



## Capital City Arts Initiative

*The Capital City Arts Initiative [CCAI] is delighted to present, Saludos Amigos, an exhibition by artist Justin Favela, at the CCAI Courthouse Gallery from October 4, 2019 – January 29, 2020. CCAI extends its sincere appreciations to the artist, the Carson City Courthouse, and to all those involved with the exhibition. In addition, CCAI thanks our commissioned writer, Emmanuel Ortega, PhD., who provided this extended essay on Saludos Amigos.*

### Justin Favela's Saludos Amigos and the Perils of Exoticization

Upon first inspection of any of Justin Favela's paper murals, the visitor may be overwhelmed by the ways in which the artist utilizes color and paper. However, beyond the surface of all this material lies a critical contextualization of Latinx identity politics. His large-scale paper murals are from diverse sources such as the nineteenth-century Mexican landscape painter José María Velasco and Walt Disney's movie illustrations. His "piñata" technique and use of colored paper as a medium to recreate such iconic images reverses notions of "popular art" to challenge Latin America's art historical canon. Furthermore, his intention is not only to express the joy through the materials of his murals, but also, he aims to make a commentary on the common perceptions of various Latin American countries as "exotic" destinations.

In this installation, he takes iconographic cues from the movies produced by Disney for the Good Neighbor Policy era to construct abstract works of color and paper. Ultimately, Favela has integrated several different types of landscapes in order to create a mural installation that aims to celebrate his Guatemalan, Mexican heritage, while simultaneously highlighting the history of the ways in which Latinx peoples have been perceived for centuries.

### Good Neighbor Policy

In 1941, amidst fears that various countries in Latin America would side with the Nazi effort to win the war, U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt created the Inter-American Affairs (CIAA), as part of the U.S. Department of State.<sup>1</sup> These efforts were later to be known as FDR's Good Neighbor Policy. Amongst several strategies aimed at solidifying political relations with Latin America, the U.S. government invested in the production of Hollywood movies with the goal of combating some of the negative stereotypes against Latinos that existed in the U.S. popular imaginary. As noted by Dale Adams in "Saludos Amigos: Hollywood and FDR's Good Neighbor Policy," the Policy years, between 1933-1945, created hundreds of musicals, animated movies, and even westerns where the image of Latin America and Latinos in general attempted to be uplifted, promoting thus a good relationship with all those countries portrayed on the silver screen.<sup>2</sup>

The rising power of Disney as a film production company and its massive popular appeal would serve as one of the most effective tools of political propaganda. "Perhaps the two most influential and successful films of the era were Walt Disney's *Saludos Amigos* in 1943 and *Three Caballeros* in 1945."<sup>3</sup> The anthropological exploration of Walt Disney also resulted in a short film documentary titled *South of the Border with Walt Disney*. Disney set out from Hollywood to Latin America with the company of eighteen illustrators and producers. The documentary opens with the seal of the United States' Government, indicating the ideological intentions of the content the viewer is about to experience. In the opening lines, the movie states that Disney's visit to Latin America, "resulted in a better understanding of the art, music, folklore, and humor of our Latin American friends and a wealth of material for future cartoons."<sup>4</sup> Adams mentions that U.S. audiences were surprised to see

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1 Dale Adams, "Saludos Amigos: Hollywood and FDR's Good Neighbor Policy," (Quarterly Review of Film and Video, 24:3, 2007), 289-295, DOI: 10.1080/10509200500486395

2 Adams, 293.

3 Adams, 293.

4 Walt Disney, *South of the Border with Walt Disney* (DVD. Directed by Jack Cutting and Norman Ferguson. Los Angeles: Disney, 1942).

“Latin-American cities with skyscrapers, automobiles, and surprisingly clean and bustling city streets with fashionably western dressed men and women—scenes many Americans associated only with large American and European cities and certainly not what the prevailing Hollywood images of Latin America had been.”<sup>5</sup>

Yet the cartoon characters that came out of their travels reiterated the stereotypes that the “Good Neighbor” program was in theory attempting to erase.

