Curtain Call
A Mexican artist on the world stage

BY MICHAEL SLENSKE

THE EXPLOSIVE, MIGRAINE-inducing polychrome advertisements flanking Mexico City’s Anillo Periférico highway offer commuters a nonpareil optical assault. But look closer, says Mexican artist Pia Camil, and you’ll find some “blind spots” that break up the visual clutter with flashes of understated beauty. See, when a billboard falls out of use in Mexico, or the rent isn’t paid, mischievous sign owners simply reshuffle the panels and leave them scrambled like some muted roadside Rorschach, known locally as espectaculares.

“When you’re driving through Periférico, it’s like billboard, billboard, billboard, and when one is abstract it’s the anomaly, a nice eye rest in this fucked-up madness,” says Camil, who spent years assembling photo archives of the city, which tipped her off to the preponderance of large-scale municipal abstractions. “I thought it was quite a nice thing to engage with and how it could immediately become a light critique on a failed capitalist economy.”

Those critiques are meant to examine the “aestheticization of failure” in the form of heavily labored, hand-dyed and -sewn
They are built.” Still, her instinct to break out of the studio and embrace the street is at the heart of her practice. “I have a thing for construction sites,” says Camil, sipping a glass of tequila in the art-filled foyer in the home of Patricia Ortiz Monasterio and Jaime Riestra, the power couple behind Omr and the grandparents of her son, Guadalupe, with boyfriend Mateo Riestra. While her recent ascent to Omr’s vaunted Maco-timed exhibition—opposite the white-hot José Dávila—might seem like a form of nepotism, Camil showed for years with La Central gallery in Bogotá, staged her own shows in commercial buildings around Mexico, and first approached the gallery as a curator (showing her works alongside those of Dávila and Stefan Brüggemann) and a musician (in a month-long residency of sound- and zine-making with her former band, El Resplandor). And this happened only after years of late-night talks with Mateo’s younger brother, Cristobal Riestra, the gallery’s heir apparent, about what the five-year-old project space could be.

“‘It’s a relationship that was always family first. They were very prudish about my work. They knew I made art, but for five years they probably never saw anything but a few drawings,” says Camil, pointing to a Kafkaesque landscape of hers (an old birthday gift to Jaime)—marked with the phrase “He’s Not What He Thought He Once Was”—which hangs on the wall above the elder Riestras’ staircase. “I very, very consciously made a decision to operate in a place that’s not necessarily close to all these conflicting relationships.”

While the Riestra boys were born into the art world, Camil’s place in it was never a sure thing. Her parents divorced when she was young, and had it not been for her mother’s sending her to train with a printmaker at the age of 13—which later evolved into addictive life-drawing sessions—she may well have followed her dream to become an architect. With encouragement from an American history teacher, she applied to the Rhode Island School of Design, where she was accepted after initially being waitlisted.
“For me, RISD just gave the right type of mentality of things I still use to this day: how to assess your work, how to put a good body of work together, how to have the right discipline and questions for your work,” she says. “It was quite a critical school. RISD was like hard-core studio practice, especially the painting.”

That said, during a study-abroad program in Rome, Camil was given a studio but couldn’t focus, with the city’s layer cake of history beckoning just outside her door. So she assembled photo archives of the Piazza del Popolo, and when she spotted road crews repaving the sampietrini streets, she’d mark down the location and return at night to paint eyes on the cobblestones. “It was like romantic graffiti,” says Camil, who was also drawing like crazy, a practice she’s since abandoned. “In my mind, I have a personality problem. If you see my drawings, they’re very loose, wacky, very sexual, very autobiographical—and that’s a lot of the reason I stopped doing them, because it’s too invested. It was haunting me in my drawings. I would leave a drawing and I would dream of that drawing all night.”

This desire to transfer deep physical (and emotional) intensity into artwork started with hours spent in the city’s museums on weekends as a young child. “My parents brought me to some really incredible shows, and one I remember specifically was Anselm Kiefer, those pyramid paintings he did,” she says. “In Mexico, you had the murals, so it wasn’t as much the scale of the Kiefers but how fucking physical they are. I’d never seen anything that intense. I was there for hours and hours on end. I couldn’t leave it.”

For Camil, Mexico—more than any other city—has that same pull. “New York has lost it. What I like about Mexico is that it’s still chaotic and in the making, and it still has this sense of invention to it. In Mexico there’s always a sense of ingenuity,” she says. “There’s a very nice anecdote that Mateo tells me about a visit André Breton had to Mexico. He designed a chair and did the drawing in perspective, took it to a carpenter, and when he came back a few days later, the carpenter had made a chair in perspective. It’s this nice Mexican way of not seeing things for what they are.”

Whether that means Espectaculares as curtains or Jacuzzi-size, sprayed-concrete sculptures of empty pools—the next project she’s contemplating—Camil’s work will always be precarious, she insists. “Precarious means you find a way to fucking do something with what you have and solve things in a creative way.”

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