

The evidence continues to mount for the growing theory that Los Angeles has supplanted New York as the artistic capital of the United States. Among the proof is the emergence of numerous significant art movements in Southern California over the past four decades.

Along with Light and Space, Finish Fetish and various other additions to visual art's expanding lexicon, L.A. can count another wildly popular contribution: Lowbrow Art, the proverbial finger in the eye of an art world resistant to its intentions and origins, and hence, slow to acknowledge the movement's legitimacy.

With roots that precede the term, Lowbrow's lack of critical acceptance comes as little surprise. While not labeled as such, the genre is prefigured in numerous late '50s and '60s kitsch art by such "luminaries" as Keane's big-eyed waifs, cartoonist Big Daddy Ed Roth's hot rod-driving monsters like Rat Fink (and SoCal's Kustom Kulture in general), tiki art, and a host of other disreputable, commercially oriented illustrative styles.

But more than just a thorn in the art world's side, Lowbrow has found market acceptance, with art sales and increasingly exorbitant prices in many cases continuing to eclipse the record of contemporary art (a Mark Ryden painting goes for \$800,000; not bad for the work of any living artist, no matter his station as insider or outsider).

# PICKENS, CUELLAR

Conversing Through Art, on the Links and in the Studio

TEXT BY AARON COLLINS

Visalia-based ceramics artist Antonio "Evaristo" Cuellar. The exhibition will offer a glimpse into one sub-genre of the movement known as Pop Surrealism (some prefer this term in lieu of – or interchangeably with – Lowbrow).

Pickens' female portraits are derived from models he knows, some are hand drawn while others are composites of eight or nine different models, he said, the latter being the more current strategy.

While Cuellar's work is more indebted to established mainstream ceramics artists like his mentor, the notable Paul Soldner, or the late Peter Voulkos, his new works are departures from his earlier architectural pieces. The new pieces represent a direct dialogue with Pickens in that they incorporate some of the formal, if not conceptual, features of Pickens' work, the product of an ongoing conversation between friends who are just as likely to chat on the golf course as in their respective art studios.

"Bryan and I became friends about four years ago through art. We had other interests and passions we share like golf – a sport of which he excels in – and music, family, things that take us from our isolation and independent tasks, such as the making of art [does]," Cuellar said. "The dialogue, as far as the show, works well. We are both working on the female figure and our appreciation for the magnitude of Venus and the brilliance all women share. Bryan's impeccable attention to detail, his knowledge of color and line quality have brought this new body of work a rich explanation of his soul and mind." →

RIGHT: Fixate, by Bryan Pickens (2010; acrylic on birch panel; 23" x 40"), among the portraits to be included in the two-person show at Arts Visalia entitled Figurative Narration, along with golf buddy and fellow Visalia artist Antonio Cuellar (September 29-October 29, 2010).





Pickens, better known as a commercial designer before throwing his hat into the fine art ring, arrives a latecomer to the Lowbrow game, but says he wanted to be a fine artist all along. However, practical career concerns drove him into the graphic design field with a degree from Cal State Chico. “The genre fits better than prior work in my recent shows like the large-scale musical instruments and wine-themed paintings I did, which were commercially successful but artistically less satisfying,” he said.

In some of the new works, Pickens has introduced physical layers, rendering them either sculptural paintings or painted sculptures. “I have always wanted to incorporate more dimension into my paintings,” he said of the new process. “Switching from canvas to a more organic structure like the birch panels has allowed me the freedom to do so. With the sculptural paintings a lot more planning is involved. I have to really sit down and plan out the piece, thinking about what form or shape I am going to layer or cut out. Every shape is cut out by hand with a jigsaw, then painted in acrylic piece-by-piece until finished. Then I assemble it. In the sculptural paintings new things appear, like natural shadows that change with directional lighting.

“I am utilizing every possible influence I have to produce the new work. My background in graphic design is noticeable in the work with the shapes and forms along with the use of color theory. Also, my love for abstraction, tattoo art, pin-striping, stenciling and sculpture reveal themselves in the work. Pop Surrealism is just that; use the tools and influences around you ... and just make art,” Pickens said.



The new paintings also harken back to earlier artists such as the once-highly collected '80s litho artist Patrick Nagel, whose stylized female subject matter, like Keene, was not categorized as Lowbrow per se, but probably fits the bill. Akin to Nagel's slick works that were synonymous with '80s fashion, Pickens mostly drops his earlier more painterly approach and opts for a more graphic treatment. The stylistic gambit offers a distancing effect from any graphic quality (in the other, lurid sense of the term) that one might expect from the modern nude as subject matter.

Given the demands on his time from his freelance design work as well as his own painstaking painting process, Pickens typically only produces a limited number of paintings per year. →



Perhaps Pickens is most distinguishable from other Lowbrow artists in that he really isn't radically opposed to the mainstream art world's defining characteristics that originally sidelined Lowbrow. Despite the nude as subject, he's not confrontive. One senses he isn't even necessarily interested in tweaking social mores or delicate social sensibilities. His work reflects a sincere love of the physical painting medium; the love of purely visual, visceral impact; the formal pleasures of color and pattern and texture.

Notably, Pickens' work has affinities with – but seems to leave to – other Lowbrow artists the task of puncturing the high-minded values and sacred cows of the mainstream fine art critical establishment through a preoccupation with style over concept; fascination with kitsch over cool; desire for mass appeal over esoterica; insistence on tight craftsmanship over slapdash technique; a concern with figuration over abstraction; and above all, an indulgence in the excesses of irony, outrageous camp or just outright bad taste, among the genre's de facto indictments against the pomposities of the mainstream art world.

Naturally those outré characteristics ensure Lowbrow's place as the refusnik art form of the moment and perhaps into the foreseeable future, and along with that, a comfortable perch for amigos Pickens and Cuellar to indulge their love of form and craft. ■



PREVIOUS PAGE: Visalia artist Bryan Pickens at work in his home studio on *Solace* (2010; acrylic on birch panel; 40" x 65"), a piece that will be included in the upcoming two-person show at Arts Visalia entitled *Figurative Narration*, which will also feature fellow Visalia artist and friend Anthony "Evaristo" Cuellar, who will show recent ceramic works.

TOP LEFT: Antonio "Evaristo" Cuellar and Bryan Pickens, both Visalia-based artists, enjoy an ongoing dialogue about art and life both in the studio and on the golf course.

ABOVE: Recent vessels by Antonio "Evaristo" Cuellar include *Vase with Red Spirals*, *Vase with Green Spirals*, and *Vase with Triangle* (all works 2010; raku ceramic), which will be on view in the Arts Visalia exhibition entitled *Figurative Narration*.

RIGHT: *Bab's Pot* (2010, ceramic wood and steel), by Antonio "Evaristo" Cuellar, represents a departure from earlier works, a shift stemming from a direct visual dialogue with fellow artist Bryan Pickens. The show opens with an artist reception open to the public, Friday, October 1, 2010.

