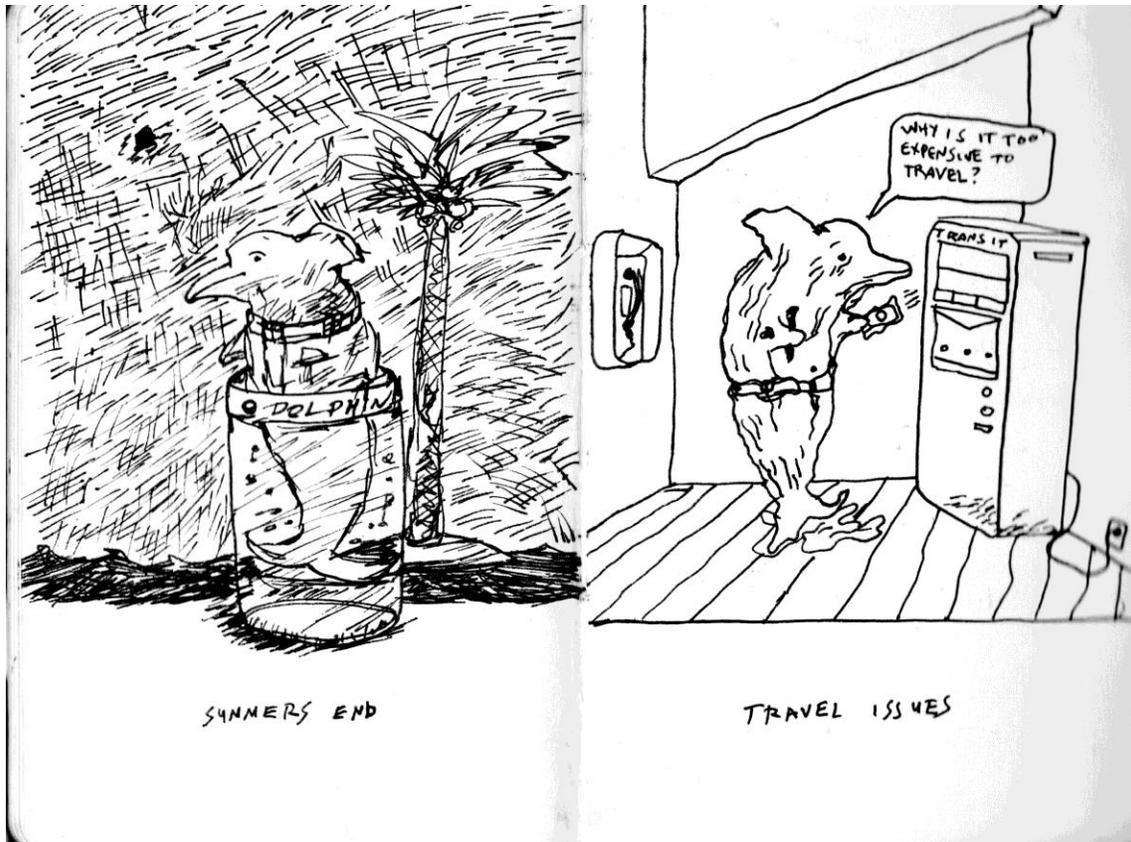


JOSÉ ALEJANDRO RODRIGUEZ



"Summer's End/Travel Issues 2014" (2013) ink and paper, scanned

The versatility Chicago-based artist José Alejandro Rodríguez -- percussionist, graphic designer, illustrator, font of gnomic wisdom -- is captured well in his ever expanding portfolio of posters, advertising events of all kinds from film festivals to underground music shows. It's a format that allows Rodríguez's talent to shape-shift, like an amoeba in heat, from piece to piece. In fact, 'poster' doesn't do justice to the medium these days since the images he creates circulate in the virtual sphere. Consider it "Art in the Age of Virtual Reproduction."

Followers of his work know to expect anything from homespun hand-drawn illustrations to the clean, geometricized forms of his fluorescent, Photoshopped phantasies. One might have focused on the hybrid digital/analog style of Rodríguez's approach as recently as a decade ago, but today the notion of the "hybrid", as some gesture toward the mixture of mixed-media, looks anachronistic. The line between the online and offline genesis of contemporary art isn't simply a blur: it's completely obliterated. Rodríguez grew up in an age when Photoshop was just another tool in the toolkit (not heart-palpitating fodder for ontologists of art), and it shows.

The diversity of Rodriguez's aesthetic approach is more often than not anchored by the *basso continuo* of his subtle, absurdist comic sensibility. This may express itself with a light touch, such as the 'IMPORTADO' pasted across the lower right of the poster for a Latino film festival. As if Latino culture were a bar of Schokolade from Belgium, a slab of chorizo from Spain, or some other commodified exoticism, instead of a homegrown American cultural product. In one simple stroke Rodriguez highlights the double-blind of minority politics: either (fill in minority here) let other culturally hegemonic groups marginalize it; or it marginalizes itself by way of "empowering" yet reductive displays of ethno-cultural essentialism.

In his storytelling mode Rodriguez resorts to the recurring character of an occasionally clothed, occasionally nude dolphin. The aquatic mammal is an exaggerated avatar of the artist himself, who, like most twenty-somethings searching for a foothold in society, offsets the drudgery of unrewarding labor (jumping through flaming hoops) with the carnate perks of adult sophistication (boutique whiskey). The smirking, sartorial dolphin may dress in a cardigan, sport a beard, smoke cigarettes, nosh a grilled cheese sandwich -- whatever is required to wash away the sour taste of a sagging domestic economy and the latest austerity measure dreamt up by baby boomer politicians already perched safe and secure on their retirement nest egg. Weak sauce in terms of political protest, but what's a dolphin to do?

In "Summer's End/Travel Issues 2014" a somewhat more world-weary dolphin is presented in a split screen narrative. "Summer's End" shows a passably content dolphin enjoying beach weather, cooling off in a glass vat of salt water. Presumably the aquatic creature could satisfy the same end by jumping into its natural habitat, the ocean? Perhaps the dolphin cannot truly relax without the tiniest bit of artifice, which the artificial habitat provides? In the opposing panel, "Travel Issues", we see another dolphin in a mass transit locale, bemoaning the escalating price of public transport. The dolphin is visibly wrinkled. Is it the same dolphin, older, far removed from its peak earning years, regretting its feckless, spendthrift youth (or perhaps cheated out of a pension)? Or is it the same dolphin, returning from the beach, skin wrinkled from the salt water bath, unable to understand why it can't afford the kind of recreational timeouts that the beautiful people in movies and on TV enjoy? The message is ambiguous without being inarticulate. Is it a moral parable? A satirical commentary? Rodriguez gives a head nod to Goya by titling the series of these illustrations *Modern Caprichos*. Like Goya's *Los Caprichos*, "Summer's End/Travel Issues 2014" readily gives away the basic units of its symbology - beach (play), mass transit (work), smooth skin (youth), wrinkles (old age) - while keeping their meaning in reserve, obscured, hidden behind a gigantic placard of potential platitudes.

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