

By **Adriana Herrera**, Miami

IRENE CLOUTHIER AND HER PLASTIC TOYS

Artist Irene Clouthier **took refuge** in the United States to flee her family's tragic past in Mexico. But, ironically, her **recent success** has drawn Clouthier more and more into that very past.

When Irene Clouthier arrived in the United States, she looked forward to anonymity. She wanted to start from scratch without the burden of her family's sad and troubled history. Now, having made a name for herself in a country where her surname draws a blank, Clouthier has found the courage to try to recover through her art an identity indelibly linked to Mexico's recent history of death squads in Sinaloa, her father's ideological opposition during those violent times, and the political paradoxes that blighted her childhood.

And it is only now that she lives and works in peace as a teacher at George Mason University in Virginia—where she also completed her master's degree in visual information technologies—and enjoys her success as an artist is Clouthier considering revealing more of her own past. Several well-known galleries throughout the U.S.,

notably Houston's Macky Gallery and the Marina Kessler Gallery, represent Clouthier and have encouraged her to include a text along with her art, which explains how her life and art were shaped by her father's public life.

That art has begun to draw attention in the U.S. in part because of Clouthier's unusual choice of materials as well as the subject matter. *The Miami Herald* art critic Elisa Turner describes Clouthier's art as a "consumerist cornucopia of plastic that comes through with barbed humor, especially in her references to the plastic toys and dolly fashion accessories" manufactured by U.S. industry, and the vigor of the surreal pastiches through which she captures a perspective of Mexico.

Pieces of the jigsaw

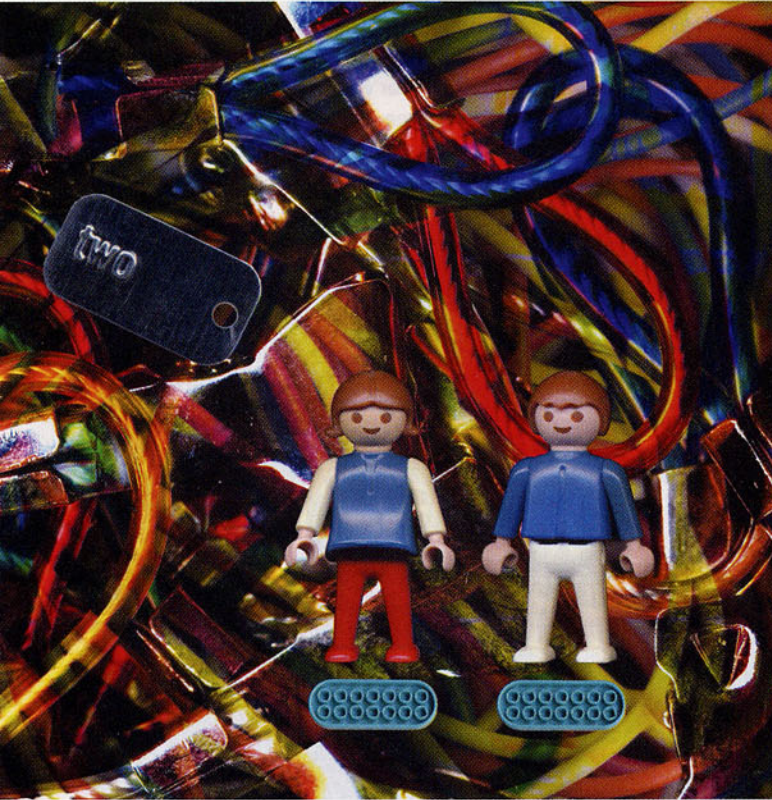
"My father had a plastics factory in Culiacán, Sinaloa," Clouthier says. "One of the first memories I have of my childhood is the happiness I felt looking at the color and shapes of the plastic. Totally captivated, I would watch the injection molds, and I used to run to pick up the

waste plastic that melted and dripped onto the floor and then solidified again. I used to take it home and find uses for it. I made it into tiny dolls' chairs or rugs and had the idea that when I died, I wanted to be wrapped in plastic."

In a presentation piece for her works of art, in which plastic is still omnipresent, Clouthier wrote, "I am attracted to toys, plastic objects that have transparent qualities ... I use plastic as the material that promises ephemeral paradise, a disposable happiness ... I use plastic to simulate stories as a reflection of my childhood, to enact fantasies. As a statement about the bubble-wrapped society we live in and its loss of sensitivity."

