



**JAIMÉ  
CARREJO**

**[An] immigrant, who maintains a close connection to a culture, inhabits a strange middle ground sharing two identities. This can be very conflicting. I think this middle ground is something most people share, regardless of where they come from. Culture may be a generator for identity, but it is the decisions we make on a daily basis that define us.<sup>1</sup>**

## Our Own Worst Enemy

This is an exhibition about identity. A complex visual story told by an artist who is constantly challenged by what it means to be a border-crosser, both physically (movement from one place to another) and psychologically (decision-making processes). Scholar Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, defines Chicano art as art that “seeks to link lived reality to the imagination . . . It intends that viewers respond both to the aesthetic object and to the social reality reflected in it.”<sup>2</sup> Carrejo’s installation, *Our Own Worst Enemy*, invites us to participate in a nuanced interplay of old and new metaphors for identity and uses whimsical iconography to question the circulation of multi-lingual signifiers. The images—*el burro* (the donkey), *la grúa* (the crane), and *la flor* (the flower)—are adapted from a children’s game involving chance and visual recognition called *Lotería* (lottery).

“I’m looking to where my family came from as a generator of metaphorical symbols that cross cultural boundaries,” says Carrejo, who was born and raised in El Paso, Texas. Situated on the U.S.-Mexico border, El Paso constitutes an important point of entry for Mexican immigrants traveling *la Carretera Panamericana* (the Pan-American Highway) to a better life in *el norte* (the north). The city functions as both a static and a transitional place, where those on the go pass through quickly; and those that stay are suspended in-between two cultures and they become: Mexican-American, Chicano, Hispanic, or Latino. It is this in-between state that captures Carrejo’s imagination and motivates him to investigate the sources and meanings of a more fluid “multi-hybrid” sense of self.<sup>3</sup>

However, this is not an exhibition about Mexican art or history. Although Carrejo uses a traditional folk-art aesthetic—piñatas and *papel picado* (cut paper)—he is not Mexican. He is American and the symbols, language, and culture that he understands as Mexican are Americanized versions of *Mexicanísimo*. Positioned between the past and the present, the Mexican-American artist assimilates a cultural identity through second-hand stories and *dichos* (sayings) told by those to whom the identity of Mexican truly belongs—his ancestors.

Although the following provides a guide for interpreting the individual components of this installation, it is not Carrejo’s desire for the objects to be read as isolated parts. At its core, Carrejo’s work is about a negotiation of individual identity based on a maneuvering of collective identity.

### El burro

The donkey is a beast of burden both physically and metaphorically. Initially domesticated as a pack mule, the donkey has become a politically motivated symbol for labor, stubbornness, and foolishness.<sup>4</sup> In re-presenting an oversized sculpture of a *burro* piñata, Carrejo playfully harnesses established metaphorical associations to connote an animal that has been burdened with a multi-hybrid identity. Producing the animal as a piñata, an object made of small scraps of material, highlights the amalgamated nature of this icon.

Piñatas originated in China as clay pots filled with gold and jewelry, candy, or food. Nobility used them as objects of entertainment. Due to the silk and spice trade, the piñata migrated to the

Cover:  
**Our Own Worst Enemy**,  
2009  
Paper flowers  
(detail)



**Our Own  
Worst Enemy,**  
2009

Wood, acrylic paint,  
metal, paper, and  
rubber; donkey,  
104 x 60 x 30  
inches; cart:  
44 x 43 x 84 1/2  
inches; crane: 74 x  
67 x 12 3/8 inches

Middle East, Italy, and Spain. Spaniards brought the piñata to the new world and transformed the clay pot into a seven-pointed paper star. Each point on the star was a stand-in for the seven deadly sins—lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy, and pride—and was used to indoctrinate the indigenous peoples of Mexico into Christianity. Piñatas were purposefully made of bright colored paper to emphasize the seduction of sin. The stick, traditionally used to destroy the piñata, was a symbol for God; and the act of destruction, or breaking it open, was synonymous with salvation, showering worshippers with gifts of fruits and candy interpreted as rewards from heaven. Carrejo is interested in the significance of the piñata as a translatable conduit for cultural exchange, both positive and negative. His investment in understanding the history of this object encourages us to rethink the piñata as more than just a fun activity at a birthday party or celebration.

Carrejo's *burro piñata* creates a *trompe l'oeil* (a trick of the eye) effect. We assume that such an object would be made of brightly colored paper. Yet, on close inspection, we discover that the artist has substituted the more ephemeral material of paper with a more stable one, wood. This code-switching—paper to wood—replaces one organic substance for another; each material remains wedded to a single point of origin, a tree. To give the organic substance a more illusive non-organic finish, Carrejo paints each wood tile with brightly colored latex paint, which tricks the eye into reading the piñata as made of plastic. Carrejo attempts to save the piñata from destruction by making it out of these materials; yet, in this act he also frustrates the inherent ephemerality of the piñata as something to be destroyed.

