



Crabella

SURFACE TREATMENT

What: *Alebrijes: Works of Mexican Folk Art* by Sandra Cancino
Where: Beyond Arts Gallery, 114 North A Street, Harlingen
When: Through Nov. 19. Hours are Wed-Fri: 1pm-5pm,
Sat: 10am -5pm
Contact: (956) 230-2859

Fanciful Creatures

Sandra Cancino creates alebrijes. Her brightly colored paper-maché creatures have the energy of living specimens perched on white pedestals. Currently held captive at Beyond Arts Gallery, several of them are on display. The folk art style sculptures are made with a technique the artist learned in San Luis Potosi where she lived for twenty years. It was there that she studied at the National Mask Museum and learned the process of mask making, cartoneria, and alebrijes.

Alebrijes are fanciful creatures that have elements from different animals, birds, and fowl, such as dragon bodies, bat wings, wolf teeth, and sometimes dog eyes. They are familiar to many of us as the 1b1r1l1g1h1t1l1y1 1c1o1l1o1r1e1d1 1O1a1x1a1c1a1n 1f1o1l1k1 1a1r1t1 1a1n1a1l1s1c1u1l1p1t1u1r1e1s, which they inspired. 1 1T1h1e1 1f1i1r1s1t1 1a1e1b1r1i1j1e1s1, 1 1a1l1o1n1g1 1w1i1t1h1 1u1s1e1 1o1f1 1t1h1e1 1t1e1r1m1, 1 1o1r1i1g1i1n1a1t1e1d1 1w1i1t1h1 1P1e1d1r1o1 1L1i1n1a1r1e1s1 1i1n1 1t1h1e1 111913101s1. It is recorded that 1L1i1n1a1r1e1s1 once 1f1e1l1l1 1v1e1r1y1 1i1l1l1 1a1n1d1 1w1h1i1l1e1 1u1n1c1o1n1s1c1i1o1u1s1, 1 d1r1e1a1m11ed 1o1f1 1a1 1s1t1r1a1n1g1e1 1p1l1a1c1e1 1r1e1s1e1m1b1l1i1n1g1 1a1 1f1o1r1e1s1t1 inhabited by1 1t1r1e1e1s1, 1 1a1n1i1m1a1l1s1, 1 1r1o1c1k1s1, 1 and 1c1l1o1u1d1s1 1t1h1a1t1 1s1u1d1d1e1n1l1y1 1t1u1r1n1e1d1 1i1n1t1o1 all 1k1i1n1ds1 1o1f1 1u1n1k1n1o1w1n1 1creatures. 1 1H1e1 1s1a1w1 1a1 1d1o1n1k1e1y1 1w1i1t1h1 1b1u1t1t1e1r1f1l1y1 1w1i1n1g1s1, 1 1a1 1r1o1o1s1t1e1r1 1w1i1t1h1 1b1u1l1l1 1h1o1r1n1s1, 1 1a1

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2t2h2e2m2 2a2l2e2b2r2i2j2e2s2. Colorfully painted, contemporary Oaxacan artisans
also carve them from copal wood. This phenomenon has been so successful that some
people have named the whole Oaxaca wood carving style Oaxacan Alebrijes.

But Cancino sticks to the original paper-maché form. She likes to incorporate different styles and ideas, and considers her work to be apart from the folk art experience. "It's not pure alebrijes," she explained. "Some have human faces; alebrijes do not have a human face, so that's where I mix in the mask making. I make my pieces more feminine and call all my alebrijes or sculptures "female" even though they may look very scary looking. To me they're all female."

With their bold colorations and imaginative constructions, the works in the show have the strong presence of the whimsical Oaxaca folk craft, but when Cancino references a real creature, she tries to incorporate its actual colors. With "The Mantis," it starts out green, but then red-tipped aqua spikes appear on the back and a vivid red patterned under-belly recalls a poisonous spider. "Butterfly Girl" is definitely an insect-human hybrid. Poised in stop-action thought, the delicately modeled face reflects the artist's mask making skills.

The human-hybrid pieces are the artist's strengths, and although "Monarch" is displayed as a signature piece at the entrance to the gallery, there is a self-conscious Modernism about it that seems insincere. Worse, it lacks charm. And rough charm is an important ingredient in Cancino's images. "Crabella", however, has it all. Clever in concept and uniquely patterned, this absurd creature is convincing. "I try not to copy; I know that everything we create has already been created years ago," Cancino mused philosophically, "but you try to be unique."

Nancy Moyer, Professor Emerita of Art from UTRGV, is an art critic for The Monitor. She may be reached at nmoyer@rgv.rr.com