

Dzine: An Interview with Carlos Rolon

Bree Hughes, Friday, February 21, 2014

Carlos Rolon, also known as Dzine, is an artist who has exhibited all over the world. He is the recipient of the Joan Mitchell Award for Painting and Sculpture (2006), and the award for the National Endowment of the Arts (1995), and has published books including *Nailed: The History of Nail Culture and Dzine* (2012) and *The Beautiful Struggle* (2011). artnet's Bree Hughes recently caught up with the artist at Paul Kasmin Gallery, where "Dzine: Born, Carlos Rolon, 1970" is currently on view.



Carlos Rolon

Bree Hughes: Although moving seamlessly between murals, sculpture, painting, and installation, you never seem to let yourself get comfortable in one area. Instead you are always trying to push the boundaries of your practice. What drives you as an artist?

Carlos Rolon: It's a very personal thing. I am very aware of stereotyping. Growing up in one of the only Puerto Rican families on the southwest side of Chicago, I remember having to deal with this on a regular basis. This behavior, at times, is apparent in the art world. People try to put a label on you, but I don't want to be pigeonholed. I want to challenge the idea what identity means within stereotypes. The title of my current dual exhibition in New York at Paul Kasmin Gallery and Studio 94, *Dzine: Born, Carlos Rolon, 1970*, defines where I am going as an artist. I love the discussion of identity and what it means or supposed to mean, so the title is crucial. It is derivative of museum information plaques, which is important to me because I always want to know where the artist is from and when the work was made. But I also want to look beyond the idea of the name; I'm curious about *how* a work is made—I love when someone tells an honest story through craftsmanship.



A view of the exhibition "Dzine: Born, Carlos Rolon, 1970," on view at Paul Kasmin Gallery

BH: You are about to publish a new book this year. What can we expect from this publication?

CR: The book is called *Boxed: The Visual History and the Art of Boxing*, published by Daminai and co-published by Paul Kasmin Gallery. Whereas my last publication and exhibition, *NAILED*, paid homage to my mother, I consider *Boxed* to be a love letter to my father. Watching boxing matches on a Saturday afternoon with my father was a way for me to connect with him when I was young. As I began to develop this exhibition, I realized there has never been a publication on the visual history of boxing, so I started collecting images and data to change this. The book traces the sport from the Grecian Olympiads to some of the first black and white images of bare-knuckle fighting. It explores everything, from craftsmanship to racism to pop culture. It also looks at the culture of Contemporary Art, and how artists like David Hammons, Gary Simmons, Andreas Gursky, and Jeff Koons have used pugilism as a metaphor in their work. In addition, it incorporates three specially curated photographic sections by Cheryl Dunn, Chris Mosier, and Lyle Owerko, who document Gleason's Gym, a famous boxing gym in Brooklyn; a series on the culture of Ring Girls; and a look at the work of SARTONK, Ardash Sahaghian, and his grandson Edward. SARTONK is a company founded to safeguard the legacy of 94-year-old Sahaghian, an Armenian craftsman, and a man who reinvented handcrafted championship boxing belts. I wanted to show this craftsmanship in the context of an art publication. I love that the book crosses cultural and artistic boundaries. It documents a body of work inspired by all of the above.

BH: Can you describe the exhibition and talk about some of the pieces on display?

CR: There is one particular piece titled *Heavyweight*, based on the range of patterns found on boxers' robes and trunks, which I have layered to create one unique visual. On close inspection of the work, you can identify individual patterns found on boxers' often-outlandish costumes, but once you distance

yourself from the work, the patterns merge. Overall, these works are very tactile, with color, texture, patterns, and experiments in surface that create a visual dialogue between the physicality of boxing and the garments worn by the fighters. The frame of this particular work is hand carved because I'm also interested in bringing craftsmanship to the forefront, just as the items (robes, trunks, belts, etc.) worn by the boxers would be used and made. I wanted to share a boxer's aesthetic within an art context.

In addition to this new body of work, the nexus of the exhibition is a wood-paneled, blue-collar trophy den where people can watch the No Más fight— one of the most famous fights in boxing history—when Roberto Duran surrendered to Sugar Ray Leonard in the eighth round. It was a pivotal time for me as a child, and it brings back memories of spending time with my father, so there is a sense of nostalgia and memory for me. The room also displays new works, as well as re-appropriated trophies that have been donated to me by friends, which already tell a personal story that I have been entrusted with. These trophy sculptures, *Immigrants/Emigrants* (symbols and mementos for the Nuyoricans), were created for people like my father and mother who came to the United States for a better life, with dreams and aspirations that never quite materialized, but who still achieved success in other aspects of their lives. These trophies explore the concept of unrealized dreams, pay homage to my parents, and celebrate the successes they achieved.



A view of the trophy room where visitors can watch the No Más fight



A close-up of the trophy sculptures

BH: You definitely have an eye for assemblage. Can you tell us a little about what you collect and how you share your collection with others?

CR: When I can afford it, I love collecting period furniture, and I'm very attached to the Art Deco movement. I have a collection of vintage boom boxes, all functional and in mint condition. I also have a decent collection of art, from photographs by Hiroshi Sugimoto to drawings by Yoshitomo Nara, Keith Haring, and Rammellzee. I've also purchased work by Erik Hanson, as well as a fantastic new work by José Luis Vargas, and am in the midst of trading work with artists Nir Hod, Rashid Johnson, and Brian Alfred. One of my favorite pieces is an original vinyl of Jean-Michel Basquiat's Beat Bop record; there were only 2,000 made, so I am proud to have that in my collection.

Dzine: "Born, Carlos Rolon, 1970" is on view at Paul Kasmin Gallery through March 1, 2014.

All photographs courtesy of the artist and Paul Kasmin Gallery. Photographs by Jeff Elstone.