



**Hubcap Milagro—Junípero Serra's Next Miracle:
Turning Blood into Thunderbird Wine**

1989

Mixed media: chrome hubcap, circular saw blade and fragment, sheet lead, escutcheon pins, wood, wire, acrylic paint, aluminum letters, tin funnel, Thunderbird wine bottle, carved wood, hardware

Exhibition, Publication as *Father Serra's Next Miracle*

All Time Is Simultaneous

Solo Exhibition

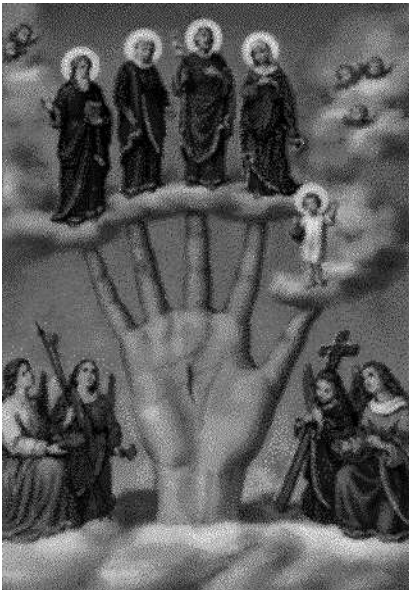
MARS (Movimiento Artístico del Río Salado) Artspace, Phoenix, Arizona
January 3 – 27, 1989

Exhibition brochure. MARS Artspace. Jan. 1989.

This folded 11" x 17" document included a B&W reproduction on page one [caption: *David Avalos, "Father Serra's Next Miracle," Mixed Media*].

NOTE:

After shipping the hubcap back from MARS I removed the Interstate 5 sign as a background. I painted the palm of the hand in muted earth tones and replaced the aluminum letters spelling "BINGO" to eliminate the overpowering metallic glare of the piece. I also used paint to emphasize the vaginal stigmata and painted the individual letters on five wooden squares attached to the fingertips. The piece is a take off on *La Mano Poderosa* with BINGO replacing Jesus, Mary, Joseph, et al.



Mano Poderosa

The Roman Catholic image of the Powerful Hand (*Mano Poderosa* in Spanish) depicts the right hand of God with fingers and thumb stretched upright [see right]. The palm, with its stigmata, faces toward the viewer. The figures that stand at the top of the four fingers represent St. Joseph, the Virgin Mary, and her parents, St. Joachim and St. Anne. The Christ Child is depicted on the thumb.

Philipp Scholz Rittermann photographed it in his studio. After viewing the wonderful transparencies I felt the work was now completely resolved visually. (Remember, if the photo of the piece doesn't look better than the actual work – get a new photographer. Philipp is one of San Diego's best.)

The hubcap was never exhibited as photographed. In June 1989 I replaced the vaginal wound with a bleeding heart while installing *Café Mestizo* at INTAR. I had been considering changing the piece in response to critical comments from Linda Tadic, a

UCSD graduate filmmaker who identified it as yet another representation of the “bleeding wound,” and by Deborah Small who suggested that its similarity to that cliché deflected attention from the critique of Serra. Her thinking was convincing. When Inverna Lockpez, the INTAR gallery’s director, commented negatively I decided to carve a heart for the piece before hanging the hubcap. Its appearance has remained the same since then.

Despite the not insignificant change I continued to use Rittermann’s 4” by 5” color transparency whenever I was asked for publication images. Initially I did this because it I did not have reproductions of the final version. But I persisted for other reasons. It looked terrific and felt “right.” I enjoyed seeing various publications reproduce the image of a nonexistent work as though it did exist. I enjoyed the reviewers who on more than one occasion responded to the catalogue reproduction rather than the exhibited work. (Maybe they agreed with my dictum regarding the ideal difference between art works and their photographs, but tellingly they never commented on the relationship between the two.) I came to regard the image as a work in its own right, existing nowhere as a sculpture and everywhere as a reproduction, my untouchable sole possession.