Examples of the characters include a Brazilian armadillo, a Peruvian llama that comes to life to the sound of an Andean kid’s flute, a *Gauchito* from Uruguay that travels with his *burrito* (little donkey), a flying *sarape* (or an orientalist Mexican magical flying carpet), and Joe Carioca, a spiffy dressed Brazilian parrot that became a central character of several movies of the Good Neighbor era. The “exotic” nature of South American flowers and the “picturesque” and “colorful” landscapes of these countries, made their way into future Disney films. More than defining the “other” Latin America that U.S. audiences had yet to experience, the anthropological and neo-colonial pretensions of Disney defined the beginnings of a company that to this day manufactures fantasies as opposed to creating art.

Favela’s examinations of the nationalistic landscapes of Mexican nineteenth century artist José María Velasco, to the illustrations abstracted from Disney’s films, reflect a journey into illusions of the “exotic,” which have determined the nature of our relationship with Latin America for centuries. The murals of the installation in the CCAI Courthouse Gallery reflect ongoing interests from the artist to critically engage in the ways Mexico, Guatemala, and other countries have been historically distorted as simple exotic places. The definition of Latin America through Disney’s eyes as a magical and colorful place validates western audiences’ fantasies that since 1492 have been similarly constructed through scientific, literary, and visual institutions.

### Inventing the Exotic

José Rabasa, in *Inventing America*, contends that the introduction of the Americas into the European imaginary as a land inhabited by fantastic creatures stems from the imagination of Christopher Columbus and his affinity for medieval travel journals.<sup>6</sup> For the European readers of *Diary of First Voyage*, a collection of Columbus’ letters describing his journey into the Americas, the newly encountered lands must have been imagined as hostile, strange, and otherworldly. The establishment of the Americas as a hostile and dangerous land was, from day one, a medieval fantasy that reflected a need for colonial intervention. This myth was proliferated through many forms of visual expression, which included illustrated travel journals, maps, paintings, and collections of “exotic” objects or trophies of war such as feather arts, pottery, and gold.<sup>7</sup>

Similarly to Columbus, Disney’s fantasies, which were authenticated through documentary footage, stem from a need to showcase unknown lands as resourceful enterprises. The last scenes of *South of the Border* shows Walt Disney and some of his illustrators arriving back in U.S. soil at the airport customs. The officials unpack the explorations booty, “sketches, music, souvenirs costumes and miscellaneous ends from Latin America.”<sup>8</sup> Both, Columbus’s and Disney’s fictions represent two ends of a five hundred year history spectrum of abstracted views of Latin America and its peoples. Justin Favela’s oeuvre aims to disrupt that history by conceptualizing those fictions into artistic abstractions instead of historical realities.

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5 Adams, 294.

6 José Rabasa, *Inventing America: Spanish Historiography and the Formation of Eurocentrism* (1st Ed. ed. Oklahoma Project for Discourse and Theory Vol. 11. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 66.

7 A myth, as explained by Roland Barthes in *Mythologies*, is “a system of communication, that is a message,” and also is “a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the nature of things.” See: Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, (New York: Noonday Press, 1991), 109.

8 Walt Disney, *South of the Border with Walt Disney* (DVD. Directed by Jack Cutting and Norman Ferguson. Los Angeles: Disney, 1942).

By denying realism in his installation, and instead offering a pixelated version of the images he appropriates, Favela undoes their original function. In other words, the artist avoids making art that accommodates to the established order and instead offers dizzying baroque compositions. His murals are meant to awe the beholder, but most importantly, encourage further examination and critical contemplation. I argue that the confusion of Favela's installations as simple impressionistic images detracts from a responsible engagement with issues of exoticization, which are at the center of his works.

The installation, *Saludos Amigos*, invites its viewers to engage with its monumentality, not as an individual redemptive exercise in formalism, nor as a distraction from the political realities of its history. Instead, *Saludos Amigos*, like much of his artwork, should be approached as a piece of politically-engaged art that aims to deconstruct the politics of Latin American exoticization, colonialism, and Latinx identity politics in the U.S.

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