

More than 'the fifth Ramone': Art exhibit showcases Arturo Vega

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A painting in Arturo Vega's "Silver Dollar" series

(Photo: Special to The News-Press)



To punk fans, Arturo Vega was known as the “fifth Ramone.” He designed the Ramones’ famous logo, painted their concert backdrops, manned the merch table and attended all but two of the band’s 2,263 concerts. But Jade Dellinger sees more than just a punk-rock icon in Vega. He also sees an important artist.

And now he wants the entire world to know.

To that end, Dellinger has curated Vega’s first major U.S. art retrospective. The exhibit opened last week at Rauschenberg Gallery in Fort Myers and continues through Dec. 17.

“I think it’s important work,” Dellinger says. “We’re making a case for Arturo.”

The world appears to be paying attention, too. When “Empire: An Arturo Vega Retrospective” opened Nov. 4 at the Florida SouthWestern State College gallery, the room was packed with about 40 art experts, docents and journalists for major publications such as GQ, The New Yorker, Vanity Fair and Forbes.

The late Arturo Vega displays a back tattoo of The Ramones logo he designed. *(Photo: Special to The News-Press)*



With luck, Dellinger says, they’ll all write articles in the coming weeks and months and help Vega find the international audience he deserves.

Vega died in 2013, but former Ramones tour manager Monte A. Melnick wishes his friend was still alive to see the exhibit. “He would have loved it,” Melnick says.

A painting in Arturo Vega's "Silver Dollar" series
(Photo: Special to The News-Press)



Much of the artwork in “Empire” harkens back to Vega’s most famous image: The circular Ramones logo modeled after the U.S. presidential seal —with the band members’ names encircling an eagle and a baseball bat clutched in the bird's talons.

The logo remains popular even today, 40 years after the Ramones kick-started punk rock with their self-titled debut album in 1976. “We have kids coming in the gallery all the time wearing the T-shirt,” Dellinger says.



A stack of laminated backstage passes from Ramones concerts, including the band's last show in 1996
(Photo: Special to The News-Press)

The U.S. presidential crest didn’t just inspire Vega's Ramones logo. It’s also featured in many of his Pop Art-style paintings in the “Empire” exhibit, including the title work and Vega’s colorful "Silver Dollar" series that depicts an extended hand with a silver dollar in its palm — eagle-side up.

How you interpret that open hand depends on the viewer, Dellinger says. “It could be begging. Or it could be offering money.”

Those recurring silver dollars were Vega's commentary on money and its influence, including the influence of U.S. dollars on foreign countries such as Spain, Honduras and Mexico (Vega's home country). Those countries' flags and crests are also featured in the large-scale painting "Empire."

"It's all about U.S. monetary policy," Dellinger says. "It's about how our money affects other people in the world."



Arturo Vega's "Empire" features U.S. silver dollars and flags and crests from several Spanish-speaking countries. (Photo: Special to The News-Press)

Other pieces in the exhibit include art inspired by supermarket signs, a mixed-media collage that uses old vinyl LP records (including several Ramones albums) and entries from Vega's "Insults" series.

Dellinger considers the "Insults" series to be the most important component in the exhibit. In fact, those paintings are what first drew his attention to Vega in 1992, when Dellinger saw them displayed at punk-rock venue CBGBs' 313 Gallery.

Until then, Dellinger hadn't even *heard* of Vega, let alone appreciated him as a fine artist.

"At the time, I didn't realize his connection," Dellinger says. "I knew the Ramones, but I didn't know his role."

The "Insults" series features bright collages of paintings with words spelling out New York City-style insults — several of them not publishable in a family newspaper. "YOU IDIOT BASTARD," one painting yells in bold primary colors. Other insults include "WHAT THE HELL," "PEOPLE ARE ROTTEN" and "TO HELL WITH YOU."



A painting in Arturo Vega's "Insults" series (Photo: Special to The News-Press)

The paintings were inspired by what Vega heard from people as he walked the streets of New York City, Dellinger says. Vega was a bisexual man, and an immigrant from Mexico, too. So he was no stranger to insults.

"It's what he heard on the streets," Dellinger says. "It's what was shouted at him. ... He was impacted by what he heard."

As for the Ramones, they're part of the exhibit, too. Although Dellinger says he deliberately downplayed the Ramones to make room for Vega's lesser-known work.

The show includes, among other things, photos of Vega with his Ramones logo, a hand-drawn lighting scheme from one of the band's shows and a stack of laminated backstage passes from its concerts. That includes a pass from the Ramones' final show in 1996.

Vega was there, of course. He attended every Ramones show but two. On one occasion, he was sick. On the other, he was in jail.



This Arturo Vega collage uses vinyl LPs, including several albums by The Ramones
(Photo: Special to The News-Press)

Vega met the Ramones soon after he came to the United States as a fine artist. But after befriending the band, he largely gave up his fine-art career to tour with them, design their lighting and backdrops, sell T-shirts at the merchandise table and serve as their spokesman.

“He just became a big Ramones booster and fan,” says tour manager Melnick. “He just took off with it... He was there at just about every single rehearsal and show.”

Still, Vega’s artistic ability was always front and center. His lighting schemes and painted concert backdrops help put the Ramones on the map.

“Arturo got involved in the band’s earliest stage,” Dellinger says. “They were playing CBGBs. Then he gave them a backdrop. All of the sudden, they were professional. They had a logo. They had a lighting scheme.”

Throughout it all, Vega somehow found time to create many of the paintings that appear in the Rauschenberg Gallery show. Although most of his friends never knew about them.

“He hardly ever showed them to anybody,” says longtime friend Jane Friedman, who founded the Arturo Vega Foundation after the artist’s death. “And many of his friends didn’t even know it existed.”

A painting in Arturo Vega's "Silver Dollar" series
(Photo: Special to The News-Press)



Friedman and Dellinger hope to change all that with the new exhibit. The Ramones were great, she says, but Vega was so much more than the “fifth Ramone.”

“Every time you think of Arturo, you think of the Ramones,” Friedman says. “That’s human nature. But I would like to have the opportunity to establish Arturo, even a little bit, as a fine artist.

"I think his work is beautiful. His forms, his color, his messages — I think it’s outstanding work. I really do.”

Vega has had a retrospective in Mexico and some smaller U.S. shows, Dellinger says, but this is his first retrospective in a U.S. museum or art gallery. “Most of this work has never been shown before.”

And the Rauschenberg Gallery show doesn’t even represent all of Vega’s artistic accomplishments, he says. Maybe, someday, that work will get shown, too.

“There’s enough art to fill FOUR Rauschenberg Galleries,” Dellinger says. “And the quality is just as good.”

If you go

What: “Empire: An Arturo Vega Retrospective”

When: Now through Dec. 17

Where: Bob Rauschenberg Gallery at Florida Southwestern State College, 8099 College Parkway, south Fort Myers

Admission: Free

Gallery hours: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday

Info: 489-9313 or RauschenbergGallery.com