Reviews of the reproduction rather than the sculpture didn’t always occur. The wooden heart version was exhibited in Lancaster, Ohio in 1990. In a review Brian Alexander observantly described the work as featuring “a pierced heart in the palm that pours blood through a funnel.” This despite his *Los Angeles Times* article being illustrated with a black and white half tone of Rittermann’s photograph. In an *Art in America* review of *The Bleeding Heart* the wooden heart hubcap is described thus: “the palm of the hand bears a vagina-shaped wound from which flows a stream (made of painted wood) of bright red blood that pours through a funnel.” Shifra Goldman in her *Bleeding Heart* review for the *New Art Examiner* writes, “this blood seems menstrual in nature, coming from a female sexual organ.” For me the final pleasure in seeing the never exhibited hubcap reproduced is how the relationship between the representation and the represented confounds critics and demonstrates the surprising inattention to details among some at times.

Publications of the Rittermann photograph

Alexander, Brian. “S.D. border art leaves folks in Ohio unmoved.” *Los Angeles Times* 28 July 1990: San Diego County ed.

This article included a B&W reproduction [caption: David Avalos’ sculpture, “Father Serra’s Next Miracle: Turning Blood Into Wine.”].

Avalos’ “Father Serra’s Next Miracle: Turning Blood Into Thunderbird Wine” brought the strongest reactions. The sculpture features a leather hand with the word *bingo* spelled across the fingertips and a pierced heart in the palm that pours blood through a funnel and into an empty bottle of Thunderbird wine.

“It’s a crime what has happened to the Indians,” said Sandy Romano, a Lancaster housewife. “But this offends me as a Catholic and as a person. This is

the sort of thing I would be against the NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] supporting.

Still, Romano stressed that she did not think such art should be banned from the festival, and applauded Keynes for providing an opportunity to see something different.

Debroise, Olivier. "Heart Attacks: on a Culture of Missed Encounters and Misunderstandings." *El Corazón Sangrante/The Bleeding Heart*. Seattle: First U of Washington P. 1991.

This catalog includes a color reproduction on page 55 and a B&W reproduction on page 153 [caption is the same for both: David Avalos, **Hubcap Milagro – Junipero Serra's Next Miracle: Turning Blood into Thunderbird Wine**, 1989, hubcap, sawblades, wood, lead, acrylic paint, thunderbird wine bottle, funnel / tapacubo, hojas de sierra, madera, plomo, acrilico, botella de vino "Thunderbird," embudo, 38 x 81 x 15 cm, Collection of Doug Simay, San Diego, California].

The political angle of Avalos' work is complemented by his ironic installations of cultural objects recast in painted steel and bronze, as if the artist would like to oppose the ephemeral nature of paper with the solidity, density, and durability of metal. His metallic hearts, vaginas, and mechanical *retablos* are made with precisely the same techniques used in industrial engineering, in one of the leading cities of the post-industrial age. Between Mexico and Los Angeles, a two-fold nostalgia? (47)

Johnson, Ken. "Hearts and Minds." *Art in America* Mar. 1992: 43-47

This "Report from Boston," included a color reproduction on page 47 [caption: *David Avalos: Hubcap Milagro – Junipero Serra's Next Miracle: Turning Blood into Thunderbird Wine, 1989, mixed mediums, 31 3/4 by 15 by 6 inches. Collection of Doug Simay, San Diego.*].

But even where ironic skepticism was strongly marked . . . you seemed to have sincerity and satire in equal proportions.

This ambivalence was most dramatically realized in an installation of the work of Californian David Avalos, whose funky mock icons made out of found materials spoof Mexican kitsch with ferocious wit. One piece is called *Hubcap Milagro—Junipero Serra's Next Miracle: Turning Blood into Thunderbird Wine* (1989). In this work, a sculptural hand juts from the middle of a round frame made from a hubcap and a circular saw blade; the palm of the hand bears a vagina-shaped wound from which flows a stream (made of painted wood) of bright red blood that pours through a funnel into a Thunderbird wine bottle. Thus the Christian miracles of transubstantiation and stigmatization are seen as integral to a modern, low-rent, popular cult of sex, booze, violence, consumerism and superstition. Yet even in his mockery, you feel in Avalos a real affection for and susceptibility to the gaudy vitality of folk iconography. At the ICA, Avalos's works were gathered together in one darkened, theatrically spotlighted room, where they created a chapel-like ambience. It was the most effective part of the show.

Too bad the rest of the installation wasn't treated with similar thoughtfulness, for it was in Avalos's room that you felt most poignantly the tension between the cool postmodern head and the hot, atavistic, perhaps essentially Mexican heart.

