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Intimacy and Sincerity Are Rare in Contemporary Art A Review of Carlos Rolón/Dzine at the Chicago Cultural Center

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Carlos Rolón/Dzine, "siempre pa'lante," 2016. Neon, 10 x 6 feet /Photo: Nathan Keay

RECOMMENDED

Having recently returned from New York City and a trip to the still relatively newly relocated Whitney Museum—where all the clichés of “contemporary art” could be found in their contemporary survey via creepy mannequins, skeletal wooden models and ramshackle construction throughout—my visit to the more local “I Tell You This Sincerely...” by Carlos Rolón/Dzine lived up to its title as an intimate experience considerably different than the sterile academic exercises in NYC.

Entering the first gallery, you encounter “Bochinche,” an installation of floor-to-ceiling, handmade shell macramé full of convincing fake plants and a wrought-iron sculpture that evokes a fountain, also full of plants, surrounded by white marble benches. One scarcely needs to read the wall text to understand that this is intended to evoke a Caribbean courtyard, per the artist’s Puerto Rican identity.

If “Bochinche” speaks of intimacy, in the next gallery the artist literally invites you to sit down and watch the famous 1980 “No Más” fight between Sugar Ray Leonard and Roberto Duran on a retro tube TV within a structure designed to resemble a quintessential 1970s-era man cave, complete with shag carpet, wood paneling, a lime green recliner, boxing memorabilia and many trophies. Again, you immediately know that you’re in a personal space. Indeed Rolón’s time in rooms like this with his father inspired him: “It really wasn’t so much about [boxing], but rather a way to connect with my father and spend time with him.” Explore the room closely and you’ll find a novelty wooden jigsaw puzzle of “Carlos,” the kind a parent might give to their child.



Carlos Rolón/Dzine, “Untitled (Fine Regal China #1),” Porcelain with carved pattern, 11.8 x 11.8 x 23 inches

Following the exhibition title, Rolón is at his best when he is personal and sincere. Elsewhere, art, commerce and labor commingle in uneasy and charged works, but their critique is sometimes undone by their eminent consumability. “Fine Regal China” draws on Rolón’s mother’s collection of faux Chinese vases (again, from his childhood) but covered here in the Louis Vuitton trademark print, the status symbol drowns out the work’s critique and irony. However, this is a minor criticism in what is a very rewarding exhibition. (Abraham Ritchie)