

## The illusion as a pretext.

Review on the Hugo Rivas Íntimo exhibition.

Museo de arte de El Salvador

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Curated Antonio Romero, Hugo Rivas's solo exhibition opened on the ramp of the Museum of Art of El Salvador, bringing together a series of life-size wall paintings, including a monumental portrait of Walter Mercado. Hugo addresses social issues linked to the Salvadoran militarist imaginary, offering a critical perspective in which humor and irony are part of the implicit discourse of the show.

In our creative field, multiple expressions linked to contemporary art are mainly fueled by certain limits such as; gender issues, postwar, migration, violence, among others—difficulties that we face daily as a society.

Hugo Rivas, through his profession as an art therapist for mental health at the Ministry of Health, is strongly tied to the consequences of these phenomena, and presents the impact that these issues have on our population within his work. Due to these experiences working with psychology and art therapy with vulnerable populations, his interest in historic and social conflicts becomes unique.

In his 2015 Vulgar series, Hugo opts for the aesthetics of the grotesque to address social problems in his work, which underpins the discursive axis of his work—criticism. With robust, deformed, vulgar bodies he shows us scenes of a reality that goes unnoticed before us, intending to make visible what we try to hide, what should not be shown.

The exhibition in the museum uses this same approach, it shows us a scene in which different characters enjoy an exhibition of paintings. Characters include; a portrait of General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez, another of “El General,” a Panamanian singer of reggaetón; a painting that references Pancha by José Mejía Vides and another monumental portrait of Walter Mercado who, holding the image of Atlacatl, enjoys a panoramic view of the entire show.

As Hugo states in one of his interviews, the transversal position of the exhibition is the military imaginary and its fiction. It is almost inescapable to talk about the history of El Salvador without talking about militarism and the dissatisfaction of social classes. In each of the characters portrayed, physical features stand out that do not necessarily correspond to an image linked to militarism, but rather a popular one according to the artist.

Defining what is popular or how it should be represented can result in ambiguous speculation, understanding that it is generally linked to the identity of a society: its cultural values, traditions, customs and belief systems that express its diversity.

Although the characters in Intimate contain certain peculiarities that could be classified as popular, the jocular treatment and black humor in them evoke ridicule, and the presentation of them to elites in a white cube space make them exotic.

Regarding the curatorship of the exhibition, the immediate reading offered by the exhibition can be interpreted as an apology for militarism, because certain formal elements are arranged in such a way that they cause a significant visual difference. In contrast to the popular characters, which are rendered with Rivas' vulgar and jocular approach, the military characters are treated in an idealized/romantic manner, which respects the formal characteristics of the portrait, eliciting more respect from the public. The visual weight of their golden frames also guides our attention to them and gives them a commemorative aspect like the portraits found in state institutions.



As the exhibition deepens, interconnections emerge generating dialogues between the Salvadoran general and the rest of the characters. Walter Mercado's image is related to the insignia of the Atlacatl Battalion, likewise, the portrait of Mejía Vides refers to the cultural development also promoted by the president during his administration, facts that, as Rivas affirms, are mixed with the fiction that circulates around Martínez.

The Reggaeton General is also in dialogue with Maximiliano, suggesting that the illusion of militarism in El Salvador are implicit in our reading, and that these illusions may correspond to the popular classes represented in the mural scene. Despite the common thread of fiction and romanticism that unites the three generals, the link between local militarism and the geographical/political context of Puerto Rico and Panama (places where Reggaeton and Mercado come from) seems to be blurred or unjustified.



Because the central character of the exhibition is General Martínez, the exhibition invites us to carry out an analysis of the value of militarism in El Salvador and the historical events linked to this privileged population.