Hills, Patricia. "Art in context: bleeding hearts, borders, and postmodernism." *Art New England* [Brighton] Dec./Jan. 1992: 1+.

This article included a **B&W reproduction** on page 32 [caption: David Avalos—*Hubcap Milagro – Junípero Serra's Next Miracle: Turning Blood into Thunderbird Wine*, hubcap, sawblades, wood, lead, acrylic paint, thunderbird wine bottle, funnel, 38 x 15 cm, 1989, photo: Philipp Scholz Rittermann.].

A view of the exhibition confirms that the artworks do indeed alternate between dour seriousness and slick parody. Take the case of representations of male and female genitalia that occur frequently throughout the show. . . Chicano artist David Avalos impiously incorporates vaginas in his "hubcap milagro" pieces. (One cannot resist seeing these witty tableaux as also spoofing Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* ceramic plates.)

Goldman, Shifra M. "The heart of Mexican art: image, myth & ideology." *New Art Examiner* Dec. 1993: 12+

This article adapted from a lecture given at the Newport Harbor Art Museum in January 1993 included a **B&W reproduction** on page 44 [caption: David Avalos, *Hubcap Milagro – Junípero Serra's Next Miracle: Turning Blood into Thunderbird Wine*, 1989, mixed media, 15" x 32" x 6"].

I would close this examination of the images and myths of Mexican art expressed through the wounded or open body, and through blood, with a discussion of three Chicano artists who work with very different styles and themes, although all three—in my opinion—owe an iconic debt to Mexican religious imagery. . . David Avalos's *Hubcap Milagro – Junípero Serra's Next Miracle: Turning Blood into Thunderbird Wine* (1989) confronts the legend of Father Junípero Serra, who erected many of the California missions. He has now been beatified by the Catholic Church in preparation for sainthood—a fact which has enraged many of California's Indians, who see this sanctification as rewarding his cultural and physical genocidal practices. Avalos's sardonic wit has turned the Sacred Heart of Jesus miracle into a bitter social critique. Blood becomes wine for the communion: but this blood seems menstrual in nature, coming from a female sexual organ. The wine is not a transubstantiation; it is cheap Thunderbird wine, a reference to the drunkenness in which so many of the almost-decimated California Indians hide their misery.

Suleiman, Susan Rubin. *Risking Who One Is, Encounters with Contemporary Art and Literature*. Cambridge: Harvard U P, 1994.

This book includes a **B&W reproduction** on page 150 [caption: David Avalos, *Hubcap Milagro—Junípero Serra's Next Miracle: Turning Blood into Thunderbird Wine*, 1989; hubcap, sawblades, wood, lead, acrylic paint, Thunderbird wine bottle, funnel.]. On page

155 there is a B&W reproduction of the installed hubcap which reflects the changes made including the wooden heart substitution, even though the caption is exactly the same as the version with the vaginal wound [caption: David Avalos, *Hubcap Milagro—Junipero Serra's Next Miracle: Turning Blood into Thunderbird Wine*, 1989, installation in *Café Mestizo*, photographed at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, 1991.].

Pincus, Robert L. "Avalos imagemaker: Few visitors will feel neutral about streetwise show." *San Diego Union-Tribune*. 3 Mar.1994: Night & Day 42.

This supportive review included a color reproduction on page 42 [caption: In "Y Que," a selective retrospective, David Avalos displays his skills as a sculptor in works such as "Hubcap Milagro — Junipero Serra's Next Miracle: Turning Blood into Thunderbird Wine."].

...

Avalos is a sculptor, imagemaker and installation artist as well as a public artist. What becomes apparent, with this exhibition, is just how coherent his vision is, whether the work is of the studio or street variety.

"Y Que" is a good title, too. It signals the viewer just now central Chicano culture is to Avalos, and this phrase, in particular, pinpoints the sensibility of the artist.

It literally translates as "and what" but has richer meaning on the street. As Avalos writes in his statement for this show, this pair of words is "a provocation, an invitation to a confrontation: " 'Mess with this and we'll find out who really knows better.' "

...

His "Cafe Mestizo" (1989), an installation onto itself, expands the argument, declaring that the mix of cultures in the United States has yielded a troubled history but it is a vibrant fusion. The sculpture "Mr. Chili" (1989), who stands at the door to the cafe, is a slightly smaller-than-life-size host. He wears a street script style "Y Que" on his chest. Irreverently, his chili for a tongue sticks out of his mouth.

