



# **Tony Ortega**

## **Mi Frontera Es Su Frontera**

June 11, 2010—September 5, 2010

BOULDER MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

**T**ony Ortega's exhibition at the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art introduces conflicting connotations of shared space—welcoming hospitality versus delineated boundaries and resistant attitudes surrounding border crossing. Through vibrant and colorful monotype/serigraphs, charcoal drawings, and a site-specific mural/installation, Ortega examines the stories of those who find themselves not heard or seen “in the land of opportunity.” As current controversies continue to make us acutely aware of issues facing Mexican immigrants and Latino communities in the United States, *Mi Frontera Es Su Frontera*—translated *My Border Is Your Border*—could not be more timely.

This exhibition, part of the Biennial of the Americas hosted by the City of Denver during July 2010, was funded in part by the Biennial of the Americas Corporation, Boulder Arts Commission, Centro Cultural Mexicano, Consulado de México in Denver, the Citizens of the Scientific and Cultural Facilities District, the Gay and Lesbian Fund for Colorado, and the Kevin Luff Family Fund.

David Dadone  
Executive Director



Tony Ortega working on the charcoal mural/installation *Apparition* at the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art.

**Tony Ortega:** *Mi Frontera Es Su Frontera*

Chicano artist Tony Ortega has long been renowned for creating paintings chronicling the Latino experience. Utilizing a signature style of bold coloration, simplified forms, anonymous figures, and cultural icons, he explores community, family, street life, labor, entertainment, youth culture, popular culture, and cultural politics. While in the past his work has been more focused on the sociological interactions of community than on identity politics, the influences of social movements, historical precedents, and a long tradition of visual representation are profound. To Ortega, the border is porous, with layered implications. In *Mi Frontera Es Su Frontera*, through the use of monotype/silkscreens, charcoal drawings, hand-colored etchings, and a mural installation, Ortega offers a timely glimpse of the melding of histories, traditions, culture, and politics of our ever-expanding and diversified population.

Ortega's work stylistically and thematically explores the richness of Latino culture. His use of bold jewel toned and primary colors—often outlined in black—is contemporary, yet reflects an indigenous folkloric sensibility. Posters used as back-grounds can be traced to early Mexican graphic works, and murals reflect influences of the great Mexican mural tradition. Both would become favored art forms during the Chicano art movement. The absence of facial features in Ortega's distinctive style reinforces the importance of the group over the individual. While anonymous, his characters are decidedly not devoid of gesture or emotion. If anything, they seem to become even more personal and relatable as they take on the potential of being anyone, or everyone.

For this exhibition, Ortega, who has created numerous community-based murals in Colorado and beyond, confronts the issues of the border in the mural/installation *Apparition*. In the distance, a syncretization of the Statue of Liberty and the Virgin of Guadalupe offers her followers the promise of justice and freedom. She is depicted with torch and seven spikes as she is in New York Harbor, but is also resting on an angel who holds up her star-studded mantle. This conflation of the American symbol of freedom and democracy, and Mexico's most ubiquitous religious and cultural icon and symbol of acceptance, harkens a reading that honors the multiculturalism of people on both sides of the border. Facing her, a group of men and women is assembled just inside a barbed wire fence. Outside the fence sits a lone plastic water drum supporting a white flag. The fence is the border, but the ambiguous

positioning of the statue, the people, and the water station reifies the border as much a psychological and fictive state as a defined demarcation.

Since 1886 when France, in a gesture of good will, gave the statue to America, she has inspired patriotic emotion and creative outpourings. In the famous poem by Emma Lazarus, *Liberty entreats*, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free." Lazarus, a Sephardic Jew who hailed from ancestors expelled from Spain 400 years before, was an advocate for the disenfranchised and a notable proponent of immigration. Today, the notion of immigrants crossing the border instead of the ocean is rife with complexities that mirror the current state of cultural politics. Ortega's *Liberty/Guadalupe* presents herself as a powerful icon. Masses are still drawn to the promise of freedom and acceptance, but wire fences obstruct passage and water drums have been placed by humanitarian groups to stave off the hardships endured by those brave or desperate enough to cross the border into the harshly uninviting landscape on their way to an ostensibly better life.

The term Chicano emerged during the turbulent decade of the 1960s and served as a politicized cultural identifier. *El Movimiento* paralleled the peace movement, reflected the idealism of the times and protested civil rights and human violations against those of Latino and Hispanic heritage. It evolved from the student movement that radicalized around protest against the Vietnam War and prevailing racism and was manifested in the United Farm Workers march led by César Chávez in California. This movement of solidarity aimed at recuperating cultural pride and establishing a new sense of national identity through political activism. While of uncertain derivation, possibly from the Nahuatl pronunciation of the word Mexican, the term Chicano came to be used to acknowledge indigenous heritage and hybridity. Community involvement was implicit in the success of *El Movimiento*, and art provided a viable way to mobilize a highly engaged population.

