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# Domestic Affairs: The Poetically Political Art of Nery Gabriel Lemus

By Carren Jao  
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The works of **Nery Gabriel Lemus** illuminate the fractures incurred from cultural collisions. Informed by his childhood shuttling between a predominantly Latino urban neighborhood to suburban Granada Hills, in a bus full of Latinos and African Americans, Lemus's work gracefully exposes the subtle racial tensions between two cultures.

"There were hardly any African American families living [in my neighborhood]. Maybe one," recalls the artist, in his Altadena studio dominated by comic figures, books, magazines. His neighborhood's relative isolation allowed bias to reign undisputed; only when the artist cultivated friendships with African Americans, while at art school, did he come to understand the cultural schism between these Los Angeles populations. In today's Los Angeles, African Americans are still a minority making up 9 percent of the population versus 48 percent of Latinos, based on **2011 Census figures**.

In "Black is Brown and Brown is Beautiful," a series of paintings feature pastel-colored texts juxtaposed with hand drawn backgrounds to soften a hard-hitting message. In one, a sunny yellow text on the foreground asks "You've always loved their music, so why can't you love them?" while an old-school Motown-type microphone gleams in the background. Rose-hued words spell out, "Amigo, you think black people are okay, but if your daughter ever dated a black man, you would send her to Mexico," disturbing a 77-inch tall charcoal portrait of a African American man.

"Fallen Nature and the Two Cities" explores the same tenuous cultural divide by focusing on one hairstyle. Lemus filmed young Latino men in Latino barbershops and young African American men in barber shops getting their hair cut in the same lined-up fade hairstyle. At some point, he brought Latino men into African American barbershops and vice versa. By singling out a shared experience, Lemus established an aesthetic common ground.

Lemus has no signature style or preferred medium, he lets the idea take the lead. As a result, his work flits and shimmies effortlessly from drawing, painting, photography or video; to textile, ceramics and even sawdust.

What is evident, however, is his sense of poetry. Explosive though his topics might be, he spares shock and violence. Instead, his method of delivery sidesteps insult and dips into genuine elegance of expression.

Not one to be stereotyped himself, Lemus sees his exploration of race as part of a larger inquiry on domestic issues. Over the years, he's used art to comment on immigration, domestic violence, and child abuse. His work has not escaped notice. This year, he won a **COLA Individual Artist Grant** and a **Rema Hort Mann Foundation Grant** for his work.

"I'm a behavioral specialist," explains Lemus. For 14 years, the artist has been involved in social work. He's aided children in danger of expulsion in school, worked with convicted sex offenders, and now, helps parents and troubled children build more stable relationships. His exposure to Los Angeles's underbelly has been the foundation for his more recent work.

In "Until The Day Breaks And Shadows Flee," Lemus co-opted pocket-sized Mexican graphic novels -- which often depict domestic violence -- and translated it into an over-sized sepia-toned mural. He stripped text from the images and let the drama unfold in silence.

At last year's **Made in L.A.** biennial, Lemus paired the mural with "Alfombra Domestica," an ephemeral rug made of dyed sawdust, incorporating messages like "No more hurt. Pain. Violence" and "He says it won't happen again" in a bright graphic style. Much like a sand mandala's short-lived beauty, as visitors walked over the rug at the exhibition opening, its design was swept away, symbolizing change and healing.

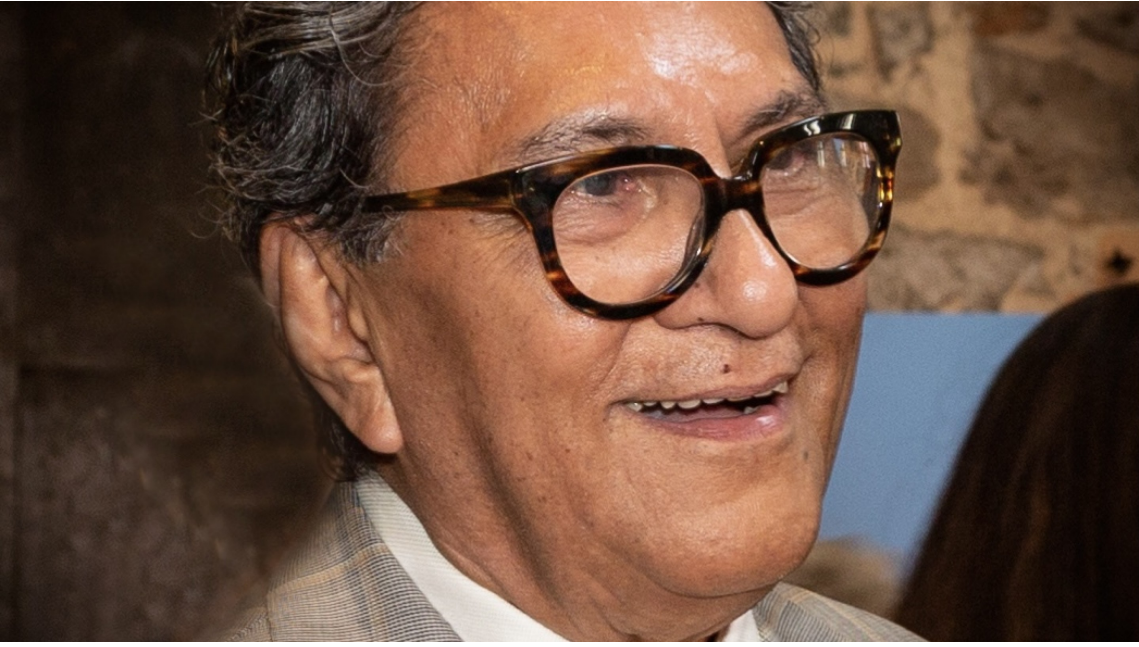
A married man with a small family of his own, Lemus now finds himself dealing with even more personal topics and finding within it the seeds of the political. For his upcoming show "A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich" at Chinatown's **Charlie James Gallery**, the artist tackles absentee fathers, a situation he considers to be a major contributor to social ills. Expect pop culture figures rendered in tapestry, poignant collaborative work with his six-year-old, as well as a piñata-inspired installation.

Though he knows firsthand the difficulty of balancing priorities, he says that shouldn't be an excuse. "I understand that you could never ever balance things. I've tried; you just can't. The problem is when you stop trying to balance it. You always have to strive for it. You always have to keep yourself in check."

"A Hero Ain't Nothing But A Sandwich" is on view now at **Charlie James Gallery**. It runs until March 20, 2013.

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