

Art in America

MARCH 2005

SALVADOR DALI

MOMA: 7 VIEWS

AGNES MARTIN

RODNEY GRAHAM



\$5.00 USA
\$7.00 CAN £3.50 UK

REPORT FROM MONTERREY

Art Blooms in Mexico's Boomtown

While remaining one of Latin America's most stable financial centers, Monterrey is currently in the process of establishing a lively cultural identity befitting its vibrant economy.

BY DAVID EBONY

A visitor's perception of Monterrey as Mexico's boomtown begins at the Monterrey International Airport, where an extensive expansion and renovation project is currently under way to accommodate the city's growing numbers of business travelers, students and tourists. Foreign arrivals last summer were obliged to duck under scaffolding and sidestep ear-splitting riveters and sandblasters in order to reach a makeshift passport control desk. One can see signs of Monterrey's economic vitality everywhere. The airport express bus heading toward the old city center passes numerous—and often enormous—recently built industrial parks lining both sides of the highway for much of the 15-mile stretch.

The capital of the northern state of Nuevo León, which borders Texas, Monterrey has weathered Mexico's stormy political and financial climate in recent decades and remains one of Latin America's biggest economic success stories. Last year, *Fortune* magazine named Monterrey the best city in Latin America in which to conduct business. A lower crime rate and a higher education level compared with other sizable Mexican locales make the city a favorite outsourcing destination for U.S., European and Asian corporations seeking relatively cheap, efficient labor. In the past few years, new biotechnology and e-commerce firms have joined the electronics, building materials, auto parts and beer manufacturers that are at the core of Monterrey's economy. The city is also home to the Technical Institute of Superior Studies (ITESM), one of the nation's most prestigious universities, as well as the headquarters of Banorte, the only Mexican bank controlled by Mexicans.

Once little more than a dusty trading post nestled in a pretty valley surrounded by the Sierra Madre mountains and several extinct volcanoes, Monterrey and its environs are now home to more than 3.5 million people. Lacking the pre-Columbian monuments or early colonial landmarks of other important Mexican cities, Monterrey has struggled in recent years to establish a cultural identity that could match its extraordinary economic prosperity. The city's downtown area reflects the growing pains. In a dissonant mix of old and new architecture, glass and steel high-rise office and apartment buildings loom above historic 17th- and 18th-century terra-cotta-roofed stone structures on the quaint cobblestone streets radiating from one side of the Grand Plaza, a large grassy mall located in the heart of the city. Scattered throughout the midtown area, funky late 19th- and early- and mid-20th-century structures seem to anxiously await either a wrecking ball or a restorer.

Until fairly recently, the principal Mexican beneficiaries of the city's economic growth—multimillionaires who own second and third homes in Mexico City and abroad—participated little in Monterrey's cultural life, particularly with regard to art, whether in the form of museum-going, art collecting or exhibition sponsorship. For these activities, they preferred Mexico City,



Valeska Soares's installation *Vanishing Point*, 1998; at MARCO. Photo Roberto Ortiz Giacomán.

New York, Los Angeles, London or Paris. The opening of Monterrey's Museo de Arte Contemporáneo (MARCO) in 1991, however, sparked a change. Showing a wide range of first-rate exhibitions featuring important Mexican and international figures, the venue put Monterrey on the contemporary art map and helped spawn the city's modest but lively gallery scene and a growing community of emerging artists. Monterrey's young artists are receiving an increasing amount of attention both at home and abroad. Mexico City-based Francis Alÿs, for instance, recently selected the Monterrey collective Tercerunquinto as the inaugural recipient of the 2004 blueOrange award for the most promising new artists in Mexico [see "Artworld," Nov. '04].

MARCO

A sprawling modernist structure located at one end of the Grand Plaza, MARCO was designed by Mexican architect Ricardo Legorreta. The building was controversial at first, as some critics insisted that the money would have been better spent on bolstering the scant art education programs in Nuevo León's schools [see *A.I.A.*, Oct. '91]. But MARCO's \$11-million price tag now seems a modest sum compared with the cost of new museum buildings today.

