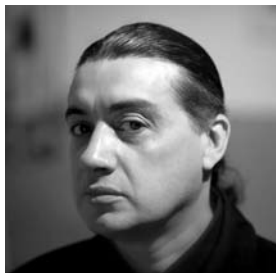


## : artist profile **Guillermo Bert**



LEFT:  
 "RED STATES, BLUE STATES AND WHITE LIES"  
 2007  
 MIXED MEDIA WITH LASER CUTTER  
 20" x 68" HIGH (TRIPTYCH)  
 PHOTO COURTESY OF GALLERY 415  
 PHOTO OF GUILLERMO BERT BY RONALD DUNLAP

The complex heterogeneity of contemporary life has been the focus of modernist art in industrialized countries for a century and a half, and the digital revolution has only accelerated the pace. Continually in flux, overwritten and repackaged, our postmodern world would seem impossibly elusive to traditional media, but Guillermo Bert's ironic mixed-media sculptures and reliefs manage to both embody and comment on contemporary consciousness. Bert chooses metaphors that embody transformation: patriotic or religious symbols changing into financial abstractions in the *Bar Codes* works, and ancient script flipping into modern commodity brand names in the *Subliminal Desire* works.

Born in Santiago and educated in Pinochet-dominated Chile, Bert immigrated to the United States in the late 1980s. Since then he has won grants and commissions from the Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC) and the City of Los Angeles Cultural Affairs Department; created murals and public sculptures; and worked as Art Director for the *LA Times*. Currently he teaches at the Art Center School of Design in Pasadena and maintains a studio at The Brewery.

Bert's work has always synthesized such opposites. In his *LA Sites* series, Bert rendered nudes, dancers, athletes and wild animals—emblems of vitality—on scavenged fragments of shredded, weathered street posters, "windows of perspective on the past and the present, seen from the vantage point of the future." His *Fossil* series injected a similar temporal filter, depicting semitransparent dancers, animals and urban landscapes on mosaics of spiral-bound artist sketchbooks, which are perforated or cut into puzzle-piece fragments. In other pieces Bert half-buries his opaquely rendered figures under a welter of abstract collage. The book sculptures from this series, engraved with sardonic inscriptions, lead to his current, more conceptual and less illustrative work, on consumerism and capitalism.

We all remember the ridicule Bush One incurred in 1992 when he revealed his ignorance of supermarket scanners. Those fatal Universal Price Code symbols in their machine-language Esperanto have proliferated beyond the checkout counter; they now pervade every part of life, and not just for inventory control or billing. They are becoming our electronic avatars, entities encoded and abstracted through the demographic filters of age, sex, race, religion, income, etc. Bert uses computer-guided laser cutters to create reliefs of these zebra stripes in his *Bar Codes* works. Rendered in industrial-grade plastic coated with lustrous enamel auto paint in red, white and blue (Chile's colors as well as ours), or in wood coated with gold leaf, the symbols themselves become objects of desire—albeit with sardonic labels, like *Red States*, *Blue States* & *White Lies*. Some of the taller pieces even suggest boxy modernist high-rise buildings. Bert's laser-burned stripes fit nicely into the history of abstraction, but they also connote Christ's flagellation welts. In some of Bert's images the stripes seem to weep or bleed from the emblematic art and architecture images he selects as motifs: the White House in *White Lies*; a Doric temple in *11000100101*; and a pre-Columbian artifact in *Justice Justice*. As in Eliot's *The Waste Land*, we see the mythic and romantic through less-than-heroic modern eyes.

Bert's *Subliminal Desire* series addresses consumerism by juxtaposing Old Master imagery, classically and eternally beautiful, with lengthy faux-texts in Greek which here and there suddenly decode themselves into legible words and phrases. In *Fountain of Youth*, the words "facelift" and "Botox" pop out at us, as do "North Korea," "Pakistan," "China" and "United States" in *Nuclear Club*. (No "Iran" yet.) Finding the hidden persuaders is the fun here, but discerning their hidden constant presence in the daily media gauntlet is our challenge the rest of the time.

—DEWITT CHENG

*Guillermo Bert's work can be seen at Gallery 415, San Francisco*

