



Symbols Grappling for Hope

TEXT STEPHEN BRACCO PHOTOGRAPHY ALEXANDER RICHTER

RAÚL MANZANO'S PAINTINGS MAKE USE OF FAMILIAR SYMBOLS SUCH AS THE AMERICAN FLAG AND THE STATUE OF Liberty to draw attention to issues like immigration, materialism, freedom, and terrorism. His provocative works grow out of a strong South American tradition of using the visual arts to engender social change, and challenge us to examine the politics of our elected leaders and the assumptions we may take for granted.

In addition to his work as an artist, Raúl conducts onsite art classes at select NYC museums and is director of the School of Visual Arts' summer travel program, "Painting in Barcelona." A former president of the West Side Arts Coalition, he has received awards for Outstanding Service and his contribution to Hispanic culture from Fairleigh Dickinson University and Empire State College, as well as the Medal of the City of Ashkelon, Israel, for service to the arts.

Ins&Outs: What made you decide to paint icons instead of something more representational, like landscapes?

Raúl Manzano: Being from Colombia, I have always looked closely at social injustice in the political arena. When I came here to America, I saw some of the same problems, in a country that is supposed to be about equal opportunities for everybody. Racial problems, women's rights, gay rights, labor issues. I try to address those subjects using the Statue of Liberty and the American flag. The flag is the most symbolic icon we have to relate to our origins and our nationality, so it represents a special place where you belong. Everybody has a certain respect for their flag.

I&O: You were painting the American flag and the Statue of Liberty before September 11, 2001, but in your paintings after the terrorist attacks, the American flag and especially the Statue of Liberty take on more urgency, for example in "Dis-Integration" and "Liberty Will Always Prevail."

RM: Yes, the Statue of Liberty represents unification, so that this particular painting ("Dis-Integration") represents it in the opposite way. Her tablet commemorates the signing of the Declaration of Independence, but in the painting, the tablet is breaking apart. It raises the question: What happened to the pacts by which our forefathers created this country? Are they being ignored? Do we no longer look at them as a basis for how our country was founded?

In "Liberty Will Always Prevail," the foot of the Statue of Liberty is stepping onto the White House, meaning that no matter what, liberty will always prevail. At the time that I painted it, our telephones were being tapped, and the President was like Big Brother. The White House was trying to control what we were doing, but freedom can never be taken away from us.

I&O: You're saying that liberty is universal, not specific to any one country.

RM: Right. People come here looking at the Statue of Liberty and see it as a symbol of hope, not of constraint by the rules of any government.

I&O: Your triptych "To a Wise Person" has the Statue of Liberty in the classic poses of "see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil." What was the inspiration for that?

RM: That the government doesn't want to do anything about immigration. They talk about it, but no one wants to make a commitment about immigration issues. I don't want to hear, I don't want to know, it's not my problem, leave



me alone. People see the Statue of Liberty as a symbol of opportunity, but democracy seems to be disappearing in some ways.

I&O: Urgent social ideas have long inspired your work. Where do you see things going for America in the future? What issues do you see yourself working on?

RM: The economy will be an issue I'd want to work on and how that plays out and affects everybody. As I read the news, that's how I explore the concepts and arrange the ideas for my paintings. My ideas are used to raise awareness in people, whatever those issues are, and about whatever topic I am painting.

VISUAL ART



I&O: With the Obama administration, do you see a hope for change and a shift in priorities?

RM: President Obama is playing an important role, and he's formulated his administration with people from all different backgrounds, which I think will be important, because we don't know what's going to happen. He is an important player, especially in how other countries are going to see us as leaders of the free world. The fact that we now have a black president is something that everyone notices around the world.

I&O: The gap between the idea of America as land of opportunity and the harsh reality has widened. Do you think that the gap can close a bit with President Obama, or has the damage been done?

RM: The damage is done, and now it needs to be repaired. That will be the key role for the new president.

I&O: There's no despair in your paintings. There's always hope of things changing. One doesn't get a sense in your work that you're saying this is the end of the road and there's no possibility for change.

RM: Hopefully when people look at my work, they can ask themselves: What are we doing? The idea is to make you think about a particular issue so you can ask that question: What do we need to do to make things better? We need to change. Liberty will always prevail. We cannot let our government control what we do. We cannot have our freedoms taken away.

www.raul-manzano.com

