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FEATURING: ISIS RODRIGUEZ • TIGERS AND JAGUARS: LA'S ASIAN-LATINO ART FUSION
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The After Life of a Comic Stripper

by: Titania Kameh

Isis Rodriguez



What She Consumed

It's hard being a woman; scratch that, a person and confronting the works of Isis Rodriguez.

The graphic language in her cartoon-like imagery hits at the core of comfort levels, making some squirm in their seats at the sight of not only its blatant sexuality. That would be too easy. It also provokes its viewers to question the source of their own identities. Like going through a second adolescence, it confronts spectators with uncomfortable questions like, am I the way I am because mind-stunting politics, advertisements, magazine imagery, the American Dream told me that this is how I should be, or am I the director of my own psyche?

Inside her San Francisco home, Rodriguez - an eccentric caricature of pointy 50s glasses and cinna-bon rolled hair - describes how she once let commercial conceptions define her femininity.

"As a teenager," she says. "I remember reading through fashion magazines and looking at these models and these rock stars and these actresses, and they wore the most scandalous outfits. People adored them and I really interpreted that as that's how I kind of wanted to be."

Using her own experiences as a woman in society, Rodriguez has concocted visual narratives that speak to the sexual dilemmas of most women in our society.

For over a decade, her comic strip-style drawings and paintings have taken viewers through her own journey in search of sexual and self-autonomy – a Siddhartha-like odyssey that began in San Francisco's strip clubs and continues in illustrative unravelings of a newfound indigenous self.

It's a disempowering state when your actions and behaviors are dictated by influences other than your own and not of your choosing. But that's just the situation most women, like Rodriguez, have found themselves in. Tied to the sexualized portraits of women presented in magazine imagery, the virginal standard prepared by Christianity, and, yes, even the economic pressure to sell their souls for bling, women are told to look to everything outside and beside themselves to define their femininities and overall identities.

Growing up in Topeka, Kansas, Rodriguez felt like she couldn't wear tight Jordache jeans let alone experiment with her sexuality without being seen negatively. "You really couldn't be an individual," she says of her adolescence. "You really had to conform to what others wanted you to be. And if you did take adult license into your own hands...that was seen



Photo by: David Perry



No More

Photo by: Rubin Gorman

as being kind of like a prostitute, or seen as being overtly sexual."

Once very aware of how others saw and defined her, Rodriguez explored the idea that modern-day women cannot look at themselves without being aware of how they are looked at in her Little Miss Attitude series (1999). In it, female character studies – a black mo-hawked punk-rocker, a lollipop-licking Lolita, a knife-wielding butch biker chick – exhibit various furrow-browed sneers and snickers, challenging the viewer head on in "What are you looking at?" poses. "Women have to be on guard sometimes," Rodriguez says. "We have a lot to protect: Our honor."

Inspired by underground comic artists like R. Crumb and Robert Williams, both prominent artists whose works lean to human-based, psychological concerns, Rodriguez has always been interested in the reasons behind people's decisions, most specifically, why women portray themselves the way they do. Her early works show that, for the most part, the motives behind our actions are rarely our own. Our lives are directed by ideas concocted by political institutions and social constructs, whether we know it or not.

Armed with a knack for drawing developed over years of copying Hanna-Barbera cartoons, an undergraduate degree in Painting from the University of Kansas, Lawrence in 1989 and a year in the Masters of Fine Arts program at San Francisco Art Institute in the early 1990s, Rodriguez is equipped to document her discoveries with artistic ease.

She has been invited to exhibit her work everywhere from the San Jose Museum of Art to the 1997 Bay Area Now exhibition at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco. Isis has also worked as an Artist-in-Residence at Jentel in Banner, Wyoming and the NorCal Sanitation Site, San Francisco, CA. In 2003, Rodriguez was awarded the Individual Arts Commission Grant for her work in San Francisco. She has most recently had a solo exhibition at Patricia Correia Gallery in Los Angeles in August 2006.

