

Juego de Lotería

Mexican icons get a makeover

Teresa Villegas hails from where the Mississippi River laps the eastern Iowa shore — Davenport, to be exact. But her vivid oil paintings prove that her heart is deep in Mexico, her land of artistic choice.

New paintings by Villegas and by Mary Antonia Wood anchor Chiaroscuro Gallery's Spanish Market show, opening today, July 25. But there will be an additional visual delicacy as well: selections from the 54 images Villegas created in honor of Juego de Lotería, the traditional Mexican bingo.

"Lotería is very common," Villegas said from her Phoenix-area studio. "It originated in Spain, then came to Mexico." Its first general dissemination there came in 1887 with a version created by French

businessman Clemente Jacques, she added.

"He came to Querétaro and decided to buy a

company — it was a fabrication warehouse where they made ammunition and bullets and canned food for the army. There was a little printing press in this big workshop/warehouse. They were using it to make the labels for the canned foods. He thought of printing loterías and putting them in the canned food sent to the soldiers.

"That's how the game spread. The soldiers loved it, this 'Don Clemente Gallo' version, so they brought it home to their families. The demand grew, then don Clemente started doing calendars and other games." Today, Jacques' descendants, the Landin family, still own and run the business.

Villegas met them on one of her trips to Mexico — and she had made many such journeys before. "I was going down there when I was 18," she recalled. "That was a little more than 20 years ago. That's when I moved to Arizona, to Tucson. I went to the university there. I traveled and lived in Mexico in the summer, more the central part — Mexico City, Guadalajara. I'd visit the beaches and all that, but they weren't as interesting in terms of histories and art" as the cities.

"I spent a lot of time in San Miguel de Allende. It's a beautiful Spanish colonial town, one of the seven major towns the Spanish colonists created. I spent most of the summers in San Miguel. It was easy to go there and rent a studio. It was too hot to work in Tucson! San Miguel is 8,000 feet. That's about where you're at in Santa Fe, isn't it?"

Villegas met the Landins as the indirect result of a National Endowment for the Arts Grant awarded through the Arizona Arts Commission. She decided to paint a lotería as her project and approached the family's company about doing research. When they saw the paintings, they asked if they could exhibit them in Mexico and if they could create a new lotería version using the images.

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Craig Smith | The New Mexican

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"I wanted to have food; I wanted to have strong Mexican female characters — they get so bypassed in history. I wanted pop-cultural icons. I wanted to accentuate the positive side of the culture. I thought of putting a cell phone in, but I didn't. I decided to paint more timeless things.

"It traveled to four different cultural centers," Villegas said proudly of the show. "At every opening, they gave away free copies of the game. The leftovers were sold, and the proceeds were donated to the Mexican office of Save the Children Fund. I'm giving part of my royalties to it too. It's a way I can give back to Mexico."

We don't tend to think of the Davenport, Iowa, of 30 years ago as a center of Spanish thought. But Villegas' grandfather — a playwright at a local college — loved the culture, she recalled. "My grandfather would write plays about Native Americans, plays about Mexican natives and Indians. That's how I got into Mexico. He was also a painter and actor. He was the cultural inspiration in our family."

Villegas' grandparents also traveled to New Mexico, she said, where they "hung out with D.H. Lawrence and Mabel Dodge Luhan. I remember asking my grandmother about Mabel Dodge Luhan. I said, 'What was she like?' My grandmother said, 'She was a very interesting woman, a very nice woman, talented, but her feet were always dirty. She never wore shoes.'"

Besides his journeys and plays, Villegas' grandfather "told me about the Mexican painters. And I always had an appreciation for some of the American regionalists — Thomas Hart Benton, Grant Wood."

Asked about the rather surreal look of some of her lotería paintings, Villegas laughed. "I love Magritte. He's my European influence. I did a painting as an homage to Magritte for this show. It's a floating head with clouds all around it."

There are several characteristics that define Villegas' style. Her images are carefully painted, usually on hollow panels, with great attention to detail, light and shadow. They tend to be iconic in feeling, with a generous dash of the unreal to them. And they're vividly colorful. As she said, "I love oil paints. I could eat them. My colors are influenced, of course, by Mexican folk traditions."

Chiaroscuro will exhibit the 54 lotería paintings in rotation, since there isn't room to show them all at once: The originals are large-scale, and the full deck display is 10 feet by 27 feet. "I prefer to paint large, but for the gallery, the special paintings I did are a lot smaller — 4 by 4, 4 by 6 inches. It was quite an exercise, painting them."

For more information, visit www.teresavillegas.com. ◀

DETAILS

▼ Teresa Villegas: *La Lotería and New Paintings*; oils by Mary Antonia Wood

▼ Opening reception 5-7 p.m. today, July 25; exhibit through Aug. 15

▼ Chiaroscuro Gallery, 708 Canyon Road

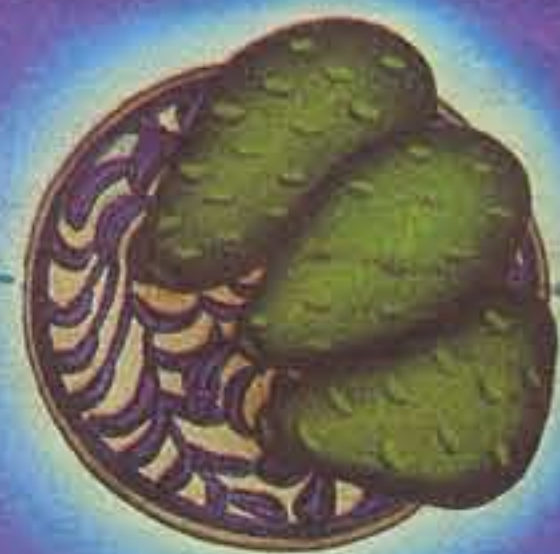
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EL TORITO

