



- 7-day archive
- Special reports
 - Base Realignment
 - Jobs in new economy
- Impact Iraq
 - Associated Press
 - Iraq after Saddam
- Local
- Neighborhoods
 - Teacher Profile
 - Nomination forms
- For the Record
- FYI online
- Business
- Opinion
 - Our Views
 - Letters
 - Columnists
 - Cartoons
- Weather
- Sports
 - Today's Stories
 - Joe Muench
 - High Schools
 - Prep sports
 - Community sports
 - Events
 - Outdoors
 - Question of week
 - UTEP basketball
 - NFL 2003 season
- Living
- Technology
- Education
- Obituaries
 - Search
 - In Memory
- Corrections
- AP Wire
 - AP Headlines
 - U.S. News
 - World News
 - Business
 - Sports

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Living Saturday, January 10, 2004

Ex-El Pasoan hits big time in art world

Ramón Rentería
El Paso Times

The artist in Mónica Aíssa Martínez is a bit philosophical.

"I'm always trying to define myself and find where I belong," Martínez said in a recent interview.

At 41, Martínez no longer worries whether she will discover the answers.

Success has been shining brighter on Martínez -- an El Paso native now living in Phoenix -- since the Bilingual Press at Arizona State University profiled her and her artwork in 2002 in "Contemporary Chicana and Chicano Art," a widely acclaimed two-volume collection representing the best and most promising Latino artists in the United States.

"My art is a reflection of myself as a female, as a human being, and ultimately as the creative spirit that I am," Martínez said in the book's artist statement.

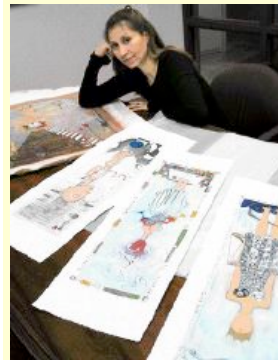
Martínez devotes 70 percent of her time to painting and exhibiting in galleries and museums and selling her fine art. The rest of the time, Martínez does design work, the stuff that guarantees a regular paycheck.

She defines her art as surreal/abstract, very different from the traditional images of virgins and homeboys and violence you might encounter at a Chicano art festival.

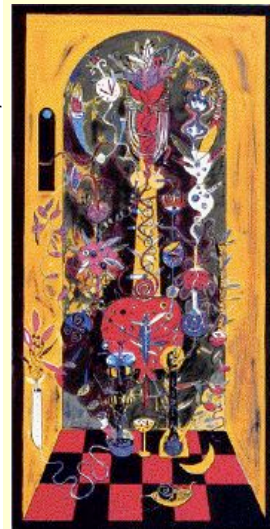
Art critic Linda A. McAllister, writing about a Martínez exhibition in 1995, said, "She portrays our bodies as fantastic little factories, maybe tiny sex breweries, in a series of works about brides and grooms. The bodies take on the form of laboratory glasswork."

No doubt that being selected for the Chicano art book opened up doors. Martínez has four exhibitions lined up for 2004, including a solo show in Phoenix April 1-28. Last May, she sold seven artworks at an exhibition and art auction arranged by the book publishers. The municipal court in Phoenix bought some of her work depicted in the art book.

"It made me realize there's something



Ramón Rentería / El Paso Times
Artist Mónica Aíssa Martínez, an El Paso native, displays a series of drawings depicting the "Seven Deadly Sins" and the "Four Cardinal Virtues." The drawings will become parts of larger paintings on canvas. Her work will be shown in a solo exhibition in April in Phoenix, where she now lives.



Courtesy of Mónica Aíssa Martínez
"Alchemical Action" lithograph.



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out there happening for Latinos," Martínez said. "We had a variety of people, buyers, well-educated people and ordinary people. It clarified my purpose a bit more. There's this big picture and I'm part of it."

Right now, Martínez's energy is mostly dedicated to a series of drawings and paintings that she produced in response to the current chaos and upheaval in the United States and the world.

"This last year, as we went into war and nothing but images of anger, pride and greed filled our media, I became overwhelmed with it all," Martínez said. "I wondered if there was any good, any peace and any reason left in the world."

In response, Martínez did some research and cranked out drawings concerning the "Seven Deadly Sins" and the "Four Cardinal Virtues." The drawings are gradually becoming parts of larger canvas paintings.

The body of work, tentatively titled "The World Stage, a Play in Finite Acts," is the gist of a solo exhibition that Martínez will have in April at the Central Gallery in the Burton Barr Central Library in Phoenix.

"My sensibility is deliberately whimsical and playful," Martínez said. "The main goal in this series is to lightheartedly incite awareness and choice."

Prudence Crosswhite, the curator of the exhibition, never had any second thoughts about booking Martínez.

"She's an incredible painter. There's so much intricate detail in her work, even in the background," Crosswhite said. "Her work also has a very strong underlying theme."

Martínez grew up in middle-class El Paso surrounded by artisans, actors, writers, musicians and teachers. Her passion for art started at El Paso High School. Art teacher Debbie Hartmann saw the spark and encouraged Martínez.

"I don't know what causes her to do what she does. I just know that it's from the heart," Hartmann said. "She's a real generous person, very unpretentious, very sincere in what she shows."

Martínez looks forward to the day when she can devote less time to design work and direct her attention to painting, perhaps even teaching.

"Maybe that's my purpose, to get people to think about life," she said.

Ramón Rentería may be reached at renteria@elpasotimes.com; 546-6153.

Courtesy of Mónica Aíssa Martínez
"The World Stage -- a Play in Finite Acts." Casein on canvas.



Courtesy of Mónica Aíssa Martínez
"Courage." Mixed media on paper.



Courtesy of Mónica Aíssa Martínez
"Pride." Mixed media on paper.

Martínez file

- **Who:** Mónica Aíssa Martínez.
- **Born:** 1962 in El Paso.
- **Family:** Husband Eddie Duran; no children.
- **El Paso link:** Parents Roberto and Elisa Martínez, plus four sisters and a brother.
- **Education:** Bachelor's

degree in fine arts, University of Texas at El Paso, 1986; master's degree in fine arts, New Mexico State University, 1991.

- **Personal note:** Her mother chose her middle name Aíssa because she liked the same Greek name that John Wayne gave his daughter.

- **Quote:** "My images speak to the sophisticated art enthusiast as well as the novice, to the adult as well as the child."

On the Web

- To learn more about Mónica Aíssa Martínez and other Latino artists, visit www.latinoartscommunity.org

Make plans

- **What:** Mónica Aíssa Martínez solo exhibition, "The World Stage."

- **When:** April 1–28.

- **Where:** Central Gallery in the Burton Barr Central Library, 1221 N. Central, Phoenix.

- **Information:** (606) 256-3521.

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