

A CLOSER LOOK

Rafael Perea de la Cabada



Rafael Perea de la Cabada (Mexican, b. 1961, active USA)

Agua Bendita, 2000

Acrylic and mixed media on canvas, plastic bottles, cloth, metal

SBMA, Museum purchase with funds provided by the 20th Century Art Acquisition Fund, 2000.43.

About the Artist

Rafael Perea de la Cabada was born in Mexico. He moved to Santa Barbara in 1987 to attend UC Santa Barbara, where he earned his MFA. Today, he is an art professor at Santa Barbara City College and lives in Ventura, CA.

Themes

- Identity
- Immigrant Experience
- Mexican History
- Political Critique

Overview

In *Agua Bendita*, artist Rafael Perea de la Cabada blurs religious and cultural symbols of contemporary Mexico in an allegory to political change. The work's central image doubles as a bottle of Coca-Cola and the Virgin of Guadalupe, while also referencing the central emblem of the Mexican flag. Surrounding these intertwined icons are plastic Coke bottles filled varyingly with handkerchiefs emblazoned with the Mexican flag. Having created this work after former CEO of Coca-Cola for Latin America, Vicente Fox, was elected President of Mexico, Perea de la Cabada alludes to the polarities that make up Mexican society and the frequent conflation of politics, cultural identity, religion, and consumerism.

In *Agua Bendita*, the artist ultimately asks us in what vessel do we place our faith? Do we place it in religion, politics, technology, commerce, or in ourselves? He uses his art to make us think about these issues, but maintains that the most important part of the painting is the background—the smoky, obscure patches of paint that are not clearly defined and leave room for our individual interpretation.

Read: An Artist Interview

The following statements were taken from an interview with the artist in 2002.

On his training and philosophy as an artist:

One of the most influential teachers of my youth was Ricardo Rodea Bernal. He was educated at the Academy of San Carlos in Mexico City. His teacher, Antonio Rodriguez Luna, had come to Mexico after the Spanish Civil War—a war in which David Alfaro Siqueiros fought. Both artists had a profound knowledge of their craft, were inquisitive, experimental, as well as politically aware. My training was academic with a strong emphasis on drawing and craftsmanship and a broad exposure to the history of art at a regional, national, and international level.

For me, politics was never separate from the making of art. Art was directly connected to the community and capable of politically influencing, even transforming society. On the other hand, strictly “political art” was often viewed with suspicion. Sometimes it was dishonest manipulation, especially when the artist was connected to the ruling party. In those cases art was being supported, even funded, by the very system it pretended to be criticizing.

I developed my work at a time when there was a generational divide between artists. On the one hand, there were those who followed the muralist movement, who viewed art as a weapon or tool for social change capable of indoctrinating or mobilizing people. On the other hand, were the artists who believed in the universality of art and subscribed to a more poetic and lyrical visual language independent of political affiliation. Currents,

the extremes, and the grace in-between influenced me.

Art and life are two sides of the same coin—I cannot separate them. We need to reflect in our art the complexity of life, not reduce it to black and white statements. As artists we educate our eyes and mind to see deeper and better. We prepare ourselves to respond to our times both at a personal and a universal level with all the tools at our disposal. We should respond as we respond to the cry of our own child: immediately, with the same sense of urgency. That child is all of us.

Discuss: Making it Personal

- What symbols are part of your life? Do you understand them? Question them? Accept them at face value?
- What symbols do you associate with Mexico? With the United States? Where do these images come from? Television? Advertisements? Are they stereotypes or true reflections of the two cultures?
- The artist puts Mexican flags in the bottles. What would you put inside if you wanted to express Mexico, the United States, or another country?
- *Agua Bendita* addresses the power of the church, government, and advertising. If you were to make a similar piece relating to the United States, what are the principle powers you would want to portray? What symbols might you use to communicate those powers?



Activity: Making it Personal

If you were applying this image to you as an individual, not a country, what symbols might you use?

What are the “powers” in your life? School? Family? Friends? What do you keep “bottled up?” Write or draw your response.

This lesson plan was created by the Education Department at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 2020.
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