

Border-blurring show finally has a U.S. stage

[Jesse Hamlin, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

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Finding an acupuncturist in San Francisco is easy. But it's a bit more challenging to get one who's willing to poke needles adorned with American and British flags into a woman's nude body in front of a live audience. As that's going on, a cross-dressing shaman in a feathered helmet - part Aztec, part conquistador - recites a multilingual poem about remapping the divisive post-9/11 cultural and political landscape.

"The acupuncturist is the hardest part to cast," says Guillermo Gómez-Peña, the performance artist and writer whose latest border-blurring spectacle, "Mapa/Corpo 3: Interactive Rituals for the New Millennium," plays Saturday night at Theater Artaud as part of Youth Speaks' Living Word Festival. It deals with the "neo-colonization/de-colonization" of the Bush-era body politic. The flag-tipped needles represent the nations in the "coalition of the willing" that invaded Iraq.

"The acupuncturists understand our politics, but when we tell them 300 people are going to be witnessing this operation, sometimes they get stage fright. We need one with an extroverted personality who is willing to play with us," says Gómez-Peña, a globe-trotting provocateur who was born in Mexico City and has lived in San Francisco since 1996. That year, his group La Pocha Nostra premiered "The Dangerous Border Game" - an "epic Spanglish Lounge Opera" with naked Zapatistas mopping the floor and mariachis in straightjackets and wheelchairs - at Artaud. Two years later, they brought forth "The Mexterminator Project," "an interactive performance with techno bandits and ethnographic freaks." After a long international run, "Mapa/Corpo" has its final performance Saturday night, when a local acupuncturist is set to don a white lab coat for her performance-art debut.

In this piece, "the body becomes a metaphor for occupation, a metaphor for occupied territory," says Gómez-Peña, 53, sitting in the kitchen of the Mission District loft he shares with his wife, Galeria de la Raza curator Carolina Ponce de Leon, sipping espresso from a Mona Lisa demitasse and smoking a cigarette. He's a charming man with a long mane of gray-streaked hair hanging down the breast of his black Mexican cowboy shirt. He's wearing a tiger's eye and silver piece dangling from his left ear, a Southwest Indian eagle bolo tie and a touch of eyeliner.

The artist's wondrous place is filled with objects reflecting his hybrid, boundary-bending aesthetic, where religious iconography meets pop-culture kitsch. There are Dia de los Muertos skulls and a holographic Jesus, Bart Simpson in a big sombrero, a plastic Christ statue with the

mustachioed face of former Mexican President Vicente Fox. One of his velvet Tijuana paintings depicts John Wayne wearing an eye patch and an Immigration and Naturalization Service hat. Another, one of a series Gómez-Peña commissioned from Tijuana artists portraying his various performance personas, shows a babe in a black bra with a goatee.

"A transvestite Pachuco," Gómez-Peña says with a smile. He's a MacArthur Foundation "genius" with a wily sense of humor (he was awarded the prestigious MacArthur grant in 1991). His earlier works were noted for their satiric humor, but "Mapa/Corpo 3" is a more somber affair.

"It's a very serious piece about a very serious subject," says the artist, who has performed it in 20 countries over the past several years. "Yet, it's a hopeful piece. It's not a downer. People cry when extracting a flag or writing a little haiku of hope on somebody's body, but they come out of the theater or museum energized."

'Total environment'

As usual, Gómez-Peña and his collaborators immerse the audience in a "total environment." People can wander around the space, participating in the action or just watching. When it gets too intense, he says, they can repair to the bar. The piece features two tableaux unfolding at different "stations." A woman wearing a burqa and a crown of thorns washes the body of an immigrant - "the universal immigrant," the artist says - as if preparing it for burial. She morphs into a Madonna figure. Viewers are invited to write on the body (belonging to Pocha Nostra's Roberto Sifuentes). Elsewhere, the acupuncturist uncovers the U.N. flag draping the body of Violeta Luna and inserts the flag needles. The audience can remove them under the pro's supervision.