The Chicano art movement involved the community in dialogs about multiracial and multicultural global and local issues. A neo-indigism flourished, taking its roots from pre-Columbian culture. Its rejection of Euro-American assimilation gave way to a desire for a multilingual, and binational determination. Hence the hegemony of European art and cultural aesthetics



were challenged by a privileging of a mestizaje aesthetic, utilizing pre conquest, folk, and Indian influences. This neo-indigism was accompanied by a new appreciation of Chicano popular culture artifacts with a “rasquache” sensibility, a term coined by scholar Tomás Ybarra-Frausto to describe the juxtaposition of bright colors, bold patterns, excessive ornamentation, irreverent and ironic images, and the subversive power implicit in the conjoining of high and low cultural and religious artifacts. Ortega’s juxtaposition of Guadalupe, Lady Liberty, and the Frito Bandito exemplifies that rasquachismo.

Posters and murals emerged as potent formats for politicized artistic expression in the 1960s and 70s as artists and arts collectives began to use public space to circulate public art. Like the great muralists Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros, the muralists of the Chicano art movement were chronicling prevailing cultural situations and concerns. Murals sprang up on buildings, walls, and fences, with Mexican icons, graffiti, and Spanish phrases commandeering and infiltrating these sites, often with Che Guevara and Frida Kahlo portrayed as hero and heroine. Such urban interventions, witness the murals of Judy Baca, succeeded in subverting established notions of artmaking and art exhibition, moving art from the galleries and museums to the streets, further blurring the boundaries of high and low art and culture. By the 1980s artists specifically interested in border issues continued the tradition of utilizing art to serve as platform for dialog on cultural memory and civic history. Most often these explorations were undertaken by installation, conceptual and performance artists like Guillermo Gómez Peña and Coco Fusco whose personal expressions and confrontational stance have become significant, irreverently humorous, and articulate voices of mobilization.

A current series of Ortega’s works utilizes posters collected from Denver area venues as background. Originally meant to advertise musical performances, events, and sponsors, they’ve been overlaid with monotype/silkscreens that pictorially represent border patrol, policemen, families, children, or workers. Sometimes, a third layer of imagery is outlined portraying such cultural icons as the Statue of Liberty, the Virgin of Guadalupe, Uncle Sam, and space aliens. The tradition of using posters as announcements and pronouncements of particular cultural milieu is well established. A hundred years before the Chicano art movement in this country, the use of posters was established in Mexico by artist José Guadalupe Posada whose multitudes of graphic broadsheets transmitted news, ideals, lurid gossip, and current states of political, religious, and social affairs. For Ortega, the layering on the posters is not solely an aesthetic decision, but also a representa-

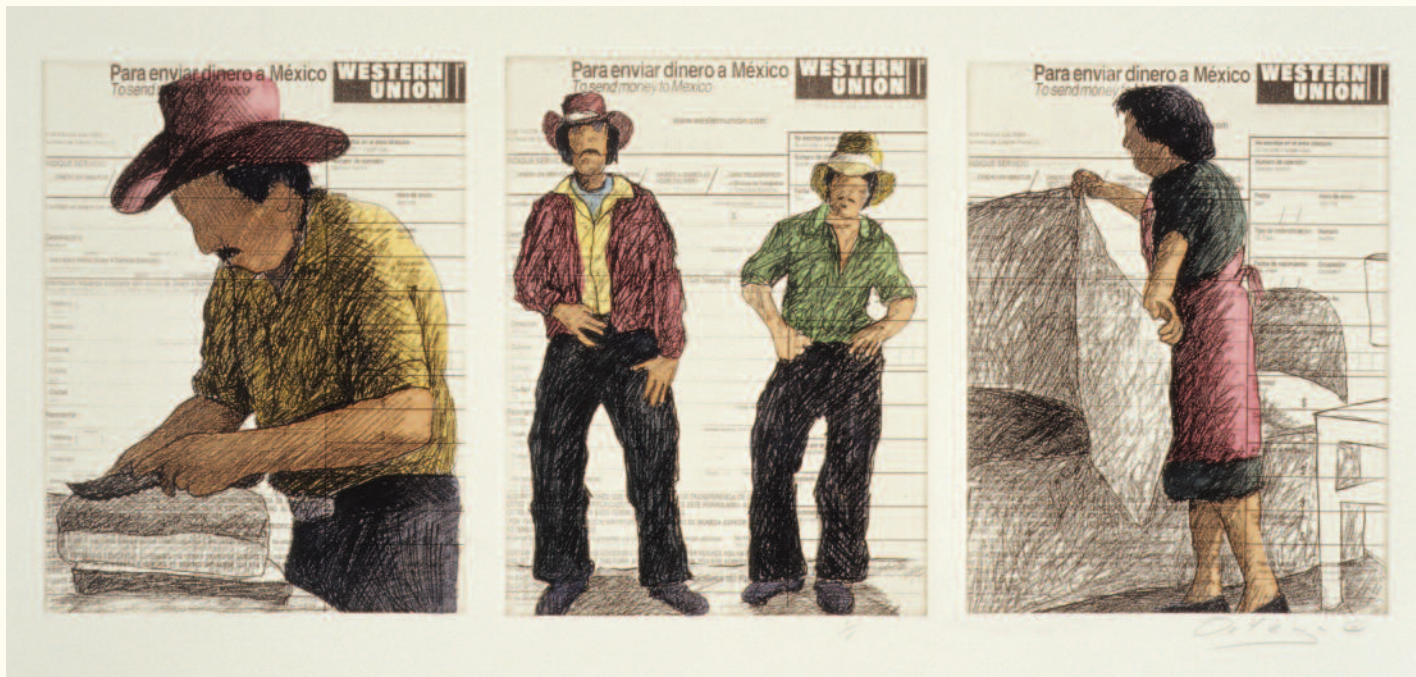
tion of the many layers of meaning in each of the images.