That simulation of stories, one of the central themes of her artistic language, is deeply linked to her childhood games and her knowledge of the theory of games, which later allowed her to understand them and reconstruct them as incisive series of contemporary art. "Play set-type games, which represent everyday life situations, were created after the Second World War to help children overcome

+ Clouthier began playing with alternative materials in her father's plastic factory.



disturbances caused by the trauma," Clouthier explains. "The idea was that as they relived their stories by playing in micro-universes, children could reestablish order in their own world."

However, for Clouthier and her twin brother play sets that were neither masculine nor feminine represented the best way to stage the stories they saw. "We used to include the world in our games," she recalls. One of her pieces of photography with mixed digital printing processes is called *Twins*.

Clouthier and her twin brother used to pretend to kidnap or kill the dolls. "That was normal. We had to bury them, hide them in the yard. We had grown up listening to such stories, with violence at the table every day, hearing about people getting killed every day and we had lost all our fear at an early age."

In the 80s, a particularly strong period for kidnappers and the explosion of drug trafficking, the artist's father, Manuel, "did not keep his opinions to himself" and was constantly threatened. Clouthier remembers that, during his first political

campaign, when she was just 10 years old she went with him one afternoon to give gifts to the factory workers just before Christmas. "Right in the middle of the cornfields, some soldiers appeared and stopped us at gunpoint," she says. Then nothing more happened.

Four years later, after Clouthier's second campaign, the Partido de Acción Nacional (National Action Party - PAN) clashed with President Carlos Salinas de Gortari over some murky election results, and a civic alliance was formed which included Clouthier and Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, (later to

become mayor of Mexico City) committed to achieving electoral reform.

"I grew up seeing power from very close up, in the midst of campaigns, in a place where gunshots could be heard at night and accustomed to the risk of violence that belonging to the opposition meant at that time," the artist says. "You needed a lot of balls to stand up and object."

The insecurity, which came from living with the constant and very real possibility that her father would be killed inspired one of Clouthier's best-known animations, *Sueño plástico* "Plastic Dream." It recounts the story of the void and vertigo of certain dreams and is best understood in the context of Clouthier's own experience. Manuel Clouthier was killed in an accident, whose circumstances the family considered dubious.

"He died at 10 a.m.," Clouthier says. "I think that at the time, you don't realize anything at all. [For me] everything was a blur. Then one year later, in Monterrey, when I turned 15, I was mad that I had lost my father to Mexico, that I hadn't had him with me as much as I could have during all

Clouthier's art reflects her father's political activism and the violence surrounding their life.

those years and I felt it hadn't been worth sacrificing him." Then, somehow, she decided to leave Culiacán behind. Clouthier knew that she could not be happy there and that she did not want to continue living alongside death as if it were normal. "Now that my father had died, I had no more ties and therefore, no more persecution," she says. But ties with her homeland—her mother's home, the beach, her childhood memories—always find a way of returning somehow.

Her plastic universes are a way of going back to those happy memories of plastics at her father's factory. But at the same time, as is reflected in those pieces of a complicated conceptual jigsaw that she has been putting together in a series, Clouthier feels the need to deny her identity, an urgency to escape. The Anchorage Museum of History and Art in Alaska asked her for a work of art that would be seen by children, and Clouthier changed one piece the museum considered disturbing. The piece was a play set seen through a magnifying glass where a little doll appeared without a face or hair, missing all expression and identity.

But one's identity cannot be erased so easily. The unspoken promise she and her brothers made after their father's death—that "people will hear about the Clouthiers"—has been fulfilled through the liberation that comes from working with culture

and creation: Irene is deputy director at the Institute of Mexico in Paris and she is one of the most outstanding Mexican artists resident in the United States of her generation.

