

CRAVE

“Empire” is the Long-Awaited Retrospective of East Village Visionary Arturo Vega

Bob Rauschenberg Gallery at FSW, Fort Myers, presents “Empire: An Arturo Vega Retrospective,” a tribute to one of the most influential artists of our time.



by [Miss Rosen](#) Nov 9th, 2016



Artwork: Arturo Vega, Empire, 1989 Acrylic and Silkscreen on Canvas. 80 1/4 x 132 1/4 x 1 1/2 inches, Individual panels: 80 1/4 x 20 1/4 and 80 1/4 x 30 1/4 and 80 1/4 x 31 1/4 and 80 1/4 x 25 1/4

Arturo Vega: you may not know his name but you assuredly know his work, as the Ramones logo is one of the most replicated images on earth. The mastermind behind it all was a tireless workhorse who toured with the band for more than two decades and nearly 2,263 live shows as the art and lighting director. And when he wasn't on tour he could be found in his loft at 6 East 2nd Street at Bowery in the East Village, producing artwork of his own, or on the scene, out supporting fledgling artists with advice, a place to work, or straight up purchasing their pieces to put money in their pocket.

Vega, who died in 2013 at the age of 65, hailed from Chihuahua, Mexico, where he was an artist and activist until the 1968, when he fled the country after being arrested en masse with 148 of the country's most notable artists, poets, and intellectuals including filmmaker Alejandro Jodorowsky. With the government carrying out disappearances, torture, and extralegal executions, Vega fled to New York, which he had already visited a few times, establishing a network with prominent figures including music publicist Jane Friedman.



Arturo Vega, What The Hell, 1994 Acrylic on canvas 54 x 162 1/4 x 1/2 inches Friedman remembers, “He was gentle. He was gorgeous—lusted by male and female like—but he was the most modest, kind man I had ever met. He didn’t like people arguing. He’d say, ‘Don’t do that.’ He was one of the most generous people you could ever meet. At his memorial, anyone could stand up and say anything, and everyone said the same thing: ‘If it wasn’t for Arturo, I wouldn’t be an artist today. I met him on a street corner, and he asked what I did; then he got me equipment and art supplies, and let me do it as his place and bought my work.’ He was a very unusual guy. Just amazing.”

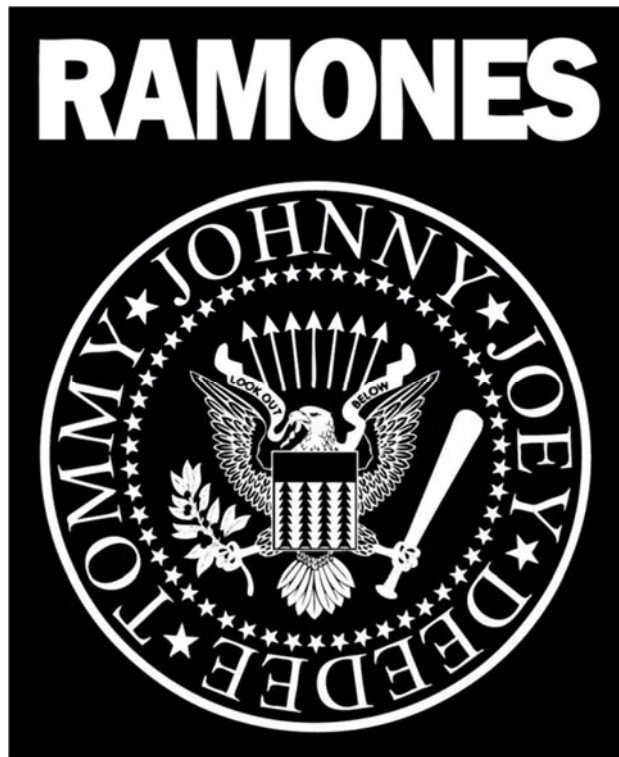
Arturo Vega’s generosity of spirit is mirrored in his friends who have come together to celebrate his life and legacy with [Empire: An Arturo Vega Retrospective](#) at Bob Rauschenberg Gallery at FSW, Fort Myers, Florida, on view now through December 17, 2016. Curated by Jane Friedman and Ted Riederer, both of [How! Happening: An Arturo Vega Project](#) along with Jade Dellinger, Gallery Director, *Empire* is a stunning retrospective of Vega’s life and work.