Surpassing even the most optimistic long-term forecasts, MARCO eventually established itself as a popular, stable and respected institution. There is talk of an addition to house its small but expanding permanent collection. Some of its holdings formerly belonged to the now-shuttered Museo de Monterrey [see *A.I.A.*, May '94]. For now, though, the museum, guided by director Nina Zambrano, continues its pro-

gram of temporary shows of works by cutting-edge and emerging artists as well as more established figures. In recent years, the museum has worked in tandem with foreign institutions to bring international exhibitions to Monterrey. An exemplary trio of recent traveling shows resulted from the museum's successful collaboration with several U.S. art institutions.

Last summer, the large ground-floor galleries, a series of airy rooms surrounding a spectacular Legorreta-designed indoor fountain, were divided between a survey of 28 major paintings from the past two decades by the Nicaraguan artist Armando Morales and an exhibition of 19 recent large-scale sculptures and installations by Abraham Cruzvillegas, a young artist from Mexico City. The slightly smaller second-level galleries contained "Follies," a mid-career survey of sculptures and installations by the Brazilian-born, New York-based artist Valeska Soares.

Armando Morales

The long-overdue museum survey of works by Morales was curated by critic Christian Viveros-Fauné and organized by Betsy Wittenborn Miller and Emilio Steinberger of New York's Robert Miller Gallery in collaboration with MARCO. Subsequent to its Monterrey debut, the show traveled to Miami Art Central and Robert Miller.

A prominent figure in Latin American painting for more than four decades, Morales, now 78, was born in Granada, Nicaragua, where he maintains a home and studio. A one-time diplomat (appointed by the Sandinista government to represent Nicaragua to UNESCO in Paris in the early 1980s), the peripatetic artist, who has lived in Mexico City, Paris, New York



Above, Morales: *Railway Yard and Fountain, 2003, oil on canvas with beeswax, 51 1/2 by 82 1/2 inches.*

Right, Morales: *Tropical Rain Forest (Edge of the Verzea, Near Manaus, Brazil), 2004, oil on canvas with beeswax, 51 1/2 by 63 1/2 inches.* Both images courtesy Robert Miller Gallery.



and elsewhere, spends part of each year at his home and studio in London, where I visited him last year. As energetic and restless as ever, he is currently in the process of relocating to Barcelona.

After studies at the National Academy of Arts in Managua, Morales attracted considerable attention in the 1950s for abstract canvases featuring organic shapes rendered with crisp lines and muted colors. In 1957, his large painting *Spook-Tree* (1956) was acquired by New York's Museum of Modern Art, and in the following two years he held successful shows in Lima, Toronto, Houston, Washington, D.C., and New York. His international reputation was further enhanced when he won the Ernst Wolf prize for the best Latin American artist at the 1959 São Paulo Bienal.

During the 1960s and '70s, figurative elements began to appear in his work. Eventually, Morales arrived at the imagery for which he is best known today. His deft drawing and bravura painting style using oil and beeswax in countless layers of feverishly applied, small crosshatch brushstrokes result in dreamlike images in which refined figures, objects and landscape elements seem immersed in a brilliant haze. The textural nuances often lend the surfaces the appearance of

quilting or embroidery. Morales's imagery consists primarily of nudes, still lifes, allegorical scenes and landscapes in and around his native Granada.

Augmenting the lush sensuality of the images, certain shapes are outlined with narrow white bands carefully trimmed in the colors of the spectrum. These luminous contours, as well as similarly outlined white patches, appear in various areas of the compositions, as if the artist had viewed his subjects through a prism. While all figures, objects and places are ostensibly based in reality, the work has little to do with realism; it is perhaps more akin to Latin America's literary tradition of Magic Realism in works by writers such as Miguel Angel Asturias, Isabelle Allende, Julio Cortázar and Gabriel García Márquez. The latter, Morales's friend, contributed a 1992 essay on his painting to the MARCO catalogue.

Morales's penchant for visual narrative is most evident in the mural-sized *Annunciation* (1999-2001). Here, the crescent moon in the upper left faintly illuminates a phantasmagoric twilight scene. Cubist-style elements in the fractured landscape include an urn, a pitcher and an empty, rust-orange birdcage set beside the kneeling Virgin at center

left. Beyond the dark, slightly ominous shadow of the archangel Gabriel looming on the right, a farmer in the far distance goes about his chores, oblivious to the drama unfolding nearby.

