



THE VAN MAN

Ruben Ochoa has loaded up his art and headed for the streets of Los Angeles.

For the past few years, Los Angeles artist Ruben Ochoa has literally been on the road to success. A popular and appealing figure in the Culver City, Calif., art scene, Ochoa first captured local attention with an unusual project called *Class: C*, a mobile mini gallery in a delivery van.

"My family is in street vending," says the 31-year-old Ochoa. "They've been selling tortillas for 30 years now. That vehicle was a hand-me-down."

But whereas the public once came to the van to buy tortillas, now they come to look at art.

Ochoa outfitted the van with all the accoutrements of a contemporary gallery—a white cube exhibition space; an

office with a desk, a swivel chair, and backroom storage space—and invited artist friends to install their artwork. The vehicle is perfectly street-legal and requires no operating permit other than a standard driver's license, what the DMV refers to as a Class C permit—hence the name. So Ochoa can take it anywhere in L.A., especially to neighborhoods that are underserved by the art establishment. One time, Ochoa even followed his father's current delivery truck on its rounds, and the elder Ochoa's customers visited *Class: C* after buying tortillas.

While the *Class: C* van is largely retired from service (awaiting its place in some collector's or museum's permanent parking lot), it has appeared in several gallery exhibitions and is now the inspiration for an interactive video kiosk Ochoa is developing with a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. "It will be like this Eighties-style video game," he explains. "You drive the van around, sell tortillas and show art."

Ochoa's newest work continues to develop his central idea of engaging the public spaces of Los Angeles to undermine conventional notions of where and how art can be displayed. This month, he opens *Extracted*, a solo exhibition at the nonprofit space La><Art that focuses on the massive concrete retaining walls along L.A.'s freeways.

"Not only are these barriers physical, but they're mental constructs," explains Ochoa. "I look at these walls as cultural artifacts that unintentionally caused divisions between economic and ethnic groups. I imagine removing them."

First, Ochoa re-created a section of concrete freeway wall and transported it to a residential neighborhood in the process of gentrification. If the freeway wall initially seemed an unwelcome barrier or a foreign monolith, local graffiti artists soon tagged it and thus made it into a free-form, community-based interactive mural.

His second strategy was to unmake a freeway wall where it stood.

"I knew Caltrans [the California Department of Transportation] would never give me permission to remove a wall," Ochoa admits. "But it isn't really necessary. I can do it with Photoshop. I can essentially just wallpaper the freeway."

With a grant from the Creative Capital Foundation and the ongoing cooperation of Caltrans and the City of Los Angeles, Ochoa photographed a highway wall on the I-10 eastbound in the Boyle Heights area and plans to print a photomural that will superimpose an image of the green hillside behind the wall.

"If you're zooming down the freeway, it will look like a section of the wall has crumbled," says Ochoa. "But if you're stuck in traffic, you'll see it's just wallpaper." (A study for *Freeway Wall Extraction* will be shown on a billboard above La><Art.)

In high school, Ochoa's early interest in art was encouraged by his teachers, so he applied to the Otis College of Art and Design to study commercial illustration. Once there, however, he discovered he was more interested in fine art and switched courses. Ochoa remains close to his cultural roots, even if he does not identify himself primarily as a Chicano artist. His work, which is not overtly political, reflects a shared Southern California experience as much as an upbringing in the Latino community. For the sculpture *Mission Ave.*, for instance, Ochoa turned the standard base molding from a new suburban home into a bas-relief that calls attention to the evolution of Mission architecture, from historic adobe churches to contemporary fast-food restaurants, on Mission Avenue in his hometown of Oceanside, Calif. What Ochoa does like to do, though, is involve his family in his art. A brother worked as "gallery security" for *Class: C* (his punning T-shirt read, "Van Guard") and the family's fast-food restaurant, Carlito's Chicken, sponsored Ochoa's solo exhibition at the Oceanside Museum last year.

"You know how these big corporations sponsor exhibitions, so I wanted a mom-and-pop business to sponsor an exhibition," Ochoa says. During the show, Carlito's customers received a free museum pass and museum visitors received a coupon for a free meal at the restaurant.

"They went and collected on it right way," Ochoa says, recalling that the first coupon-bearers arrived at Carlito's within half an hour of the museum opening. "I was like, 'Wow. They went to see the show for five minutes—and then they went to get their food.'"

But for Ochoa, the coupon project was more than a marketing stunt. As with *Class: C* and the detached highway wall in *Extracted*, his objective was to confuse certain assumptions about who consumes art and why.

"I wanted to transpose the audience from one location to the next," Ochoa says.

He effectively made fast-food customers into museumgoers and vice versa, thus reminding both constituencies that there isn't as much distance as either might believe between the museum and the marketplace, or between collecting art and consuming a tortilla. —KEVIN WEST



From top: Ruben Ochoa's study for *Freeway Wall Extraction No. 1*; Ochoa; proposal sketch for La><Art billboard project; Ochoa's *Rigor Motors*.