**I'm not necessarily interested in the history but in what the object has become, which strangely reflects back on its history.**

## La grúa

A crane is a simple machine designed to lift a heavy load while maintaining stability. Used as a tool for destruction and construction, the crane is also imbued with inherent contradiction. Located on the back end of the pink cart, the crane and “wrecking ball” become an extension of the donkey; maybe even a surrogate for its missing tail. On the other hand, the donkey is tethered to an object that has the power to destroy it. As he did with the *burro* piñata, Carrejo plays with our understanding of familiar objects. He makes the crane out of wood instead of steel, tilts it slightly (setting it off balance), and replaces the heavy-metal wrecking ball with a bouquet of white paper flowers.

## La flor

Flowers are given as offerings and gifts. Placed on a grave, they are symbols of commemoration. Given on birthdays and anniversaries, flowers mark a special occasion, as they are symbols of love, adoration, acquisition, and loss. Each of the flowers in the cart is hand-made by the artist, and the flowers function as gifts. Carrejo’s installation is intended to be activated by the visitor, as he invites us to write down a moment of indiscretion on the paper provided on the table; and, if we so choose, reflect on our action by first acknowledging it and then releasing it by putting the paper into the donkey through a hole located in its back. In exchange for this gesture we receive a white paper flower from the cart.

**I was thinking of the flower as a commemoration or reflection on people’s lives. In that reflection, people may change something even slightly and that is the significance of the wrecking ball; breaking things down by confronting them.**

## Papel picado

Cut paper is a Mexican art form in which intricate designs are cut out of thin squares of colorful tissue paper. Traditionally, the individual squares are strung together and hung as banners to commemorate feast days and celebrations;

typical motifs include birds, foliage, flowers, angels, skeletons, historic figures, and sometimes words. Carrejo repeats the traditional motifs in his designs (overleaf), but their meaning is far from traditional. Undertones of damnation, salvation, and resurrection lurk menacingly in each image. The graphic quality of these images abridges complex narrative structures; but the die-cut, vinyl decals nonetheless read as miniature investigations of selfhood.

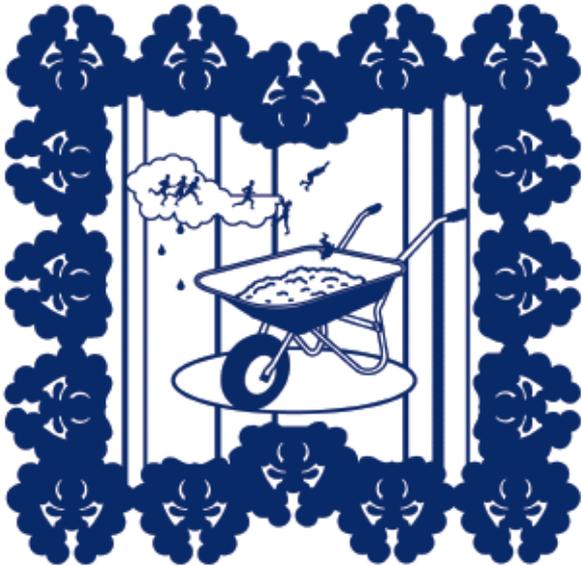
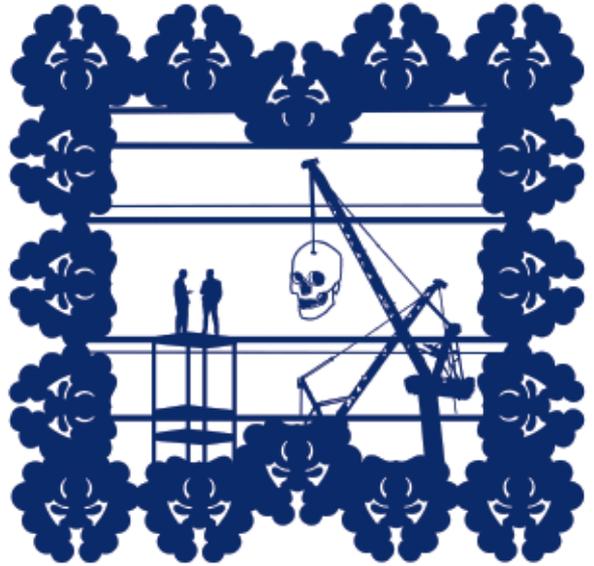
Ultimately, Carrejo sees his role as a conductor of collective experiences. He creates spaces between complex systems of identification and invites us to engage in our own retrospective analysis. Our own identities—gender, race, class, and sexual orientation—are called in for questioning as we write down our indiscretions, feed it to the donkey, and take a paper flower. We assume that once the piñata has been filled, the vessel and its contents must be destroyed in order to find liberation; for, at times, we can indeed be “our own worst enemy.”