Prominent among Morales's works are Nicaraguan jungle scenes, painted from memory, reminiscent of areas near his hometown. Today, Morales sometimes uses a camera to help with the compositions, but he does not square up the images or paint directly from them. One of the largest paintings in the group, *Tropical Rain Forest* (2004), approximately 5 by 6 1/2 feet, shows tall and twisted tree trunks snaking through dense foliage toward the top of the canvas. A sense of order and clarity prevails, however, even as the relentless verticality of the image is offset by diagonal bands of light traversing the composition from upper left to lower right.

The most resplendent of all the jungle pictures here, *Tropical Rain Forest (Edge of the Verzea, Near Manaus, Brazil)*, 2004, features a vertical progression of sumptuous shapes, from organic tangles of leaves and stems at the top of the picture to the nearly abstract, geometrized tree trunks in the lower part of the canvas. The quasi-Cubist look of the bottom portion is highlighted by prismatic passages that activate the surface and contribute to the work's overall brilliant luster.

Another favorite subject is Granada's distinctive old railroad station, which recurs regularly in Morales's work rather like the Piazza d'Italia in de Chirico's pictures. A fine example, Morales's *Railway Yard and Fountain* (2003), features in the background the turquoise arches and terra-cotta roofs of the station complex. The entire scene is bathed in an eerie, diffused light, as if a solar eclipse were underway. To the left, a female nude sits alone by the tracks in the desolate station. A trio of nude caryatids standing in the center of a fountain in the foreground could be either people or statues. They hold above their heads the fountain's silvery bowl, the brilliant white center of which, outlined in the colors of the spectrum, suggests a shining crystal. The gleaming ellipse serves as the nucleus and focal point of this haunting composition.

Abraham Cruzvillegas

While at polar opposites in terms of the means of artistic production, Morales's mystical vision is oddly compatible with Abraham Cruzvillegas's wry meditations on the mundane. As a student, Cruzvillegas, 36, participated in Gabriel Orozco's influential workshop at the latter's Mexico City studio from 1987 to 1991. Emphasizing unorthodox materials and display methods, accompa-

Cruzvillegas: *Syndicalism, 2003, gessoed handmade baskets, tennis balls, iron hook, wire, 23 1/2 by 29 1/2 by 29 1/2 inches.* Courtesy kurimanzutto gallery, Mexico City.

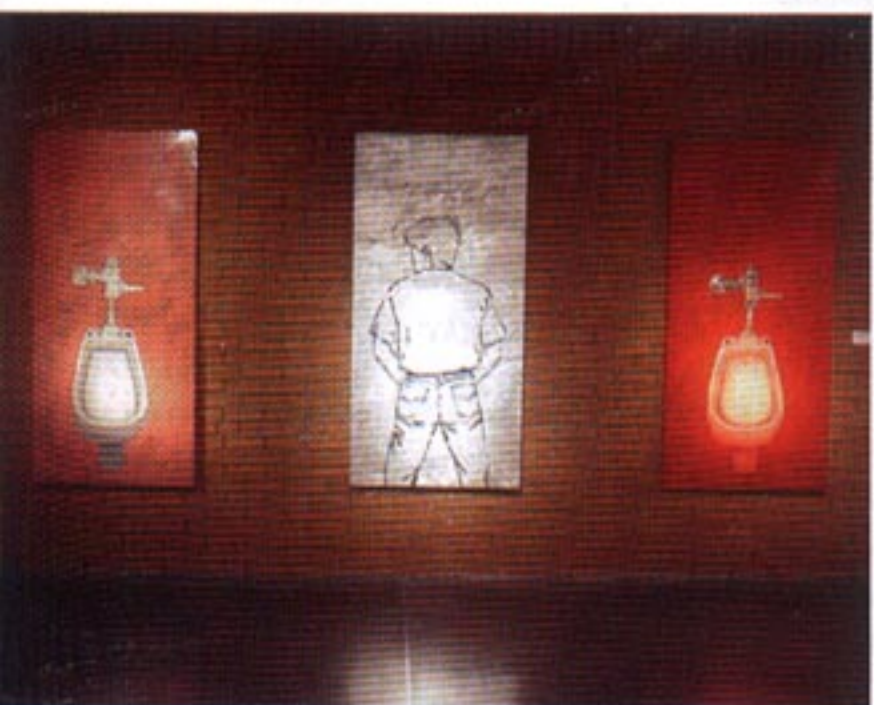




View of the exhibition "LARVA," 2004; at the Centro de las Artes.



Daniel Ruanova's Nuc-Them Operativo, 2004, vinyl on wall; in "LARVA."



