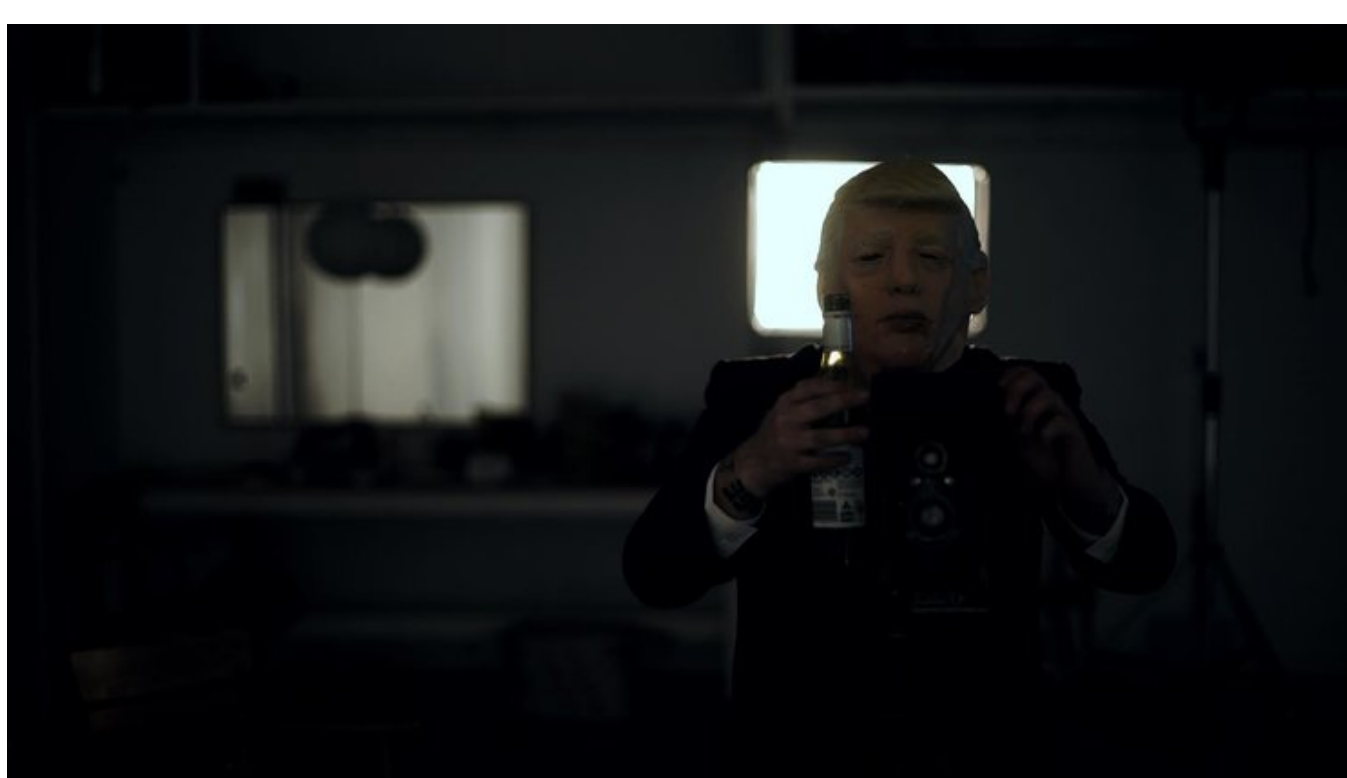


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DIEGO RAMIREZ // POSTCARD EXOTICA

