

Keep on Crossin'



Photo by Victor Payan

By Sandra Peña-Sarmiento

In a time when triple fences are being approved and political ads tout an immigration “invasion,” Perry Vasquez and Victor Payan’s KEEP ON CROSSIN’ project is a welcome addition to the current frenzied discourse on borders.

Launched in 2003 as a conceptual art project, KEEP ON CROSSIN’ advocates a fresh perspective on the current pop-culture paranoia surrounding borders of all kinds. The project, which continues to spark controversy, includes a patch, a plaster monito and a forward-thinking manifesto that states:

“When in the course of human events it becomes necessary to cross borders of political, social, linguistic, cultural, economic and technological construction...we will cross. For long before there were borders, there were crossers. We are the proud sons and daughters of these crossers, and we hold that crossing is a basic human right.”

When one thinks of all the freedoms that seem to be slipping behind triple fences of the mind, – segregation, gender & sexual, genetic, internet, spiritual, and cosmic...among others, it appears that we find ourselves in an age when “borders” themselves are everywhere.

An art movement that advocates for humankind’s collective “freedom to cross” with wit and humor, evokes the spirit of the Dada-ists – whose visually challenging work and appropriation of popular imagery emerged as a dangerous challenge to the status quo. At least Hitler thought so, when he confiscated much Dada work and exhibited it as “Degenerate Art” in 1937, as Germany marched headlong into madness. Similarly, the KEEP ON CROSSIN’ movement has been attacked at its most literal level by today’s party faithful. The Friends of the Border Patrol got their hands on a patch and pranced it around in the press. Still, other right wing militia groups have raged about it on the web and even posted one of the patch’s creator’s photo and personal info on the web. It appears that the Facists of today, still haven’t developed a sense of humor, much less an appreciation for art.

How did the whole hullabaloo start? Although Vasquez and Payan each worked on the celebrated Stanford humor magazine, “The Chaparral,” (Vasquez in the the early 80s and Payan in the early 90’s) the two did not meet until a chance encounter at San Diego’s once-famous Centro Cultural de La Raza.

The year was 1993, and the Centro was at that time still a thriving beehive of creative activity – presenting Guillermo Gomez Peña, the Border Arts Workshop and a string of groundbreaking exhibitions and performances of cutting-edge Chicano art. Vasquez curated Payan’s creations in two exhibits at the Centro, “Plan 9 from Aztlan” and “Apollo 13,” and a strong friendship was formed. During the next decade, Vasquez made a name for himself as a visual artist, while Payan earned acclaim as a writer while working as associate producer for award-winning PBS documentaries, such as “The U.S.-Mexican War: 1846-1848” and “The Border.” Payan also wrote for Lalo Alcaraz’s legendary “Pocho” magazine and pocho.com, where he chronicled the rise of xenophobia with zany yet biting news parodies.

When a boycott was called on the Centro Cultural de la Raza in 2000 (the result of draconian measures employed by a new administration) the celebrated San Diego Chicano arts community dispersed. Vasquez and Payan set up operations at the ICE Gallery, home of Vasquez’s Apollo 13 project. During a brainstorming session to come up with a patch for Apollo 13 – with a celestial theme a la NASA – Payan suggested appropriating R. Crumb’s Keep On Truckin’ guy and customizing him for the new border reality.

“It was a very positive message and seemed to capture the spirit of the times,” says Payan, “plus Perry’s Apollo 13 project already played upon lots of border symbolism.” The storied space mission not only serves as a starting point, but also evokes the “Raza Cosmica” vernacular of the Chicano rights movement and combines it with hidden references to everything from “pollo,” Mexican slang for a border crosser, to

Apollo, the god of the arts. Crumb's character was refashioned with a wide sombrero and huaraches, renamed "R. Curumba." The design was drafted by Vasquez, and a patch was born. "One small patch for man. One giant patch for mankind," declared Payan.

As the two artists prepared to unveil their creation at Voz Alta gallery in January 2003, they decided a manifesto was needed to add mojo to the project. Payan set about writing the document, which he penned and posted on the wall of the gallery even as the crowd was starting to arrive. Demand for the patch was so high, that the initial run sold out in a few weeks. A second batch was ordered, and Vasquez and Payan began work on their next artwork, an authentic Tijuana plaster statuette ("monito") of R. Carumba.

The success of the Voz Alta show was followed up in 2004 with the KEEP ON CROSSIN' awards gala at the ICE Gallery. The event launched the project into infamy. Thirteen statuettes were converted into awards and bestowed upon such honorees as Dolores Huerta, Los Lobos, Michael Moore, The Dixie Chicks and a local transgendered singer named Liberia --- each an influential "crosser" in their respective fields.

"The awards were given to people who demonstrated significant achievements in the art of crossing during a year when artificial borders were going up in every area of society," says Payan.

Fame and fortune soon followed as the KEEP ON CROSSIN' project was featured in exhibits at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, Self Help Graphics in Los Angeles and the Galeria de la Raza in San Francisco. Several hundred more patches were unleashed onto the public, spreading the Keep on Crossin' message and generating a mythology of "mojo," as patchwearers began reporting that the colorful talisman had helped them out of various tricky situations.

In 2005, Vasquez and Payan were invited to speak at a class on NAFTA at the California Western School of Law. As part of their presentation, they asked students to put the tenets of the manifesto into a legal framework, which Vasquez and Payan will work into stage two of Keep on Crossin', a fair trade movement known as the Baja Regional Trade Organization, or BRTO (pronounced "bur-ree-to"). Not to be confused with the Bisexual Rough Trade Organization, this madcap plan to redraft the US/Mexican border demarcation line at the 94 freeway (a reference to NAFTA's passage in '94) is a grassroots challenge to "free trade" agreements such as NAFTA and CAFTA.

"These two are the cleverest guys on the border!" exclaimed James Cooper, a photographer and Law Professor at California Western School of Law, who had invited the pair to participate in his NAFTA class. "I love...how (their) work constantly evolves and reinvents itself."

Recently, the pair also entered the publishing arena, contributing their graphics and

manifesto to the anthology *Sunshine Noir*, a compilation of San Diego writers, which includes work by Mike Davis, Reg E Gaines and others.

The work ultimately reached the attention of the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, who purchased a *Keep on Crossin'* installation (patches, monitos, lithographs, and manifesto) for its permanent collection this year.

At the recent opening for the MCA's "Strange New World: Art and Design from Tijuana," "Crossers" Perry and Payan were greeted as veritable 'rock stars' by museum staff, fellow artists and admirers as they embarked upon their latest caper. Payan was decked out as a suave "Luchador" (masked Mexican wrestler) with a microphone, conducting interviews while Perry videotaped the comic reparte for an upcoming video piece on their website, www.keeponcrossin.com. The Crossers' presence ignited animated commentary and curious stares as the duo darted from artist to artist asking, "Who would win in a fight, San Diego or Tijuana?"

For a project that is now three years old and keeps gaining momentum, it is clear that *KEEP ON CROSSIN'* has real staying power. In creating a series of vanguard events that cross into various disciplines...graphic art, writing, performance, happening and philosophy...all rolled into one, Vasquez and Payan have touched upon a nerve in the collective Gestalt of our era and will surely lead it into a whole new frontier.

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