The situation of those who have gotten beyond the borders to live and work in rural and urban settings is also explored in this exhibition. Three large graphic charcoal drawings, *The Mechanic*, *The Carpenter*, and *The Maid*, each position the workers centermost, engaged in the laborious acts required by the job. These are mundane tasks, but also tasks necessary for society’s continuity. In *Obreros de la Fresa*, several *campesinos* are engaged in the backbreaking toil of picking strawberries. All work is carried out with perceived stoicism, driven by the implicit sense of familial obligation. The triptych *Western Union* highlights the oppression inherent in the inequitable exchange and transfer of remittances going back to families in Mexico.

Ortega’s interest in life in the barrios and on the streets reflecting conjunctions between high and low culture, otherness, have and have not sensibilities, and subversive explorations in youth culture, is also manifest in *Mi Frontera Es Su Frontera*. A *curandero*, a healer, cares for a patient surrounded by potions. A *cholo*, a contemporary icon of resistance, sporting an attitude of toughness, slowly drives his lowrider through the streets in a performative ritual of the road. This cultural imperative of seeing and being seen actively counters the sense of invisibility often described by those who feel marginalized or obscured by society at large. The conflict between the desire for assimilation and the maintenance of the richness of cultural heritage is at play in Ortega’s visual narratives.

*La Monarcha*, while the smallest work in the exhibition, is potent. Here, a brightly colored butterfly has landed on Lady Liberty. Like the border crossers entreated by the promise of a better life and aided by humanitarian groups and *coyotes*—those who smuggle immigrants across the border—multitudes of monarch butterflies guided by genetically coded information travel annually from the states to Mexico to mate and then return north. Ortega views their 2,500-mile circular migration as a powerful metaphor for migration across the border in both directions between Mexico and the United States. As implied in the title of this exhibition, *Mi Frontera Es Su Frontera*, Ortega has skillfully depicted the currently contested and highly charged issue of the border as one which faces us all, on both sides, and which calls upon us to consider how we can adopt the founding principles of America to appropriately address the current state of imperiled cultural politics.

Joan Markowitz  
Curator



**Western Union**, 2008  
hand-colored solar etching  
19.5 x 8.5 inches





**Low and Slow** Guadalupe, 2005  
monotype/silkscreen over poster  
27 x 19.5 inches



**Border Patrol**, 2004  
monotype/silkscreen over map  
26.5 x 19.5 inches



**No INS, No FBI, No CIA, No IRS, 2004**  
 monotype/silkscreen over poster  
 24 x 18 inches



**A New Racial Profile, 2004**  
 monotype/silkscreen over poster  
 24 x 18 inches





**Speak Out for Your Rights**, 2005  
monotype/silkscreen over poster  
27 x 19.5 inches



**Curandero and Chihuahua**, 2005  
monotype/silkscreen over poster  
27 x 19.5 inches





**Brown Nanny, White Baby**, 2004  
monotype/silkscreen over poster  
27 x 19.5 inches



**Speedy Gonzales Helps the Underdog**, 2005  
monotype/silkscreen over poster  
27 x 19.5 inches



**La Pistola**, 2005  
monotype/silkscreen over poster  
27 x 19.5 inches



**Sweatshop Alien**, 2005  
monotype/silkscreen over poster  
27 x 19.5 inches





**Madonna of the Border Crossing**, 2008

monotype, digital and etching

9 x 11 inches





**The Mechanic**, 2007  
charcoal  
51 x 31 inches



**The Carpenter**, 2007  
charcoal  
51 x 39 inches



**The Maid**, 2007  
charcoal  
51 x 39 inches





**Obreros de la Fresa**, 2009  
hand-colored solar etching  
8 x 10 inches

## Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art

*Mi Frontera Es Su Frontera*

June 11– September 5, 2010

Exhibition checklist:

