



Photo of artist, Andrei Renteria (2018). Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin, Germany. Photo by Peter Rosemann

## By Marissa Del Toro

Last year Andrei Renteria, San Antonio-based artist and recent awardee of The George A. and Eliza Gardner Howard Foundation at Brown University, participated in a three month residency in Berlin, Germany. The program, sponsored by [Blue Star Contemporary](#) in partnership with the Künstlerhaus Bethanien, awarded four Bexar County (San Antonio, Texas) artists to take part in the three-month residency. The Künstlerhaus Bethanien hosts artists from around the world at their facility located in Berlin's Kreuzberg borough, the city's vibrant alternative art center.

This was Renteria's second trip to the city, as he had already traveled there previously for a study abroad trip during his MFA program at the University of Texas at San Antonio. In an interview before his return to the States in April, he mentioned how his time abroad gave him a fresh perspective on his work. "I took a lot of this time to hit the refresh button and come up with new ideas; just being exposed to the work here has led me to work in a more sculptural manner." During his residency, he was "exposed to so many artists here in Berlin, so many galleries, and artists trying to work and do their thing that it made [him] realize that it's important to go out of your area and be exposed to different kinds of people and listen." Listening was his biggest takeaway from this experience, along with the numerous friendships and connections he made with other international artists.





Untitled (as part of Tracey Snelling's *Beer Drinking Unicorn* performance), 2018. Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin, Germany. Photo by Clemens Wilhelm

Renteria is known for his strong socio-political perspective and his unflinching presentation of it through his work. His 2017 *Fringes* series, 12 large scale drawings shown at *Young Latino Artists 22: Ahora!* (curated by Alana Coates at the Mexic-Arte Museum in Austin) focus on victims of violence, specifically femicides which are regularly associated with Ciudad Juárez. The drawings, created on vellum paper with graphite and lithography crayon, have a sketch-like appearance with figures depicted in violent poses. The text of investigative and forensic notes surrounds the figures, detailing their injuries, disappearance, or murder, frozen in time within the drawing. The litho crayon suspends the drawn figures above the paper, adding to the context of the victims' suffering being suspended in time without any resolution to their vicious attack or death. The victims and their stories are fictitious, based on imaginary cases that Renteria drew from his daily readings of news reports on disappearances, femicides, police brutality, and kidnappings throughout the U.S. and Mexico. His creation of these stories and sourcing from real life tragedies can be viewed as problematic or even exploitative. But the work prompts viewers to recognize and remain aware of these all too frequent stories of violence and injustices.



Andrei Renteria, *Fringes* (installation shot), 2017. Lithography crayons on vellum paper. Mexic-Arte Museum, Austin, Texas, USA. Photo by Andrea Rampone





Andrei Renteria, *Fringes: Allison Parker* (installation shot), 2017. Lithography crayons on vellum paper. Photo by Andrea Rampone

While in Berlin, Renteria continued with his focus on victims of violence but in a new way, exploring “how victims are objectified and used as messages of war. How the perpetrator conduct threats or [convey] their message through violence.” Whereas his *Fringes* series is concerned with acts of violence and the victimization of individuals, especially women, his upcoming series will explore the idea of “language during times of violence” through sculptural and installation formats that embrace ephemeral qualities and materials. His interest in ephemerality stems from the work of Austrian artist Gustav Metzger, who wrote *The Auto-Destructive Art Manifesto*, a text that Renteria encountered while abroad. He was greatly influenced by the idea that art is a reflection of humankind, therefore art should be made to be self-destructive, deteriorative, ephemeral, and short living. This line of thought has led him to look for and use material that is self-destructive, such as flowers.

His time abroad not only gave him space to flesh out new material but also question the ethics surrounding his artistic practice. Renteria is aware of the subject matter that he presents and is critical to his creation of fictionalized stories that are partially based on real-life events. He challenges his use of these violent stories as a form of goods that are consumed by a capitalist society. In our talk, he shared that he continues to challenge his role as an artist by questioning, “Who is benefiting from my contribution and who is being exploited? Am I exploiting anyone? What is my part as an artist in this whole thing?” When asked if he views his work as a form of activism, Renteria was hesitant to embrace the notion, noting that he would like to someday but he doesn’t know if he will ever reach that level and that he is “still in a state of self-discovery.” Only time will tell if he does traverse the gap between art and social change by influencing and creating change through his work, or if it just becomes another part of the systems that be.



Renteria is an avid reader who admires the work of journalists and writers, such as the Argentinian writer Rodolfo Walsh, who Renteria noted as supporting the belief that it is the “responsibility of intellectuals and writers to create a body of work that is so sophisticated that it cannot be set aside, that it cannot be silenced.” The use of violence to silence the masses has been prevalent throughout history. We are at a critical time in society when all eyes are witnessing the assassinations of journalists and immigrants, the bombings of children and adults who protest in defense of their existence and homeland all through a technology that is potentially a corrupted weapon by those who only seek to maintain power and wealth. Thus, Renteria views it as his role as an artist “to make sure that history never gets erased. [It is his] responsibility as a Mexican living abroad, [for the] victims and the family members or prolonged victims...[to not] stay silent about these issues.”



uprisings from both sides of the border. He mentioned that while he was growing up, he was perhaps a little naive at times and didn't always pay attention or understand the extent of violence occurring around him. But as he became older he became more aware and began to develop a different perspective on his surroundings. The killing of Esequiel Hernandez, a classmate of his brother, by U.S. Marines in the dusty borderland near the Rio Grande greatly influenced him "to understand [his] life in a larger context, a more political context."



Curator Andrei Renteria in the exhibition *Los de Abajo: Garbage as an Artistic Source* (2016). Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center, San Antonio, Texas, USA. Photo by David S. Rubin

This political context continues in his curatorial works and projects. In 2016 Renteria curated the exhibition, *Los De Abajo: Garbage as an Artistic Source*, at the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center in San Antonio, Texas. This exhibition included artworks by John Atkins, Jason Eric Gonzales Martinez, and Juan De Dios Mora, who "transformed unconventional and overlooked materials into the sublime and beautiful objects." The objects made from garbage were a symbolic "return of the repressed" and a critical view on American culture as it converges modernist and avant-garde aesthetics through "the discarded products of industrial society." This exhibition was an extension of Renteria's own artistic practice, as he frequently uses found and used objects in his artworks. Most notably from his 2016 portrait series of friends that incorporated items such as paper clippings, discarded miniature toy soldiers and eyeglasses, as well as ligas and roses to accentuate the sitters' sketched portraits.

The work of Andrei Renteria, in both his artistic and curatorial practices, exposes the systems of violence, capitalism, and culture in which we live in. His sketched portraits of victims challenge us to question the society and the borders of division we exist in. As for his experience in Berlin and future work, Renteria values the friendships he made while abroad and looks forward to creating a mature body of work that continues to explore his aesthetic ideology through new practices and mediums.

***Make sure to check out his upcoming exhibition related to his Berlin residency, Fünf, featuring Amanda Miller, Ethel Shipton, and Jared Theis June 7 - September 8, 2019 at Blue Star Contemporary.***



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