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Los Nopales

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LUJURIA

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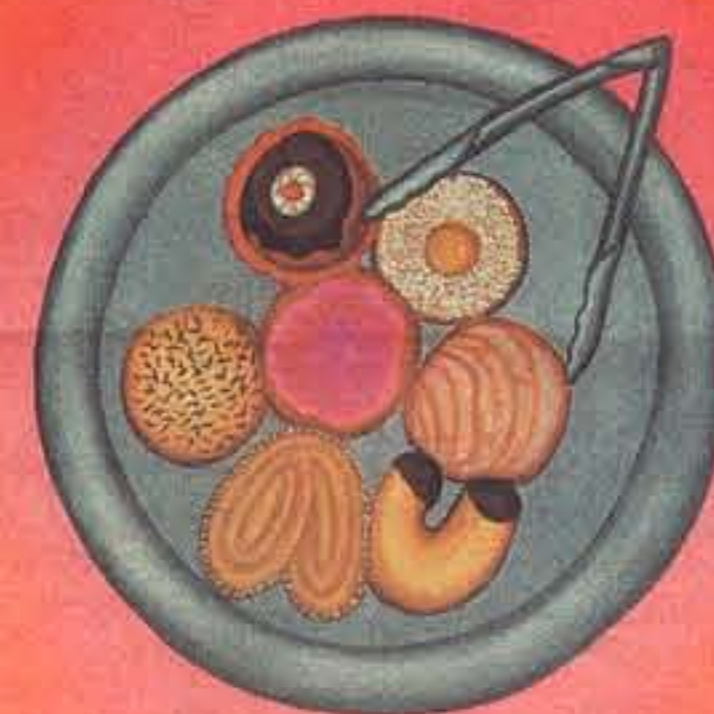
Polvo Magico

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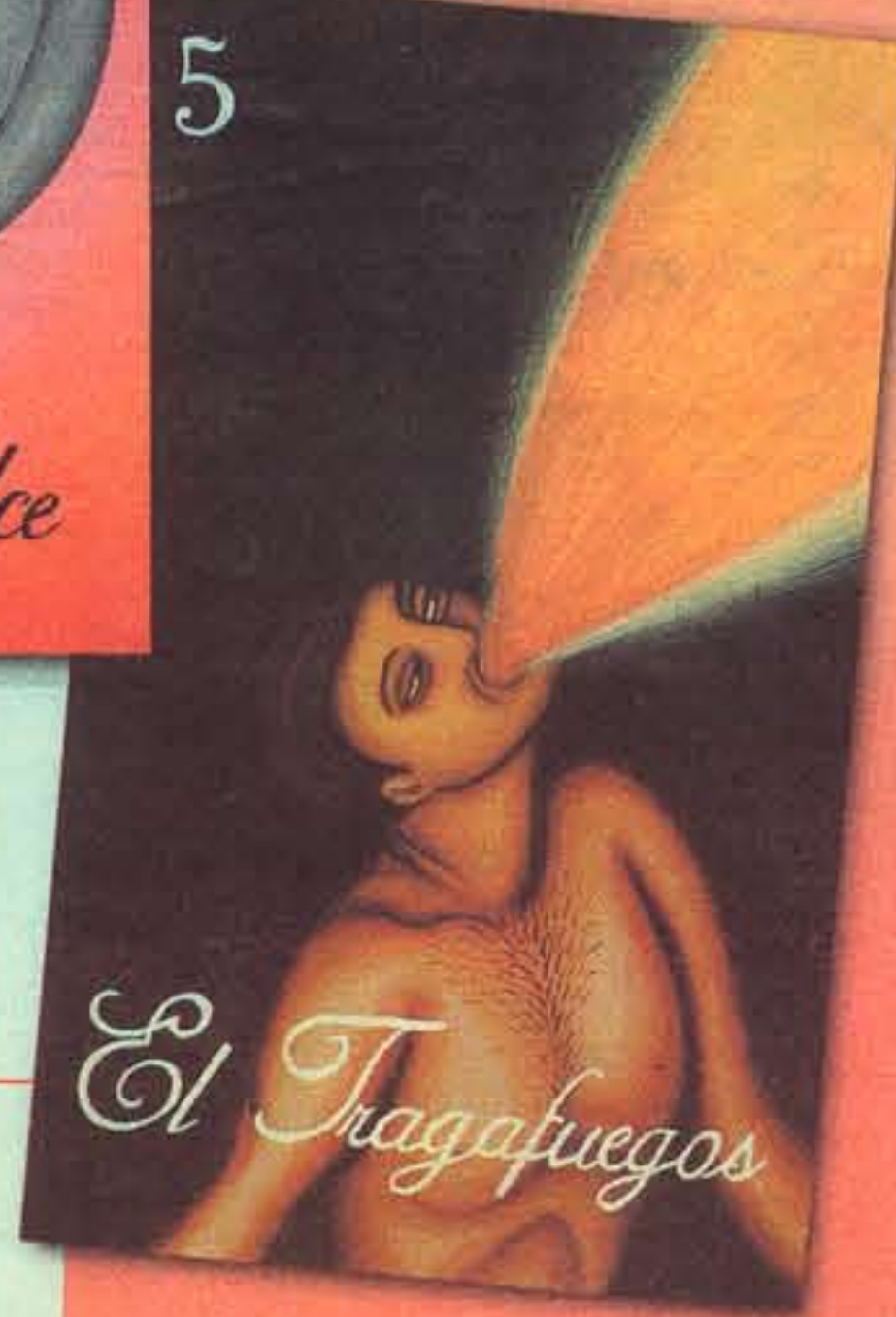
Cantar

35



Pan Dulce

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El Tragafuegos