



Diego Ramirez. Image credit: Karl Halliday

Interview

# Diego Ramirez

December 9, 2022

In my work, I prefer to locate my sensibilities as contextual, something related to culture, time, and place rather than identity. I am interested in how ideas get corrupted, how certain figures corrode with time.

Diego Ramirez is a Mexican-Australian artist, writer and facilitator who draws inspiration from a dark sense of humour with references to his upbringing in Guadalajara, Mexico's second largest city where Catholicism infiltrates almost every aspect of life.

Ramirez arrived in Australia in 2008 and completed Bachelor of Fine Art at RMIT University and an Honours Degree of Fine Arts at Monash University, while becoming a renowned video and visual artist who delves into issues of representation and identity. His work has been shown in ACMI, ACCA and many other international venues, including galleries in Tijuana, Warsaw, Taipei and Los Angeles. In 2023 he will open his third solo exhibition, *Vampires of the Earth*, at [MARS] Gallery in Melbourne.

His art brings together echoes of Catholic and baroque iconography with references to contemporary bestiaries and figures such as the vampire and the Devil. His work is dark, with shades of goth, both materially and conceptually. He uses a variety of media, from video to photography, neon lights and his own body in performance art.

Ramirez is Director at SEVENTH Gallery and sits in panels for Creative Victoria, City of Melbourne, and is a peer assessor for the Australian Council of the Arts. In his writing he combines pointed art criticism with a joyfully pessimistic view of life.

On a rainy Carlton afternoon, Ramirez talked with César Albarrán about his work, artistic obsessions, and what it means to be a Latin American multidisciplinary creator in Australia in the age of influencers and woke culture. Image credit: Karl Halliday

## Where are your grandparents from?

My grandparents were from the states of Jalisco and Zacatecas. One of them was a bit of a nomad, he crossed the border into the United States and then returned to Mexico, settling in several states at different times.

There is a lot of apathy in my family regarding our heritage. My grandparents look very striking and odd in photographs, deeply mysterious people on both sides. I have the feeling that one side wanted to be forgotten and the other to be remembered. The meeting of these drives gave birth to a casual indifference.

## Has it been challenging to explore your Latin American identity in your art, through religious iconography, for example? How has this connected with Australian audiences?

I rarely think of myself in terms of identity, so the challenge has been circumventing that interpretation, but I do find a lot of inspiration in that problem. Identity feels like a given because I am what I am, changing from moment to moment. Barely do I feel the need to spell it out.

In my work I prefer to locate my sensibilities as contextual, something related to culture, time, and place rather than identity. I am interested in how ideas get corrupted, how certain figures corrode with time. I am a cynic; I am sarcastic.

A key moment for me was the year 2000, when there was an apocalyptic disposition in the air—the feeling the world would come to an end. I remember the fall of the PRI's perfect dictatorship [the PRI is the political party that remained in power for 71 years], when Vicente Fox won the Mexican presidential election, also in 2000.

I was a 10-year-old watching TV in the city of Guadalajara, an intensely Catholic epicentre. Our house was infested with black widow spiders and black butterflies because it was abandoned before we moved in. Meanwhile, everyone kept banging on and on about the Mayans predicting the end of the world. It was a formative moment in my imagination because I became aware of Mexico's political system and corruption as a social fuel through a supernatural lens.

I stumbled upon another cultural moment in my 20s, when I got lumped in with The Woke, Wokedly, Doo because I am a member of the diaspora in Australia. I met wildly narcissistic personalities trading on a virtue economy while coming of age as an artist and writer. Tumblr and BuzzFeed fried their brain and now they can barely function in social reality. I refer to these Millennial archetypes as 'Diaspora Politiciarts' and 'Advocados' (a portmanteau of advocate and avocado). Eventually, I returned to this memory of Fox's campaign as the harbinger of a new era and Catholicism as a structure of punishment to articulate the corruption of virtue hoarders.

When I turned 30, I read *Paradise Lost* by John Milton. He depicts Satan as a corrupt democrat. Suddenly these disparate moments came together. That poem helped me translate these preoccupations into different contexts and connect with wider audiences in a more complex dialogue.

*'I keep going back to that watershed moment in the year 2000, when Fox heralded the end of PRI's dictatorship amidst talk of aliens and the Mayan calendar. That time was full of hope and optimism.'*

## You have explored the idea of the Devil, as well as vampires, in your artwork. You use the mythical figure of the vampire to discuss capitalism as a cultural, political, and financial system, for example...

Both the Devil and the vampire are longstanding figures in the history of visual and narrative cultures. These two figures have adapted to reflect the preoccupations of different times, they mirror society's concerns. They also symbolise our understanding of evil.

