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Review: Works mix media, tackle issues Web Posted: 10/12/2008 12:00 CDT

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Guatemalan artist Verónica Riedel creates richly imagined portraits of Latin American women from the 15th and 16th centuries by combining photography with embroidery, adding pearls, jade, silver and charms to her conceptual collages.

Riedel's "The Making of a Mestiza" is on view through Oct. 19 at the Southwest School of Art & Craft, along with two other FOTOSEPTIEMBRE USA shows — Zoë Sheehan Saldaña's "Caution" and Jennifer Khoshbin's "Missed or Misunderstood."

"I wanted to see how artists use photography with other media," said curator Kathy Armstrong. "By adding other elements, artists present photography as a different art form. But these three artists also use photography to address important issues, such as domestic violence, the origins of Latina identity and consumer culture."

Because few images exist of Latin American women during Spanish colonial times, Riedel decided to create her own, combining photographs of contemporary models with costumes and settings that she selected from book illustrations of the period. Riedel's costumes are fictions with details appropriated from both European and American paintings.

But the contrast between the indigenous models and the high fashion of 400 years ago also illustrates the huge cultural gap experienced by native women forced to adapt to European cultures while still trying to cling to their own traditions and customs.

"The conquest, for these primitive women, must have been tragic, traumatic and a surrealistic experience," Riedel says in her artist's statement. "By the first year of the invasion, most of them had ended up settling, in one way or another, into the lifestyle of the Spanish. This also entailed adopting the teachings of the Catholic Church. Some indigenous people mixed the teachings of the Bible with their own ancestral beliefs — creating a syncretic religion, which is very much alive today."

The women range from wives of prominent military officers to prostitutes. One woman was abducted by the Spanish and forced to tell the secrets of her people, who consider her a traitor. Another woman, whose dress is adorned with jade, shells, pearls and antique beads, considers herself lucky, since her lifestyle is so much more opulent than it was before the Spanish arrived. Each story is told in the women's words in notes that Riedel has added to each portrait, which range from the heartbreaking to the proud and defiant.

Saldaña, who teaches at City University of New York/Baruch College and lives in Brooklyn, is showing work from her series "Caution," which illustrates some of America's most dangerous occupations, sports and places.

She took photographs of the country's two most dangerous intersections, in Philadelphia and Pembroke Pines, Fla., and then sent low-resolution images to the Taller de Gobelinos in Guadalajara, Mexico. The weaving cooperative transformed Saldaña's photographs into two huge tapestries, though the images are so heavily pixilated that they resemble loose patterns formed by giant, colored squares.

It's easier to recognize the images in Saldaña's drawings from videos, such as "White-Tailed Deer (America's Most Dangerous Animal)," "Mt. Rainier (America's Most Dangerous Volcano)" and "Bullriding (America's Most Dangerous Sport)."

In the Ursuline Hall Gallery, San Antonio artist Jennifer Khoshbin adds depth and mystery to famous photographs by backing them with books, which she carves into to create three-dimensional designs. For example, "Clipped" utilizes Victor Schragar's photograph of two birds, but their feathers are carefully clipped out so it appears that they may take wing at any moment. Francesca Woodman's photograph of a girl jumping rope seems to leap out of the picture plane. And a George



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Verónica Riedel mixes photographs with decorative items in imagined portraits of Latin American women in the early days of the Spanish conquest. Stories of their lives accompany the pictures.

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Krause portrait in Drama Queen appears ready to spin around a spiral whirlpool.

"Verónica Riedel: The Making of a Mestiza" and "Zoë Sheehan Saldafia: Caution" in the Russell Hill Rogers Gallery along with "Jennifer Khoshbin: Missed or Misunderstood" in the Ursuline Hall Gallery are on view through Oct. 19 at the Southwest School of Art & Craft, 300 Augusta St., (210) 224-1848, www.swschool.org.

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