

Without Compromise: A Personal View of Raymon Elozua's Art

By Garth Clark

Raymon Elozua and I have enjoyed a tradition over the past decade or so. Whenever he completed a new body of work, he would call and invite my partner, Mark Del Vecchio, and I over to see and discuss the work. It was not a social call. Elozua has little use for small talk. There was no breakfast buffet waiting; just a cup of coffee and maybe a bagel. The purpose was to analyze and debate the new work. His most recent sculptures are ready to be viewed when we arrive, lined up against the Eastern wall of his combination living and working space just off New York's infamous Bowery all lit effectively with portable, clip-on spots. Coffee in hand, we then talk the work for several hours with the express understanding that the gloves are off. Elozua does not pull punches in his opinions and expects the same hard hits in return.

So over this time I have watched the work grow and change. It has been a fascinating journey across an increasingly harsh and unrelenting terrain. Elozua's work has toughened; tougher, more demanding, more complex in its messages and its conceptual games. He has also made it less accessible in a way, using textures and material combinations that are sharp and while radically textured, do not invite touch. He has been putting more and more pressure on the viewer to confront his art with the same ruthless integrity with which it is made. This is daunting art.

When I first encountered the work about thirty years ago, long before we met, I would have predicted a very different arc of growth. I might have wrongly pegged him as a sentimentalist. At that point he was making his most accessible work; water towers, billboards and drive-in movie screens. This was charming stuff. The craft was precise, loving and virtuoso. The small model-sized scale even made the work, if I dare use the word, rather cute. Each piece was warmed by nostalgia that we, his audience, brought to his art and which one felt was a sentiment that the artist invited from us. But we

were wrong. We were starting a journey with Elozua that was taking a very different route to the one that we anticipated.

In later years I came to look upon the early work as being separate from the later, more difficult oeuvre. But over the years it has fused into a seamless whole. There is no contradiction between his art then and the art now. It is just that the early stages of his journey offered a more charming aesthetic. Yet those works were still, once one set aside a seduction of their craftsmanship, about some nasty stuff; decay, death, man's messy contract with industry and nature. This was a collage of cultural detritus and the sub-text expressed all of its ramifications, a loss of dignity in labor, abuses of capital, rampant pollution, the destruction of communities and families as our society moved step by step, closing factory after factory, into the still uncertain global, post-industrial, service and information-age economy.

His art can be seen as a form of cultural decoulage. Decoulage is a decorative technique whereby multiple layers (usually different colored layers of paint) are degraded to reveal the layers underneath. It is about taking away to reveal interior surfaces. In a decorative arts sense this is designed to create an elegant but faux sense of use and wear, the effete expression of a history that never took place. But Elozua's form of decoulage is based on a real layering of time. With each successive body of work he has kept scrubbing away at this history until he exposed raw, inflamed, painful surfaces.

One saw this tougher agenda emerge when his beautiful wooden structures, made from clay with such felicitous, obsessive attention to detail, began to include strange cracked white buildings that resembled eggs or pods of some kind. While it seemed acceptable that the wooden structures were degrading, the destroyed buildings were much more ominous for they had the look of institutions, monuments or temples of an unspecific kind that were never meant to collapse. Their pristine white shards, shattered and scattered, carried more of a sense of violence than the more gentle and natural erosion of the wood structures that surrounded them. At that point Elozua's

work began to more openly challenge our notions of order and reflect more pointedly on the impact of institutional decay on the individual.

That message was delivered in its most literal and personal form at a solo exhibition at Carlo Lamanga Gallery in 19XX when Elozua explored his own family's history, growing up during the demise of Pennsylvania's once thriving iron and steel industry. The message was pro-labor, clear and angry. Some elements remained from his early work, of handcrafted realism, but they lacked the optimism of the younger art. These pieces were emotionally and visually heavy and dark, almost dank in their sense of moral rot. This experience of the rust-belt has indelibly shaped his vision, as he watched the blue-collar bridges demolished, one after another, severing this country's most effective and most democratic passage from poverty to middle class security and effectively trapping an entire class of Americans at the other side of this divide, where they remain to this day in minimum-wage decline.

