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ART REVIEW

Angry, Funny and Concerned About Identity

by Benjamin Genocchio

You've got to admire Wanda Raimundi-Ortiz, the 35-year-old performance and video artist from the Bronx whose work is now being shown at the [Jersey City Museum](#). Despite the fact that identity politics in art has been out of fashion for a decade, she continues to make angry, difficult but also poignant and occasionally riotously funny works about being a Latina in the United States. Hers is art with something to say.

But unlike a lot of identity-based art, her work is never tepid or academic. This is because Ms. Raimundi-Ortiz is not interested so much in theories and philosophical debate as in what is actually going on out in the world.

This kind of art is not for everyone; it may make some people feel uncomfortable. But what I like about Ms. Raimundi-Ortiz is that she continually challenges the way we look at the world. Her performances pose alternatives to habitual judgments and prejudices, reminding us that how we see ourselves and others is bound up with an intricate mix of social and cultural mores.

The current show contains three video performances in which the artist adopts the speech, mannerisms and dress of a young Latina from the projects, known as Chuleta, and instructs her viewers in art world topics like postmodernism, identity politics, Color Field painting and Dada. It is like a cross between Robert Hughes's TV series "The Shock of the New" and a novel by Oscar Hijuelos.

Though numbered, the three videos here can be viewed in any order. Their format and content is pretty much the same, with the artist in each case taking an unfamiliar, often complex art world topic and then attempting to explain it using language, terms and analogies familiar to Latino teenagers. She is foul-mouthed, opinionated and sassy, with a fondness for food and Internet imagery. But through it all she somehow manages to get the basic information across.

It is easy to laugh while watching these videos, especially if you know anything about art. The third one, "Topic Three: Color Field Painting" (2007), is a lot of fun, especially a moment in which Chuleta, recounting a recent museum visit, recalls having seen what she believes to be the same painting by [Mark Rothko](#) at the dentist's office. Further reflection leads her to the realization that it must have been a print.

In "Topic Two: Pollock and Kahlo" (2007), Chuleta, dressed in denim overalls with a large hairbrush in her back pocket, gives an impromptu demonstration of how to make a [Jackson Pollock](#) painting. It is a mess. She then attempts to explain Abstract Expressionism before getting frustrated and, in desperation, advising everyone to order the movie about Pollock's life on Netflix.

Then there is the scene in "Topic One: Contemporary Art" (2006), the first video in the series and probably the funniest, in



DEMYSTIFYING The artist Wanda Raimundi-Ortiz, in her 2007 video "Topic Two: Pollock and Kahlo," with a promotional image of the actress Salma Hayek from the 2002 feature film "Frida."

which she explains the concept of the "white cube" gallery. Her explanation is matter-of-fact: "It sounds stupid but it is four white walls in the shape of a box where you be putting the pictures." It is refreshing to hear someone cut through all the art-world mumbo-jumbo.

Chuleta's naïveté can be charming, but her folksy and frequently skewed art history lessons have a more serious purpose. Time and again in these videos she makes reference to Latinos' being intimidated by the art world and not feeling welcome at museums. She repeats in all three videos that her goal is to "bridge the gap between the art world and everyday people."

One way the videos attempt to do so is by demonstrating how Latinos can see themselves and their experiences depicted in the work of artists. The paintings of [Frida Kahlo](#), discussed in "Topic Two: Pollock and Kahlo," become an occasion for reflection on the trials of pregnancy, female suffering and male infidelity.

In short, these videos have a dual mission. On the one hand they seek to educate young Latinos about beauty and imagination in art. But they also try to demystify art, to show how, at its best, it reveals something that may otherwise be invisible to us in daily life. This is a quality anyone, of any background or education, can appreciate.

"Wanda Raimundi-Ortiz: Ask Chuleta," Jersey City Museum, 350 Montgomery Street, through April 26. Information: (201) 413-0303 or [jerseycitymuseum.org](#). ■