

[Monument 10]

*Meditations on a Metropolitan Condición*

Los Angeles has long been described as a paradigmatic post-modern city. It is a city that virtually everyone knows and it is a city that often provokes starkly opinionated critique (both pro and con). It is a city that most of us know precisely because LA is everywhere and everywhere is LA: LA is a city that foretold of the economic shifts from Fordist to Post-Fordist production—in it we saw both rust belts rust and silicon harden; LA is one of the world's most photographed cities making it as much an imagined global landscape as it is a real local place; and LA is a city that now bares witness to a variety of post-minority culture wars—wars that catapult actors into office and workers over geographic and political barriers. LA is both our promised land and our collective purgatory.

In a sense, LA represents the shifting cultural and physical landscapes of our most recent transnational era. I say most recent transnational era, in part, to recognize the fact that cities like *Los Angeles* have been destinations within a global matrix for centuries—LA would not exist as we know it were it not for long-standing global practices. LA was a world city before it was cool.

As such, LA has been a city of change and change often requires one to cognitively map and re-map the local environment if one is to retain some sense of orientation. Personal geographies, then, must be agile, adaptable, and yet somehow stable in the midst of a shifting visual or urban landscape. In order to achieve such stability, one must assign a degree of monumentality to places that might otherwise be overlooked. Monuments, or the places, artifacts and sites made memorable through the interplay between our cultural and spatial lives, play a vital role in the construction of our individual and collective mental urban maps. Monuments serve as visual anchors as we navigate the sea of images found within contemporary society.

Monuments must, therefore, be legible and their meanings must be easily located. But, not all things can be monuments. Typically, monumentality is a status ascribed from on high; in this sense, monuments develop their momentum within established circuits of civic or governmental power. However, other landscapes can and must be granted a form of monumentality. One must find ways of locating meaning within the everyday urban environment in ways that compensate for the lack of official validation from seats of power. One must act in the world in order to take hold of urban space and to make an identifiable place within it. For many Chicana/o and Latina/o artists, the struggle to define their urban experiences has been a struggle to add new meaning to an existing urban landscape. Such acts involve the production of an *other* space within the city—one that provides some measure of reality with which to stave off cultural disappearance.<sup>i</sup>

Monument 10 represents such an act. In a sense, this series of prints is one result of an attempt to ascribe a sense of meaning and monumentality to the urbanity (both cultural and spatial) that Ramón Ramírez confronts daily. Ramírez, acting as our urban avatar, is helping us to navigate our shifting socio-spatial worlds; he is helping us to take hold of a city that increasingly seems to be slipping from our grasp. For Ramírez, these prints provide lenses through which to view the urban in new ways; they provide a two-fold metaphor for the contemporary city. Here, the ubiquitous adhesive sign—the sticker—represents a wide variety of elements that we often perceive as mundane, common and easily lost within the landscape of images that help to form our urban environments. Rather than allowing these artifacts to sink out of sight within a sea of images awash upon LA's urban shores, Ramírez takes advantage of the specificity of each individual sticker in order to add detail and difference to a body of images that appears uniform on its surface. And, the body of the work, the entirety of the series itself, also represents the seemingly anonymous body of the contemporary city—the auto-oriented rivers down which we travel, the detail deprived windscreens through which we see, the market-driven landscapes of consumption we find repeated along our journey.

Ramírez captures fragments of the city neither to remind us of our society's capacity for waste nor to ask us to listen to yet another critique of urban development gone awry. Rather, this series

of prints illustrates the potential for localized creative and critical engagement that remains alive despite the onslaught of global culture. This series of prints is, in essence, a collective monument; this is a gallery of images drawn from our collective memory that simultaneously documents and seeks-out monumental subjects/objects—both as objects of study and agents of resistance. Through these prints, Ramírez explores an urban aesthetic that combines the found object with the creative process. Here, Ramírez appropriates images from the world around him in order to re-order those very same images within a new grid of meanings. In this sense, Ramírez is re-working the city around him (and us) in order to open up a landscape of images that confront an urban order imposed from the outside.

