

Miami Herald

Posted on Fri, Jul. 05, 2013

Discovering 500 years of immigration

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Special to the Miami Herald



One of Ricardo Cases' views of Latin Miami

Two exhibits are presenting two ends of the Hispanic experience in the United States, from vastly different perspectives yet intrinsically tied together, each sponsored by cultural arms of the Spanish government.

To mark the 500th anniversary of the first Spanish footprint on what would become U.S. soil, "Imagining La Florida" — at the Miami Dade College galleries at the Freedom Tower — is the story of the early Iberian explorations of the peninsula. At the Spanish Cultural Center (CCE) just down the street, a 2013 view of the results of that initial foray are laid out in photography in "Latino/US Cotidiano," which details the incredibly diverse culture that Hispanic America has become.

It's natural to start this fascinating tour with "La Florida," organized by Acción Cultural Española. The exhibit begins its historical tale with a replica of a Spanish galleon that you can walk through, as it is stocked up in Sevilla in preparation for the transatlantic journey. Ponce de Leon took off on one of these ships and landed in what he thought was an island of the Bahamas in 1513, but

which was in fact the mainland. In a mere 13 years after Columbus first arrived, the Spanish were already criss-crossing the Caribbean at an unbelievable rate.

But back to the galleon, where the conquistadors were crammed in with other travelers such as various tradesmen — including beer brewers — pigs and horses, weapons and food. As we continue to move through the exhibit, we find out more about the men aboard these ships, and about the people they found here in Florida.

Along with the details of the life of Ponce de Leon (whose fabled but probably untrue quest for the Fountain of Youth is documented here), we discover that early sailors included

African “conquistadors,” both free and enslaved — one of whom, Juan Garrido, accompanied Ponce de Leon on his excursion in 1513. Another black leader escaped slavery in the Caribbean to form the first free black community in the United States, in Florida. And there is a prominent woman highlighted, too — a favored Indian chief called Doña Maria, who lived near St. Augustine.

While interaction among the Spanish, the Africans they forced to the New World and the natives they encountered is a complicated and often tragic history, the exhibit aims at a straightforward, dispassionate account of these amazing formative years. Told through paintings, models and text, this is the story of an era that likely will be unknown to most visitors, but which is important to understanding who we are as contemporary Floridians.

At the CCE, dozens of large prints depict the lives of the hybrid world that would result from those initial Spanish incursions, the incredibly dynamic, varied Hispanic community — a population that in 2013 has reached the 50 million mark in the United States. Cotidiano means “everyday life,” which is what the 12 international photographers chosen for this traveling exhibit depict.

Ricardo Cases picked Miami to use as a backdrop for his set of photos — the skyline and street scenes will be instantly recognizable, as will the reality that Miami is a Latin city. Those high-rises and shiny cars, as well as the little pink houses and food trucks, belong to people of Hispanic origin; our city’s Latin life crosses all borders.

The same may not be so out west, suggests the camera of Hector Mata, who aimed his lens on Los Angeles for a series called L.A. Tinos. In one triptych, we see the Apple logo paired with an immigrant laborer, with urban buildings creating a gap in between.

Susanna Raab visited a rodeo outside of Houston, snapping shots of high-spirited festival revelers, working-class Mexican Americans in cowboy hats riding bulls standing in front of amazingly colorful wall murals.

Sol Aramendi on the other hand stayed home, taking photographs of herself dressed up, and in one case seemingly getting ready for a mermaid party. Normal, everyday life.

There are also behind-the-scenes portraits of glamorous actors from Mexican soap operas; a girl digging through her boyfriend’s drawer; a couple lying in newly fallen snow.

The most memorable, dramatic prints come from Dulce Pinzón: His giant Spiderman scaling the wall of a skyscraper, cleaning the window, hangs in the front of the gallery on Biscayne Boulevard, highly visible to the outside traffic. He depicts other superheroes in his scenes as well — there’s Superman on his bike with basket, the Incredible Hulk drilling on a construction site. One costumed hero is arresting a perp; another is hanging out in front of a peep show. In fact, other photographers in the show dress some of their subjects in comic-book attire as well.

While there is a humorous tone to all of these, they are also telling a compelling and relatable story about contemporary Latino life. There is nothing more American than Superman; the cultural icon has held the imagination of the country for more than half a century — and he has always held power. Immigrants and those outside mainstream

culture rarely hold such power, but it's a dream. In the meantime, one can dress up, don the fantasy, and get on a bike and go to work.

The photographer who goes by the singular name Calé also implies the lack of access to power, and loss of identity, when he blurs his subjects' faces as they stand in front of cold cityscapes — in one instance in front of an enlarged image of a \$100,000 bill.

The immigrant experience informs much of the work here, as it is something that still ties many of the various Latino communities in the United States together. Other cultural signifiers pop up as well — some religious Catholic iconography, faux-Baroque décor — but what is truly revealing is how disparate the images are of Latino life today. Five hundred years after the hybrid process began, the images look like everyday life in multicultural America, Latino and otherwise.

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