art. Moreover, a group of local artists has redefined the art scene in the last five years and added to the pool of artistic diversity: Gabriel Treviño, Cande Aguilar, Jr., Antonio Antinori, Noel Palmenez, George Lorio, Toni Hudson, Mark Clark, Oscar Álvarez, Mauricio Sáenz, Eduardo Ibarra, and Rosendo Sandoval. This group of artists joins the artists already living there: Don Breedon, Nancy Sclight, Carlos G. Gómez, Brad Doherty, Esmeralda Treviño, Marcia Selsor, and many others of different levels and intentions. Here is a sample of their art.

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The dynamic energy of both Brownsville and Matamoros defines the area's art as constant change and invigorates it.



▲ *Confronting Death*, 16" x 20", 2012 (oil on canvas).

GABRIEL TREVIÑO

was born in Matamoros, but lives in Brownsville, Texas. He is a mixed-media artist constantly searching for new ways to express himself. Treviño is very prolific and his work is eclectic. He is currently exploring primitivism. brownsvilleartform@yahoo.com

"The work I have produced the last two years has been a reflection of border violence relating to both 'narco' and human smuggling. My style of painting is an approach influenced by a combination of both pop and pre-Columbian art. The work is also a sort of self-portrait, a reflection of growing up on the border and who I am: a Mexican-American painter."



▲ *Life Has No Mercy for Mexicans*, 58" x 54", 2011 (mixed media on linen). From the "Handsome Pepper Series."

CARLOS G. GÓMEZ

is a South Texas artist and a "social abstract surrealist" dealing with universal issues, but who has strong ties to the Chicano Art movement. Currently he is a full professor and interim chair of the Visual Arts Department at UT-Brownsville. Gómez has participated in over 225 exhibitions around the world and is an active curator.

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This painting reflects that lack of human dignity that spans the whole history of great civilizations of Mexico. The iconography in the painting is meant to reveal culture, the cycle of life, caution, mercy, and destruction, and the images hidden in the background are echoes of its history.

Statement: "In a time when there are serious concerns regarding the 'browning' of America and immigration issues are common, a people struggles with fear and humiliation, and is often ridiculed and seen as strange. The Handsome Pepper is a celebration of the beauty that for thousands of years dominated the New World. Peppers, like the original peoples of the Americas, vary in nature. This body of work looks at the strength and determination of a people metaphorically and places them in typical situations common to all human beings. The pepper icon was chosen due to its impact globally when Columbus introduced it to the rest of the world. The intensity of its flavor and number of varieties mimic the plethora of New World peoples; or, I could say that the Handsome Pepper was an idea that came about when an art connoisseur viewed it as an inferior symbol not worthy of hanging and that I also overheard two outsiders refer to the local Mexican population as 'strange and nasty looking.' You choose which is more appropriate."



▲ *Mexicans Killing Mexicans*, 24" x 28" x 1.50", 2011 (mixed media on concrete).

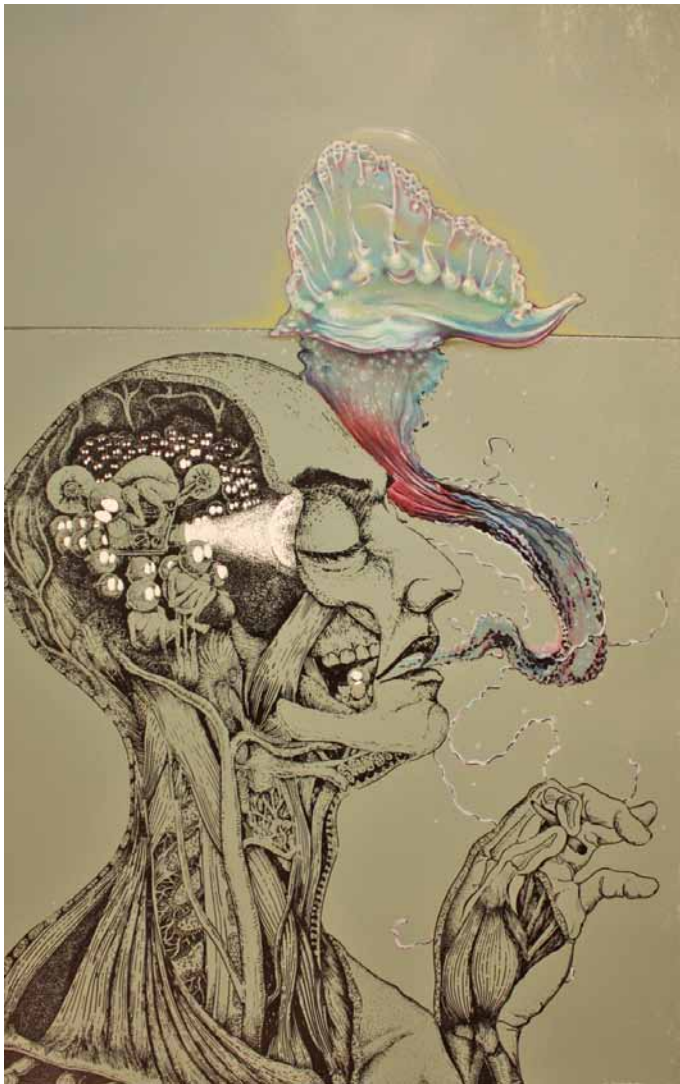
As more and more young artists evolve, it is interesting to note that social preoccupation with social political connotations represent an awakening of aesthetics and powerful imagery.