It is this type of critical engagement that has long fueled the work of many Chicana/o and Latina/o artists and that has drawn the attention of scores cultural theorists. This type of cultural flexibility allows Chicana/o and Latina/o artists “operate within a ‘third landscape’”<sup>ii</sup> that confronts the present in order to “re-describe our cultural contemporaneity.”<sup>iii</sup> In this sense, the city becomes both a borderland and a site of intervention: the city becomes a borderland between cultural worlds (between high/low, between mainstream/marginal, or between *Los Angeles* and LA); and the city becomes a site of intervention that “demands an encounter with ‘newness’ that is not a part of the continuum of the past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation.”<sup>iv</sup>

Monument 10 is an act of resistance—resistance to the homogenizing tendencies of a corporate media imagescape, resistance to the incursions of infrastructure into community landscapes, resistance to conventional labels of Chicana/a or Latina/o art.

Monument 10 is an act of resistance in part due to its sheer volume—79 silk-screen prints (of which 35 are now on display), 5 artist’s proofs, 5 printer’s proofs, 2 studio proofs, 4 test proofs, and 1 source-drawing make up the full series. In a sense, the army of images mobilized for this exhibit is positioned for a battle to define and control an urban identity. This vein of artistic work produces what the cultural theorist Arjun Appadurai has described as an “ideoscape,” or a landscape of images that work to counter dominant social (and, in this case, physical) orders in an effort to re-establish a sense of agency with the contemporary city.<sup>v</sup> And, like the city itself that Ramírez actively studies, elements within the prints have been shaped by a contemporary image world. Material found within these prints were first found around the world; stickers were collected from as far away as Spain, London and Paris. These transnational images parallel others found locally to produce a set of documents reflective of the global cultural flows that now shape even the most remote of our local landscapes.

It is interesting to note that Monument 10 represents a type of homecoming for the artist. Ramírez is a native Angeleno and the prints in this series were developed with the support of the legendary East Los Angeles-based Self Help Graphics. While many Chicana/o and Latina/o artists have gotten their starts with the help of Self Help Graphics, Ramírez’s work has been maturing independently for the past 10 years. The support of Self Help Graphics, therefore, marks a threshold in his career—or possibly a shift between stages. Monument 10 also represents a shift in direction for the artist. While the subject matter remains focused upon the urban condition of contemporary Los Angeles, this series of prints does not attempt to depict specific images of places within the city nor does it attempt to serve as a collective portrait of the city’s many characters. This series is neither about gritty realism or mythic fantasy—two well-established modes or genres with which to collect urban imagery. Rather, Monument 10 alludes to the city through the abstract form of a vessel or container—a bitter pill that carries within it fragments of a changing urban DNA—and through a red burst of energy (possibly the energy of a freeway or that of an urban artist) that simultaneously bisects the city while binding it together in other ways.

Ramírez is showing us both his world and ours; the sense captured in this series is both uncannily familiar and yet ambiguous. These images are both about place and about placelessness. The homecoming, then, is not a nostalgic return to a former place of nurture or a

sentimental return to a homeland; this is a homecoming to a place that seems constantly unstable and teetering along a set of conflicting terms—*Los Angeles*/LA, global/local, imagined/real. The work on display represents a type of homecoming that feeds an itch, one that quenches a thirst that the artist knows will incessantly return. Ramírez does not collect this work here in order to create a form of artistic refuge. This exhibition signals not the emergence of an author but, rather, the fact that the city engages a multiplicity of authors. And, it is the connection to a larger collective authorship that gives this body of work some measure of authority. It builds upon and adds to a myriad of voices, projects, acts of resistance, and acts of little or no consequence. It takes the often unintentional aesthetic found within the city as license to further extend that image-rich landscape in order to extend its capacity to carry meaning into other venues. This is a homecoming in which home is re-written/re-printed by an artist seeking to know something more about a city that is often tritely described as only surface. This is a homecoming to a promised land for few and to a collective purgatory for many.

Jose L.S. Gamez, *Charlotte and Los Angeles* (September 2006)

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<sup>i</sup> See: Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

<sup>ii</sup> Guillermo Gomez-Peña, "A New Artistic Continent," *High Performance* 9.3 (1986): 27.

<sup>iii</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994) 7.

<sup>iv</sup> Bhabha 7.

<sup>v</sup> See: Arjun Appaduri, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, eds., Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia UP, 1994) 328-329.