You'll find it well worth your while to enter the room, to mess with Avalos' symbolically charged assemblages. In formally ingenious ways, they toy with conventional sets of symbols: religious and secular.

He lampoons the uncritical acceptance of Junipero Serra as holy icon — an image that runs contrary to historical evidence — in one of several wall-mounted constructions that take the hubcap as inspiration and make it part of the formal mix. "Hubcap Milagro—Junipero Serra's Next Miracle: Turning Blood into Thunderbird Wine" (1989), depicts blood streaming from a hand {of Christ? of brutalized Indians?} and filling the bottle on a shelf below. Each finger on the hand holds a letter and together they spell "bingo."

With acidic wit, Avalos alludes to the tragic legacy of the mission days, when Indians were employed for cheap labor and often forcibly converted to Christianity. For them, the historical legacy of that era is reservations and high alcoholism.

The mestizo, historically a pejorative label, becomes a virtue in Avalos' art and world view. The cafe is a microcosm of contemporary America, if we're willing to acknowledge its view of society. . .

AZTLAN, A Journal of Chicano Studies 24.1 (1999): Front and back covers. This issue's cover art consisted of four color reproductions of hubcaps with *Hubcap Milagro—Junipero Serra's Next Miracle: Turning Blood into Thunderbird Wine* on the front cover.

Exhibitions and Publications of the Milagro in the Doug Simay Collection

<i>Cafe Mestizo</i>	Solo Exhibition
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INTAR Gallery, New York, New York
June 13 - July 28, 1989

Untitled Exhibition

Java Coffee House, San Diego, California
~April 24 – May 12, 1990

<i>Living on the Border: Art and Activism in San Diego/Tijuana</i>

The Festival Gallery, Lancaster, Ohio
The Lancaster Festival
July 20-28, 1990

Alexander, Brian. "S.D. border art leaves folks in Ohio unmoved." *Los Angeles Times* 28 July 1990: San Diego County ed.

This article included a B&W reproduction [caption: David Avalos' sculpture, "Father Serra's Next Miracle: Turning Blood Into Wine."]. The photo caption differs from the title used in the article.

Avalos' "Father Serra's Next Miracle: Turning Blood Into Thunderbird Wine" brought the strongest reactions. The sculpture features a leather hand with the word *bingo* spelled across the fingertips and a pierced heart in the palm that pours blood through a funnel and into an empty bottle of Thunderbird wine.

"It's a crime what has happened to the Indians," said Sandy Romano, a Lancaster housewife. "But this offends me as a Catholic and as a person. This is the sort of thing I would be against the NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] supporting.

Still, Romano stressed that she did not think such art should be banned from the festival, and applauded Keynes for providing an opportunity to see something different.

Visible Truths: Traditional Sources within the Chicano Aesthetic

Galeria Posada, Sacramento, California
September 21 – November 10, 1990

Exhibition Artist's List Entry:

16. FATHER SERRA'S NEXT MIRACLE: TURNING
BLOOD INTO THUNDERBIRD WINE

Tere Romo's exhibition with indigenous Chicana/os Carmen Lomas Garza, Gilbert "Magu" Lujan and Patricia Rodriquez. I was proud to exhibit in their company.

El Corazón Sangrante/The Bleeding Heart Traveling Exhibition, ICA Boston

Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, Massachusetts, Oct. 25, 1991 – Jan. 5, 1992
The Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, Texas, February 29 – April 26, 1992
Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, May 15 – July 5, 1992
Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon, Canada, September 10 – 1 November 1, 1992
Newport Harbor Art Museum, California, December 17, 1992 – February 14, 1993
Fundacion Museo de Bellas Artes, Caracas, Venezuela, March 28 – May 30, 1993
Museo de Arte Contemporaneo de Monterrey, Mexico, July 17 – September 30, 1993

Debroise, Olivier. "Heart Attacks: on a Culture of Missed Encounters and Misunderstandings." *El Corazón Sangrante/The Bleeding Heart*. Seattle: First U of Washington P. 1991.

The political angle of Avalos' work is complemented by his ironic installations of cultural objects recast in painted steel and bronze, as if the artist would like to oppose the ephemeral nature of paper with the solidity, density, and durability of metal. His metallic hearts, vaginas, and mechanical *retablos* are made with precisely the same techniques used in industrial engineering, in one of the leading cities of the post-industrial age. Between Mexico and Los Angeles, a two-fold nostalgia? (47)

Littlefield, Kinney. "The pulse of a Mexican icon: Newport exhibit spotlights the bleeding heart." *Orange County Register* 16 Dec. 1992: F1+.

