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Mexic-Arte plays host to cart project started by Mexico City artist

By Jeanne Claire van Ryzin

Artist Michael Anthony García isn't exactly used to this.

Last Saturday, he sat just outside the entrance to Mexic-Arte Museum on Congress Avenue next to a small stainless steel cart on which were displayed his latest artworks: photo collages printed on transparencies which are then slipped between two thin sheets of Plexiglas.

García typically makes large, often towering installations using old furniture and clothing, items he finds in thrift stores and garage sales. His is the type of conceptual and often site-specific artwork more often seen in institutional exhibits, not commercial galleries. (He's exhibited at nonprofits such as Mexic-Arte, the Lawndale Art Center and in the 2011 Texas Biennial, among others.)

"I'm not used to working small and in 2-D," García says. "And I don't make art to be sold."

But García is participating in the Changarrito Project, a transient art vending endeavor that makes use of singular carts, the creations of Mexico City-based artist Máximo González.

Since 2005, the easily transportable carts have turned up in cities around the world, usually outside of museums or galleries or places where the commerce of fine art happens such as art fairs.

Mexic-Arte Museum will be hosting the Changarrito Project for the foreseeable future, inviting regional artists to participate. Per the parameters of the project, artists keep 100 percent of the profits they earn.

González started the Changarrito Project in 2005, an extension of his ongoing investigation of issues surrounding commerce, economies and the social significance of the often super-heated, money-driven art market.

González has made sculpture from devalued peso bills from his native Argentina and also crafted installations of silver helium balloons printed to look as if they're Mexican 10 peso coins.

The omnipresent markets of Mexico City naturally captured González's attention.

Street vending in Mexico dates to pre-Columbian times, with vast public markets a regular feature of life during the Aztec empire. Such markets became the models for the modern-day "tianguis," roving markets that typically set up one or two days a week in different parts of Mexican cities — a kind of informal commerce that is nevertheless hugely important and accounts for a measurable percentage of the Mexican economy.

Riffing on the unofficial nature of tianguis, González veritably crashed the 2005 ARCO international art fair in Madrid, the year Mexico was the spotlighted country. González stocked his first Changarrito cart with small, affordable works by Mexican artists — a democratic, accessible action that in spirit was the total opposite of the moneyed, exclusive art fair.

González brought a Changarrito cart to Austin in 2008 for the Fusebox performance arts festival, setting up in front of the Long Center for the Performing Arts, the Blanton Museum and the Victory Grill among other places.

On Saturday, branded Changarrito bags hung on one corner of the cart — purchasable and ready to carry a piece of art home with a customer.

Some walking into and out of Mexic-Arte didn't pay much attention to García. Others stopped to inquire and admire his work.

And though he didn't sell anything, García later said he still appreciated being a part of the project.

"I enjoyed the chance to interact with people," he emailed the next day. "And at least catch people's eyes examining my work as they walked or rode by on their bikes."

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