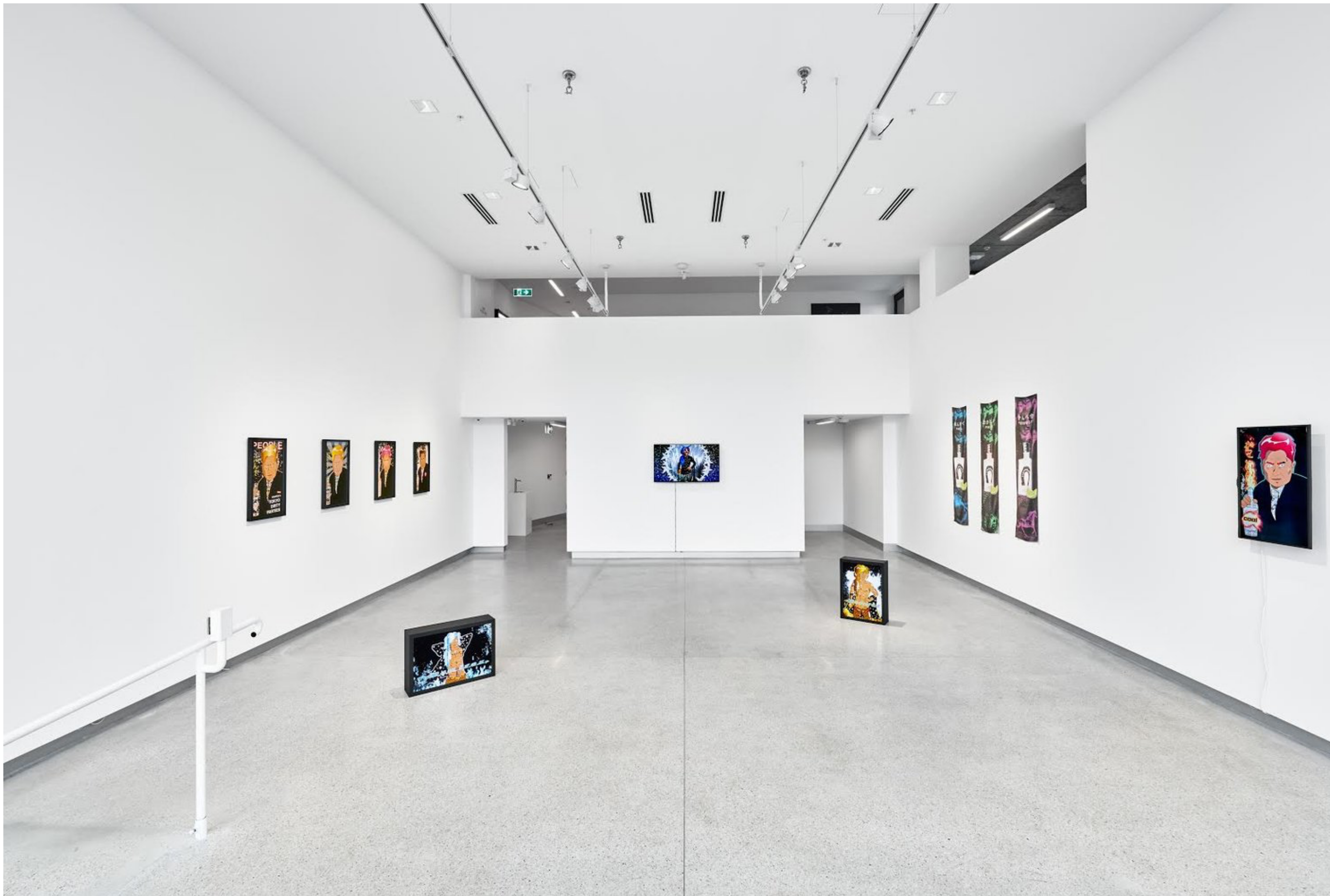


I can remember quite clearly the day Mexican video artist Diego Ramirez and I first met. I had long been familiar with his videos, having once invigilated his 2012 exhibition, *Touch Me Tiger*, at Kings ARI, sitting in the gallery with his work on loop for six hours straight. When we met at Nicholas Projects years later, I thought he looked familiar, but couldn't quite place him. The unassuming, bespectacled Ramirez in a shearling jacket, dark hair falling over his face, is far from his various on screen personas. These include a strange lilac creature, a hybrid of man and axolotl (Mexican Walking Fish), who gazes wistfully out his kitchen window *axolotl's Happiness*, the archetypal couple in *Heart Shaped Bruises* who slur maxims on gender; blood gushing from their wounds, dripping down their bruised cheeks, and of course his robed character from *Touch Me Tiger*, caked in lurid theatrical makeup, reminiscent of the visage of a Butoh actor.

Ramirez, who has exhibited at numerous galleries, festivals and biennales both nationally and internationally, uses discordant, disconcerting and sometimes absurd vignettes such as these to explore notions of gender, sexuality and race through the lens of the grotesque or the spectacle. Using acts of 'misreading'—altered translations—Ramirez investigates correspondences between sexually deviant practices and ethnics that stray from the hegemonic white body.

