

## MIGUEL ANGEL RIOS

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DES MOINES ART CENTER

by christopher stackhouse



**DES MOINES** Miguel Angel Rios masterfully weaves the esthetic and political into forms that deliver both on equal footing. The 69-year-old artist, born in the Calchaquies Valleys of Argentina, fled to New York City in the 1970s during the country's infamous Dirty War. He currently maintains studios in New York and Mexico City.

"Walkabout," curated by the Des Moines Art Center's Gilbert Vicario, surveyed 10 years of the artist's ongoing meditation on the transmigratory aspects of Latin America. Comprising video and sound installations, oil paintings and drawings (including mixed-medium collages and *papel picado*-cut paper works derived from Mexican folk art), the show offered a compelling mix of autobiography, anthropological study and mythmaking.

The videos show Rios at his strongest. In the immersive, three-screen projection *Ni me busques . . . No me encuentras* (Don't Look For Me . . . You Won't Find Me, 2002), the artist searches for, finds and eats a hallucinogenic plant. We see him, in his vertiginous altered state, experience apparitions, memories and realizations beneath a cruel Mexican desert sun. A series of 20 paintings with the same title, made from 2003 to 2005, depicts some of the imagery in the video, such as the artist inspecting an abandoned roofless adobe house. "El viaje del botanista" (The Botanist's Journey, 1997–2002)—another series related to the video—consists of 165 works on paper, including C-prints and faxes hung salon style. Some of these, which range from cartoony figures to abstractions, were made under the influence, in Henri Michaux fashion.

All of Rios's videos resolutely blend gorgeous imagery with poetic treatments of human peril. *Mecha* (Fuse, 2010), a 10-minute, two-channel projection, analogizes a diversional game called Tejo to armed conflict. (In Tejo, players toss weighted metal disks at targets stuffed with gunpowder, which explode when hit.) The opening frames of the video show men's arms throwing the disks. An ominous industrial cable spool rolls through a maze of wire fences in staged scenes of empty war-torn buildings and courtyards. The spool becomes an absurdly anthropomorphized villain as it moves either behind or in front of the men, who run haphazardly

through obstacles amid sparks, fire and sounds of warfare. Eventually, a video camera falls from the sky onto a Jasper Johns-like target painted on the spool, now stationary and on its side. Camera effects turn the surfaces of objects to a muddy yellow, which has the result of muting the violence. In this strange, beautiful, rhythmic alchemy of anxiety and pointless haste, Rios presents disarming commentary on the futility of war.

Social critique and celebratory folk art blend in the noteworthy *Untitled (Cutout Drawing Large)*, 2011. The 5-by-13-foot piece pictures hundreds of different guns-their barrels directed toward the viewer. As with Rios's treatment of Latin-American culture in general, the cutout drawing asks those familiar with Mexico's cultural history and current daily life to interrogate the degrading situation in which humans are reduced to senselessly killing other humans.

*Photo: Miguel Angel Rios: Don't Look For Me . . . You Won't Find Me, 2002, three-channel video projection, approx. 8 minutes; at the Des Moines Art Center.*

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