

Rochelle Botello

@ Me-&-You Variety Candy

by Carol Es

DOWN BY THE RIVER ON TENTERHOOKS

Down by the LA River, just off of Stadium Way from the 5 freeway, lurks a mysterious force that arises amidst the vapor mixed factory fog that mills Twinkies and Zingers. Talk about exhibiting on the down low; within this little unassuming "neighborhood" exists a teeny tiny little gallery called *Me & You Variety Candy Los Angeles*, practically next door to the big Dolly Madison factory. There, I had the fortune to see a fabulous installation by LA artist Rochelle Botello.

The show is titled *on your tippy toes mister* just like that: all lower case letters, as if the sentence in and of itself was a little sculpture to help set the stage in this meager, haphazard project space. Botello displays mixed media collage drawings and accompanied tape and fabric sculptures that create much the same kind of empathy as the gallery itself, and I wondered if Botello was attracted to the space for the same reasons she infuses her cunningly sharp commiseration upon the subjects within her art. Needless to say, it seemed a happy marriage that contributed to the whole vibe of the exhibition, and the underlying narrative.

But Botello points out that there isn't a particular story here; her work engenders a kind of visual poetry that the written word lacks. In her most compelling of the sculptural works, *Oh Dear*, a dead, cerulean blue dog/deer has been either shot in the stomach, or conceivably bitten open. Its colorful, magic innards spill over from an open wound in the form of precisely printed circular swatches of fabric all over the floor: an overlapping pool of imaginary fluid takes shape like as if it is the step child of a Polly Apfelbaum installation. Is it blood and guts, or is it candy? Either way, it's yummy stuff, since a nappy-headed child in a pink dress seems to be closely examining it. She is lying down on the ground and lapping up the spill like it is some kind of divine benediction, or possibly an intense hallucinogenic experience. The work is both absurd and disarming.

Meanwhile, nearby there stands some kind of furry, long eared child person in a knitted hoodie and green cowboy boots who has

stopped dead in their tracks to observe the scene. He, or she, has either stopped on purpose or has fallen off her bicycle, which is also amazingly sculpted from cardboard and duct tape.

Another piece entitled, *Say Uncle* has a similar character standing on the paws of a pathetic animal I would like to describe as a donkey dog. He is missing most of his fur, seemingly pulled out in giant tufts. His hands/paws are stretched behind his body and dragging on the floor, like he's being ridden as an all-in-one sled with dog. I say "he" but what I like most about Botello's art is the lack of specificity in gender.

The exception is another sculpture called *Old Man with Stump*. An old man slumps into the corner of the room wearing only a baby tee and crocheted panties with built-in suspenders. I'm not making this stuff up folks. Seeing it is better than reading it here. He's also wearing hot pink ladies shoes and he's got one hand inside his underwear. I know it sounds a bit daffy, but I'm pretty sure I've seen this guy walking down Hollywood Boulevard. Anyways, he is standing next to a tree stump made of ripped, corrugated cardboard and colorful felt fabrics to imply the transverse surface and inner rings of the tree trunk. And I won't forget to mention the sweat sock on an upper branch that hung off half way off like some kind of signal flag.

Botello's sculptures can easily be mistaken for papier-mâché, but the materials and her process are much less controlled and a lot more visceral. For one thing, she begins by tearing and molding empty paper towel rolls with her hands: tearing and squishing, unraveling and bending. She knows not what the form of these skeletons will take exactly, and she likes it that way. The practice itself elicits fate and chance, and she can often be just as surprised where these sculptures go as one might be as the observer. She then uses different colors of tape to create a surface and help mold the remainder of the form. And I love that she uses fabric and knits, fiber and plushie bits. Her imagination appears as pure as a child's, and the meaning needs less thinking than what comes natural to

us as art connoisseurs. As adults we have a need to psychoanalyze and use our reasoning skills, but here, refreshingly, there isn't a use for this.

I haven't even told you about her incredible collage drawings that I am as equally excited about. I've spend too much time raving about her sculptures and now I'm nearly out of time, folks. But I will tell you that I was passionately impressed with them all, and especially one called, *Yellow (Don't Leave Me)* created in ink, colored pencils and wood-print contact paper. Some parts are drawn in an obsessive manner, while some are drawn elsewhere, cut out and layered into this playful but serious work of art. And she uses a scissors, not a blade. It's yet another childhood indulgence that her process delivers through and through.