It is often the fate of the artist that uses their own body to act within their work, to be compartmentalised, fetishised—their own identity merged with those whom their work depicts. Perhaps responding to this, Ramirez steps away from the camera's gaze in his latest research project, *Postcard eXotica*, by delegating his performance to amateur actors. Supported by the *City of Melbourne Arts*, *Postcard eXotica* is a cinematic performance in two acts: firstly a screening of the film at ACMI, accompanied by the performance of a live soundtrack and Q & A with curator Brendan McCleary, and finally an exhibition at MARS Gallery.

In the first act, the intimate theatre at ACMI is crowded with visitors as the lights go out. On screen a man in a rubber Donald Trump mask whirls in circles, arms outspread, like a child playing at a park; his once pristine white shirt drenched a vivid crimson from the wine that he has rapidly swilled. Progressively becoming more and more drunk, he proceeds to film seemingly Mexican actors thrashing guns at one another in a theatrical display of hyper masculinity. While the artist's body of work is renown for its gaudy, lurid and sometimes camp digitally-rendered aesthetic, *Postcard eXotica* is visually more subdued, embracing the melancholy and the macabre.



In this film, Ramirez creates cinematic responses to found photographs of Mexicans taken by American businessmen. Taken during the first few decades of the 19th century during the Mexican Revolution, these American 'entrepreneurs' capitalised on the West's increasingly intense curiosity about Mexican people. These 'exotic' images were disseminated throughout the world, fetishised by their audiences and ultimately informed our current Western stereotypes of Mexican people.

For *Postcard eXotica*, Ramirez has created a melodramatic pastiche of reenactments to expose these problematic cultural attitudes. Self-reflexively locating itself within the broader canon of film history, the work contains footage from early silent horror films, sandwiched between stills of the original postcards, highlighting the way we so often vilify the radicalised other. *Postcard eXotica* is the culmination of two-years of research, aiming to reconfigure the Western gaze and deconstruct accepted ways of viewing.

Indeed, reality collapses throughout the duration of *Postcard eXotica*. As viewers gaze at the narratives- spliced and contorted on screen- the throbbing base notes of a synth soundtrack, played live by musician Luca Dante, reverberates throughout the room. The soundtrack creates an atmosphere of urgency: the presence of a live musician further blurring the boundaries between screen and audience.

Fast forward two weeks and *Postcard eXotica* is screened at MARS gallery for a second act: here the realms of film and reality entwine even further. Stepping into the dark enclave of MARS' celebrated black box video gallery, audiences are presented with the opportunity to watch the bizarre fate of the film's multitude of characters a second time. However, it is the moment visitors step into the adjoining exhibition space that fiction collides with the corporeal once more with shocking immediacy.

On a wall sit prints in which the 10 postcards are presented, alongside their filmic reenactments. Visitors comes to the still used in the exhibition's promotion: a debonair Latin American man (even though he is actually middle eastern), who gazes seductively at the camera, his face lit by the glow of his smouldering cigarette. Turning about in this small gallery space, visitors are jolted by a bewildering sight. As if he has stepped out from Ramirez' screen just moments prior, this same man begins to pace the gallery space: an exact twin of his on-screen self, right down to crisp suit and e-cigarette. It is of course, the very same actor Ramirez has hired, once again donning his suave façade: a delegated performance that is extended throughout the exhibition's opening time frame.

For Ramirez, collapsing fact and fiction reflects the postcard's origins: their dissemination promoting stereotypes, contributing to the supremacy of Western "mis-readings of culture". Ramirez's appropriation combines highly stylised slapstick, camp, melodrama- references to Commedia Dell Arte even- in order to emphasise the original 'fakery' of the photographs. As in his previous body of work, *Postcard eXotica* plays games with viewer's expectations by confusing the boundaries between fact and fiction to emphasise the fallacies of Western attitudes to Mexican culture. Viewing works such as *Postcard eXotica* force us to acknowledge racial stereotypes, an acknowledgement that is crucial for a postcolonial Australian audience.



All images are courtesy of the artist and MARS Gallery

[See more of Diego Ramirez's work here](#)

Katie Paine is an artist, curator and writer: you can find her work on Instagram, at @dreamsofspeaking