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### Artists look into the future...quizzically

By Patrick T. Reardon on Wed., 07/26/2009 –10:14 am.

Looking to the future can be an exercise in dread. Or filled with the thrill of excitement. It can tap into a sense of tranquility, or determination, or wonder.

That's what makes "El Proximo Centenario" ("The Next Century"), an art exhibition that opened in June at the National Museum of Mexican Art, so curious.

Instead of strong emotions, the seven artworks are tentative, even quizzical.

It's as if, asked to look over the next 100 years, the artists found their vision obscured by clouds. There's a surprising tone of ambivalence. Indeed, three of the seven works have no title.

### A nation holding its breath

This isn't a comment on the quality of the art. What I'm talking about is what these works say about the mood of the Chicago region at this moment --- and probably of the nation as well.

If an art exhibit had been mounted in the 1950s, after the U.S. had climbed out of the Depression and won World War II, there would have been a strong note of triumph and optimism. In the 1960s, the art would have reflected civil unrest, either from the point of view of the haves or have-nots.

A century ago, the watercolor illustrations from the Plan of Chicago, written by Daniel Burnham and Edward Bennett, were on display in the Art Institute, and they reflected the bold can-do spirit of civic leaders.

Here, in "The Next Century," I think the artists have captured a moment in which the nation is holding its breath, not exactly out of fear but not with a great

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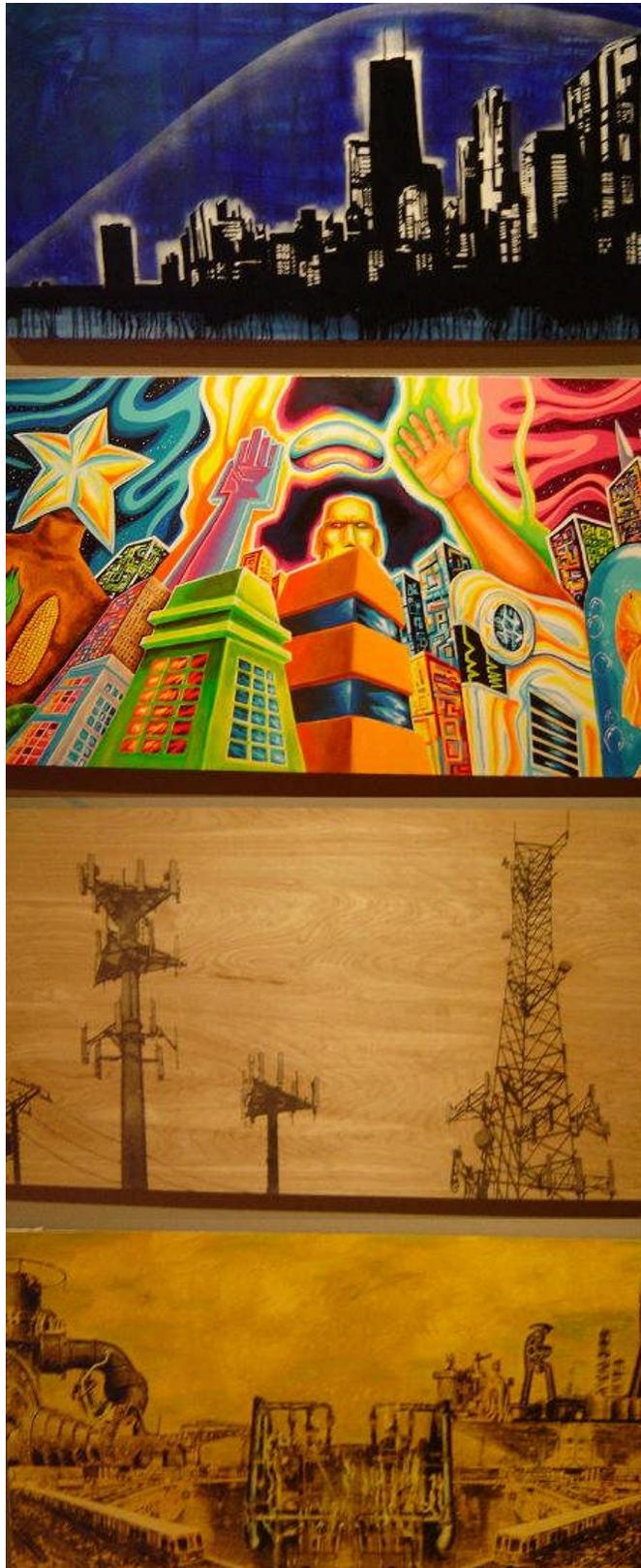
This blog is about history, planning and the future. It's rooted in the recognition that we live in a world that is created by plans – and by the failure to make plans. [\[MORE\]](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[Patrick T. Reardon](#) is a Chicagoan, born and bred. He has been writing about the city, its region and planning issues, mainly in the Chicago Tribune, for nearly 40 years. [\[MORE\]](#)

sense of security either. These works seem to come from a no-man's land. And perhaps that's where we're all living at the moment.



### From the heart

Although the works are by Mexican-American artists in a museum rooted in the blue-collar Latino neighborhood of Pilsen, my suspicion is that the artistic insights aren't

from the margins of American society, but from the heart.

The purpose of the exhibit, according to a summarizing statement, is to present “various perspectives of the transformation of Chicago into a new megalopolis as it moves into a new century....In the spirit of Burnham’s ideology ‘make no little plans,’ the cityscapes within this exposition present us with a conceptual depiction of a new plan of Chicago for the next 100 years.”

Among the seven rectangular works, all five feet by three feet, the strongest negative statement is an untitled work by Cirilo Esquivel. Images depicting giant machinery are laid over photographs of el trains and the Chicago River, and the surface is covered with yellow and yellow-green washes.



The colors may be there to evoke the idea of pollution, but it seems that, for Esquivel, the bigger worry is how the machinery of the modern world --- all the technology --- may be overpowering the future. It’s not exactly clear.

**Threatening or benign?**



The most positive of the works is the brightly colorful “Here Comes Tomorrow” by Ricardo Gonzalez. Skyscrapers form a border along the bottom half of this painting, and out of them rise two arms. Between the arms is the top of what may be a man’s head or possibly

a god's head, and above that head is an image of Millennium Park's Bean.



The upward thrust of the arms and the painting's vibrant colors seem to give this painting a hopeful tone, but that feeling is undercut by the man-god's head.

This head could be threatening or benign. There's no way to know. The eyes don't give a clue, and any clue the mouth might give is hidden behind the upper level of a building.

### **Two fists**

For me, the most intriguing art is "Chicago" by Antonio Martinez. What he's done is glue a roadmap of the city and suburbs to his canvas, and superimposed on the streets and block various size squares as well as splotches of green and yellow paint that give the work a pleasant feel.

But over all of this, Martinez has painted, in black outline, two fists, one facing up and one facing down.



To me, they look like Abraham Lincoln's fists as they were modeled in plaster and then cast in bronze in 1860, at the same time his life mask was taken. But this is too obscure a reading, I'm sure.

I only mention it because, in fact, it's hard to know how to read the fists. Obviously, fists are easy to equate with fighting, but that doesn't seem to be Martinez's goal.



They could be a reference to a fist-bump ala Barack and Michelle Obama at the Democratic National Convention.

Or they could be an evocation of fists that the oppressed of society raise in the air to indicate individuality and collective power.

It's very unclear. And intriguing.

Like this exhibit.

Like the future.