

*Rio de Historias / River of Stories*  
*Drawings, Prints and Artists' Books by*  
*Gustavo Ramos Rivera*

*Rio de Historias / River of Stories*, in conjunction with the San Jose Museum of Art's exhibition *Gustavo Ramos Rivera Paintings: Eternidades del instante*, marks the first comprehensive presentation of Gustavo Ramos Rivera's paintings, constructions, drawings, monotypes, monoprints and artists' books from the past 25 years. The large-scale, intensely colored abstract work of Mexican-born Ramos Rivera is built on memories, everyday observances and experiences, and cultural traditions. They are about time: keeping it, marking it, and holding on to it. They recall the past, record the present and posit on the future.

Born in the small, rural town of Ciudad, Acuña, Coahuila, close to Mexico's northern border, Ramos Rivera settled in the San Francisco Bay Area in 1969. In the ensuing 37 years, he has divided his time between studios in Mexico and San Francisco. His art represents a special confluence of his cultural past with his present day environment. As a young artist growing up in Mexico, he was greatly influenced by the work of Rufino Tamayo (1899 – 1991), a towering figure in the generation of artists immediately preceding Ramos Rivera. While Tamayo's contemporaries, including David Alfred Siquieros, Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and other Mexican muralists, were advocating art with a message, often political, his work focused on plastic forms integrated with a masterful use of colors and textures. Throughout his lifetime, Tamayo remained fiercely committed to painting as a spiritual activity rather than a nationalistic statement. As an artist of the subsequent generation, which came of age during the early 1960s, Ramos Rivera had an even greater willingness to look beyond the guiding force of Mexican nationalism for inspiration, most particularly to the contemporary art of the United States.

When Ramos Rivera arrived in San Francisco, the most notable artistic activity was taking place at the San Francisco Art Institute under the direction of Richard Diebenkorn, David Park, Frank Lobdell and Elmer Bischoff. Although Ramos Rivera is self-taught, the influence of these primarily abstract painters is evident in his work. In addition, one can detect the playfulness of Paul Klee, Joan Miró, Alexander Calder and Cy Twombly. The strong initial impression of color in his work is reminiscent of Henri Matisse and Mark Rothko. And the sculptural and architectural elements reflect those concerns in the work of Antoni Tapiés, and Robert Rauschenberg.

Despite these numerous and diverse influences, the work of Ramos Rivera has an emotional and visual intensity that is punctuated by his individualized iconography and abstraction. As Robert Johnson says in his catalogue essay, "...his works have a distinctive sense of signature – they look like Ramos Riveras." The works on paper from the early 1980s involve dark tar-like grounds through which warm light emerges. He experiments with sculptural collage to add line, shape and contrast to these ominous pieces. By the 1990s, Ramos Rivera moves into the use of vivid color and his line work evolves into a clearly developed vocabulary of personal symbology. Throughout his paintings and works on paper, collaged elements consistently lend meaning to his narration. And, when he does not employ the technique of collage, it is implied with a clearly articulated shape that appears to be applied to the surface of the paper.

As an accomplished printmaker and collagist, Ramos Rivera's works on paper equal the scope,

volume, texture and intensity of his works on canvas. In his monotypes, his skill as a colorist is readily apparent as he builds up translucent layers of color that create an illusion of depth. The result is atmospheric sensual fields of color juxtaposed by his vocabulary of linear markings. From the start, Ramos Rivera's works on paper have allowed him a sense of freedom and innovation that led to his experimentation in digital prints with David Salgado at Trillium Press in 2002. He has also worked extensively at Smith Andersen Editions in Palo Alto and Aurobora Press in San Francisco.

We are honored to be collaborating with the San Jose Museum of Art on this joint presentation of Gustavo Ramos Rivera's work. *Gustavo Ramos Rivera Paintings: Eternidades del instante* opens at the Museum on Friday, April 21 and will include a wide range of Ramos Rivera's works on canvas. The ICA's presentation includes his works on paper, prints, painted constructions and artists' books. How the work is articulated is of little concern to Ramos Rivera. No matter the medium, his work is an integrated whole made up of line, shape, form, texture, color and space. This joint exhibition, which culls together work from the past 25 years, represents a unique opportunity to see the art in its entirety.

## Painted Constructions

Created over a five-year period roughly spanning 1980 – 1985, the painted constructions of Ramos Rivera are a series of works best defined as a hybrid between painting and sculpture.

*Diccionario para Ociosos / Dictionary for Daydreamers* is part of a series of painted constructions that hang on the wall and whose two-dimensionality closely approximates the planar presentation of a traditional painting. A diptych comprised of two painted doors, *Diccionario...* is filled with multiple layers of illusion and metaphor. The doors are very clearly doors, but they are also windows through which one sees a painting on the right, reminiscent of the tar-laden canvases Ramos Rivera was working on at the same time. On a smaller scale, a miniature canvas is stretched on the surface of the door to the left, made of repurposed burlap and branches. The red, white and green horizontal stripes are suggestive of a flag and yet that is not explicitly depicted.

