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ENTROPY

Eduardo Portillo: Frontera @ RULE Gallery

Joshua Ware, October 17, 2017



Frontera, Eduardo Portillo,
Solo Exhibition at RULE Gallery
September 14 - October 28, 2017

From September 14 through October 28, Rule Gallery's Denver location will host *Frontera*, a solo exhibition by El Salvador-born and Houston-based artist Eduardo Portillo. According to Rule Gallery's press release, Portillo's artwork crosses "the imaginary division that separate[s] painting and sculpture" in order to "subvert our traditional definitions" of both. Such subversions present themselves in two distinct manners.

First and foremost, Portillo builds frames of "irregular" shape in order to develop non-normative surfaces and create volume. A look behind "Messier 82," for instance, reveals the artist's craftsmanship. In addition to constructing joints that do not meet at traditional ninety-degree angles, Portillo builds a layered armature of wood on top of wood to produce elevations (and, thus, volume). But more than just creating depth, Portillo bevels the wood on the upper layers. The beveling-effect results in a canvas that undulates and slopes in multiple directions once it's stretched over the frame.

Furthermore, the way in which Portillo situates his artwork throughout the gallery space subverts normative identity/designation of the object as well. For example, he stations "Messier 82" on the floor, indicative of a sculptural identity. But the piece is still a canvas stretched over a frame, consisting of a painted outward-facing surface and an exposed wall-facing surface. These qualities are suggestive of traditional wall hangings. In fact, the pieces placed upon the floor would seem just as natural hanging next to the other works, and vice versa. The gesture calls attention, then, to the manner in which physical placement affects nominal identity.

Of course, the exhibit's title demands that viewers expand their notions of border-crossing outside the aesthetic realm. Rule Gallery's press release notes that Portillo's "immigrant" identity fostered within the artist a heightened attention to the "borders that divided his country from others, and the lines that connected where he grew up to where he lives now." As such, *Frontera* suggests that gallery visitors engage the broader context of border politics in the United States.



To this extent, attending to *Frontera* through the critical framework of writer, scholar, and activist Gloria Anzaldúa seems appropriate. In her now iconic book *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Anzaldúa describes the U.S.-Mexican border as “una herida abierta where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture.” Cast in corporeal terms, the border becomes a live wound that bleeds, oozes, scabs, and hemorrhages.

But the grotesque gives way to beauty. To creation. To synthesis. To a “merging,” as Anzaldúa writes, that acts as a catalyst for a new, polyphonic, and vibrant “border culture.” Later in *Borderlands / La Frontera*, she champions the “racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollination” that occurs at/in such sites. The maimed body, thus, transforms not into a cadavre exquis, but a culture exquisite. A communauté exquisite.

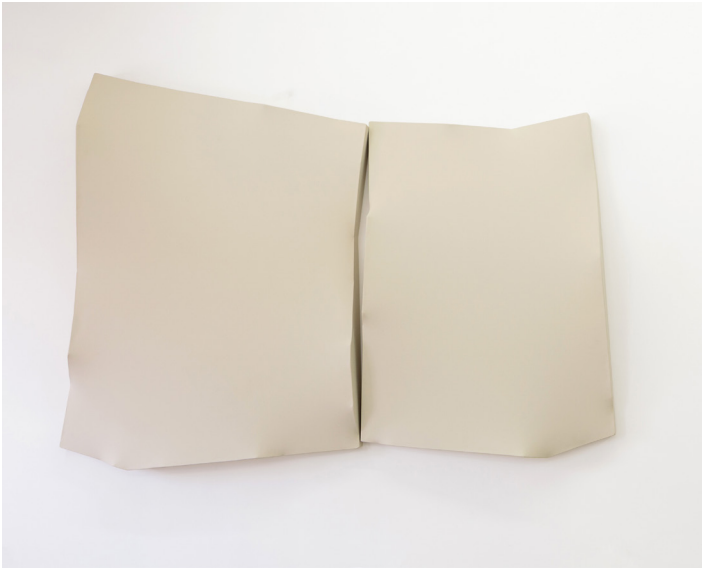
Such “cross-pollination” has the potential to create “mental and emotional states of perplexity” within a subject caused by an ambivalence produced from the “clash of voices,” policies, identities, and ideologies that tear at the very fabric of one’s being. But at its best, the ambiguous conditions along *la frontera* allow for a consciousness that is of both worlds: one that is flexible in thought and adaptable to altering contexts. In short, *la frontera* has the potential to foster a

mestiza consciousness that develops a “tolerance for contradiction [and] ambiguity.”

