

The San Fernando Valley Sun

Dec 18th 2008

Sacred Art

San Fernando Valley Artist Luis Villanueva has created sacred art from recycled items, that are often found discarded. He is known by his fellow artists as having the ability to turn anything into a stunning piece of sculptured artwork that has a new purpose. For the holiday season, Villanueva has recently exhibited his "Santos" made from recycled materials, at the Latino Art Museum in Pomona. In the next week's holiday issue of the San Fernando Valley Sun, the artist opens his home to give our readers a look at his personal "Nacimiento" (Nativity Scene), handcrafted by Villanueva.

NELAArt SECOND SATURDAY GALLERY NIGHT - AT THE SOUTHWEST MUSEUM - Featuring Luis Villanueva - Opening Reception Saturday, April 11 7-10pm Show and Sale runs April 11 - May 3, 2009

Luis Villanueva was born in Mexico and since the age five has been making art from cartons and paper found in the street. He especially enjoys making art for nacimientos de navidad, or Nativity scenes. Villanueva has studied art at various schools, including Escuela de Artes Plasticas, Universidad de Guadalajara, in Mexico. He also studied with artist in Oaxaca and Guanajuato, Mexico, as well as in Spain and France. His sculptures have been exhibited at the Mexican Consulate in Los Angeles, the Museo de Arte Latino in Pomona, and with co-presenter Jorge Ramos, at the Libreria Martinez in Plaza Mexico, Lynwood. He is also artistic director for Dia de Los Muertos at the Hollywood Forever Cemetery. With over 35,000 participants, it is the largest yearly celebration of the Day of the Dead in the United States.

The sculptures in this exhibition express both Villanueva's feelings and his commitment to the environment, as they are all made from recycled materials. Each Madonna is constructed from old newspapers and used milk cartons. Villanueva also enjoys giving art workshops to young children and teaching them that what some consider trash can be given life and made into works of art.

It is believed by Luis that making enchanting and engaging art from recycled materials is a sacred act that pays homage and preserves Mother Earth. Majestic towering figures made from detergent bottles, toilet paper rolls, soda cans, discarded dresses, and broken Christmas ornaments come to life in the hands of Villanueva. Just like his Madonna sculptures represent the birth of the divine, Villanueva, too, breathes new life into discarded objects and turns them into divine works of art.

At the age of 5, Villanueva lived in the devout Catholic, Mexican village of Ixtlan, Nayarit, where he often longed for a nativity set of his own. He would stare at displays in store windows that his family was too poor to afford. One day, while gazing at a beautiful nativity set in a store front, he lowered his head and set his eyes on the dirty discarded cardboard and paper trash lying in the streets. It is then that the thought entered his mind. He would craft his own nativity set. This first nativity set was made of cardboard paper from the popular "Maria" cookies. His family loved the set and brought his family, including two older sisters, much joy that Christmas. Villanueva has since made one nativity set each year.

At the age of 8, Villanueva was already making large-scale paper mache figures for Day of the Dead celebrations. His love of art led him to study at various schools such as the Escuela de Artes Plásticas at the Universidad de Guadalajara, in Mexico. He has also studied with artists in Oaxaca and Guanajuato, Mexico, as well as in Spain and France. In Salamanca he studied with Doña Villanueva, a famous wax artist, who was quite impressed with his innate ability to make the wax figures with such detail particularly in their faces and hands. She, along with the famous painter and dancer, Rafael Zamarripa in Oaxaca, was impressed with his innate ability to paint and his attention to detail that gave the paintings his own sense of beauty and life.

Today, Villanueva continues exhibit his art and curate and assess the works of other artist. He is the former artistic director of one of the largest Dia de Los Muertos celebrations in the U.S. at the Hollywood Forever Cemetery and has been exhibited at the Mexican Consulate in Los Angeles, the Museo de Arte Latino in Pomona, and, with copresenter Jorge Ramos, at the Libreria Martinez in Plaza Mexico, Lynwood and will be the exhibiting artist for the inaugural 2010 Dia de Los Muertos celebration at the Autry Museum of the American West

By Yadhira Deleon