

Queens Times Ledger

July 12, 2007
Circulation: Weekly - 4,724

Artists tackle immigration in Corona Plaza exhibition

BY ALEX CHRISTODOULIDES

A new exhibit in Corona Plaza brings art about immigrants to spaces where immigrants are likely to look: a Western Union branch, two record stores, a restaurant and a supermarket-circular-style publication.

In "Corona Plaza, Center of Everywhere," four artists — Shaun "El C." Leonardo, Hector Canonge, Stephanie Diamond and Xaviera Simmons — created site-specific projects to show their takes on Mexican wrestling, the foods dear to immigrants, landscapes of home and portraits.

Leonardo's project includes a promotional video hyping his Mexican wrestling alter ego, El Conquistador, who will take on The Invisible Man later in the year. The video is currently playing at Disco Rocio at 104-06 Roosevelt Ave. and Freddy Records at 102-07 Roosevelt Ave., but El Conquistador will sign autographs and then wrestle his nemesis in September, before the exhibit closes.

In the video, Leonardo said, "I'm wrestling an invisible presence. It's been about wrestling with my identity, wrestling with masculinity."



Photo by John Wendle

The peepholes in Hector Canonge's "Dystopic Walls" display postcards of various immigrant homelands.

Canonge's piece, "Muros Distopicos/Dystopic Walls," represents the divide between the United States and Mexico and

has a temporary home in the Western Union at 103-16 Roosevelt Ave., a business that bridges the distance by giving immi-

grants the means to send money to far-off relatives.

The installation looks like a staircase turned on its side.

Peepholes are placed discreetly at various heights to allow one to catch a glimpse of a tourism-office postcard image of home — be it Mexico, Ecuador or Bangladesh.

"When you're looking at the wall, you see one side or the other side," Canonge said. The effect he sought by creating perfect right angles in his piece can also be said of the debate about immigration in the U.S.

Opposite the wall is a display of letters to far-away family members written on Western Union moneygram forms. The messages show a longing to communicate and a fear of further

Continued on Page E18

IF YOU GO

Corona Plaza, Center of Everything

Location: Corona Plaza, Roosevelt Avenue & National Street, Corona; and Queens Museum of Art, Flushing Meadows Corona Park
Date: Through Oct. 14
Time: QMA gallery hours: Wednesday - Sunday, noon - 6 p.m.; Friday, noon - 8 p.m.; in Corona Plaza daily.
For More: 718-592-9700 or www.queensmuseum.org

Corona plaza

Continued from Page E8

separation: "Dear Mama, I'm writing to you because they're building an impossible wall between the U.S. and Mexico and I won't be able to pass," one read in Spanish.

Canonge overcame initial distrust by offering papier-mache, crayons and paper to the children of immigrants, then approached the parents to ask them to participate in his project.

"A lot of times the parents didn't want to talk," because they were undocumented immigrants or ashamed they did not write well or speak English, Canonge said. But the word spread and people soon lined up to contribute, he said.

Stephanie Diamond's faux circular "What I Eat" is the culmination of years of talking to people about food and offers recipes from immigrants with the ingredients depicted, like product listings in a supermarket circular.

The ideas are simple — ceviche, chicken à la Coca-Cola — and so are the instructions, which skip

measuring and instead call for a container of this or a can of that. Items are readily available in local markets and bodegas.

The project is about celebrating what exists.

"What I Eat" is available free from boxes around the neighborhood, two in Corona Plaza, one on 103rd Street and one on National Street.

"The project is very much about community, about this," she said, pointing to the photos of food in the circular she held up. "It's not about creating anything new, just celebrating what exists."

Diamond said the inspiration for the project came years ago when food allergies got between her and dishes she could eat safely.

She has made a career out of photographing food as it is, rather than how advertisers want it depicted. "I take pictures of food on my plate, on the

ground," she said. Some of her photos are at the bottoms of the pages of "What I Eat."

A block away, hung abruptly on the wall at Tacos Mexico, are four of Xaviera Simmons' photos, which depict immigrants — singly or with their families — using traditional portrait photography tinged with the nostalgia of old tourist postcards. Others are displayed in store windows around Corona Plaza.

The four projects were first on display at the Queens Museum of Art beginning in June, then moved July 1 to Corona Plaza on Roosevelt Avenue between 104th and National streets, where they will remain on display until Oct. 14.

There will be additional events on Sept. 8, when Leonardo will do an autograph signing, and on Sept. 15, which will feature a free portrait studio by Simmons and Leonardo's performance.

Reach reporter Alex Christodoulides by e-mail at achristodoulides@timesledger.com or by phone at 718-229-0300, Ext. 155.