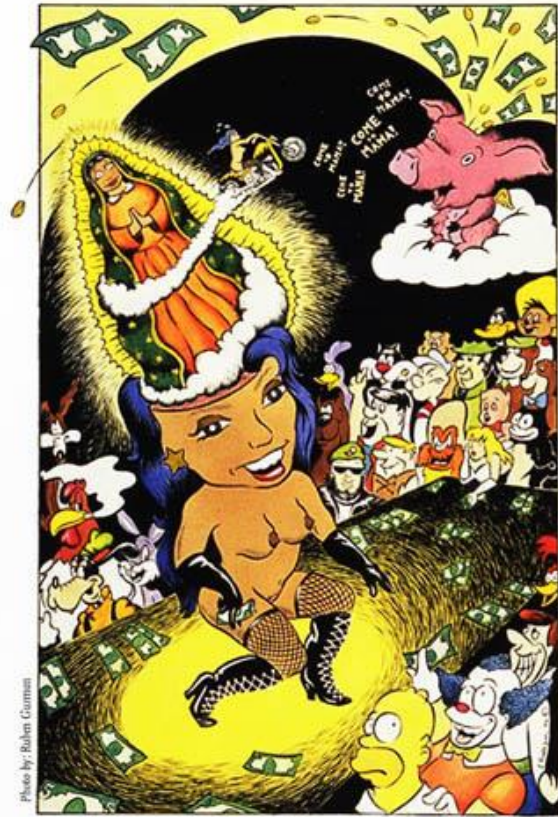
Her early female character-driven narratives provide startling

peeks into Western culture's effect on the way women both perceive and project themselves.

In her first series, the infamous "My Life as a Comic Stripper" - born out of her 10-year stint as a real-life stripper - the politics within San Francisco's sex industry and their effects on women's bodies is satirical exposed. Its leading ladies - stark naked strippers in stilettos (the black flaxen haired, brown skinned beauty is Rodriguez incognito), buxom comic book super heroines, gun-wielding-40s femme fatales - represent American ideals of female sexual empowerment. Each is shown steeped in monetary, religious, and patriarchal pressures that define/stifle a woman's sexual potential: A prancing naked Chicana (Rodriguez?) in Evolution de-evolves toward a dollar-leaved tree into a jumping money-mongering chimpanzee. She's just another example of a woman who's lost her humanity



Miss Lady Luck's Enlightened Disguises of Confusion

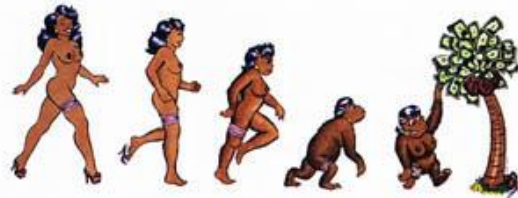


Freedom

in the all-encompassing quest for money.

"I didn't go into exotic dancing to get my freak on," Rodriguez clarifies. "I went into stripping to really understand what it was to be a woman and to cover my tuition at the San Francisco Art Institute MFA program and the expense of living in San Francisco.

Then there's Freedom which confronts viewers with the Madonna/Whore complex, poisoning a radiating Our Lady of Guadalupe on the head of a gyrating Chicana as she dances on a stage for an audience comprised of Homer Simpson, Krusty the Clown, George Jetson and other prestigious male cartoon patrons. Meanwhile, an animated piggy bank showers her with dollars and cents overhead. The graphically and



Evolution

contextually complex scenes seethe with countless ironies of stereotypical American values, revealing the unsightly underbelly of a Pop culture which forces women into these impossible roles.

Many of the series images came in response to a \$200 shift fee imposed on dancers. The fee caused many women to cash in their moralities, integrities, and overall identities in order to rake in the required salary. Women's bodies became the property of industry politics, and expression took a back seat to making money, just as it often does in society. But Rodriguez fought back.

Reinvigorating the '70s pop slogan, "the personal is political," Rodriguez testified against the compromising work practices of the strip clubs at the Commission for the Status of Women in San Francisco. But she also fought the industry through her imagery. "Never Again" sports a red dressed '40s femme fatale holding the towering buildings of the sex industry at bay with a pistol. The composition appears like a Communist propaganda poster gone women's lib.

