

Alejandro Diaz: A Can for All Seasons

Public Art Fund

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If you ask people for their opinion of public art—or, for that matter, contemporary art in general—you're likely to get something along the lines of, "One guy's trash is another guy's treasure." Alejandro Diaz has taken that adage to heart with *A Can for All Seasons*, a smart, beautiful and thoroughly successful public art project sited on the Grand Concourse, a major thoroughfare in the South Bronx.

As part of Public Art Fund's *In the Public Realm* series, Diaz' Bronx project builds on what he has always excelled at—that is, displacing products of culture from one context into another to tell a larger story about the construction of culture. These juxtapositions have often explored ideas about "high" and "low" art, contemporary and "retro" eras and Mexican-American and WASP culture in the US. His work is most successful when it distills these ideas into simple, well-crafted objects, which then stand in stark contrast to their new surrounding context. In this case, bigger is definitely better—*A Can for All Seasons* is a "cultural intervention," slicing deep, into the social tissue of the site it inhabits.

The project consists of four large, cylindrical planters placed along the median in the busy Grand Concourse roadway. Each is roughly three feet wide and three to four feet tall and carefully constructed of painted aluminum. The containers are near-exact copies of brand-name Mexican canned goods—La Morena chiles, Morelia chocolate, Jumex tomato juice, and Herdez corn—all contemporary versions of staples from the ancient Mesoamerican diet.

The planters' "labels" are carefully painted copies of the actual product packaging, capturing every detail in bright colors and crisp lines. Viewed large-scale, these designs are more vivid and compelling here in the street than on a grocery store shelf, and their beauty and brazen manipulations are emphasized—i.e., La Morena's sexy, dark-haired "chile vamp" or Morelia's pious nun with a tray of chocolate and entreatingly gazed. Jumex and Herdez—with their plump, shiny tomatoes and succulent-looking corn—have adapted to current US marketing trends, emphasizing the quality of their product rather than creating a beguiling narrative.

But these "byproduct" observations are perhaps only tangential to what Diaz is after. The Bronx, like much of New York City (the outer boroughs in particular), continues to experience



Alejandro Diaz, *A Can for All Seasons* (details), 2005
Mixed media sculpture in four parts
Courtesy the artist

an explosion of immigration from Latin America. In recent years, traditionally Puerto Rican and Dominican communities have experienced large influxes from Columbia, Ecuador and Mexico (yes, perfect tacos *al pastor* can be had in NYC). These transplanted populations are remaking neighborhoods in their own image, often via culture and commerce (and typically in underserved locations in desperate need of a makeover).

Diaz' intervention, therefore, is quaint and most likely a little jarring for residents of the South Bronx. The practice of growing plants in cans is a thrifty gardening technique that is perhaps more characteristic of Diaz' hometown of San Antonio than New York City, though urban community gardens in the neighborhood are certainly resplendent with all manner of *rasquachismo*, a term that translates roughly as "making do."

This theme of making do is closely linked with the Chicano experience and also that of new immigrant arrivals. Culturally speaking, it's worn as a badge of creativity and ingenuity in the face of hardship. Diaz is adept at articulating this theme in his varied practice, and *A Can for all Seasons* is an excellent example of how *rasquachismo* has cultural and conceptual dimensions beyond the *rasquache* objects themselves. Though not upscale, the Grand Concourse is one of the cultural hubs of the borough—in fact, The Bronx Museum of the Arts sits across the street from Diaz' installation. The visual dialogue between the planters, the surrounding neighborhood and the Museum has numerous reverberations, the most important being the question of whether this institution (and others in the city) are aware of and sensitive to new "transplants."

The lightness and wit of Diaz' cans suggest high marks for The Bronx Museum, and rightly so. Interestingly (but not surprisingly), public opinion on Diaz' project along the Grand Concourse was mixed. When asked if they liked the work, one young Latino family in a minivan said, "No, they're kinda weird." Three lively friends in the next car heartily disagreed. When asked if they objected to the grocery store cans, they responded, "Don't worry about it! You do what you gotta do. Yo, clean this place up and make it pretty!" In other words, urban renewal *rasquache*-style.