Then his work shifted away abruptly from the literal into deeper layers of feelings, expressed in abstracted figures, often wrapped in formalism and increasingly influenced by the new technologies that have replaced the old industrial order. His interest in technology has grown and from early on he has used computers to translate art into new forms (such as music into paintings and vice versa), to separate the planes of paintings and turn them into sculpture. His work shifted into drawings in space and form, made from a mix of clay and a fire-resistant wire that came out of the kiln; sharp, crusty, awkward and potentially dangerous to handle both physically and psychically. I am not sure that Elozua realizes, comfortable as he is with his own techniques, just how difficult, alienating and lacerating his art can be, just in its tangible and material realm, yet alone in the next layer of meaning and metaphor. But Elozua does not make adjustments for his audience's comfort. Whether the thought even crosses his mind or not is not clear. I doubt it would make any difference either way. He is one of those rare artists who is without calculation or compromise.

His life is much like his art. There are no screens or masks when he is in social situations. As a result some fear him as a loose canon, others revere him for his bluntness and honesty. It is one of the reasons why I try never to miss a ceramic conference at which Elozua is speaking. I do not go for the inevitable explosions in the audience (he can stir up mouth-foaming apoplexy among those who are committed to the status quo.) This is a definite bonus but the real payoff is that, much as in his work, Elozua is ruthless at skewering and revealing the pretensions that cloak mediocrity in our field. One rarely leaves one of these events without Elozua's comments boring into ones brain like a diamond tipped drill.

Does he relish the role of provocateur? Is this a role that he has created over the years for effect? Does he perform for effect? My answer to that is a decided no. His work, his discomforting telling of truths is not theatre even though he work does have a touch of theatricality.

His living circumstances mirror his art and his persona. His home, appropriately close to the legendary grit of the Bowery, is the picture of unvarnished functionality. There is almost nothing in his life that softens, pretties, decorates or disguises. Everything is what it is, unvarnished and unembellished. There is no difference between the style of the space in which he works and that in which he lives. It is all one process, defined by utility and not by style.

By now I may have created in the minds of those who do not know Elozua, a portrait of a recluse and a dry-as-dust aesthete. That is not true. Elozua's toughness is softened by his searching, teasing intellect, his warmth, an eclectic interest in our times, a wicked sense of humor, and perceptive critical eye for other art. Elozua loves beauty as much as he loves truth. However, his idea of beauty is tougher than most.

One sees this in one of his private passions, collecting burners from old gas-stoves. Gas-burners may not be everyone's idea of the sublime but individually and collectively they are exquisite objects, torn from the guts of the stoves, no longer

delivering fire, they have formal majesty, merging unintended sculptural presence with functional precision. One cannot see and handle these objects without thinking of Stone Age relics, of reductive Minoan figures, or Brancusi's purity of form. Also one cannot help but wonder whether they are in some way trying to recapture, conceptually at least, the fires of the giant smelting plants that for a while put food on the Elozua family table and whose final extinction lit both a creative and a political flame in this artist's youth.

I trust that enough has been said to inform those who are new to Elozua's art that one should not expect to be entertained. Instead one should be ready to engage and maybe to joust. And do not think for a moment that his work does not give pleasure, it does, but it is the pleasure of rigor. It has a working class ethic, if you do not labor, you will not be rewarded. If you stretch, reach, think and question you will get back more than you might imagine. And finally, understand that you are viewing the career of an artist who is not a careerist. Elozua is one of those rare contemporary artists for whom art is not vocational choice, but is a trust and sacrament in which compromise and dishonesty are simply not options.

Garth Clark, New York City, 2002

[Raymon Elozua is represented by Ferrin Contemporary.](#)