But the ultimate symbol of emancipation comes from "No More!" The tattoo-like totem shows a tiger leaping from the open legs of a naked gun-and-apple toting Chicana, an American flag bandanna wrapped around her head and her limbs bound by unshackled cuffs. The brash and gutsy portrait offers an "It's-my-body-I-can-do-what-I-want-to" feminist barbaric yawp, but also a grave warning: "It isn't just your pussy. It's an animal," Rodriguez says sneakily. "It could kill you if it wanted to. It's about women taking responsibility for their own bodies." And there lies the point: Who is in charge of your body?

Women may be the sole stars of Rodriguez's work, but the political issues that entrap their bodies and overall sense of self is applicable to all people. Her graphic activism confronts an otherwise ignorant public with the bleak realities lurking not only in strip-clubs, but also outside their front doors. The pig-bodied strip-club baron in PeepShow Gone CreepShow screaming "It's Not Enough" to a spread-eagled stripper mounted on a slice of American apple pie, could, in effect, be anyone's boss. The pressure to perform at all costs is a weight our culture has placed on us all.

But Rodriguez doesn't want her work to be just advertisement, she says. It has to go beyond that. "For me, my role as an artist is to create something meaningful, to help people find their own meaning in their life, and to help them along." This message runs in the same vein as the consciousness-raising sessions of the '70s Feminist Arts Project. Like FAP's founders, Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, Rodriguez has turned her experiences as women in society into art in search of social change. Rodriguez has been profiled in several books including Judy Chicago and

Edward Lucie-Smith's *Women and Art: Contested Territory and Vicious, Delicious and Ambitious: 20th Century Women Artists*.

Rodriguez's early works indict aspects of American culture – money, religion, patriotism, the dominant male gaze- to show how those values can threaten a woman's sense of self. But the works have a greater motive in mind. They show viewers the startling effects of blindly following societal expectations in order to rouse women out of their social positions. Rodriguez's task is to provoke the marginalized masses to question the source of their own sexual and self-identities, propelling them to take responsibility for reclaiming their bodies.

Yeah, so society sucks, but Rodriguez places pressure on the individual to define her own life, to rebel by being her own preternatural self. Basically: Fuck the system. Know thyself.

"It's really about becoming aware of your true possibilities of being in this world instead of always being in the same category or stuck



Photo by: Judy Reed

Don Cien

in the same stereotype," she says. "I mean, we're creative individuals. To just stay in the same place is not normal." And Rodriguez's work has avoided stagnation, evolving with the artist into new, spiritual terrain. In her latest works, the strippers of yesteryear have graduated onto to mystical pursuits as a means of breaking their id's free from what society says they should be.

"I've actually been experiencing a new way of seeing myself and other people," Rodriguez says of her works transformation "I found out I'm aware of other people, but I've never really been aware of myself.

"With 'My Life As a Comic Stripper' I was very influenced with what happened in the strip club and all the politics of it. After I left the industry, I felt that something had changed in me. I felt like I was a new, different person now, and I didn't know what that was. So I didn't want to watch too much TV or read too many magazines or spend too much time in the city, because there's a lot of information out there," she explains. "I would just sit down, and I would just draw like crazy. And let whatever come to mind just do its thing (doodles) and then refine it slowly but surely. It allowed me to tap into my subconscious," she says. "That's when I discovered that there was this new person that was different than being political all the time." What she discovered was something ancient.

The woman, who once looked to others to define herself, turned her gaze inward. And, as is usually the case, as the artist changed, so did her art.

Having found that societal expectations often provide inefficient accommodations for an individual's needs, the women in her imagery now exist in a space that mirrors their inner dimensions - a more textured, natural environment.

The result resembles incarnations of Mesoamerican goddesses, seen most vividly in her "Iron Doodles" series. Her free-associative drawing technique applied to ornamental iron rods created arabesque female heads, each donning the plumed headdresses of Pre-Columbian deity representations. Rodriguez has, in effect, decolonized the female body of, as she says "the colonial values that were not necessarily the values of the people they were oppressing."

