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Artist Profile | Carlos Rolón: Nostalgic Bling

Chicago artist combines memories and opulence in hybrid installations.



by **Erica Rivera**

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Artwork: Carlos Rolón/Dzine. Imperial Nail Salon (My Parents' Living Room, 1976), 2013. Mixed media, dimensions variable. Photo: Nathan Keay.

Maybe you didn't grow up in Chicago. Maybe your parents aren't **immigrants** from Puerto Rico. But as soon as you step into the living room of artist Carlos Rolón/Dzine, you'll feel right at home.

No, it's not his actual living room. It's a work of art called "Imperial Nail Salon (My Parents' Living Room, 1976)", a replica of the living room his family had when he was six years old, out of which his mother ran a bootleg hair and nail salon. It was part of the "Homebodies" exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, curated by Naomi Beckwith.

Regardless of background or class, Rolón says, many of the viewers who took in the exhibition could recall their own childhood home or the home of a friend or relative who lived in a similar setting, packed with busy wallpaper, hanging plants, a rotary phone, and a plastic-covered sofa straight out of the '70s.

"Sometimes when people walk into museums or galleries, they feel like they're left out of the joke. They're not part of the inside story. They're not sure if they're welcome or not," Rolón says. "I feel like it's my duty as an artist to make work that a) is something that is important to me, personally, b) creates discourse and discussion, and c) that people can relate to."



Artwork: Carlos Rolón/Dzine. *Gild the Lily (Decadence Upon Decadence I)*, 2016. Oil, satin varnish, and gold leaf on canvas, 96 x 72 x 3 inches. Collection of Eric McKissack.

Rolón wanted to be an artist since age 14, an interest that arose from the hip-hop culture and graffiti movement of his youth. In his early 20s, Rolón hung with a creative crew of filmmakers, photographers, artists, sculptors, and poets in the Wicker Park neighborhood of Chicago. It was, perhaps, an unlikely community for a kid from a blue-collar family that never went to art galleries or museums.

“I didn’t see reflections of my family or reflections of things I could connect with immediately in the context of the museum and the gallery world,” Rolón says. Yet he became fascinated with art history and studied painting and drawing at Columbia College Chicago.

While he still paints, he isn’t limited by that medium. “I’m very interested in making these works that become a hybrid of items: painting, sculpture, video, neon,” he says. His work circles themes of cultural identity, subcultures, personal identity, community, and childhood memories.

Rolón’s work is a melting pot of both personal stories and historical homage. That complicated combination may take the form of a floating garden and *bochinche* benches (*bochinche* means “gossip” among Puerto Rican Spanish speakers). It might take the form of a “Boriqua Sound System” (a vintage Schwinn bicycle adorned with Puerto Rican flags that pulls an audio system and boom box with record player behind it) which recalls the artist’s teen years in the ‘80s, when car stereo theft was common. It might take the form of a trophy room that was decorated with a boxing memorabilia, complete with an old television set playing footage from a fight. “Boxing was a way for me to connect with my father,” Rolón explains.



Artwork: Carlos Rolón/Dzine. Installation View. I Tell You This Sincerely..., 2016. Photo: Nathan Keay.

The artist’s work exudes a glamorous gravitas, even when a piece seems slightly off-kilter or doesn’t turn out as planned. At one point, he produced several works on wood panels. Because wood is an organic, living, breathing material, it began to move when the works traveled to humid places and the glass on top of it cracked. “It was a very kind of Eckhart Tolle moment for me,” says Rolón. “I embraced

the cracking as a happy mistake.” He made several new works based on this concept, letting the brokenness not only be, but creating it intentionally. “Those are paintings that look very celestial. I love the idea of taking something that is possibly considered violent and making something very beautiful. It has a memory and it has a story behind it,” he says.



*Artwork: Carlos Rolón/Dzine. Celestial 1, 2016.
Collection of Rolando and Ednita Jimenez.*

These mirror paintings harken back to the Chicago bungalow where Rolón grew up, a place adorned with an abundance of mirrors, an interior decorating trick to make the space appear bigger. “There was something very aristocratic about it and a sense of privilege that you got from the house,” he says.

Indeed, a sense of opulence and excess is present in much of the artist’s work. From porcelain vases with printed patterns to pimped-out low-rider bicycles dripping in Swarovksi crystals to a body of tropical floral paintings on 24-carat gold backgrounds, this art has serious bling to it.

Though he used to be known professionally primarily as Dzine, the artist is making a conscious effort to use his first and last name as his work becomes more personal. One could also argue his work has increasingly become **more political**. From an 8-foot, bright pink “Afrocomb” that is formed into a fist at the top to purple neon letters that spell out “siempre pa’lante” (“always forward”), it’s clear that this is more than just navel-gazing. For the “Forms of Imagination/Chicago Architectural Biennial”, Rolón produced a customized street vending cart that had spaces for stereo speakers, food service, and apparel and jewelry displays. “The idea was to produce this work of art so other people can sell their goods to make a living. It served a dual purpose,” he says.



Artwork: Carlos Rolón/Dzine. Commonwealth, Oakland University, Michigan, 2016. Photo: Nathan Keay.

“What I’m very, very proud of is that even though my work is personal or has a deeper meaning or is a hybrid of different cultures or I’m making something that is completely new or I’m appropriating something that’s old and making it new again, you can be Asian, you can be Jewish, you can be black, you can be white, and when you see the work, you can relate to it.”

Though Rolón has exhibited all over the world and his artwork is included in public collections at the Brooklyn Museum, the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego, and the Museo de Arte de Ponce in Puerto Rico (among many others), those accomplishments are not necessarily what fulfills him most about his career. Praise from viewers of diverse backgrounds, especially those that aren’t in the target audience of a traditional gallery, is what he finds particularly meaningful. “I can definitely always use money,” he says with a laugh, “but sometimes those words are worth more than money. That’s when you know that you’re doing something right.”

Additional Artwork Credits:

“Imperial Nail Salon (My Parents’ Living Room, 1976)”, 2013. Mixed media, dimensions variable. Included in the exhibition “Homebodies” (italicize?), Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago curated by Naomi Beckwith. Photo: Nathan Keay.

“Installation View of Trophy Room”, 2016. Mixed media, dimensions variable. From the artists solo exhibition, “I Tell You This Sincerely...” Curated by Nathan Mason, Chicago Cultural Center. Photo: Nathan Keay.

“Installation View of Hustleman (Nomadic Habitat)”, customized vending cart, dimensions variable, 2016. From the artists solo exhibition, “COMMONWEALTH”, Curated by Dick Goody, Oakland University Art Gallery, Michigan. Photo: Nathan Keay.