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GALLERIES

Revisionist history with an acute vision

'Mirror' shows a Europe conquered by invaders from the Americas.

By Cindy Chang, Special to The Times

Alternate versions of history have been imagined by writers and artists alike, but seldom have those fancies been documented so pointedly as in "The Art of Smoking Mirror."

The show, by the Ecuadorean artist Eduardo Villacis at Bert Green Fine Art, opens with a map of the Aztec Empire on what appears to be very old parchment paper.

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In some ways, the map is reassuringly familiar. The contours of Mexico are faithfully represented, and a dotted line traces Christopher Columbus' voyage from Spain to the New World.

But any similarity to history as we know it ends there. Another dotted line snakes across the Atlantic Ocean, starting in Mexico and ending up in Rome. It is labeled "Warlord Itzcoatl (1503)." The continent from which the Niña, Pinta and Santa Maria set sail is not called Europe

but "Amexica — the New World." Britain is the land of "Quarantined Tribes" and Germany is the "Barbarian Lands."

Villacis proposes this alternate history in a mock museum exhibit that documents the conquest of Europe by the Aztecs through an array of fake artifacts and explanatory captions written in the simplistic, knowing tone of museumspeak. This is what Mexican schoolchildren might have seen on a field trip to the local museum had their Aztec ancestors colonized Europe, instead of the other way around.

In this world, there are no more Christians, leaving modern-day Amexicans to speculate about what god the natives of "U-rop" might have worshipped. "Entglitcz" is a lost language and Shakespeare completely forgotten. The Aztecs are just as cruel in victory as the Europeans were, enslaving the natives to build new cities on top of the ones they have destroyed.

"Smoking Mirror" — the title is a reference to an Aztec warrior god, as well as to the mirror-image version of history — opened on Jan. 11.

For Villacis, turning colonial history on its head was an attempt to come to terms with the deeply ingrained racism of Ecuador, where native Indians have traditionally been considered second-class citizens. His ancestry is mostly European, and even as a child, people treated him as if he were somehow superior to his darker-skinned friends.

"I grew up with this theme that the native culture is oppressed, that native values, all the things that native culture produced aren't valued. So I thought, 'What could happen if it were the opposite?' " Villacis said by telephone from Ecuador, where he is a university professor.

Villacis, whose father is a prominent Ecuadorean poet, lists as many literary influences as artistic ones,



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among them the magical realism of Gabriel García Márquez. Much of his work blends narrative and satirical elements from literature with drafting techniques from comic books and illustration.

"Smoking Mirror" originated as a graphic novel, mimicking the museum exhibit form, with fake historical documents, war weapons and illustrations supposedly by artists of the time, for Villacis' thesis project at Cal State Fullerton, where he was a Fulbright scholar. It was first shown at the Laguna Art Museum in 2001. Villacis is still trying to finish the graphic novel and hopes to publish it in the United States.

To dramatize Columbus' arrest by Aztec authorities on charges of illegal immigration and traveling without proper identification, Villacis' "museum" includes a detention document from that supposed incident, written in a pseudo-Aztec script.

In pastel and pencil illustrations, Villacis shows pyramids being constructed over the ruins of the Vatican (circa 1505), the Pope on trial for heresy in an Aztec court (1507) and a shining new Aztec city dwarfing what remains of Paris (1522).

Physical "artifacts" also move the Amexican story forward: a priest's vestments in a glass case, pistols and cannonballs decorated with fantastical motifs that Aztec craftsmen supposedly made after studying the weapons brought by Columbus and his crew. (Villacis designed the weapons himself and asked a sculptor collaborator to realize them in clay.)

The Aztecs' attempts to understand the European culture they are destroying are as comically uninformed as were those of the conquistadors in Latin America. Because the examples — Shakespeare, Michelangelo, Christ on the cross — are intimately familiar to western viewers, the ridiculousness of the conquerors' interpretations is all the more apparent.

One caption speculates that the European natives worshipped a god named Henry, due to the inscription "INRI" above the crucified Jesus. Another notes that the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel must have depicted an orgiastic bacchanal: "The two masculine hands about to touch each other thus would be part of a larger homosexual scene."

And just as really happened in the New World, Villacis' conquerors abuse the natives. One illustration shows German slaves used for transportation in lieu of horses. In several other drawings, the Aztecs marvel at the Europeans' pale skin and hairy bodies and spread exaggerated rumors about their strange appearances.

"The large amounts of facial hair of the native men fascinated the public. Many groups like the Spaniards were said to be so hairy as to have hairy tongues and ears. There were reports of Italians with hairy pupils," one of the captions reads.

"The significant question he's asking is, if it were the other way around, would it be all that different?" gallery director Bert Green said. "The answer is probably no. People are what they are, and the group in power tends to define power on their own terms."

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The Art of Smoking Mirror

What: The Art of Smoking Mirror: Chronicles by Eduardo Villacis

Where: Bert Green Fine Art, 102 W. 5th St., L.A.

When: Noon to 6 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. The artist will be at the gallery March 17 and 24 to speak about his work.

Price: Free

Info: (213) 624-6212; www.bgfa.us

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AROUND THE GALLERIES

Attention to disturbing detail

Aurel Schmidt draws faces whose features are defined by cockroaches, cigarette butts and condom wrappers.

By Leah Ollman, Special to The Times

Challenging the usual perspective

Turnabout is fair play — and the premise of an amusing, astute project by **Eduardo Villacis** at Bert Green Fine Art. Imagine, Villacis proposes, if the familiar conceptions of New World and Old World were reversed. What if, after Columbus arrived on the American continent, the Aztecs set sail for the east to "discover" and conquer Europe?

As Villacis envisions it in a museum-style display complete with didactic panels, conquest is conquest, whomever the victor. The defeated culture is dehumanized, their places of worship built over and their ways of life derided as alien and primitive. Villacis, an Ecuadorean artist who received his master's degree in illustration from Cal State Fullerton a few years ago, fleshes out this fantasy in faux-historical paintings, contrived documents and mock weapons.

The display reads as pseudo-history but looks more like the storyboards for an animated epic. Colors are lurid, figures are cartoonish and caricatured, and nearly every scene is set on an amped-up diagonal. The visuals feel far less nuanced and historically informed than the concept.

Villacis' lesson is timeless in its application, barbed with ugly truths and spiked with clever humor. In one painting, the pope quakes at the feet of an Aztec warrior. In a drawing of everyday life in the newly conquered land, an Aztec is shown riding the back of a sturdy Germanic slave, the original Volkswagen or "car of the people." Another chuckle comes from the witty bundle of anachronisms in Columbus' detention report, which includes a fingerprint and pictographic mug shot — all laser-printed on papyrus.

Bert Green Fine Art, 102 W. 5th St., L.A., (213) 624-6212, through March 24. Closed Sundays and Mondays.

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