Arturo Vega, Untitled, 1977, Acrylic and silkscreen on canvas. 79 3/4 x 58 x 2 inches

The exhibition presents a recreation of Vega's white leather belt that featured an eagle belt buckle, which he had crafted after seeing Elvis sort something similar on his legendary white jumpsuit. The eagle was at the center of it all, both on the Mexican flag and the seal of the President of the United States—which caught Vega's eye while he was touring with the Ramones through Washington, D.C.

The seal was the inspiration for the band's logo, with the sinister bundle of thirteen arrows replaced by a baseball bat, as band member Johnny Ramone was a major fan of the sport. Around the eagle, the names of the band dropped in and dropped out, as the Ramones replaced members over the course of its 22 year history.



Ramones logo, designed by Arturo Vega

But, as *Empire* reveals, the logo was the culmination of Vega's many loves, a soliloquy of icons that repeat themselves throughout his work. Above all there was the circle, the perfect form, 360 degrees of symmetry that has no beginning or ending, no top or bottom. Within that circle all the world could be contained, in this case the eagle, the apex predator of the skies, as well as the star, the source of life from which we all come. And then there was the word, the word that could name that which registers as fact within our brain. Taken together, these symbols become one, creating an icon as supreme as it is timeless. It's hardly any wonder the Ramones sold more t-shirts than albums.

After 38 years, the Ramones first eponymous album was certified gold, selling half a million copies on April 30, 2014—whereas the t-shirt was an instant hit, famously stage-worn by the Sex Pistols' late bassist Sid Vicious back in the late '70s and has been knocked off by everyone from the Diplomats to the Muppets. But it was all love. The attitude was truly punk. It was more important to spread the word than restrict the design. Such was Vega's limitless generosity and his *joie de vivre*, going so far as to have the logo tattooed across his entire back and happy to share it with anyone who might be interested.



*Paul Zone Untitled, 2016 Digital Print 22 x 16 inches.
Curt Hoppe Untitled, 2012 Digital Print 19 x 13 inches*

And though he is gone, his spirit is never far away, for it finds itself manifest in the love of art, music, and liberty. *Empire* beautifully showcases Vega's vast bodies of work in a selection of seminal series that speak to his love of the spaces where the symbolic and the vernacular mix and merge. "My ideas come from the streets," Vega was known to proclaim, and the works selected here shown here are a testament to that ethos.

Empire featured Vega's iconic *Supermarket* and *Silver Dollar* series (both begun in the 1970s); his *Flags* and a selection of "word paintings" from *Insults* heard on the street, as well as more single large-scale works made in more recent years. Of particular note are the *Supermarket* paintings, which have aged and been discolored through happenstance and life, only adding to their authenticity. At a time when poor neighborhoods were serviced by sub-par stores, offering aged produce and low-quality meats like chitlins and tongue, Vega embraced the New York of old, honoring the ethnic influences that would one day disappear from his beloved community.



The Supermarket series at Bob Rauschenberg Gallery, photo by Miss Rosen

In the same way, the comments featured in the *Insults* series spoke to the New York experience. As art critic Carlo McCormick observed during a panel discussion at the gallery, “We’re New Yorkers. We like insults. It’s the way we talk to each other, the way we express our love... I could never really tell if they were insults or come-ons. Are you trying to pick me up or put me down?”

Such is the heart of Arturo Vega that radiates from within, like his portrait of Jesus Christ, which appears in his final piece, *Life Isn’t Tragic Love Is Just Being Ignored*. The underlying essence is: life is ambiguous. In order to create the whole we must fuse both sides as yin and yang. It’s only complex if you want things to be one way or the other. But if you accept that everything cuts two ways, you will find yourself inside the beating heart of *Empire*.