While working on his wall-mounted constructions, Ramos Rivera also created a series of free-standing painted constructions. The pronounced linearity of these works echoes the use of line in his drawings and paintings. "Drawing in space" is not without precedent. David Smith's *Hudson River Landscape* from 1951 is a prime example. However, Smith was first and foremost a sculptor and Ramos Rivera is not. There is a very clear connection between Ramos Rivera's free-standing sculptures and his paintings and works on paper that is not merely visual, but also one of process. As David Salow notes in his catalogue essay, "...in both instances, the artist opens himself to chance, be it the unpremeditated peregrinations of the brush or the unexpected meanderings of the twig, both are one and the same." In speaking of his painted constructions, Ramos Rivera says, "It's a question of how do you know when to stop. Well, I don't. Some of these have been added to or subtracted from for years." Referring to the mechanics of the decision making process he adds, "I don't think twice about things like that. It's instinctive."

Image: David Smith, *Hudson River Landscape*, 1951

## Monotype and Monoprint

Smith Andersen Editions is a fine art press specializing in the monotype and monoprint processes. Gustavo Ramos Rivera began printing there in 1988. At the Press artists are invited to work in a collaborative atmosphere where the master printer assists the artist to realize an idea in print media. Ramos Rivera has worked with Smith Andersen Editions' Master Printer, Kathryn Kain, for more than fifteen years.

A monotype is a unique print created when an artist paints or draws directly onto a hard surface and then transfers that image onto another surface. This image cannot be exactly reproduced. A monoprint begins with a matrix, such as an etching or drypoint on metal or plastic. This image can be printed as an edition, where each work in the edition is exactly the same. The artist then works each print individually with monotype, hand coloring, or chine collé (a printmaking collage process). The result is known as an edition variée (variable edition) or a suite of monoprints.

## Digital Printmaking

These monoprints are from a suite of 30. The matrix of these pieces is a digital print that was made by the artist at Trillium Press in Brisbane, California. Ramos Rivera hand colored each print, sometimes adding collage and always adding layers of his distinctive drawings. On many, the underlying digital image is completely obscured.

Digital printmaking takes its lead from traditional printmaking techniques. An original work of art is created using a computer and printed with ink or pigment as an edition, monoprint or monotype. A digital print must not be confused with a digital reproduction of a painting, drawing or photograph.

## Unique Fold-out Books

The accordion books made by Ramos Rivera are the same in format and style as the Aztec codices. These were sacred texts depicting religious rituals, the calendar, divination and philosophical speculations on the universe. Due to their religious content most were destroyed by the Spaniards during the Mexican Conquest in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The work in these codices by Ramos Rivera is reminiscent of the pictographic and symbolic style of the Aztec codex.

## *Xochitl in Cuicatl*

This portfolio of ten monoprints was published on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of the first meeting between the Europeans and the inhabitants of the New World. Gustavo Ramos Rivera has created illustrations to accompany the text from Nahuatl poems recorded by Spanish missionaries between 1524 and 1585. *Xochitl* is the Nahuatl word for flower, *cuicatl* means song and together, "*xochitl in cuicatl*", means poetry. For the Nahua people (to which the Aztecs belonged), the flower is a metaphor for the expression of Truth and poetry is the only

means of human expression of Truth.

Ramos Rivera begins the sequence of the suite with a vibrant exaltation of the cycles of the natural world and the place of the Nahuas within them. The religion of the Post-Classic Nahua civilization was centered on the balance between death and rebirth. Destruction and sacrifice were a part of daily ritual as much as renewal and the folios evolve to illustrate this. With powerful historical relevance that resonates with the Mexican Conquest's ultimate destruction of a culture, the suite culminates in images that are violent and irreversible.

*Xochitl in Cuicatl* was published by Aurobora Press in San Francisco. Much like his prints, Ramos Rivera's artists' books are a collaborative process, and not only of artist and poet. On this project, Ramos Rivera worked with master printer, Gary Denmark; letterpress printer, Alan Hillesheim at Digger Pine Press, Berkeley; and paper maker, David Kimball at Magnolia Editions.

## Project Room

Amy Hicks: *Suspended Series*

*Suspended Series*, a visual rumination on commuting, uses the automobile as the locus for moving the viewer through contemporary structures and space. Amy Hicks alters the familiar terrain into an ethereal experience of fantasy and discovery. She focuses on the horizon: "the intermediary between atmosphere and soil." The abstractions turn our daily ritual of driving into rhythmic, hypnotic experiences that conjure up images of flight, the future, and the cosmos. Hicks is interested in the relationship between the use of technologies in daily life and the evolution of human behavior.

## Night Moves

### First Street Window

Kerry Loewen: *Driving By Braille*

Social and political issues provide the conceptual framework for Kerry Loewen's most recent digital video installation. As the motorist listens to President George W. Bush's speech regarding the intelligence failures that led to the current war in Iraq, he maintains course solely by the distinctive staccato beat of the Botts Dots (invented by former San Jose State University Chemistry professor, Elbert Dysart Botts to warn motorists of lane changes). With the exception of a few choice words describing weapons of mass destruction, the entire speech is broadcast backwards. Loewen's intent is to create a metaphor for how he feels George W. Bush has performed as President of the United States of America.

### Market Street Window

Ligorano & Reese: *Happy Hour*

Created by New York-based collaborators Nora Ligorano and Marshall Reese, *Happy Hour* is an open narrative. Why are they laughing? Are they laughing at each other? Are they laughing at us? Why does sorrow sound like laughter, and laughter like lunacy? These vintage style neon clocks suggest an idealized era. Yet, a clock marks the continuum of time and perhaps, now, hysteria is the image of our time.