Then again, to San Diego artist David Avalos, whose "Cafe Mestizo" installation is the heartfelt core of the "Bleeding Heart," the bleeding heart has yet another meaning.

"It shows spiritual love pulled out of the container of the body and put into the larger body of the community," Avalos said. "The idea of being bathed in the blood of Christ is a very passionate spirituality that becomes equated with spiritual ecstasy."

In Avalos' work the symbol of the bleeding heart takes a back seat to more outrageous elements. Avalos' room-sized "Cafe Mestizo" looks like a cross between a cave-like beer joint and an altar-filled chapel. It includes five of

Avalos' irreverent hubcap-based milagros, named after the charms nailed to altars when praying for miracles.

One, "Hubcap Milagro-Junipero Serra's Next Miracle: Turning Blood into Thunderbird Wine," is a 3-D excursion into tabletop surrealism. In it, a plastic hand emerges from a wall-mounted hubcap and spews fake blood into an empty bottle of Thunderbird wine.

"My Junipero Serra milagro is based on a common Catholic symbol (known as) the powerful hand," Avalos said. "Yet it's also a critique of Serra, who founded the Catholic mission system in California, and consequently the systematic extinction of the Indian language and culture.

"Turning blood into Thunderbird shows the degradation of the Indians by Spain. So the piece is part sardonic critique, part clear admiration for vernacular representation of religious imagery. For me as a Chicano, it's the simultaneous embrace of opposites, like eating pleasurable food, but spicing it with lots of chili peppers so the eating becomes painful."

Suleiman, Susan Rubin. *Risking Who One Is, Encounters with Contemporary Art and Literature*. Cambridge: Harvard U P, 1994.

On page 155 this book has a B&W reproduction of the installed hubcap which reflects the changes made including the wooden heart substitution, even though the caption is exactly the same as a reproduction of the photo version with the vaginal wound [caption: David Avalos, *Hubcap Milagro—Junipero Serra's Next Miracle: Turning Blood into Thunderbird Wine*, 1989, installation in *Café Mestizo*, photographed at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, 1991.].

Upstairs, among the first things one saw was an object by the contemporary San Diego artist David Avalos, *Hubcap Milagro—Junipero Serra's Next Miracle: Turning Blood into Thunderbird Wine* (1989). Again, a work that must be read, but this time a work that is witheringly critical of the Christian mission in the New World. The title itself tells a whole story: a *milagro* is part of Latin Christian folk culture, a small ex-votive object offered to saints as a request for or acknowledgement of miracles.⁴ Avalos "updates" the *milagro* by making it a hubcap, and he uses it to critique rather than celebrate the power of Christianity—in this instance, the power of California's most famous priest, the founder of the first missions in the eighteenth century, Father Junipero Serra. In Avalos' version of one of Father Serra's miracles, the message seems to be one of profit taking: BINGO, we have found a way to convert the blood of the stigmata into an "American classic"! BINGO, we have struck it rich! (Note the letters BINGO on the fingers of the hand that bears the wound.) One does not need a translation to understand that this is an angry, sacrilegious, but also virulently humorous denunciation of the very thing celebrated by the Baroque painting downstairs: the Christian colonization of the New World. Incidentally, this work by Avalos was found to be extremely offensive when it was shown in 1990 in Ohio. An irate Catholic viewer said, "This is the sort of thing I would be against the National Endowment for the Arts supporting."⁵

I, on the other hand loved it. At first, I connected it not to the Baroque painting below but rather to all blasphemous or otherwise offensive or corrosive Dada and Surrealist predecessors, this object did not seem to me beautiful, certainly not in any ordinarily understood sense of “beauty”; nor was it meant, I thought, to seem so. However, it possessed qualities I valued as much as beauty: humor, inventiveness, and a kind of biting, extremely aggressive irreverence.

My first association to it was Man Ray’s *Gift* of 1921, a much simpler object but similarly memorable for its aggressiveness. Just as Man Ray’s “gift” of a clothes iron studded with nails is a poisoned gift, designed to tear up rather than smooth out any fabric it touches (in German, *Gift* means poison), so Avalos’ *milagro* seems designed to tear up the cultural myth of Christian missionary goodness, rather than work miraculous cures. Unless, of course, one considers the deconstruction of this cultural myth a kind of curing process of its own.