**A New Racial Profile**, 2004  
monotype/silkscreen over poster  
24 x 18 inches

**No INS, No FBI, No CIA, No IRS**, 2004  
monotype/silkscreen over poster  
24 x 18 inches

**La Pistola**, 2005  
monotype/silkscreen over poster  
27 x 19.5 inches

**Blind Justice at the Border**, 2005  
monotype/silkscreen over poster  
27 x 19.5 inches

**Curandero and Chihuahua**, 2005  
monotype/silkscreen over poster  
27 x 19.5 inches

**Speak Out for Your Rights**, 2005  
monotype/silkscreen over poster  
27 x 19.5 inches

**The Frito Bandit Strikes Again**, 2004  
monotype/silkscreen over poster  
27 x 19.5 inches

**Rifle Colorado**, 2004  
monotype/silkscreen over poster  
27 x 19.5 inches

**Alien Farm Worker**, 2005  
monotype/silkscreen over poster  
27 x 19.5 inches

**Death of a Palettero**, 2004  
monotype/silkscreen over poster  
27 x 19.5 inches

**The Coyote will Help You**, 2005  
monotype/silkscreen over poster  
27 x 19.5 inches

**Sweatshop Alien**, 2005  
monotype/silkscreen over poster  
27 x 19.5 inches

**Low and Slow Guadalupe**, 2005  
monotype/silkscreen over poster  
27 x 19.5 inches

**Speedy Gonzales Helps the Underdog**, 2005  
monotype/silkscreen over poster  
27 x 19.5 inches

**Brown Nanny, White Baby**, 2004  
monotype/silkscreen over poster  
27 x 19.5 inches

**An Alien Seamstress**, 2005  
monotype/silkscreen over poster  
27 x 19.5 inches

**Illegal Alien**, 2004  
monotype/silkscreen over poster  
27 x 19.5 inches

**Border Patrol**, 2004  
monotype/silkscreen over map  
26.5 x 19.5 inches

**Obreros de la Fresa**, 2009  
hand-colored solar etching  
8 x 10 inches

**Western Union**, 2008  
hand-colored solar etching  
19.5 x 8.5 inches

**La Monarca**, 2010  
hand-colored, digital relief print  
8 x 6.5 inches

**Madonna of the Border Crossing**, 2008  
monotype, digital and etching  
9 x 11 inches

**Madonna of the Farm Worker**, 2008  
monotype, digital and etching  
10 x 12.5 inches

**Madonna of the Family**, 2008  
monotype, digital and etching  
9.5 x 11.5 inches

**The Mechanic**, 2007  
charcoal  
51 x 31 inches

**The Carpenter**, 2007  
charcoal  
51 x 39 inches

**The Maid**, 2007  
charcoal  
51 x 39 inches

**La Monarca**, 2010  
hand-colored, digital relief print  
8 x 6.5 inches

**La Marcha de Lupe Liberty**, 2006  
silkscreen  
23.5 x 16.5 inches

**Apparition**, 2010  
mural/installation, mixed media  
240 x 121 inches



**La Marcha de Lupe Liberty**, 2006  
silkscreen  
23.5 x 16.5 inches





Tony Ortega was born in 1958 in Santa Fe, New Mexico. He lives in Denver, Colorado where he is professor of painting at Regis University. He holds MFA (1995) and BA (1980) degrees from the University of Colorado at Boulder and regularly shows his work at galleries and museums in the United States, Latin America, and other parts of the world. A selection of exhibitions includes *Ecology*, Universidad de San Carlos, Guatemala City, Guatemala (2009); *Focus: The Figure*, Denver Art Museum (2008–2010); and *Axis: Reflexiones Chicanas*, Museo de Arte Moderno de Medellín, Medellín, Colombia (2006).

Ortega's work is part of numerous private and public collections, among them the Denver Art Museum, Los Angeles County Art Museum, Museo del Barrio in New York City, and the National Hispanic Cultural Center in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He was recipient of the prestigious Governor's Award for Excellence in the Arts (1999), the Mayor's Award for Excellence in the Arts (1998), and the AFKEY Award for Excellence in Art, Alliance for Contemporary Art of the Denver Art Museum (1991).



**La Monarca**, 2010  
hand-colored, digital relief print  
8 x 6.5 inches

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