

VISUAL ARTS

## Southtown gallery with West Side vision

BY JOHN EWING

From a hand-painted sign above the door to El Otro Ojo Gallery, the all-seeing Eye of Horus peers down onto South Flores Street. An open eye within a triangle, the ancient symbol is watchful and waiting, a memorial to dead pharaohs who were thought to be omniscient while they awaited rebirth inside their pyramid tombs. It's a curious sign for an art gallery, but an appropriate one for the location. "Watchful and waiting" might also describe this sleepy stretch of storefronts and warehouses just south of downtown. For the past six years, several waves of artists and related businesses have been steadily revitalizing the area. El Otro Ojo ("the Other Eye") is the newest neighbor. Its proprietor, painter Adan Hernandez, has a direct link to talented artists, but drawing them and their work out of the "barrio" is the real test. Watchful and waiting, El Otro Ojo is both an art gallery and an experiment in building community.

"The Other Eye represents another consciousness in America, the Mexican-American consciousness," says Hernandez, a native of the West Side. "It's another way of seeing things. The goal is not just to make money but to be a good human being, to reach out and help others." Although the gallery provides an exhibition space for Hernandez' own work, El Otro Ojo's "other eye" is focused primarily on the unrecognized talents of San Antonio's young graffiti artists. According to Hernandez, the initial challenge is gaining the artists' trust and convincing them that creating trans-

portable art is an attractive alternative to defacing property. Identifying the artists through the neighborhood grapevine, Hernandez hopes to reach the kids before the street or the criminal justice system claims them.

"When you live in the barrio, you're subject to stories of desperation and grief. The opportunities are just not there, and a lot of the lawlessness stems from poverty," observes Hernandez, who also exhibits *pañó* art made with handkerchiefs by prison inmates in the Bexar County system. Sent home to family members in San Antonio, the pieces are often painted with makeshift brushes and a dark ink concocted by dissolving Hershey bar wrappers in water. Scenes of prison life are alternated with idealized memories of the outside, where the women are buxom and beautiful and the cars are souped-up low-riders. In one simple form, the handkerchief serves as document, message, and imaginative outlet.

Encouraging an unrecognized community to create art is one thing. Selling the art is another matter. Accomplishing that will challenge the artists and the gallery to negotiate relationships inside and outside the barrio. Like the all-seeing Eye of Horus, a broad overview can sometimes miss ground-level loyalties that are in opposition. In telling ways, Hernandez' art speaks from inside and outside the barrio, and gamely positions him to bridge the gap. In 1969, he participated in the Edgewood walkout that protested the high school's prohibitions against speaking Spanish. Hernandez studied art on his own, got his G.E.D., and later attended art classes at San Antonio Col-



El Otro Ojo by Adan Hernandez, oil on canvas, 40" x 40"

lege. Between carpet-laying and construction jobs, he painted. Over the years, his work has shifted across styles, evolving from photo-realist documentation of barrio life into colorful and cathartic dreamscapes. Two of his paintings are in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's permanent collection.

The artist's broad range attracted filmmaker Taylor Hackford, who commissioned Hernandez in 1993 to create key paintings for *Blood In, Blood Out: Bound by Honor*. In the film, San Antonio actor Jesse Borrego plays a painter whose art reflects the filial bonds and destructive violence of gang loyalty. From East L.A. to San Quentin, the film is a cautionary tale warning against the dangers of intractable alliances and rigid labels. Though a gruesome tragedy, *Blood in, Blood Out* is a handy metaphor for art world machinations. With its shifting field of alliances and counter-alliances, artists must be careful not to confuse a commit-

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ment to art with loyalty to a community. As an antidote, Hernandez uses the term "Post-Xicano" to describe an art that crosses boundaries.

"I grew up with Virgin Marys and Jesus Christs, which were beautiful but very simple-minded," says Hernandez. "Post-Xicano art is more complicated and a challenge to evaluate. People from different backgrounds will get different meanings." Post-Modern, Post-Gay, Post-Xicano are all responses to mind-sets that have grown rigid and confining. What does this mean to young artists from the barrio? Is Chicano art anything created by Chicanos, or is it art that depicts the Chicano experience? And what happens to the artists and the art when both leave the neighborhoods that inspired them? It's poetic irony that El Otro Ojo occupies 1526 South Flores, the former Infinito Botanica of Franco Mondini-Ruiz, whose romantic view of the barrio aestheticized it from the outside. Graffiti and *pañó* artists may be creating art from inside the culture, but Hernandez and Mondini-Ruiz demonstrate that selling art requires that an "other eye" be kept on the audience, Chicano or not.

Seeing into and beyond personal experience is the strategy that fuels Hernandez' art, and it's a vision he hopes will serve a new generation. "Artists should be the conscience of a people, not the money-makers," claims Hernandez. But in today's world, a viable art requires one eye on the art and the other toward the marketplace. As a chiefly self-taught artist inspired and sustained by his community, Hernandez knows better than most the difficult relationship between creative and commercial success. For young artists in the barrio, the conscience of an "all-seeing eye" might strike a balance between the two. Hernandez puts it simply: "Making a killing is not all there is to life. Happiness is more important." ■

[jnewing@earthlink.net](mailto:jnewing@earthlink.net). See exhibition listings in *All Day/All Night* for more information.