Another of my associations to Avalos’ hubcap was Robert Rauschenberg’s *Coca-Cola Plan*, a Surrealist-inspired combine made in 1958. Note the critical edge, here as in Avalos: Coca-Cola is America’s new eagle, ready to take over the world. Rauschenberg, too, is tearing up, in his own way, a cultural icon—that of the soaring American eagle, now replaced by Coke bottles of questionable cleanliness.

But Avalos’ *Hubcap* was actually more interesting than these associations, for it was part of a complex total environment he called “Café Mestizo.” The word *mestizo* refers to mixed-race populations of Mexico, and more recently it has referred as well to the cultural hybrids of Chicano life. Avalos, who as I found out after starting to do research on his work is an articulate theorist of *mestizaje* (the mixing of races) and a political activist and member of the Border Arts Workshop in San Diego, wrote in his introduction to the 1989 installation of Café Mestizo in a New York gallery: “For too many in the United State, *mestizo* means ‘half-breed.’ At the Café Mestizo, the management refuses to serve the half-baked cultural notion that combining two races produces something less than a whole.”⁶

But again, the interesting thing is how Avalos succeeds in being both political and artistically inventive, as if his political outrage fueled the outrageous and violent combinations he invents in his art. In the middle of Café Mestizo stands the proprietor, Mr. Chili, a parodic version of a macho Latin male, bristling with hot peppers and a very phallic head; he strikes me as a bit lovable and a bit pathetic, as well as perhaps somewhat self-ironic, in his posturing. On the left as you enter the café, you find the Thunderbird *milagro* in its complete setup, flanked by two jars of “Dolores” brand pig’s feet and two “La mano poderosa” holy candles in jars. These candles further complicate the meaning of the *milagro*: What exactly does the “powerful hand,” *mano poderosa* accomplish? Is the Church in Latin culture even today part of a booming business rather than a spiritual agent? (Junipero Serra’s “next” miracle suggests the present, not the historic past.) (151 - 154)

4. For a brief discussion and some examples of *milagros* in Latin American folk art, see Marion Oettinger, Jr., *The Folk Art of Latin America: Visiones del*

Pueblo (New York: Dutton Studio Books and the Museum of American Folk Art, 1992), pp. 42–43.

5. Quoted in the article by Brian Alexander, "S.D. Border Art Leaves Folks in Ohio Unmoved," *Los Angeles Times*, July 28, 1990.
6. David Avalos, "Welcome to Café Mestizo," in *Café Mestizo*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Intar gallery, 1989). The New York installation differed in some details from the 1991 installation in Boston. Avalos told me he does not worry about variations from one installation to another, although he obviously remembers them, no matter how minor. For the Boston installation, he worked long distance with ICA curator Matthew Siegel. (257)

Y•QUE, Selected Works and Collaborations, 1972-1993

Solo Exhibition

Boehm Gallery, Palomar Community College, San Marcos, California
February 4 - March 9, 1994

Exhibition Catalogue List Entry:

12. *Hubcap Milagro – Junipero Serra's Next Miracle: Turning Blood into Thunderbird Wine*, 1989
Mixed media
39 x 24 x 13
Hubcap: Collection Doug Simay
Installation: Courtesy the artist

Pincus, Robert L. "Noted collaborator Avalos goes it alone first time locally." *San Diego Union-Tribune*. 31 Jan.1994: E-5.

All this attention to the public projects has deflected attention from his activities as a sculptor and maker of installations. Few local viewers seemed aware that his absorbing, elegant and provocative installation, "Cafe Mestizo," was part of a 1992-93 exhibition at the New port Harbor Art Museum, "El Corazon Sangrante/The Bleeding Heart." A smaller version—"deftly edited," Avalos hopes—will be in the Palomar show, as will some of his innovative hubcap sculptures of the mid-to-late '80s.

"He is an objectmaker, a real sculptor," comments Kirtland Boehm. "His response to materials is evident here, which may make people look at him and his work differently."

LA PRENSA SAN DIEGO. 25 Feb. 1994: 10.

This announcement included a **B&W reproduction** on page 10 [caption: not available].