

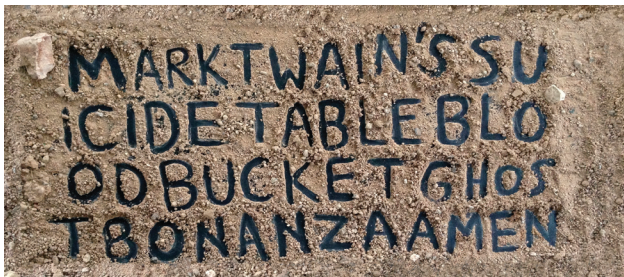
The Capital City Arts Initiative [CCAI] is delighted to present another collaborative residency/exhibition with St. Mary's Art and Retreat Center in Virginia City, Nevada. Following a two-week residency at the Center during June 2014, CCAI artist Justin Favela produced the Mark Twain's Suicide Table Blood Bucket Ghost Bonanza Amen exhibition, in the 4th floor gallery. The show runs from June 29 – August 30, 2014. In conjunction with the exhibition, CCAI commissioned Emmanuel Ortega to write the following essay. Thank you very much to those mentioned above, to St. Mary's Art Center for co-sponsoring the residency and exhibition, and to the Comstock Foundation for History and Culture for its lead donation supporting the project.

## VIRGINIA CITY'S PAVILION

### By Emmanuel Ortega

#### LOCAL SENSITIVITIES, FOREIGN CURIOSITIES

Artists throughout history have responded to their natural surroundings in order to artistically thrive. Their sensitivities regarding the places they inhabit allows for new perspectives on the world. Nevertheless, when artists vacate all that is familiar to their artistic process, their creativity and body of work tends to blossom: Monet in Giverny, Georgia O'Keeffe in New Mexico, John Singer Sargent in Venice, Motherwell in Mexico, and now Justin Favela in Virginia City, Nevada. Once a nineteenth century boom town for silver mining, Virginia City gave Favela the appropriate historic context in which his curiosity and creativity merged with the legends surrounding this historic town. Favela avoided a romantization of what he experienced in order to favor the mythical qualities that sustain Mark Twain's town in the popular imagination. As a result, *Mark Twain's Suicide Table Blood Bucket Ghost Bonanza Amen* (MTSTBBGBA) steers away from painting nostalgic western landscapes in order to conceptually reference it all - from the unfortunate destiny of those who died playing the famous Suicide Table, the Comstock Lode, to the white nun whose spirit is said to roam the halls of the former St. Mary's orphanage and hospital.



#### A LAS VEGAS ARTIST

For more than twenty years, an unspoken rule in Las Vegas's art community has been developing, where those practicing their privilege as cultural commentators in the visual arts must respond to their built environment. Las Vegas artists have transformed

fallen casinos' signs into phantasmal memories that linger on beyond their material absence. The massive casino signs' meaning as symbols of entertainment and capitalist privilege have aesthetically been transformed into hand crafted wooden signs, demolition videos and romantic archeological fields. Aware of his immediate past and Chicano upbringing, artist Justin Favela has inserted his artistic practice into this tradition.

The cardboard that constitutes the skin of his sculptures is bathed with colorful paper mache that brings to mind the neon cultural institution of Las Vegas' artists and the traditional arts of México and Guatemala. While he steps away from abstract form, the iridescent quality of his low rider piñatas and Spanglish casino signs anchor his "deep design" in the "little art history" of Las Vegas. Favela, like those before him, responds to his surroundings, making social commentaries regarding the fantasy surrounding Las Vegas Boulevard and its ongoing display of wealth and appropriation. Taken as a whole, Favela's art continues the practice of neon-based artists, but with a renewed sense of local identity.



*County Center (after Henry Moore)*; cardboard, paint, glue; 15' x 7' x 5'; 2011

*County Center*  
Clark County Government Center's rotunda, Las Vegas, Nevada, May 2011  
Photo credit: Steve Marcus

This is a view of an installation of irreverent cardboard replicas of Las Vegas' City Center art collection that Favela realized as part of the Clark County Exhibition Program. With this work, Favela offered a socio-political commentary about the display of excess reflected in public art of the strip.

