



# UNMASKED

An exhibition on real and re-imagined superheroes

Work by: Carlos Donjuan, Hector Hernandez,  
Dulce Pinzón and Rio Yañez

Exhibition: August 27 – November 15, 2014

# UNMASKED

*Real and Re-imagined Superheroes*

By Joey Reyes, *Curator*

MACLA/Movimiento de Arte y Cultura Latino Americana opens its 2014-15 season with UNMASKED, an exhibition about real and re-imagined superheroes.

Diversity has come to comic books. As women and minority consumption of comic books and graphic novels has risen, so has the push to diversify its representation of superheroes: an African-American Captain America, a female Thor, and a Puerto Rican Spider-Man named Miles Morales, to name a few re-workings of the superhero stories we know so well. The Latino artists featured in *Unmasked* explore cultural and social issues of identity and otherness through the visual language of comic books, science fiction and superheroes; they also incorporate the heroic story of and expand on the mythology of the superhero.

Superheroes have been a large part of the American literary, graphic, and pop culture landscape since the early 20th century; their history can be traced back to epic tales of good versus evil and superhuman figures such as Achilles and Zeus. The many heroic figures in American pop culture range from Paul Bunyan, a larger-than-life lumberjack with superhuman qualities, to Mose the Fireman, the toughest firefighter in all of New York City. Superheroes capture the imagination because they are aspirational and exhibit

human vulnerabilities. They possess extraordinary talents or superhuman powers, but just as frequently they display their humanity: a refined sense of justice and equality, inventiveness, and courage, all the while concealing their identity. To unmask is to reveal. The artists in this exhibition reveal a malleable vision of the superhero as icon, one that embodies the qualities of hard work and sacrifice, humor and satire, vulnerability, and the ability to overcome adversity.

Carlos Donjuan brings the surreal with his playful and unusual paintings of masked figures, hybrid animal people, pyramid, and blob creatures which play with the absurdity of the term “alien” when referencing the undocumented. Donjuan has created a hybrid visual language composed of art historical references, graffiti, religious iconography, and touches on issues of immigration, politics, and undocumented youth movements. The figures in his paintings are often Latino youth, some undocumented, with their faces concealed behind shapes and patterns of color. Donjuan conceals through masking and creates hybrid creatures that hide in plain sight while fighting for visibility. These layered portraits illustrate the journey these superheroes have embarked on in the search of a better life.

Hector Hernandez’ gorgeously minimal

and provocative *Hyperbeast* series reduces the idea of superheroes into a language of form, color, and geometry to transcend notions of identity, race, and gender. Hernandez also reminds us that even superheroes are vulnerable. Otherworldly figures are concealed, gender obscured, consumed by pieces of cloth, and vulnerable to the exterior world, but remain visions of beauty in the movement of highly saturated colors from the materials that adorn them.

Dulce Pinzón’s award-winning photography series, *The Real Story of the Superheroes*, features real-life Latino immigrants working the toughest jobs in New York City. Pinzón has captured the city’s Latino immigrant working class in their daily work environment but dressed as well-known American and Mexican superheroes: window washer Bernabe Mendez as Spiderman, nanny Minerva Valencia as

Catwoman, construction worker Luis Hernandez as The Thing. We are provided with the name of their hometown and the monthly amount of money they send to their families back home. As Pinzón says, “the principal objective of this series is to pay homage to these brave and determined men and women [who] somehow manage, without the help of any supernatural power, to withstand extreme conditions of labor in order to help their families and communities survive and prosper.” This series asks us to re-examine our definition of hero and shows us that immigrants are the real superheroes.

Bay Area-based artist Rio Yañez wittily teams up famous American superheroes with heroes of *Chicanismo*. In Yañez’ re-envisioning of the superduo he seamlessly pairs the likes of Batman with Chicano performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña or Chicana literary



Carlos Donjuan, *I'm on Your Side*, 2011. Mixed media on birch.



Hector Hernandez, *Hyperbeast Lives/Gold*, 2013. Digital photography.

author Gloria Anzaldúa in a print series that envisions creative collaborations that fight injustice and comment on social issues. Yañez mixes real and fictional heroic stories and combines pop culture references with Chicano history and icons to explore alternative mythologies. In *Dark Knight Harvest*, the Dark Knight is transported from the streets of Gotham to the fields of America to bring justice to farm workers. In *Selena y Los Dinos*, the title of Selena's first album, Yañez pairs the legendary Tejana performer with dinosaurs, both larger than life, proclaiming their superhuman ability to transcend time and space and to be forever embedded within our consciousness.

#### *About the Artists*

**Carlos Donjuan** was born in San Luis Potosi, Mexico, and currently lives in Dallas. He received his BFA in Drawing and Painting from the University of Texas at Arlington and his MFA in Studio Art from the University of Texas at San Antonio. He has exhibited widely, including at AlterSpace in San Francisco, Antonio Colombo Arte Contemporanea in Milan, Gravelmouth Gallery in San Antonio, the Houston Fine Art Fair, the Hamptons Art Fair, and the Scope Art Fair. In his work he frequently revisits a childhood question: *what do illegal aliens look like?* Donjuan recalls hearing the term frequently, but never fully understood its negative implications. "I

always wondered what everyone was talking about, imagining weird creatures in my head...I wanted to meet one and to know what they looked like." He interprets these childhood memories and converts negative stereotypes into complex yet joyful portraits. In his paintings, masked figures, hybrid animal people, pyramids and blob creatures describe the journey they have embarked on in search of a better life.