A mestiza consciousness operates tactically through any means necessary: synthesis, assemblage, association, opposition, disengagement, evasion, etc. In other words, a mestiza consciousness marshals available tools in a pragmatic fashion so as to develop a “new mythos” that functions not just as a survival strategy, but as a proactive and affirmative response to hegemony, racism, class division, and imbalances of power.

Thirty years after the publication of *Borderlands / La Frontera*, the sentiments found between its covers are just as (if not more) relevant today than they were during the 1980s. With a sitting president who actively promotes racism and xenophobia and lobbies for wall that embodies those principles, inhabiting psychic/physical spaces that effectively breach divisions and combat ignorance are of paramount importance.

Of course, just as a former real estate mogul might manifest his hatred in the dream of a wall, artists can manifest inclusivity, intellect, beauty, and anti-authoritarian sentiments through their artwork. In some cases, such artwork develops and abides by a mestiza aesthetic (for lack of a better term).



Eduardo Portillo, *Sonora DS100*, 2017,
acrylic on shaped canvas, 61 x 86 x 8 in

Returning to Portillo's exhibition at Rule Gallery, then, the minimalist, shaped canvases found therein traffic in the very ambiguities and affronts to hegemonic thought that Anzaldúa addressed in her now canonical writings.

As previously mentioned, the layering and the beveling of Portillo's frames provide a dimensionality that blurs the distinction between painting and sculpture. To ask the question "Is this is painting, or is this sculpture," though, misses the mark. Portillo constructs an aesthetic border-crossing that, as Anzaldúa would say, heals the split between "two mortal combatants...so that we are on both shores at once." The works found in Frontera are not of an either-or proposition; rather, they unabashedly embrace the logic of AND. Yes, Portillo's works are paintings. Yes, Portillo's works are sculpture.

Similarly, the placement of pieces throughout the gallery also serves to cross borders in order to inhabit a mestiza aesthetic and embodied AND logic. Is "Messier 82" a sculpture because it does not hang on a wall? Likewise, are human beings "illegal" or "immigrants" or "aliens" because they stand on one side or the other of an arbitrary and shifting line (with or without certain documents) drawn by politicians in honor of their nation-state and their own self-serving will to power? Such nominal designations serve to compartmentalize and thus reduce the potentialities of Portillo's works (as well as individuals who cross borders).

Portillo's newest work, though, might be the apotheosis of his mestiza aesthetic, insofar as he's condensed his idiom through a progression toward radical minimalism. This movement toward a further streamlined sensibility allows for his pieces to focus more effectively on the concept of borders and his material ingenuity.

"Kalahari E81" and "Sonora DS100" both employ the shaped framework of Portillo's previous work; but the artist reduces his color palette to a basic, off-white acrylic. Stripping his pieces of both the vibrancy and blending of bright colors (as well as prohibiting the use of spray paint he employed in earlier works) places added importance on the few features that remain. As such, Portillo tacitly asks the viewer to apply their critical abilities and aesthetic attention on the works' contours, undulations, and the border concepts underlying them.



Eduardo Portillo, *Kalahari E81*, 2017,
acrylic on shaped canvas, 54 x 48 x 5 in

Moreover, using diptychs (instead of singular, autonomous pieces) affords more prominence to the concepts of borders and border-crossings. Specifically, the vertical schism between frames does not align flush along the opposing edges. The contours of each frame abut so as to meet sharply at some points, while producing negative space in other areas. Indeed, the chasm between frames embodies the manner in which different ideologies, nationalities, and identities meet inconsistently at the interstices of society and culture along our borders. Echoing Anzaldúa, the edges of Portillo's diptychs "grate against" one another instead of running in a coherent, parallel fashion.

One could argue, finally, that *la frontera* to which Portillo's exhibition title refers to is not the pieces themselves; rather, *la frontera* is the space between diptych frames, as well as between wall-mounted and floor-standing objects. Couched in these terms, Portillo re-creates *la frontera* and its coincident mestiza aesthetic through the play of negative space between real artifacts. In this space, Portillo allows for a mestiza consciousness, as Anzaldúa would claim, "to shift out of habitual formations" and toward "divergent thinking, characterized by movement away from set patterns." In these spaces, then, we can foster hope for new opportunities and affirmative innovations in aesthetics, ideology, and society in general.



Eduardo Portillo, *Messier 82*, 2017,
acrylic on shaped canvas, 44 x 32 x 18 in

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