

'Offside' at UAlbany a personal, cultural exhibit

Tresca Weinstein Feb. 28, 2022



Ode to Liga Deportiva" (2019) by Ronny Quevedo, part of the "offside" exhibit at UAlbany. (University Art Museum)

For the artist Ronny Quevedo, whose family moved from Ecuador to New York when he was just a year old, growing up bilingual was his first experience of how two separate realities could exist within one life, or one body.

"I was learning English and Spanish simultaneously, at home and at school, and there was always this understanding that it was two distinct places existing at the same time," Quevedo said in a recent interview.

His show "offside," on view at the University Art Museum through April 2, explores the convergence that exists within identities, histories and spaces — the tension between what is considered valuable and what is considered disposable, the play between architecture and the objects inside it, the way in which an image can be itself and, at the same time, something entirely different.

The 18 multimedia pieces, drawn from Quevedo's work over the past decade, mine both personal and cultural narratives and inspirations. Among them are pre-Columbian architecture and Peruvian earth drawings, celestial constellations and geographical coordinates, the jazz legend Charles Mingus and the South American soccer star Alberto Spencer — and, not least, the artist's parents.

Quevedo's new installation commissioned for the museum, "fuera de lugar," and his large-scale "pachuco, pacha, pa'lante," from 2019, pay homage at once to his mother's career as a seamstress and his father's as a professional soccer player. Like the classic Rubin's vase illusion — the image can be either a vase or two profiles, depending on the viewer's perception in each moment — the works' diagrammatic lines and geometric shapes reference both dress patterns and gymnasium floors.

"I was thinking about the connection between manual labor as it relates to textiles and my mom's practice as a seamstress, and at the same time about modes of operation that are influential in textiles that come from the Andes," Quevedo said. "The strips of pattern paper overlaid on top of each other (represent) the body as a form or vessel that has multiple identities."

Within that, the work also investigates playing fields — and the metaphorical boundaries and restrictions they represent — as a defining element of Quevedo's childhood in New York City, and of the Latin American assimilation experience. The amateur soccer leagues his father refereed, which played on weekends on indoor "fields" mapped out on gymnasium floors, "were about claiming space, negotiating one's home and one's position in places that are welcoming and unwelcoming," Quevedo said.

These "visible and invisible layers," in the artist's words, are embodied in the materials he uses: pattern paper, muslin, vinyl, plywood and carbon paper, sometimes with the unexpected addition of gold and silver leaf that calls back to Andean and pre-Columbian artifacts.

"I use the material to elevate some of the other materials that are considered throwaway or dismissible or preparatory — this aspect of labor that can be omitted or erased," Quevedo said. "Once gold is applied, there's a different kind of attachment to the object."

The 2012 piece "Ulama, Ule, Olé" centers another everyday object: the milk crate, bound together with shoelaces and zip ties to form a hooplike shape.

"Growing up in the Bronx, the milk crate was everywhere—to sit on, to store books, to play basketball," Quevedo recalled. "The use of the crate as a basketball hoop is very unique to New York, and how the city and the people reappropriate things."

Yet, as in so much of Quevedo's work, the piece also reaches farther back in history, referencing the game of ulama, a Central American precursor to soccer descended from a centuries-old Aztec game.

"I was thinking about urban landscapes and the landscapes of the past that don't exist anymore and wanting to meld those two places," the artist said. He does something similar with "a mother's hand," a sculpture of stacked plywood cubes that recalls pre-Columbian platform architecture and textile patterns while referencing the modular design of the museum itself.

The relationship between art and the space it occupies is also central to "fuera de lugar," a series of dashes, dots and arcs that travel across the walls of the museum. It's a warm-up of sorts to Quevedo's next project: He is one of six New York-based artists selected to mount a permanent, large-scale work in Delta Air Lines' Terminal C at La Guardia Airport in Queens. The public art installation is a joint commission by the airline, the Port Authority, the state and the Queens Museum.

Quevedo will be transposing his interpretation of the playing field onto a wall of the terminal, using this large-scale canvas to further his exploration of how "abstraction leads to this fragmentation of home, of history, this dissonance with the past and present," as he described it. An airport, a space of limbo between destinations, time and identities, might be the most fitting site for this rich and complex commentary.