Juan el Caballero: Apparent Independence, 1995, enamel on sheet metal on wood, triptych, each 69 1/2 by 34 1/2 inches; at the Centro de las Artes.

nied by in-depth critiques of each others' work and extensive readings on contemporary art, participants in these informal weekly sessions aimed to initiate an alternative to Mexico's outdated art institutions. Inspired in equal measure by Marcel Duchamp and Buckminster Fuller, Cruzvillegas produces sculptures and installations that often feature accumulations of found objects, usually discarded manufactured items as well as perishable organic materials that require novel installation methods. The objects are usually arranged in clusters, with a minimum of manipulation applied to yield the maximum poetic charge. The large sculpture *Martí* (2003), for instance, contains bunches of machetes joined at the handles and piled up in a prickly, seemingly precarious mound about 6 feet high. The work, whose title refers to the revolutionary Cuban poet José Martí, is a metaphor for violence; it also hints at the kind of jungle shrubbery that the machete is often used to cut down.

Since the late 1990s, Cruzvillegas has been showing extensively around the world. His international reputation grew with his inclusion in an Orozco-curated exhibition at the 2003 Venice Biennale [see *A.I.A.*, Sept. '03]. The MARCO show was curated by Paola Morsiani for the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, where it debuted in fall 2003. Covering one long wall, *Las guerras floridas* (2003), named after an ancient cannibalistic ritual, contains dozens of large maguey leaves pinned to the wall in a grid pattern. Used throughout Mexico to wrap meat for cooking on a barbecue, the leaves appear in various states of decomposition, changing the configuration of the grid as they eventually wither and fall off their posts during the course of the exhibition. *Syndicalism* (2003) suggests a kind of organic regeneration. The work features two large, gessoed handmade baskets filled with used tennis balls; they resemble giant seed-pods. Placed side-by-side, the baskets are raised slightly off the floor by a chain of rusted iron hooks connected to the ceiling.

Cruzvillegas has spent much time in remote areas of Mexico studying the work of local craftsmen. The delicate interventions that he applies to each of his pieces convey a hypersensitivity to materials and an attention to texture, form and color that echo those of traditional Mexican crafts. One exceptional freestanding piece, *Patriotismo* (2004), is an audacious conglomerate of disparate objects meticulously fashioned into a refined and cohesive unit that rests on the floor. Painted in rather garish hot pink and viridian green, the cluster includes a tortoise shell, a bass and trombone from a mariachi band, a gourd kalimba, a shark's jaw and a horse's tail. Each object seems to refer in some way to Mexico's unique disposition, as does the work as a whole.

Valeska Soares

Born in 1957 in Belo Horizonte, Valeska Soares adopts the vocabularies of Minimalism and Constructivism in her cool and edgy objects, photos, videos and installations. Sometimes she seems to parody these earlier styles. Works on view in this show reflect the profound influence of 1960s and '70s Brazilian artists, especially Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica and Cildo Meireles, and closely correspond to works by Soares's contemporaries such as Mona Hatoum, Rachel Whiteread and Felix Gonzales-Torres. Titled "Follies," the exhibition was curated by Marysol Nieves for the Bronx Museum of the Arts, where it debuted in late 2003.

The show's title refers to European garden follies of the 18th century. A major work in the exhibition, Soares's 1998 installation *Vanishing Point* consists of 15 large stainless-steel basins about a foot high, variously shaped like the manicured sections of an 18th-century formal garden's maze. Each of the tanks is filled with a perfumed liquid; one can get intoxicated (or nauseous) if meandering too long among them.

One of the most mesmerizing pieces on view was *Detour* (2002/2003), an installation consisting of a mirror-lined room. A feeling of vertigo grips the viewer

Although the figures, objects and places in Morales's painting are ostensibly based in reality, the work has little to do with realism. It is more akin to the Latin American literary tradition of Magic Realism.

upon entering the space through a revolving door and glimpsing the infinite reflections of oneself everywhere. Piped into the room, a continuous audio track relates the story "Cities and Desire," (from *Invisible Cities*) by Italo Calvino, a tale about three men obsessed with a woman they see only in their dreams. Soares uses another Calvino text in *Untitled (Picturing Paradise)*, 2003, a series of 4 large polished stainless-steel panels engraved in Spanish and English with lines from Calvino's story "Cities and Eyes." It is a version of a work originally installed on the high metal fence that runs along the San Diego/Tijuana border, a site-specific installation that the artist created for InSite 2000 [see *A.I.A.*, May '01].

