

## **MANUEL GAONA**

### **Bullfighting < > Art-making**

**What could a bullfighter and an artist possibly have in common?**

**Perhaps the two apparently opposite professions are not incompatible since both are driven by the motivation to take risks and derive from endurance, coupled with dedication and discipline. Manuel Gaona has demonstrated to possess all those characteristics.**

**In the year or so since we met in person in Mexico City's ZonaMaco, where he was working at Tenerife-based Galeria Leyendecker's booth, Gaona, from his residence in Aguascalientes and myself from Cuernavaca, have engaged in a lively and dynamic virtual exchange, at times disagreeing but, in the end, learning from one another.**

**As a professional bullfighter who doubles as an artist, Gaona is best understood in a stunning video in which he is performing while challenging an imaginary bull on the roof of the Templo de San Antonio de Padua, downtown Aguascalientes. This powerful video will be on view in his first exhibition at Flux/Zone gallery in Mexico City, opening on May 4, 2023, the same date in which in 2018 Gaona became a professional *matador* (bullfighter), in the *Plaza de Toros* of Ciudad Juarez, Mexico.**

**In the video we follow Gaona's careful and slow movements, accentuated by a crescendo string musical score on the video's sound track.<sup>1</sup> We soon realize that he is both "bullfighting" and "painting", as he steps and drags his bare feet while wrapping, lifting and scraping his cape through an intense *Yves Klein* blue paint on the ground. In the end, when he has finished, what is left is a gestural drip painting on the ground. It is reminiscent of *Jackson Pollock's* famous abstractions done directly by pouring and throwing paint on a raw canvas that is, instead of hanging on the wall, lying on the floor of the artist's Springs, N.Y. studio.**

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.shazam.com/track/63765051/the-four-seasons-violin-concerto-in-g-minor-op-8-no?referrer=share>

**In another work, a series of black and white photo self-portraits that accompany Gaona's video, the artist has altered his facial or body features with color brush strokes, thereby highlighting the intense emotions of a bullfighter who not only challenges the odds but possibly faces death.**

**In another of his series, he has used his real-life photographs of ordinary people as the raw material of his paintings by transforming the images into journalistic, dead-pan frontal large-scale works. These paintings talk to the painful, dismal and urgent realities of millions of homeless people passing through endless territories while seeking a better life. In Mexico, they are at every street corner, every stop light, either selling gum, candy or begging to buy some food for their families.**

**The subject of the photos-cum-paintings are about the pull of the so-called "American Dream".<sup>2</sup> The dream of every migrant to reach the U.S. is equally dangerous and life threatening as that of a bullfighter. Most of these migrants are Caribbean, Central American, or Mexican citizens. They cry out, in a call not just for our empathy, but for some sort of organized activism that can stop the hardships of millions of migrants who endure this "journey" to seek a better life. Today, as most people in Mexico are outraged and in mourning over what happened recently in Cd Juárez, a crime that began with how those migrants got to the border city and ended with how they were murdered. The right to life begins with the right to seek one that is better as opposed to the right to punish those searching, with death. Everything surrounding this terrible mass murder is inhuman, unjust and downright criminal.**

**Even as we realize that our expectations of "painting" are not too different from what was expected of it several centuries ago: a "representation" of the world we live in at a particular and specific time or space, these paintings by Gaona stand out in their direct comment on the inhuman daily reality surrounding us today.**

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<sup>2</sup> Gaona's visual and intellectual inspiration derives from in depth research, not only photographically documenting migrants, but a wide range of sources, from films to books such as: <https://daily.jstor.org/james-truslow-adams-dreaming-american-dream/>

At the same time however, we grapple to understand the *global* dimension of representational art and how it has changed over time, a time in which the term “visual culture” replaced painting, drawing, collage and other traditional genres’ for reasons that have less to do with definition than with method. In addition, we are surrounded by multiple *local* dimensions in art-making, coming together in what we call a hybrid *glocal* sort of art. Gaona;’s work falls into this last category.

Of course, the world we live in keeps changing just as the history of representational art has changed, to the extent that the depictions of say a “portrait” or a “land-cityscape” have adapted to a set of contexts that differ from artist to artist, from location to location, weaving a fabric of distinct social contexts we call diversity. The benefits of diversity in art are obvious — it is more dynamic, more vital and, above all, more just to have an egalitarian range of voices.

Certainly, Manuel Gaona’s contributions are among the most refreshing of today’s emerging and diverse artists’ voices in Mexico.

Finally, Gaona’s social context is very much the “America” of our lifetime, the America that goes shifting as one travels from North to South or East to West and vice versa.<sup>3</sup> His work does what all the best of portraiture does, to present us with key and memorable moments of our social surroundings as they are in the making, a never a finished representation of our multiple realities. As to Gaona’s formal choices in painting, they combine either Mexican or other visual traditions, ranging from social realism to Pop art to, in the end, embody historically conflicting assumptions of race, class and most of all, identity, all issues forever present in our societies, here and around the world.

Carla Stellweg

Cuernavaca, Mexico

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.poemas-del-alma.com/pablo-neruda-america-insurrecta-1800.htm>