I am particularly interested in the psychoanalytical shift of how we perceive the Devil: it went from being a type of bodily evil to representing psychological wrongdoing. The vampire is quite similar, as it suffered a parallel transformation. Vampires are the Devil's shadow: they are Romantic figures who possess a similar malaise. Both are fallen figures, since the Devil fell from Heaven, the vampire from humanity. Both the Devil and the vampire acquire powers after their fall. We understand vampires through Dracula, a romantic figure, and the Devil through Milton's *Paradise Lost*, a psychological, introspective, emotional Devil.

## Maybe they represent what we wish we were...

Yeah, the shadow of what we aspire to be.

## How do you mix sarcasm and pessimism in your art criticism and essay writing? You are pessimistic but not gloomy. You convey a happy pessimism of sorts.

I keep going back to that watershed moment in the year 2000, when Fox heralded the end of PRI's dictatorship amidst talk of aliens and the Mayan calendar. That time was full of hope and optimism. But that hope was quickly shattered, as the promises of the so-called 'Mexican Miracle' [the promise of Mexico's entry into the First World via neoliberal politics] never materialised. Still, people went on with their lives. Pessimism gives you strength when it is joyful and weakens you when it is whiny. It is a critical state.

*'There's cultural precedents that envelop Mexicanness in a way that makes it legible for audiences aligned with a European tradition.'*

## How different is the Australian state of mind from the Mexican state of mind? How does 'Mexicanness' exist in a place like Australia?

Every few weeks someone sends me a screenshot of Wikipedia's entry on 'jester's privilege', the idea that the jester has the freedom to say anything because nothing they say matters, circulating on social media. I believe what they are trying to tell me is that my cultural criticism is a form of jestering and that's why my head is still attached to my body. It is a compliment but also a putdown, which really fits into my universe, so I am grateful. It also means I serve a social function for as long as I'm funny, which is comforting but slightly threatening. Very dialectical.

After finding this screenshot in my inbox for the tenth time, I began to reflect on mockery and irreverence, since it is not intentional in my case. It is an instinct to say or do something without proper regard, because it is in my temper.

I think we can both recognise Mexicans do this well. The news presenter Brozo, a Mexican clown played by Victor Trujillo, was a great example: his political commentary was incisive, erudite, sharp, and comedic. I am very proud that one of Mexico's most insightful and popular news presenters was a clown who clearly appealed to a nation of mockers. We must remember that Mexican news are dark in content and politicised in structure, so we have to praise Trujillo as a satirist who emerged from Televisa [Mexico's largest media conglomerate, often critiqued for its links to the political system].

I suspect that in an Australian context, the larrikin serves as another figure that accommodates these dynamics. What I am saying is: there's cultural precedents that envelop Mexicanness in a way that makes it legible for audiences aligned with a European tradition.

## You arrived in Australia in 2008. How has the perception of being a Latin American person in Australia changed, both for others and for yourself?

In the past people would openly approach you with stereotypes, 'Mexico is violent', 'There's tons of drugs in Mexico', 'I went to Mexico once'. There is some truth there. Nowadays, particularly in art circles, people are more sensitive towards cultural differences. It is a bit difficult to answer that question because people now hold back more when it comes to their preconceptions about Latin America. I believe, however, that thinking about violence when mentioning Mexico is more prevalent now. People used to talk about food, or tequila... but now violence precedes everything.

## What has been the latest work of art, cinema, visual arts, literature, that has made an impact on you?

The latest *Batman* movie by Matt Reeves. I have been watching all the Batman movies, starting with Tim Burton's 1989 version. This latest version really questions what Bruce Wayne would be like as a vigilante. Bruce discovers that even though his suffering is valid, it comes from a place of privilege and chronic depression, divorced from the socioeconomic struggles of those around him. He is constantly discovering that other people are worse off than him. They have it more de la chingada. It is a very predictable marketing ploy, carefully designed to appeal to a neoliberal audience. But it charges Batman with a hilariously pathetic energy that accentuates his narcissism. The film also brings together many musical and visual influences, from film noir to Nirvana in the soundtrack, emo aesthetics as well. Reeves did a great job. Casting Robert Pattinson was an informed decision: as an actor, he represents this shift in what a monster is and represents. It is the safe-spacing of monstrosity, via *Twilight*. Reeves's *Batman* also references the extremism of 4chan and Redditt, the radicalisation of the far-right, as well as the radicalisation of the left in Tumblr.

## I did not grow up with social media, I am Gen X, so all these platforms, Tumblr, Reedit, are somewhat unfamiliar to me, especially as spaces where many of today's political and cultural identities were formed ...

It took me a while to realise that social media bred many of these ideas, all this political eclecticism, with wokeness as the child of Tumblr, and anti-wokeness as the offspring of 4chan. My position is that it is unhealthy for a political system to be modulated on a digital platform owned by billionaire corporations that promulgate anonymity and an attention economy. Everyone who says 'do better' on social media is Batman, a fragment of a billionaire vigilante, who feels entitled to override any system of social order in the name of vengeance.



Cabronx And Leftist Deceiver. Black wool, latex, neon, and modified frame, 2022. Image credit: Teagan Ramsay