

ARTFORUM

Raul Guerrero

KAYNE GRIFFIN CORCORAN

In 1989, Raul Guerrero visited Canyon de Chelly, a site where Ancestral Puebloans built spectacular dwellings among sheer rock escarpments, and where, nearby, dozens of Diné families continue to live (the United States holds the land in trust for the Navajo Nation). It is a knee-buckling place. Guerrero encountered the striking rock formations and petroglyphs left by the canyon's many inhabitants over thousands of years—Ancestral Puebloans, Hopi, then Diné. Canyon de Chelly's natural and man-made features are instantly recognizable from commonly reproduced photographs by Ansel Adams and Edward S. Curtis. Both photographers participated in the mythification of the Southwest as a place of dramatic voids—geological, but also anthropological (lest we forget Curtis's *The Vanishing Race—Navajo*, a 1904 photograph of indigenous people riding off into a perspectival point of no return). While visiting this storied place, Guerrero, who has written of his ancestral connection to the Yaqui and Tarahumara (now living in the Mexican states of Chihuahua, Durango, and Sonora), gathered together a group of multicolored stones and arranged them in an ersatz happy face, taking a photograph of his creation for posterity. This gesture, which can be understood as an irreverent (and some might say disrespectful) extension of the iconic pictographs in the canyon, matches the tone of much of the artist's work made in the intervening years, which often negotiates (or at least articulates) the distance between artifact and artifice. Guerrero twists Sonoran kitsch—the flotsam of an economy built on nonindigenous tourist demands for "authentic" indigenous images and objects—into a sublime visual précis of his moment.

In the years since Guerrero's trip, this smiley face has appeared in several of his paintings, including two that were on display in the artist's first exhibition with Kayne Griffin Corcoran. *Canyon de Chelly, Arizona* (all works cited, 2019), a nine-foot-tall painting of the rock arrangement, revisits the artist's 1989 gesture with a kind of ironic reverence—pitting the painting's grand size against the small, temporary, and informal gathering of stones. The smiley face is easier to miss in *A Desert Road*, but it's there, on the ground, pictured between a

winsome, classically rendered European nude and a kachina (wearing a mask representing a bear) locked in a de Chirico-esque *High Noon* standoff. Blooming saguaro, a frog, a roadrunner, a Walmart truck, and a line of black ants also populate the scene of this supremely weird and satisfying painting. Acknowledging both the spiritual and economic realities of the Sonoran Desert, where semitrucks haul goods back and forth on the east-west route of highways such as US 60, Guerrero points out where the stereotypical romance of the desert meets the dystopia of consumer capitalism.

Building on the artist's impish wit were a series of three mechanically spinning tondos, painted in the style of Mimbres pottery. Guerrero has long deployed rotation as a key strategy of his practice, first with his replica of Marcel Duchamp's *Rotary Glass Plates (Precision Optics)*, 1920, which he made while an art student at Los Angeles's Chouinard Art Institute (now CalArts), then in *Rotating Yaqui Mask*, 1973, and again, more than forty years later, in the series "Rotating Native Americans," 2015–16, a series of laminated digital prints that can be mounted onto a record player–like device. The last work again invokes Duchamp, riffing on his kinetic Rotoreliefs of 1935/1953. Whereas Duchamp's rotations facilitated what he termed "retinal" art, Guerrero's applications are closer to Georg Baselitz's upside-down paintings, which defamiliarize the artist's otherwise representational images. Guerrero's revolving paintings here were spare and droll. *Mimbres: Road Runner and Coyote*, for example, invoked the eternally dueling duo of *Looney Tunes* fame with a petroglyph-ish coyote and an illustrated roadrunner moving in opposite directions. Turning at a lethargic 6 rpm, the coyote and roadrunner appear to be locked in a race without resolution. As demonstrated here and throughout this compact and potent exhibition, Guerrero's love for the absurd mediates his understanding of the human and animal ecologies of the Southwest.

—Andy Campbell

Raul Guerrero,
A Desert Road, 2019,
oil on linen, 80 × 108".