"As one body is being decolonized by the audience, the other body is being recolonized with literature," says Gómez-Peña, for whom art and politics are inseparable. He sees performances like these as "a formal right of democracy, where audiences can convene and act. They get to choose: 'Am I going to participate in this bizarre, post-Chicano, neo-colonial ritual or not? How far am I going to go?' And we have discovered that people are more than willing to partake in this politicized performative ritual. It gives them a chance to speak up and talk back."

Body as a metaphor

He started working on the piece right after the Iraq invasion in 2003. The group began, he says, with "the primal image of the female body as occupied territory. In performance art, the body is the site for reinvention, for imagination, for activism, for penance, for pleasure. We have been working with the idea of the body as a metaphor for the larger social and political body."

When they began performing the piece in Europe, tapping local acupuncturists in each city, they used about 40 different flags. As nations pulled their troops out of Iraq, their flags were replaced by American and British ones. For several years no curator in the United States would touch the piece.

"It was too provocative," Gómez-Peña says. "At the time, Bush's policy in the Middle East and the war on terror were subjects that were forbidden. They were extremely jingoistic, extremely nationalistic times. So as a result, for a couple of years, we became practically expatriates. We toured about 15 European countries and then Latin America. And it wasn't really until (Hurricane) Katrina, I believe, which opened the fault line in the American psyche, that it was OK to criticize the government. Then suddenly curators in the U.S. invited us to present 'Mapa/Corpo.' "

The piece expanded with the addition of Chicano "techno-artist" and VJ Rene Garcia of Los Angeles. He mixes live shots from the performance with a stream of other images projected on three screens: clips from old Hollywood films (some with stereotypical Mexicans and Arabs), surgical images and an aerial map of ground zero. Music, ranging from early Christian chants and Arabic love songs to Mexican hip-hop, plays throughout. It's a barrage of sound and images.

"We create environments that are overstimulating," Gómez-Peña says. "Some critics have called our aesthetic 'robo-baroque.' It's very layered, very dense. Why do we do that? In many ways we have to compete with a hyperkinetic media environment that is constantly bombarding our audiences. We really want to transport people to a parallel universe."

Mapa/Corpo 3: Guillermo Gómez-Peña and La Pocha Nostra. With "Unbuckled, Uncensored," a solo show by spoken-word artist Regie Cabico. Part of the Living Word Festival. 7 p.m. Saturday.

Youth Speaks' Living Word Festival: 7 p.m. Thursday: "War Peace: The One Drop Rule." Written and performed by Chinaka Hodge, Rafael Casal, Daveed Diggs and Nico Cary. Featuring tap dancer Jason Samuels-Smith and music by the SF Jazz Youth All-Stars. Directed by festival curator Marc Bamuthi Joseph. With "Unbuckled, Uncensored." 7 p.m. Friday: "War Peace: The One Drop Rule" repeats. With "Animal Farm," by Jacinta Vlach and Liberation Dance Orchestra.

Festival info: All shows at Theater Artaud, 450 Florida St., San Francisco. Tickets: \$5-\$25. (415) 863-9834, www.brownpapertickets.com, www.youthspeaks.org.

To see clips of "Mapa/Corpo" go to links.sfgate.com/ZFDF or links.sfgate.com/ZFDG.

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Guillermo Gómez-Peña says "Mapa/Corpo 3" is a "very serious piece about a very serious subject. Yet, it's a hopeful piece. It's not a downer." (Michael Macor / The Chronicle)



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Roberto Sifuentes plays a "universal immigrant" in a performance of "Mapa/Corpo" in Norway last year. (courtesy La Pocha Nostra Archive)



courtesy La Pocha Nostra Archive

Guillermo Gómez-Peña (clockwise from left), Roberto Sifuentes and Violeta Luna are members of La Pocha Nostra. (Zach Gross)



Celebrated performance artist Guillermo Gomez-Pena in his San Francisco studio. (Michael Macor / The Chronicle)



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