Museum of Mexican History and the Parque Fundidora

After MARCO's successful debut, the next major addition to appear on Monterrey's cultural landscape was the Museum of Mexican History, a gleaming white modernist building designed by Mexican architects Augusto Alvarez and Oscar Bulnes. Located at one end of the Grand Plaza with a dramatic Sierra Madre backdrop, the 150,000-square-foot structure was inaugurated in 1994. Like MARCO, it was quickly embraced by local residents and on any given day of the week buzzes with school kids and other visitors. Permanent displays on two floors feature art and artifacts tracing Mexico's long and varied past. One features a respectable collection of pre-Columbian art donated by museum benefactors. The airy and light-filled ground floor contains two large galleries for temporary shows, usually traveling exhibitions originating from



Einar and Jamex de la Torre: Post-Colombian History, 2001, mixed mediums, 70 by 98 by 16 inches; at the Centro de las Artes.

Nuevo León's artists are only lately receiving national and sometimes international attention. But they are a vital part of Monterrey's struggle to emerge from Mexico City's formidable shadow.

Mexico City or abroad. An extensive and fascinating show of colonial-period paintings of nuns was on view last summer; featured more recently was a major exhibition focusing on the jaguar in pre-Hispanic art.

MARCO now has some competition in the contemporary art field with the recent opening of the Centro de las Artes at the Parque Fundidora, a sprawling cultural complex located on the site of an abandoned foundry that closed in the mid-1980s. Included within the grounds are galleries, cinemas, indoor and outdoor theaters, lecture halls, administration offices, a library, a bookstore, and an amusement park for young children, as well as large tracts of lawn. Adding to the park's special ambiance, a number of the foundry's rusted steel structures have been left in place, including tall smelting towers that loom over the space like enormous modernist sculptures.

The Centro de las Artes occupies two cavernous former foundry buildings that have been tastefully renovated. One houses the Pinacoteca for art exhibitions, plus a theater for concerts and other live performances. Across a narrow pathway an adjacent, nearly identical building accommodates the Fototeca, a large space used exclusively for photography exhibitions, and the second-story Cineteca, which includes a movie theater and a small exhibition area for shows of cinemabilia.

Two recent exhibitions at the Pinacoteca were characteristic of the venue's exhibition program featuring young and emerging artists from Mexico and abroad. On the ground floor, a large touring group show, "LARVA," whose initials stand for words loosely translated as "Laboratory for the Analysis of the Relationship between Life and Love," contained 34 major pieces, including paintings, sculptures, photos, installations and video works by 29 young artists from Baja California, particularly Tijuana. The second-floor galleries contained a survey of paintings by Juan el Caballero, a Mexico City-based artist who died of AIDS in 1998, at age 39. Within the context of Mexican art, el Caballero's homoerotic imagery is at once provocative, profound and moving. Most of the works on view feature stylized male figures in various states of undress. Rendered with thick outlines, the figures are set against stark, bright backgrounds, most often painted with enamel or high-gloss industrial paint

on sheet-metal-covered wood panels. A large, striking triptych shows at the center a life-size man rendered in black on white, with his back to the viewer, standing at a urinal stall. He looks to the left as if checking out the neighboring stall. Flanking this panel are two others bearing an image of a vacant urinal set against a bright red background. Another, smaller triptych placed on a pedestal suggests a devotional religious object. Here, the hinged, sheet-metal-covered panels show on the right a figure kneeling in prayer against a red background; on the left is a shirtless standing figure against a pink field. The central silver panel depicts an angel or putto with outstretched wings and arms, soaring heavenward.

Organized by critic and curator Marco Granados, "LARVA" was an ambitious collaborative effort of the Centro de las Artes and the Centro Cultural Tijuana. Much of the art showed an extraordinary use of materials and color that seems peculiarly Mexican. Outstanding among the works were Daniel Ruanova's life-size bright green vinyl cutouts of combat soldiers, which were pinned to the wall. These rather menacing figures were gathered near the corner, perpendicular to a mural-size digital image of a bright green forest. Lively figurative paintings by Tania Candiani are made with acrylic, graphite and pieces of fabric and colorful cotton stitching.

