

Romancing Banality - Houston
-Lyle Carbajal's Authentic World

By Sara Lee Burd

Graffiti covered walls, commodity centered living, obesity, bravado, spirituality, sexuality, poverty, and adversity all have a place in Lyle Carbajal's art just as they do in the everyday world. For Carbajal, public spaces are the foundations of a culture; they anchor communities and provide democratic experiences for all who pass. The *Romancing Banality* exhibitions are all encompassing installations that act as public spaces for viewers to entangle their imaginations with disparate yet cohesive elements he incorporates within the show. Solitary structures, mixed media works, and collaborations with musicians and filmmakers provide genuine expressions of Carbajal's anthropological and artistic observations.

The artwork in *Romancing Banality* belongs within the artist's self-described Urban Vernacular artistic style. Together the words encompass Carbajal's thoughts, lessons, and perceptions of the world. The first part relates to visual and societal intersections he's encountered living in urban centers and traveling the globe. Vernacular is where the artist finds his inspiration. It's not the glitz and glamor that strikes Carbajal as authentic. His focus is on the ordinary world conceived, constructed, and populated by the majority of people, those with working class means or less. The concept of Urban Vernacular is visually defined by how he renders his subjects and presents his structures, which entails investigating the expressive quality of line in paint and the weightiness of juxtapositions.

Although he's lived most of his life in the United States, Carbajal's ethnic roots are tied to Latin America. As a man of Hispanic descent, his perspective is that of an "other" living within a white-centered culture. His travels through Mexico and Argentina profoundly affected his worldview as he found that he identified with the diversity of people, flourished in the colorful visual culture, and enjoyed learning about magico-religious spirituality spiritually. The visual references he makes in his art may not be recognizable to all, but creating encounters with the inaccessible or the unnoticed is what he strives to achieve with his art. The artist takes inspiration from the functional often commercial visual culture that shapes daily life to uncover universal elements that connect contemporary societies.

Carbajal's exhibitions feature three-dimensional structures that transform the gallery floor into an urban streetscape. *Romancing Banality - Houston* features four installations: Servicio Electrico store from Mexico City, a recycling junk shop from Manila, a commonly found church marquee, and a cinder block wall under construction. These scaled-down structures are equal parts biography and anthropology: a memory in Carbajal's visual journal and a document of the functional spaces. The commercial stops from Latin America and Asia provide numerous means for understanding the life and culture of the people who shop there. The eye catching color combinations used on the walls and signs of the storefronts are made to attract the attention of consumers. By including details such as dirty walls, missing lettering, and patched awnings, Carbajal indicates the lengthy time the stores have provided services and goods to the

community, and also the lack of funds dedicated to upkeep. The barred shop windows reveal the store owners' primitive security systems and signifies a general lack of safety impoverished communities suffer when economic disparity leads to crime. This interpretation is not fixed, however. The artist expects viewers to make their own associations and come to their own understanding of his artworks.

An essential element of Carbajal's exhibitions is his mixed media wall hangings, which he arranges in groups like advertorial paste-up posters or as stand-alone works. As he compiles emblematic imagery and ideas, he processes his musings into multi-layered, multi-media works that eschew classical artistic beauty for authentic visceral honesty. Connoting the commodification of culture, Carbajal combines mass-produced materials such as paint, toys, and printed paper packaging into multi-layered representations of people, animals, places, and objects. For example, in *Boxeador*, the artist draws from the style of promotional posters for boxers to create this iconic, yet crudely rendered boxer. Identified with the word "Julisco" above his image, the man's power is expressed through his aggressive stance and muscled body, which emphasizes the cultural value of masculine strength. The fighter appears heroic and is venerated despite the fact this debilitating sport disproportionately negatively affects the lives and finances of those with low economic means.

Through his audio journeys into rap and Latin music, he noticed lyrics and sounds that mirrored what he was also contemplating in his visual art. For his *Romancing Banality - Houston* installation, Carbajal has arranged a rap opera to play while viewers examine the physical structures, film, and art on the walls. In doing so, Carbajal immerses visitors into a multi-sensory experience of the perspectives he's gained. To accomplish a musical component for his exhibition, Carbajal invited artists to write and produce rap songs around fundamental themes. The first act focuses on strife and struggle. San Francisco-based rapper Yarrow Slaps posits his perspective on living in the trap where drugs are sold and the odds are stacked against you in "No Goodbye's":

"Funny how blocks determine The Territory of a man
I guess they forgot that it was all a setup
See we commit crimes
But understand it's just to get up"

The second act features Houston's Yung Turk's ruminations on introspection, particularly as a way to cope and rise up. San Antonio trio Third Root featuring Easy Lee, dj chicken George, and University of Texas Professor of bilingual-bicultural studies MexStep. Their song combines lyrics that resolve the third act with themes of concession, acquiescence, and accession. Easy Lee praises Carbajal in his call out to the visual artist: "abstract primitive canvas of a nomad / between the margins of this notepad / one glove crotch grab who's bad." His closing lyrics offer advice toward making a brighter future: "this world breeds the shallow / don't ever stop the digging / don't ever stop the digging." As a composition the opera reports on and responds to economic disparity, social segregation, and individual responsibility.

Romancing Banality also features a film produced by Mexican filmmakers Perrosconsueter, which features spliced images of documentary footage taken on the streets of Mexico. Graffiti tags on walls, trash in the streets, people walking, sunsets, people praying, and spectators looking, the content is mundane, but the presentation in film lends a spiritual quality to the rituals of life. The boundary blurs between the sacred and the profane in the film in the same way that cultures across the globe practice religions and build societies around the intermingling of sacrifice, suffering, redemption, justice, and salvation.

Taking up residency in areas where he is going to present his work provides a fresh context for Carbajal to create art that documents his ongoing explorations. *Romancing Banality* debuted in Seattle in 2013 and has been reconceived for New Orleans, Nashville, and Houston. Living in the Southern United States has allowed Carbajal to explore the roots-inspired artwork of the region, which captures his imagination and stimulates his own ability to depict strife, humor, and empathy. Admiring the honest expressions of Jean Dubuffet's "Corps de dame" series, Bill Traylor, Mary T. Smith's portrait of the South and in musical traditions of Rap, Blues, Country, and Jazz, Carbajal strives for the direct simplicity he finds in folk art and regional cultures.

Place is significant and pluralistic to Carbajal because of the connections amongst the ideas, sounds, colors, words, and values that pervade the roving artist's perception. Taking reference photographs as he goes, he returns to the studio to make art with imagery that is so common it is easily overlooked by passersby, but that is immensely important to his understanding of the world. With his exhibitions, Carbajal invites viewers into his world to see what he finds evocative and meaningful in mundane life and urban detritus. He is not defining a particular culture as much as sharing himself by displaying curated selections of what he sees as the universal connections among urban environments. *Romancing Banality* is Carbajal's place. It is an extrapolation of what he has found and processed as authentic and meaningful in the world.