

### Remembering Jorge Rando's *Prostitutes*: A Critical Response

Gabarron Foundation – Carriage House Center for the Arts

**January 17, 2011. New York.** Jorge Rando exceeded viewer expectation in both form and content with his latest New York exhibition, *Prostitutes*, at The Gabarron Foundation – Carriage House Center for the Arts. The artist was able to turn unexpected misfortune into a unique expression of his work after the collection of exhibition paintings and watercolour drawings did not arrive from Customs in time for the exhibition opening. Rando was able to devise and execute an ingenious solution; he presented his *Prostitutes* as large scale murals in lieu of the missing artworks. Juan Manuel Gabarrón, Vice President and CEO of the Carriage House, recalls his initial reaction to Rando's mural proposal and the circumstances under which they were created. He was neither worried nor did he question if the opening would be successful, even after it was obvious that the works would not arrive in time. Rather, he considered Rando's proposal to paint the murals an interesting opportunity and challenge for the artist to complete the large scale murals in a limited amount of time. Armed with house paints and large sheets of plastic purchased at a nearby hardware store, Rando used his brush to paint from memory, in a matter of hours, a body of work that had taken him approximately 8 years to produce. Dismantled this past Friday, January 14, the exhibition provided unique insight into the artist's work and his philosophy; it was an opportunity that might never occur again,

Rando's style is related to the expressionists in his symbolic use of color and the "gestural" paint strokes that communicate his raw emotional response to the women in his portraits. Art historically significant themes can be recognized—such as the Mother (Mary), the exotic object (Odalisque) and the (male) "Gaze"—which for decades have influenced academic discussions of prostitution in modern art. One might have recognized what appeared to be a tribute to Edouard Manet's *Le Dejeuner sur l'Herbe*, Henri Matisse's languid odalisques and Edgar Degas' candid portraits of lounging prostitutes. Spending additional time with Rando's work, however, it's reasonable to conclude that his paintings were created without definitive art historical purpose. Considering the artist's working philosophy, he might have arrived at these themes as other artists before him, by way of his own social critique and emotional intimacy with the subject. Rando's portrayal of the prostitutes is sympathetic and non-accusatory, stemming from the years that he spent living in a low income neighborhood amongst working prostitutes.

Rando painted the words "maestro sin condenar," "I saw without condemning," on the Carriage House gallery walls. This statement succinctly contextualized Rando's *Prostitutes*. The full length portraits that were displayed in the gallery are painted without facial detail; primary colors are used to suggest short hair, tight dresses and thickly applied makeup. Their mouths are stamped on the canvas with bright red swatches of paint. The artist's brushstrokes—sometimes harsh and staccato, at other times soft and curvilinear—capture the figures as Rando's heart might describe them. The works are subjective characterizations of the artist's memories, captured through the physical action of painting.

Rando's *Prostitutes* are represented by a collection of symbols that advertise the marketable object, the female body. Together with the framed works, the murals created a doubling effect that provided an additional layer to the exhibition. Rando extracted motifs from the absent works for display on the walls. Rings made with what appeared to be the saturated rim of a paint-can lid mimicked the curly hair of some of the women in his nearby framed paintings; large curvaceous figures lounged across another wall, mirroring smaller framed groupings of similar odalisque-like women. Coupled with the murals, particular details surrounded the viewer with an insistence that was hard to deny. The image of a red purse most strikingly repeats in Rando's paintings and drawings. The purse is the same color as the prostitutes' lips, fire engine red; it is rectangular and always hangs lengthwise from a delicate string worn around the wrist or hand. Rando has described, in conversation, the red purse as a depiction of everything that defines the prostitute as an autonomous human being. One might imagine her house keys nestled against a dark fabric lining beneath a crumpled grocery list and her iPod. The Prostitute's humanity is thus symbolized by the red purse, providing a compelling reversal of subject (purse) and object (female body).

A large painting in the exhibition's entrance suggested to the viewer that people and things are not always what they appear; the surface attraction may only be a careful assemblage of social symbols that are assumed and applied without regard for the individual. The painting's subjects, mother and child, are suggested with sweeping lines of black paint atop a vibrant background that is awash in hues of soft green, fuscia, and golden yellow. They spread blithely across the canvas, communicating a sense of warmth that is mirrored by the mother's ease. Though her head is turned toward the viewer, her eyes are averted with a gentle downturned gaze and a long dress or robe loosely covers her torso, arms, and legs. Though this painting may have visually opposed the others in the exhibition, Rando's perspective of the Prostitute as a human being, and not only a self-advertised object, was

revealed in juxtaposition with the mother and child painting. This woman is an image of motherly affection and virtue. In the exhibition's larger context, however, it suggested that she is the woman who dwells beneath the Prostitutes' objectified exterior, guiding the viewer to consider that the Prostitute is not entirely distinguishable from the Woman of Virtue.

Rando's exhibition was composed of layers, both in its physical appearance and significance. Quoting the artist, "Desire and reality merge both in the poet and in the painter, and with such a force they do become one. This is how the work is born as a unique and distinct creation; because the reality of nature has been assimilated, digest(ed) and reborn with new shapes." Rando re-presented the Prostitute as a misunderstood woman whose true identity lay hidden within her Self (the purse), and beneath a constructed façade. He repeatedly referenced specific motifs in his paintings, watercolour drawings and murals, but common inspiration found new expression with each attempt. Likewise, popular art historical themes concerning prostitution were revitalized by the artist as he transformed experience based on objective reality into emotive memories. If you were unable to visit the exhibition in person, you may view exhibition photographs of *Prostitutes*, Rando at work, the Opening Reception, etc.

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