

CARNE y ARENA: Taking an Operatic Virtual Reality Journey into the Borderlands

LOS ANGELES COUNTY Museum of Art, since its founding in 1961, has a history of exhibitions that attempt to offer total sensory experiences. *CARNE y ARENA* calls up memories of the 1964 Edward Keinholtz's *Back Seat Dodge '38*. By County Supervisors' orders, visitors waited to approach the indecent sculpture, one at a time. Officials feared the open sexuality on view and ordered visitors to approach the piece one at a time. Inadvertently, the line created a shared environment where viewers had time for intimate connection. By contrast, I hardly interacted with anyone as I experienced *CARNE y ARENA*, which was the most isolated and disconnected moment at a museum I have had since James Turrell's *Perceptual Cell* (also at LACMA, in 2013-2014).

As an installation, *CARNE y ARENA* aspires to expand the museum experience beyond visual culture. After collaborating on *Birdman* (2014) and *The Revenant* (2015), filmmakers Alejandro Iñárritu and Emmanuel Lubezki made *CARNE y ARENA* to be a fully immersive cinematic experience within a virtual reality (V.R.) headset. For a user who, as yet, had only played with an HTC Vive enter into a new universe, part of a genre some industry insiders are calling "narrative V.R.," where you in a friend's living room, the artists have one-upped simple filmic or virtual sensations by adding some rather intense tactile sensations. These include the touch of both harsh, dry dirt and cold, dry wind against bare skin. LACMA gave the artists a vast enclosed space, which is equipped with powerful fans and a floor of Arizona desert sand. Cannes Film Festival, Fondazione Prada (Milan), Tlatelolco University Cultural Center (Ciudad de México), and an abandoned church in gentrifying Northeast Washington D.C. have also played host to the exhibition.

Patrons find themselves alone, cut off from other visitors to the museum, in a cold, metallic waiting room. There, written instructions in Spanish and English, say to take off

your shoes. You will retrieve them later. Then a light turns color, and you walk barefoot on sharp granules up to a docent who helps put on your headset. They assure you they will not let you walk blindly into a wall. Now that you are looking into the Vive's wraparound screen, you enter the universe of what industry insiders are calling "narrative V.R." or "V. R. storytelling." At first you see and hear the dark desert landscape of the Arizona borderlands by night. Moon and starlight illuminate a clearing in the scrub, and you can hear faint voices in the distance. Most visitors will be facing the migrants when they first hear the sound of helicopter blades and see a flash of headlights. ICE agents have come to protect a border not remotely visible in this sand where you stand.

What follows is a nightmare rendering of what I could imagine a number of migrants have experienced any night in the borderlands. Heavily armed and armored agents yell questions about drugs and coyotes in English and Spanish at folks who might be more familiar with a variety of Indigenous tongues. Police forces order migrants to remove their shoes. Removed is also a good term for the scenario. In a state of comfortable invisibility, I wandered freely and inspected whichever of these unfolding tragedies attracted my gaze. That is until I noticed a dramatic change in the atmosphere. An agent's screams suddenly sounded like they were right over my shoulder. I turned around to find their weapon pointed right at me. Before just a ghostly presence, I sensed exposure, a transformative event remaking me into a vulnerable participant in the scene. Forgetting the obvious, that this was V.R., I slowly raised my hands in terrified surrender.

Having played more youthful hours with first-person shooter video games than I care to admit, I will nevertheless confess that being unarmed and in virtual reality brought me back to the frantic beginning of a new round in *Goldeneye* while racing to pick up guns and ammo. *CARNE y ARENA* evoked such ludic and carnivalesque qualities, but I emerged knowing the border more than ever as a rigged game which is impossible to win. There was no way for me to defend myself against a force of that strength. At no point was that thought more clear than during a brief poetic interlude, which the artists mapped into the narrative. Desperate yells went silent, as an ethereal singing woman rose from the ground. Before her rested a table and sailing on its surface were crossers a world away. Buffeted by heavy waves, this raft capsized and poured figures into ocean waters. A global necropolitics is at work when migrants cross either the Mediterranean Sea or the Arizona desert.

CARNE y ARENA now ranks as an award-winning work of ethno-futurism (having received the first governor's special "Oscar" since 1996's *Toy Story*). Much like the Broken Earth series by Black science-fiction novelist N.K. Jemisin and Disney's blockbusting *Black Panther*, Iñárritu and Lubezki have answered a call, which I for one first heard articulated in Chicano Studies journal *Aztlán* in 2016, for a "Pan-Latin@ speculative poetics and politics." The two filmmakers have prescribed an experience that helps participants envision one violent moment along a nearby border as a flare-up in a pattern of militarized global border matters. For a moment as I took my shoes off, I contemplated that old proverb about walking another man's mile.

A risk of virtual reality's totalizing aesthetic is to grant White-identifying visitors an opportunity to collect experiences from the lives of undocumented people of color. Fixating attention on the border, filmmakers risk obscuring additional viable and significant

pathways migrants use to get past borders. Historian Mark Padoongpatt has highlighted “illegal” paths like ex-documentation, a tactic many Thai students and workers used when overstaying visas. Then there are Mexican Americans born here in California who never crossed any desert. ICE still profiles and hassles many of them too. Chican@s might resent *CARNE y ARENA* claiming to represent all immigrant or Brown identities. Then I remember those four radical Chican@ artists from Asco who “bombed,” or graffitied, LACMA back in 1972 in response to racist remarks by the museum’s curator. Maybe divides between this major Los Angeles art institution and La Raza endure.