

There's Gonna Be Sorrow
Julio Cesar Morales
Galeria de la Raza

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Julio Cesar Morales, a local fixture as both artist and curator, recently had his first solo show at Galeria de la Raza, once again demonstrating that gallery's place in the forefront of San Francisco art and cultural politics. "There's Gonna Be Sorrow" uses mixed media and installation to challenge both the gallery space and its visitors with a complex "montage of attractions," evoking a kind of dystopic discoteque that is all the more scary for being so charged with sensual play and visual seductions.

Though there is little overt intertextual reference in the actual work, the curatorial wall text informs us that Morales' point of departure with this installation is David Bowie's failed attempt to stage George Orwell's "1984" as a musical theater event in 1974, the residue of which would ultimately become Bowie's "Diamond Dogs" album. Smartly shying away from too-obvious nods to either Bowie or Orwell (both of whom have of course inspired vast repertoires of visual representations, many of them now tired and cliched), Morales instead brings this chance meeting of glam, surface, dystopia, and paranoia into our present day context, challenging viewers to navigate a minefield of suggestive surfaces that at once attract and repel.

In the main gallery space, Morales installed a large wooden ramp, covered in broken glass bottles. Spatially imposing in the front room, the broken bottles glimmered in the light, suggesting a kind of Faustian bargain for any beguiled enough to desire the "upwardly mobile" movement of the ramp itself. Elsewhere in the front space Morales installed grids of small mirrors, suggestive not only of a dance floor but also of the kinds of narcissistic pleasure that contemporary modes of (self-) spectatorship seem to offer us (even as we give ourselves over to the state machinery of surveillance in the bargain). Inscribed into one of the mirrored walls is a reverse (mirror-image) text, "Year of the Diamond Dogs," rendered out of tinfoil in a neo-baroque font reminiscent of Latino graffiti and design scripts. Beneath the ramp (for every ramp creates a new shelter beneath it), the exhibition title was spelled out in vermillion neon, throwing yet another reflection against the underside of the wooden ramp.

This slightly ominous red glow prepares us for the rear room, where Morales has hoisted two large video screens on simple rows of two-by-fours, suggesting a quick-and-dirty screening room for some dystopian future dance floor. The facing screens featured two looped videos, one featuring Morales' aunt in extreme close-up, the other a seeming mix of DJs at work and play. The extreme editing pushed both videos towards a kind of abstraction made all the more intense by

the flare-up of over-saturated color, thick pixels, and other forms of video-static that make for a kind of eye-candy that one imagines can't possibly be healthy (even as it tastes so good). The soundscape for this room (if not the whole exhibition) is provided by the DJs Los Creamators, along with the occasional fragment of melody sung by the aunt. The music, in the context of the installation, provokes an uneasy feeling, as its recognizably "cool" beats and "hip" ambient textures are not dissimilar from the seductive lullabies that such a post-Orwellian regime might use to distract us, into a kind of passivity that Zizek has recently identified as the triumph of repressive desublimation in the society of the spectacle. Indeed, Morales successfully stages a kind of testing ground for such subject positions, wherein one is offered all kinds of pleasurable enticements, as long as one remains passive as to the underlying power structures at play.

Throughout, Morales uses a variety of means to interrogate the layered surfaces of such reflections: glass, mirrors, and foil all suggest a grand theater of spectacle, that is no longer "out there" as much as within us, and within our understanding of ourselves and our identities. Likewise, LED signage and neon amplify the staginess of the installation, without resorting to glam cliches like glitter or spray painting. Instead, the "lights" here are somewhat diminished, holding back as much as they entice or seduce. In Morales' vision, our present-day 1984 threatens to render the glamorous surfaces of everyday entertainment culture as all the more threatening for their seemingly exhausted modes of signification. When both glam rock and Orwellian dystopias can become cultural locations for nostalgia, Morales seems to suggest, what we draw from such visual strategies becomes increasingly fraught. Few are immune from the seductions of the dance floor, the disco, the opening night party, but what price is paid for the lure of such entertaining distractions? Morales successfully negotiates between the allure (and legitimate fun) of such attractions and the more chilling sense of remove and danger that such mediated forms increasingly suggest. In a culture in which the hysterical biopolitics of surveillance has become the dominant mode of visual media—where the state concerns itself with tracking deviant (and racialized) subjects within its matrix of mediated control—the flash of neon and strobing video lights can no longer only suggest innocent fun and escape.

The broken bottles on the ramp are the most overt sign of the violence inherent in such otherwise glittering beauty, which is why such techniques are used as vernacular security fencing by low-income home owners. There are further hints of violence in the videos, subtly suggested by the quick-cut splices that turn the aunt's red lips to pixellated screen-gashes, or the red lights of the DJ's mixing board into flashing panic buttons. The industrial squawks and screeches of the soundtracks reinforce the slightly menacing undercurrents that keep the viewer uneasy, unable to merely give in to the beauty and shine of Morales' colorful creations. When the sexiness of new media can become the banalities of power in a simple toggle, we need to remain attentive to how such contradictions work

themselves through us. "There's Gonna Be Sorrow" is Morales' fabulous invitation to this necessary cultural (and political) work (and play).