Colonialism's pre-packaged politics has sold women the idea that there is only one, homogeneous way of being. In terms of female sexuality: it's either naughty or nice, sexy or respectable, all values that ignore and conflict with the inherent infinite possibilities of the individual. This dichotomous state of mind that has left women in an identity bind without a reference point that speaks to an individual's multiplicities, or their indigenous instincts. Rodriguez new works have broken the female body free from such stifling constructions of gender to visually explore the lengths of sexuality and identity on her own terms.

The female connection to nature is explored in her "Glyphotoons" series, exhibited this year at Patricia Correia Gallery in Los

Playboy Webspinners



Photo by: Judy Beal



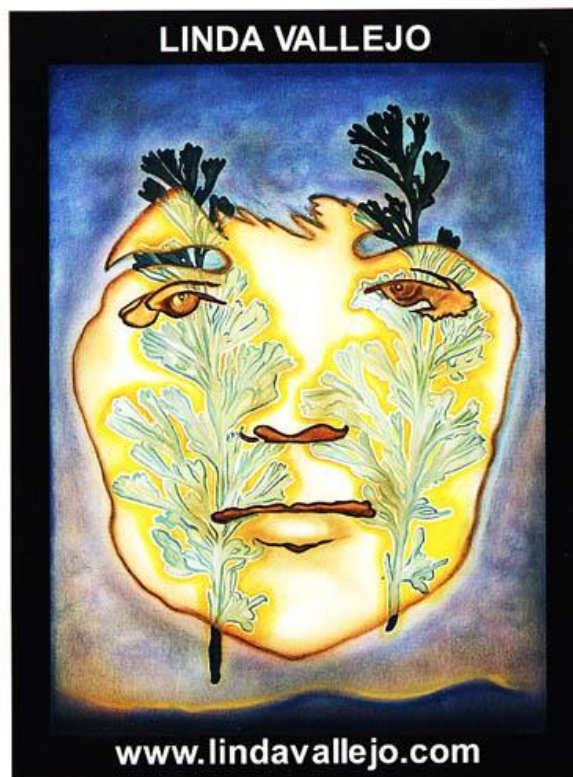
Angeles, where hybrid women - a fusion of the exotic erotic characters she discovered in her "Life as a Comic Stripper" series and otherworldly beings - blossom vermilion wings, reflect all manner of wildlife on their bare bodies and radiate with their own sense of sexuality in surreal surroundings. She abandons commercial conceptions of female sexual liberations. Her works sum shows that there are other ways of being outside of the values set by society.

Rodriguez has plans to put her message to practice for women at the correctional facilities in San Leandro, CA this year. She is working on a four-panel comic strip mural for the women's prison entitled Kenya, a story about a girl who chooses an education over a life of prostitution. The story goes: after bypassing the blaring lights and penetrating eyes of the streets and a Sponge Bob Money God holding fistfuls of loot and a leashed Prostitute, Kenya (who's really a tiger), discovers a feminist book. In the end, feminist book in hand, sitting on a throne atop a golden cloud, clad in graduation cap and gown, Kenya has the leash in her hand and it's attached to a pig in the bank. Like classical images of a canonized virgin, rays of symbolic enlightenment radiate in the background.

"In Westernized culture, women now have choices," Rodriguez says. "Now what we deal with is a self-imposed slavery, I think. And that self-imposed prison is never being satisfied with yourself. Never being satisfied with your body and always trying to make adjustments and fussing with it. So we have all of these issues with cosmetic surgery and bulimia and anorexia nervosa and women cutting themselves... I mean, these are all symptoms of a woman not accepting herself." For the artist, individuality is the only rule that applies. That goes for both her art and life.

"I think it's important for women to accept ourselves, in a way, for what we are," she says. "We're imperfect human beings. We're controversial. We're never going to be on the same page with each other. We're never going to be on the same plane. To me it just boils down to nature. You are what you are."

More of Rodriguez's work and philosophy can be found on her website: www.isisrodriguez.com



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Exhibition dates: August 5th - September 9th 2006

Artist reception: Saturday, August 5th, 2006
5:00 to 8:00 p.m.