I told Rochelle that it looked like she took the best of bits of her other drawings and created this amazing masterpiece. She seemed surprised and told me she originally felt the drawing was too busy. It is her usual intention to be a lot simpler and "Zen-like," but I told her there is still enough white space to communicate this idea. It is absolutely a beautiful work of art, revealing bits of emotional, childhood dreams with great doses of humor. Animals and people are embracing, or is the animal humping their legs. One person is sucking their thumb, another reaching up into a tree of bees. A silhouette of a Chiwawa crown the piece at the top, perhaps to memorialize her immensely loved elderly pet that was patiently waiting, in the front seat of her car, curled up in a little warm oval shape. A very compact doggie.

Botello's drawings have evolved into an elaborate place since grad school. She got her masters at Claremont Graduate University in 2004, and I saw a show of her drawings in San Pedro about a year after. I was in love with her work even way back then, but she seems to have mastered that dark humor and fantasy to a whole new level. By placing abstract innuendos and uplifting mystery into her language of drawing, she leaves us to binge on our own imaginations run amuck.

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The LowDown On High Art

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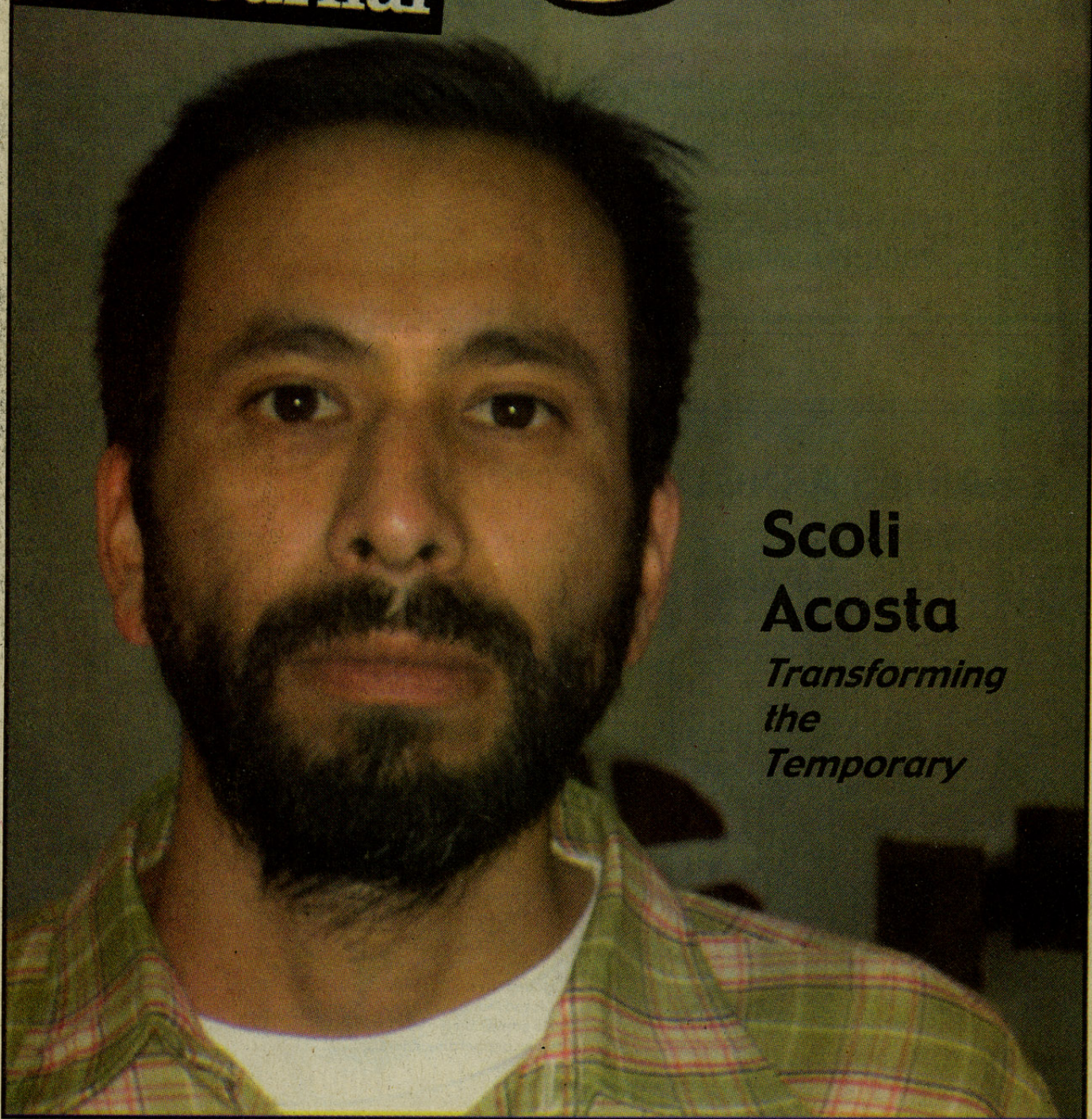
March
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issue #91

Art Journal



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