From the "Handsome Pepper Series," this painting illustrates the crossover violence from the drug culture in Mexico and how it affects the image of Mexican-Americans/Chicanos in the U.S., and how they are stereotyped and harassed.

NOEL PALMENEZ

is a South Texas artist. He is a veteran Brownsville school district art teacher and resides there. His art deals with elements of nature and the connection of nature to mankind. Lately, he has been exploring the human condition and things that affect behavior. npalmenez@bisd.us

The First of Your Last Breath represents the influences of drugs. "The cross-section of anatomy opens our imagination to a surreal world of how drugs project and influence the thought process. The message projected is of false security that it will all be fine, and that he is in control and pushes away anyone that offers help. While the figure tastes the drugs for the first time he also exhales the apparition of a man-o-war jellyfish, a poisonous yet hypnotic lure."



▲ *The First of Your Last Breath*, 20" x 30", 2012 (silk screen).

The newer artists are exploring conceptual as well as traditional art, and sometimes there is a marriage of the two, giving the area a unique flavor.




▲ *Border Town*, 19" x 29", 2006 (acrylic on panel)

JESÚS DE LA ROSA

is an assistant professor of art at Texas A&M University at Kingsville where he teaches printmaking and graphics. De la Rosa is an active artist and has exhibited his work in the U.S., in Mexico, and internationally. jesusdlr@yahoo.com

"Border Town" [...] "In this body of work, I address concerns that arise from growing up in the Texas/México borderlands, where cultures, languages, and identities constantly conflict. I work with layers of acrylic paint, charcoal, wood, collage, digital images, and ink. I use these layers as metaphors for the phenomena of cultural appropriation, the crossing of cultural, economic, social and historical borders. I make paintings and prints that coerce these layers to interrelate, coexist, and come into synthesis and explore a place through imagined landscapes. The idea of migration of peoples, particles, and animals is represented through the black rosette designs, which travel, hide, rest, and are sometimes totally absent throughout the paintings. This work demonstrates a personal and unique relationship between abstraction and landscape, culminating through luminous surfaces of acrylic paint and a wide variety of media. I layer and carve back into these rich crusts, revealing a personal history that records the individual journey and repose of the works themselves."



The years to come will no doubt bring local artists together with those who move into the area and are redefining or, if anything, adding a different element to the art of the area as a whole. As for the Brownsville art scene, it is locked in tradition; but as more and more young artists evolve, it is interesting to note that social preoccupation with social political connotations represent an awakening of aesthetics and powerful imagery. The art of the city is unified in culture and voice, but the delivery of iconography is sophisticated and diverse. The newer artists are exploring conceptual as well as traditional art, and sometime there is a marriage of the two, giving the area a unique flavor which often has a far-reaching effect on the artwork outside.

“Border art” is now an accepted term, and outside interests have not only chronicled the Brownsville art scene, but other U.S./Mexico border artists are also being examined as a movement. Artwork related to the border fence, drug violence, and trivial things are popular themes and, to an extent, tie it together.

FROM MEXICO'S SIDE

Despite its proximity to its sister-city Brownsville, the art scene in Matamoros has encountered different kinds of challenges, in addition to having a perspective about art that sets the two cities apart.

The Tamaulipas Contemporary Art Museum is the only contemporary art museum in the region as well as in the whole state of Tamaulipas. However, its biggest failing has been the fact that, due to a certain reluctance *vis-à-vis* new art trends, it has not fully adopted that “contemporary” feature and continues showcasing a more traditional style.

While the museum has been a venue for renowned artists, the opening of Galería Albertina in 2005 turned out to be the opportunity many local artists had been waiting for to show art produced by people from the city and neighboring areas. Galería Albertina holds monthly exhibits, among the most important of which is the binational “Both Sides of the River,” which promotes close bonding between artists from Matamoros and Brownsville.

Matamoros can well be said to have witnessed the rise of a number of good artists, with a strong tradition in painting, who have somehow created a movement in proportion to the few strengths and more deficiencies the city has displayed in recent decades in cultural matters.

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▲ *Tamayo-esque*, 90 x 60 cm, 2012 (oil and marble dust assemblage on canvas).

JOAQUÍN GARCÍA QUINTANA

is a multifaceted Matamoros artist who has prospered mainly in the visual arts, yet has also had a world to develop in the performing arts as a mime and theatre actor. His work revolves around line and color through non-objective art, though he has also explored symbolism in figurative art on the side, striving to make invisible what others have made visible. García's work has been featured in Mexico's most renowned cultural events, the International Cervantino Festival, and the Flesh Festival in Los Angeles, as well as in other galleries and museums in his country. He is also a prominent muralist and professor of art.