Monica Huerta  
September 2009

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## Notes

1. Jaime Carrejo. All quotes by the artist are from an interview with the author, September 1, 2009.
2. Tomás Ybarra-Frausto is a professor of Spanish and Portuguese at Stanford University, and Associate Director for Creativity & Culture at the Rockefeller Foundation. He is also an active art collector and critic. See Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, “The Chicano Movement/The Movement of Chicano Art,” in *The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, eds. (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press, 1991), 128-150.
3. A poem by the “multi-hybrid” artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña: “Today, I’m tired of exchanging identities in the net. In the past 8 hours, I’ve been a man, a woman and a s/he. I’ve been black, Asian, Mexteco, German and a multi-hybrid replicant. I’ve been 10 years old, 20, 42, 65. I’ve spoken 7 broken languages. As you can see, I need a break real bad, just want to be myself for a few minutes, ps: my body however remains intact, untouched, unsatisfied, unattainable, untranslatable.” See Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *Dangerous Border Crossers: The Artist Talks Back* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 45.
4. In literature the ass provides comic relief in both Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer’s Night Dream* and Apuleius’s *The Gold Ass*. Donkeys also have strong affiliations with children’s games: pin the tail on the donkey, and donkey rides at the local fair. The donkey is associated with the Greek god Dionysus, is the animal upon which the Virgin Mary rode while pregnant with Christ, and the Hindu God Kalaratri’s mode of transportation. Just to name a few.



**Our Own Worst Enemy, 2009**

Vinyl decals starting at top left, clockwise:

- Border Crosser
- Reconstruction Time Again
- Preserver
- Lemmings

## About the Artist

Jaime Carrejo lives and works in Denver, CO.

Jaime Carrejo was born in El Paso, Texas. He received a BA from the University of Texas El Paso in 2002; did a post-baccalaureate year at Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, in 2004; and received an MFA from the University of South Florida, Tampa, in 2007.

Currently an adjunct professor of art at the Rocky Mountain College of Art + Design in Denver, Carrejo was a visiting assistant professor at The College of Wooster in 2008.

In addition to his solo exhibition at The College of Wooster Art Museum in 2009, Carrejo is part of a collaborative artist group whose video project, titled *Neighborhood Watch*, first took place in Tampa in 2006. *Take 2* and *Take 2 1/2* of the same project took place in 2008 in El Paso, with *Take 3* occurring in 2009 in Paris, France, and El Paso. The upcoming *Take 3 1/2* in 2010 will take place in Chicago and Denver.

Other collaborative projects include *National PARK(ing) Day* in 2009, and the *New Millennial Hanky Code Project* in 2007 at the William and Nancy Oliver Gallery, Tampa.

Group exhibitions include those at Covivant Gallery, Tampa, and the Shaw Center, Baton Rouge, LA, both in 2006.

## About the Author

Monica Huerta is a PhD candidate in the History of Art department at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. She received a BA from the University of Texas at El Paso and an MA from the University of Michigan. As a Ford Foundation fellow, she is completing her dissertation on contemporary figurative sculpture. Huerta was raised in El Paso, Texas, and identifies as Hispanic.

## Works in Exhibition

All dimensions are h x w x d inches

### **Our Own Worst Enemy**, 2009

Wood, acrylic paint, metal, paper, and rubber

vinyl decals, dimensions variable  
cart, 44 x 43 x 84 1/2  
crane, 74 x 67 x 12 3/8  
donkey, 104 x 60 x 30

## Acknowledgments

Fluidity of thought and the ability to synthesize disparate strata of our world—from complex theory to observed nuance—are often common denominators among artists.

Jaime Carrejo's installation, *Our Own Worst Enemy*, demonstrates these traits with humor and eloquence in this disquisition about borders, identity, and personal responsibility.

In addition to thanking Jaime for his generosity and clarity as an artist (and great laugh), I thank Monica Huerta for her elegant essay that contextualizes Carrejo's appropriated imagery.

I also thank The Burton D. Morgan Foundation for their support of this exhibition, as well as their continued support of the exhibition program at The College of Wooster Art Museum.

Kitty McManus Zurko  
Director and Curator  
The College of Wooster  
Art Museum



**Our Own Worst Enemy**, 2009  
Donkey (detail)

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## JAIME CARREJO

October 27–December 6, 2009

### **The College of Wooster Art Museum**

Burton D. Morgan Gallery

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