

Huw Davies Gallery  
23 August - 16 September 20188

***Postcard eXotica***  
**Diego Ramirez**



Image: Diego Ramirez, *Postcard eXotica*, 2016-18, video still

**Dreams and distortion: cinematic tropes and the vilified 'other'**

*Postcard eXotica*, by Melbourne-based artist Diego Ramirez, explores the origins and perpetuation of Mexican stereotypes in visual culture. Informed by historic postcards depicting scenes from Mexico's brutal revolution (1910 – 1920), the work addresses the way popular visual media is created both by and for the ethnocentric Western gaze. Described by Ramirez as a 'macabre and racialized' depiction of Mexican people, the work approaches the pictures as carefully created movie scenes. By presenting the source material alongside contemporary re-stagings, the artist illuminates how seemingly objective documentary-style images can be created in a way that reflects and reinforce pre-existing perceptions and cultural bias.

Ramirez also draws source material from early cinema, using scenes from Dracula film *Nosferatu* (1922) by German director F. W. Murnau; *Witchcraft Through the Ages* (1922), a documentary-style silent horror film by Swedish director Benjamin Christensen; and the unfinished *¡Que viva México!* (c. 1930's) by Russian director Sergei Eisenstein, a film envisioned to be a vast episodic portrayal of Mexican culture from the pre-colonial era through to the Revolution. Ramirez states that "in a broader manner, the video pastiches early cinema, contemporary pop and horror to trace the ways in which these ideas manifest today".

Referred to as one of the 20th Century's first 'media wars', the Mexican Revolution received an unprecedented amount of media attention and was heavily documented by foreign photographers, both amateur and professional. Accompanied by a hand-written description, these images were printed on postcard stock and widely sold to soldiers and the general public on both sides of the US – Mexican border. At the same time the conflict was taking place in Mexico, cinema in the United States was rapidly accelerating as both an artform and method of mass communication, and the action of

Supported by



the Mexican Revolution soon caught Hollywood's attention. Informed by the postcards and the multitude of - often dramatically re-staged or heavily elaborated - video footage coming out of Mexico, as well as pre-existing biases, a dominant cinematic narrative soon emerged that depicted Mexican people as violent, lazy, hypersexualised, and lawless. It was these early depictions that helped shape the pervasive Mexican stereotypes that continue to prevail in the Western imagination.

Designed to upset these stereotypes, *Postcard eXotica* seeks to "reconfigure the Western Gaze and render these images anew". Black and white footage of a reclining young man, hat askew, smiling and strumming a guitar is interposed with a menacing electric-guitarist in a sombrero and poncho, face obscured by a bandana. A cigarette smoking man walks briskly over dead figures on a perfectly shadowed set, mirroring a grainy postcard where men lie dead in a field. The description on the front, scrawled in white pen, reads: "Robbed after being shot". Satan strangles a woman in dramatic fashion, his tongue out and eyes bulging with glee.

*Postcard eXotica* is dreamlike, deliberately disorienting as it challenges our perceptions of Mexican people and the way they are commodified, objectified and turned into a violent, shadowy 'other'. Through a series of non-linear and episodic scenes, the work presents an unflinching examination into the way images are created, disseminated and manipulated.

Jess Oliver, August 2018

*Jess Oliver is a writer and art critic based in Canberra.*

—

### **Diego Ramirez | Artist statement**

*Postcard eXotica* is a 30min cinematic re-enactment in HD Video of a collection of found photographs. The video appropriates scenes from early cinema and vintage American postcards produced circa 1900-1930s that depict Mexican stereotypes. It seeks to think through the Western gaze by examining the mechanisms of cinema and the history of the lens. Indeed, the work suggests that many of these images were constructed to elicit a calculated response from the viewer, belong to a larger tradition of othering in picture making.

—

### **Diego Ramirez | About the artist**

Diego Ramirez is an artist, writer and occasional curator interested in terror as a response to the other. He has held solo exhibitions and individual screenings at the Australian Centre for The Moving Image (Melbourne); MARS Gallery (Melbourne); and Perth Centre for Contemporary Photography (Perth). Group shows include Art Central Hong Kong (Hong Kong); Torrance Art Museum (Los Angeles); WRO Media Art Biennale (Wroclaw); Hong-Gah Museum (Taipei); and Careof (Milan). Ramirez's writing features in A+a: Art and Australia (Melbourne); Runway Journal (Sydney); and Critical Contemporary Culture Journal (London). He co-edited the booklet \*dumb brunette vol.1.

Ramirez is represented by MARS Gallery (Melbourne).

—

### **Image list**

1. Diego Ramirez, *Postcard eXotica*, 2016-18, HD Video, 00:30 mins, edition of 5 + 2AP \$3,500

—