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MARIO JIMÉNEZ DÍAZ

is a Matamoros visual artist whose production revolves around the conflicts that originate in society through decision-making, especially in the early stages of adulthood and their consequences. Concepts like guilt, fear of responsibility, the incoherencies in a person's education, and the "should-haves" are some of the ideas embodied in his work. Although he has explored different media, he has been more prolific as a painter focusing on aspects that could define his creations as hyperrealist. He received his degree in visual arts from the Autonomous University of Nuevo León and has shown his work in galleries in Monterrey and across the border in cities like Austin and McAllen.

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▲ *History of It-Might-Have-Been*, 110 x 130 cm, 2013 (oil on canvas).

Matamoros has always been considered the city in Tamaulipas most inclined to embrace contemporary trends and the ways of exploring beyond the conventional.



◀ *If the Color Is Relative, the New Idols Are, Too, 2012* (acrylic on canvas).

JUAN FRANCISCO GONZÁLEZ, “Jufrago,” is a Matamoros visual artist who uses different media like drawing, painting, and installation to portray the people and issues around him (Matamoros / Brownsville) and along the rest of the border, taking into account the stories running along it and connecting the two countries. His artwork intends to interact with the viewer’s mind for a synergy as the ultimate goal of art. Jufrago has shown his work in solo and group exhibits in places like the Metropolitan Pavilion in New York City, the Royal College of Art in London, and the International Cervantino Festival in Guanajuato, among others. creacionazul@hotmail.com

Today, though the long tradition of painters still exists, for example in the hyperrealism of Mario Jiménez, an effort to live up to these times and to satisfy the needs unfulfilled in painting has been made by a new generation that is trying to deliver a more contemporary view of art. This way, following in the steps of Ruiz Bayón, artists like Javier Dragustinovis, Juan Francisco González “Jufrago,” and Mauricio Sáenz, who also works on the Mexican side of the border, have geared toward the conceptual through disciplines like installation art, among others. It is important to note that Matamoros has always been considered the city in Tamaulipas most inclined to embrace contemporary trends and the ways of exploring beyond the conventional. Along with this new generation of artists, people like Juan Manuel Hinojosa, Roberto Juárez, Alejandro Goga, Roberto Cruz, and recently a new wave of female artists like Mildred López and Samantha García are successfully responding to the demand of keeping up this momentum and continuing to actively work to enrich the local scene and build up a stronger sense of an art community.

The border, especially “el valle,” is redefining itself artistically and breaking away from its stereotypical label and perhaps influencing other areas beyond it.



▲ *And the Light that Blinded You*, 180 x 130 x 130 cm, 2012 (gas tank, water faucets, and plastic hoses).

MAURICIO SÁENZ

is a Matamoros visual artist whose work converges in the notion of the vulnerable side of society and the decadence embodied through the perversion of behavior, aesthetically portrayed from an obsessive perspective of death. It has also recently embraced the idea of asphyxia as a metaphor for the obstruction of possibilities and the frustration of not being able to achieve a desired objective. Sáenz graduated from the University of Texas and received a master's degree from Spain's Polytechnic University of Valencia. He has exhibited in venues like the El Paso Museum of Art and the Museum of Contemporary Art of Yucatán, among others, and won the purchase award in the video category at the Fifth Yucatan National Visual Arts Biennial in 2011.

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ART BEYOND DIVISION

Brownsville and Matamoros, Matamoros and Brownsville. To many, it is the same place once divided by a river, now divided by a steel and concrete fence. Oddly enough, Facebook has bridged and created working relationships between the two sides of the border, and it is not uncommon for artists from both sides to host each other. Matamoros's artists are more accomplished and have an edge on contemporary thinking, at least those who practice art there. Support is plentiful and the artistic traffic is high, as many artists visit Matamoros and contribute to its character. The transit student from Matamoros who moves to Brownsville oddly becomes more traditional in time and often embraces traditional art. The Brownsville artist, on the other hand, also embraces traditional or conservative art, but slowly some do explore contemporary thinking. Artists like *social-abstract-surrealist* Carlos G. Gómez, *conceptualist* Mauricio Sáenz, *generalist* Gabriel Treviño, *iconographer* Mark Clark, *hyper-realist* Humberto Jiménez, *conceptualist* Javier Dragustinovis, *hyper-realist* Mario Jiménez, and dozens of younger artists from both sides continue to evolve "border art," but at the same time each has his/her own distinct voice in addressing the issues of the area. One could argue that the border, especially "el valle," is redefining itself artistically and breaking away from that stereotypical label and perhaps influencing other areas beyond the border. The art of this region is complicated, and while the artistic population is growing, thematically there is a sense of social priority placed on issues that hinder basic human rights, and visual commentaries do make their way to the exhibition spaces that have the courage to embrace ideology as opposed to the same old decorative image. Brownsville and Matamoros or Matamoros and Brownsville personify "border art." ■■■