## A WALK ON THE STRIP

Los Angeles painter David Reed in an essay titled "Liquid Rubens: Rubens in Las Vegas," manifested his attraction to the formal qualities of the strip. "The pinks, mauves, and off-blues of the sunset often seemed more garish, more exotic, than the neon signs and artificial lights .... I would love to walk along the Strip with Rubens ... Rubens would love the variety of the lights and I know that he'd like the work of the abstract painters now working in Las Vegas" <sup>ii</sup> Reed's abstract paintings remind the viewer of the power that the ever-changing space of "the Strip" has had over visual artists throughout the years. On the other hand, a walk with Favela will take you from Las Vegas Boulevard to Fremont Street, and further to East and North Las Vegas. Instead of a discussion regarding the infinite hues that are created when the desert sunset colors melt with the casino fluorescent lights, a conversation with him would lead you from the Strip into people's backyards, construction sites, and dive bars, thus offering you a glimpse into the past of his US/Mexican/Guatemalan upbringing. Some artists that choose to come to Vegas are magnetically pulled into the Strip as a source of inspiration. However, those born and raised here are able to artistically express the memories of the past that have forever bounced back and forth from the Strip's neon to their gravel-filled front yards and the monochromatic streets that reign over desert suburban sprawls. In the same manner that Favela has responded to his Vegas surroundings for the past few years, he now arrives as a current Capital City Arts Initiative [CCAI] resident artist at St. Mary's Art Center, not as Justin, but as a sort of Peter Paul Rubens, exuding baroque beauty, meaning, and wonder in his installation MTSTBBGBA.



*Bonanza*; cardboard, paint, wire, glitter; 42" x 88" x 23"; 2014

## VIRGINIA CITY'S PAVILION

Favela has approached the town's material, visual and literary culture like a Las Vegas architect and created a visionary pavilion about Virginia City. With his sculptures he has re-appropriated the symbols that attract tourists to this corner of the state. Similarly to the way some visitors may approach a casino such as the Luxor in Las Vegas, MTSTBBGBA's viewers can absorb the installation's beauty as if they had suddenly become nineteenth-century international world expo visitors. The lingering memory of Mark Twain, the Gold Rush, the TV show *Bonanza*, and the souls aloft the "suicide table" of the title have all been packed



*Suicide Table*; cardboard, paint, wire, glitter; 42" x 84"; 2014

together into a series of conceptual sculptures which inhabit an intimately scaled synecdoche representing the unique attractions of Virginia City. Favela has compressed the experience of a road trip into town to create his pavilion. His installation allows the viewer to experience the curiosity of this artist who exists only through his creative perception. However, one must also be careful in declaring this installation as Virginia City's Pavilion in a grand international exhibition.

It is precisely the artist's curiosity that gives life to the sculptures of this space, which is transformed through a playful inquisitive expression that is markedly different from nineteenth and twentieth century expos. Great international exhibitions, "(often called expositions), the first of which was held in London in 1851, are intended to feature displays by nations and large companies of current developments in areas ranging from science and industry to the arts and trade." <sup>iii</sup> Timothy Mitchell in "The World as Exhibition," explains how nineteenth century European's curiosity affected the pavilions

that represented cities of the Orient (Cairo, Morocco, Algiers). These pavilions were created to invent realities about colonized countries. The whole world thus became an exhibition, and the curiosity of the visitor was the fuel that sustained their fantasies of places far from France. As such, when a Parisian approached the Egyptian pavilion of the 1889 expo, he/she must have perceived a sense of the "exotic" that places such as Cairo represented to the European imperialistic eye. The curiosity thus embodied the need to behold a different world as a foreign and "unusual" *objet d'art*.

In many ways, Favela's installation engages the politics of perception surrounding expos, and of course, Las Vegas. In conjunction, his sculptures are meant to play with preconceived and even quasi-exotic fantasies that tourists to Virginia City may entertain. MTSTBBGBA invites viewers to participate actively according to their own experiences with the city. Unlike international pavilions, Favela does not produce the exotic. Instead, he has re-appropriated the aura of the "foreign" to fit his practice. The result is a Disneyesque "Small World" version of Virginia City, where puppet nuns and cardboard signs veer away from local historical symbols into the chimera of his baroque perception. The spectator, guided by large road signs, is invited to participate in the artist's fantasies as Favela's curiosity transforms Virginia City itself into an *objet d'art* that works at the service of his own imagination. The signs here act as signifiers that are to activate the visitor's curiosity of what the city represents to them. By compacting this formula into a small space, the spectator would find her/himself overwhelmed by symbols that may or may not represent their local experiences, much less foreign fantasies, about Virginia City. In the play between the art, the spectator, and Favela's vision, one can discover the true nature of the town.

Emmanuel Ortega  
Las Vegas, Nevada  
June 2014

- i The notion of "little art history" is explored by Libby Lumpkin. *Deep design: nine little art histories*. (Los Angeles: Art issues. Press, 2009).
- ii David Reed. "Liquid Rubens: Rubens in Las Vegas," May 2006  
[http://www.davidreedstudio.com/publications/dr\\_liquidrubens.html](http://www.davidreedstudio.com/publications/dr_liquidrubens.html)
- iii Robert Jay. "Exhibition architecture." *Grove Art Online*. *Oxford Art Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed June 19, 2014, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T027147>

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