Visit [www.carlosdonjuan.com](http://www.carlosdonjuan.com).

**Hector Hernandez** is a mixed media artist, photographer and installation artist. He was born in Laredo, Texas, lives, works and curates in Austin and has exhibited nationally and internationally. He is also the creator of the art blog "Art Czar." Recent exhibitions include those at MOHA (Austin, TX), the Texas Contemporary Art Fair FOTOFEEST, the Mexic-Arte Museum of Art, and the McNay Art Museum in San Antonio, TX. His long history with mixed media and photography has driven his most current work, as he has returned to such traditional materials as paper, fabric, photographed images, and fabricated artifacts to produce works that focus on the process of creating surreal characters/creatures.

Visit [www.hectorhernandezart.com](http://www.hectorhernandezart.com).

**Dulce Pinzón** was born in Mexico City in 1974. She studied mass media communications at the Universidad de las Americas in Puebla and photography at Indiana University of Pennsyl-

vania and at New York's International Center of Photography. In 2001, her photos were used for the cover of the Spanish-language edition of Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*. In 2002 she was awarded the prestigious Mexican Jóvenes Creadores grant. In 2004 she won first prize in the two-dimensional category at the fourth Encuentro Estatal de Arte Contemporáneo in Puebla. In 2006 she won first prize at the 12th Photography Biennial of the Centro de la Imagen in Mexico City. In that same year she was a fellow at the New York Foundation for the Arts and in 2009 she was awarded a grant from the Ford Foundation and nominated in 2012 to the Prix Pictet.

Her work has appeared in numerous magazines and newspapers, including Esopus, Marie Claire (South Africa and Thailand editions), Mother Jones, Rolling Stone (Italian edition), Vice, The New York Times, The



Dulce Pinzón, *Minerva Valencia is Catwoman*, 2005-2010. C-print on Sintra

Guardian, The Washington Post, La Jornada (Mexico), Reforma (Mexico), and El País (Spain). Visit [www.dulcepinzon.com](http://www.dulcepinzon.com).

**Rio Yañez** was born and raised in San Francisco's Mission District and currently works as a curator, photographer, and graphic artist. His primary interest is in combining icons and mythologies. His images bring together heroes, friends, and childhood fantasies with Chicano aesthetics, traditional images, and politics, as a response to the lack of Chicano art and iconography in cultural staples such as comic books, pro-wrestling, music, and Godzilla movies. As a curator he is a frequent collaborator with his father, Rene Yañez, and the pair have been developing exhibits together since 2005. He has exhibited in cities ranging from San Francisco to Tokyo. His re-imaginings of Frida Kahlo have included the *Ghetto Frida Project*, a series of prints, writings, and performance pieces featuring a thugged-out Kahlo. Yañez is also a founding member of The Great Tortilla Conspiracy, the world's most dangerous tortilla art collective. Yañez currently works at San Francisco's SOMArts Cultural Center as a curator and manager.

Visit [www.rioyanez.com](http://www.rioyanez.com).



Rio Yañez, *Dark Knight Harvest*, 2014. Digital print.



UNMASKED, installation view

#### *Acknowledgements*

MACLA Staff: Anjee Helstrup-Alvarez, *Executive Director*; Joey Reyes, *Curator of Engagement & Dialogue*; Letetia Rodriguez, *Business Manager*; Raeann Whalen, *Development Manager*; Vanessa Nava, *Program Assistant*; Melina Ramirez, *Program Assistant*; Ivan Martinez, *Digital Academy & Youth Arts Education Coordinator*; Michelle Torres, *Youth Education Program Assistant*; Catherine Nueva España, *Marketing Coordinator*; Earl Leal, *Lighting & Technical Assistant*; Dolores Barrera, *Facility Maintenance*; Colin King-Bailey, Damian Kelly, *Installation*; Jose Gonzalez, Elidet Guerrero, Alexis Lobato, *Interns*

MACLA Board of Directors: Nicolas Holguin, *Board Chair*; Victor Espino, *Vice Chair*; Bob Brownstein, *Board Treasurer*; Barbara Goldstein, *Secretary*; and members Lourdes Andrade, Alyssa Byrkit, Kyra Kazantzis, Linda Mendez-Ortiz, Jonathan Noble, Adam Rockwood, and Margaret Tamisiea



Movimiento de Arte y Cultura Latino Americana

510 South First Street, San Jose, CA 95113  
(408) 998-ARTE • info@maclaarte.org • www.maclaarte.org

MACLA is an inclusive contemporary arts space grounded in the Chicano/Latino experience that incubates new visual, literary and performance art in order to engage people in civic dialogue and community transformation.

Gallery Hours: Wednesday & Thursday, 12:00-7:00pm  
Friday & Saturday, 12:00-5:00pm  
Additional hours by appointment  
Free Admission

This exhibition was organized by MACLA. This program is made possible in part through support from a Cultural Affairs grant from the City of San José, the David & Lucille Packard Foundation, the Castellano Family Foundation, the Institute of Museum and Library Services, Silicon Valley Community Foundation, the Ford Foundation, Applied Materials, SV Creates, the James Irvine Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, ArtPlace America, Bank of America Charitable Foundation and MACLA donors.



Front cover image: Dulce Pinzón, *Bernabe Mendez is Spiderman*, 2005-2010. C-print on Sintra.  
Graphic design: Two Fish Design