Einar and Jamex de la Torre, a brother team from Guadalajara who relocated to Ensenada in Baja, showed edgy sculptures made of unusual materials and accumulations of found objects. One witty and acerbic work in the show, *Mexican Buddha* (2002), is a stylized transparent pig, sitting upright, about 3 feet high, wearing a black top hat. A technical tour-de-force, the piece is made of cast resin and blown glass. Embedded in the glass is colorful flotsam and jetsam, such as coins, bits of crushed soda cans, toys, bottle caps, etc., arranged in the shape of an Olmec head visible through the pig's stomach. Another striking work by the team, *Post-Colombian History* (2001), is a large wall relief made of painted wood, fake fur, neon and glass. The piece shows on the left an Aztec figure covered in yellow feathers, holding a pink greyhound on a chain leash. A glass balloon coming out of the dog's ass, which the Torres refer to as a glass fart, is fashioned like a cartoon's voice bubble. It bears the etched words, "Post-Colombian History." The team produced the work during a residency at Grand Arts in Kansas City, Mo.

Galleries

Complementing the museum activity, several new commercial galleries have opened in recent years. Generally, Monterrey's contemporary gallery scene has shifted away from the old city center to San Pedro Garza García, an upscale suburban district. One of the city's most prominent contemporary art galleries, Ramis Barquet, recently moved from its Legorreta-designed space downtown to a storefront location in Garza García. Extending the program of its New York branch-



Fernanda Brunet: Kshakaka, 2004, acrylic on linen, approx. 6 by 8 feet. Courtesy Ramis Barquet Gallery, Monterrey.

es, the gallery shows mostly Latin American artists, including a fair number of Mexicans, such as Betsabeé Romero, Ricardo Mazal and Victor Rodríguez. Fernanda Brunet, 39, inaugurated the new space last summer with a group of her large-scale abstract paintings. These exuberant compositions of colorful splashes and pours with silvery metallic backgrounds seem spontaneous, yet they are carefully planned. Demonstrating a combination of hard-edge assertiveness, reminiscent of Nicholas Krushenick's work, and the super-fluidity of Inka Essenhigh's images, Brunet has arrived at her own style of precisionist Pop in paintings such as *Kshakaka* (2004).

Also in Garza García is Emma Molina, featuring emerging artists, and the long-running Galería Arte Actual Mexicana, showing more established modern and contemporary Mexican artists such as Julio Galán, Nahum Zenil and Jorge Elizondo. A newer venue on the scene, Alternativa Once, directed by Hugo Chávez-Vargas, represents mostly young artists from the vicinity and from Mexico City. Included in the stable are photo artist Pilar de la Fuente and conceptualists Francisco Larios and Daniel Lara. Also notable here are the intriguing portraits on legal-pad paper by Jérica López.

These and other Nuevo León artists have only lately received national, and in some cases international, attention. The artists and the art institutions of Monterrey that support them are slowly being recognized as a vital part of Monterrey's struggle to come out from under Mexico City's formidable shadow. Now that Monterrey has established an economic identity that is distinct from that of the capital, it seems ready, willing and able to assume its own unique cultural mantle. □

"Armando Morales" debuted at MARCO, Monterrey [Apr. 1-Aug. 8, 2004]. It traveled to Miami Art Central [Sept. 21-Nov. 7, 2004] and was on view in an altered version at the Robert Miller Gallery, New York [Nov. 19, 2004-Jan. 8, 2005]. "Abraham Cruzvillegas" debuted at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston [Oct. 24, 2003-Jan. 4, 2004] and appeared at MARCO [Apr. 1-Aug. 8, 2004]. "Valeska Soares: Follies" opened at the Bronx Museum of Art [Jan. 5-Mar. 14, 2004] and traveled to MARCO [Apr. 1-Aug. 8, 2004]. "Juan el Caballero" appeared at the Centro de las Artes, Monterrey [June 10-Sept. 8, 2004]. "LARVA" debuted at the Centro Cultural Tijuana [Jan. 30-Apr. 3, 2004], and traveled to the Centro de las Artes, Monterrey [June 10-Sept. 8, 2004]. "Fernanda Brunet" appeared at Galería Ramis Barquet, Monterrey [June 23-Aug. 8, 2004]. The author would like to thank Gerard McCarthy for his help with this article.

Jérica López: #5, from the series "101 Ways Not to Think About You," 2003, acrylic on paper, approx. 6 by 4 inches. Courtesy Alternativa Once.

