

Art or Craft: Two Views in Mundos Alternos

By Jennifer Vignone for <http://www.NY-ARTNews.com>

What makes art "art" and an artist an "artist"? How much context is needed? A curator works around a theme to inspire the viewer. Throughout history, how "art" is defined has always stirred argument, confoundment, and mystery. Two recent encounters regarding a piece in the "Mundos Alternos" exhibit at the Queens Museum highlight this in very different ways.

During a gallery tour, a Museum Educator discussed a collaborative work by the artist Rigo23, "Autonomous InterGalactic Space Program", 2009-ongoing. A gallery is transformed with a construction of painted wood, embroidered hangings, basketry, paintings, objects, written narrative, videos, and a "spaceship" made from similar materials. A woman on the tour remarked that the work looked like a craft project, not real art. While many exhibitions she sees in museums today are interesting, they are not memorable and fall short of qualifying as "art". She thinks some museums try too hard to cater to the local culture by using an "arts and crafts" approach. They do not educate as to what "art" is as a museum should strive to do. She does not have an issue with celebrating cultures through visual interpretation but calling it "art" is not correct – she thinks it should be referred to as a craft or artisan work.



Rigo23, Autonomous InterGalactic Space Program, 2009 – ongoing; Entrance. Copyright JVignone 2019.

This discussion also shed light on how choice of words has a profound impact on inducing the right mindset — how the work is perceived and how the artist wishes it to be viewed. Multi-cultural environments add additional complication where miscommunication may occur. The variety of interpretation and potential for misunderstanding is great in even the most basic exchange of information. For example, the Educator described the participants in Rigo23's piece as "members". The woman felt that since they are not termed "artists", they are just "regular" people; how could the work be called art if

not created by people educated as “artists”? She was also against the notion of “outsider artists” and self-taught artists, referring again to the lack of formal training.

The Educator asked what she would have thought if he had described the participants as artists. (They are called “artists” in the description, but the Educator did not initially use that word.) This changed her viewpoint as it that would imply for her that the work was created by artists, that is, a group of people educated in some sort of formalized art training.



Rigo23, Autonomous InterGalactic Space Program, 2009 – ongoing: Gallery view with spaceship. Copyright JVignone 2019.



Rigo23, Autonomous InterGalactic Space Program, 2009 – ongoing: Gallery view with view of embroidered wall hanging. Copyright JVignone 2019.

Later, another visitor considered the same piece. She was moved to tears by the work, commenting that it was not only beautiful but accomplished so much regarding telling the story of the Zapatistas, while conveying so much about the culture of the people and what was important to them. She also loved the way this piece tied into the overall futuristic theme of the Mundos Alternos exhibition. She found the artists' look toward the future hopeful — the wooden spaceship being a means of preserving their culture and protecting them as they fought for their rights and dreams. This work came from their souls and unified them. For her, the art was in the idea and its expression in the many forms of work integrated into the overall piece. Her area of formal study happened to be Latin American Art, and to her, this was it at one of its finest recent examples.



Rigo23, Autonomous InterGalactic Space Program, 2009 – ongoing: Gallery view with view of wall with paintings. Copyright JVignone 2019.

Art tells a story not only of what is depicted, but of the people creating it and to those experiencing it at any given moment. It is what makes art a timeless means of communication and education. It may not always resonate with everyone in the same way, but accomplishes its goal when it gets us to stop, look, and think.

Mundos Alternos (and more). At the Queens Museum until August 18, 2019.