Artistic education

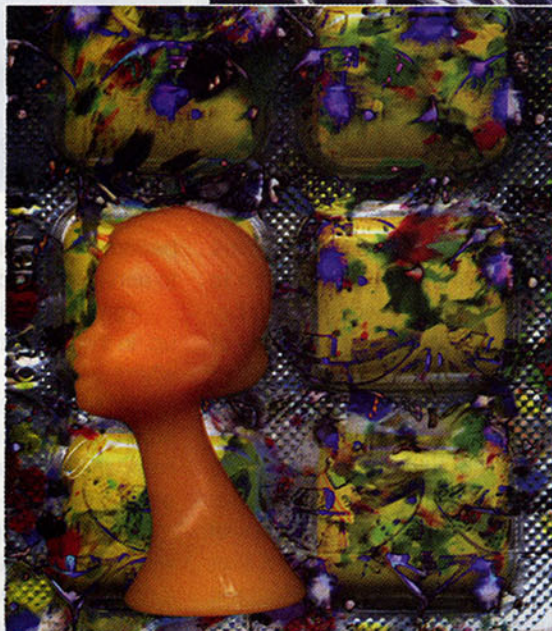
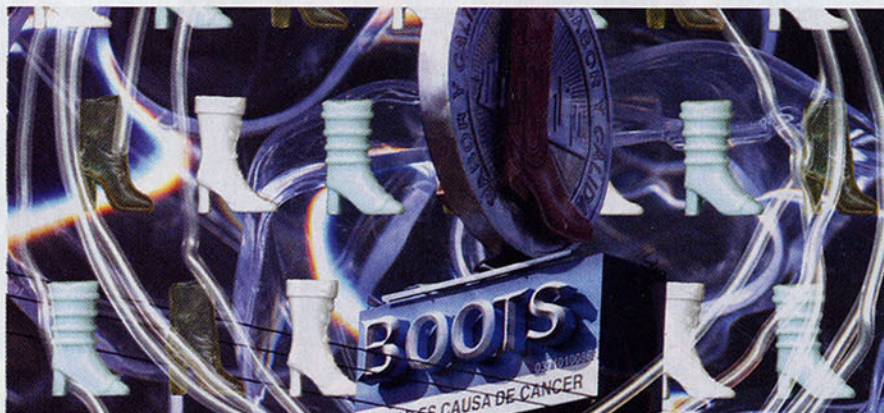
When Irene finished high school, she went to study French in Paris. She remembers family friend the late Ambassador Adolfo Aguilar Zinser asking her

what career she wanted to pursue. She told Aguilar Zinser either law or art. "He started to question me. He told me: 'The boat is leaving the dock, the sailors are casting off and you are not on board... You have to find out what you really want to do.'"

In the afternoons in Paris, while walk-

"sweating politics," but she lives politics like a normal Mexican citizen abroad who fervently takes part, for example, in urging her fellow countrymen to vote.

Clouthier was halfway through her fine arts degree at the University of Monterrey when she finally understood the dimension of an artist's commitment, according



+ Irene Clouthier's art has drawn attention in the United States, due to her choice of materials and the subject, the focus, and the mix of dark humor and violence it portrays.

ing, she could hear Aguilar Zinser's words in her head. One afternoon, while crossing the artists' bridge to catch a bus, she stopped. She looked at the people around her and thought that, as an attorney, she could never defend any cause she was not convinced about and decided right then and there "to take on other risks, other controversies, through art." That does not prevent her, even after all the rage contained in her history, to continue

to Rainer Maria Rilke's theory, which she can still recite from memory: "Ask yourself at the most silent hour of the night: Would I die if I don't write? (if I am not an artist). If you can say yes, build your life in accordance with this great truth." Her response was overwhelming. But even so, as is reflected by her own history and her art, at the same time as saying "yes," she was able to open up to opposing visions, then represented by the artistic essays of

Fernando Pessoa, which made her ask herself whether it was worth doing art, particularly in a country where this is "an exclusive product in the midst of so much hunger and misery."

Paradoxically, the very presence of contrary tensions has made Clouthier's art even richer. For example, her

ture; but, at the same time, she was the general coordinator of the Compartamos project that had just started in Monterrey. She was 100 percent committed to her creative work and even sought out businessmen to ask for financing. The dilemma between her social responsibility and her own vocation continued to make her head spin. "I didn't understand at that time the tremendous transformation potential of culture," she admits.

The way to humor

Duchamp's texts answered Irene's main questions. It was said that people without bread die from hunger but without art, they die from boredom. His theses about games and toys were, for Clouthier, more than just a reference, they were a source of meditation. With the oblique vision of the artist, Claus Oldenburg allowed her to look at everyday objects and understand the playful, yet

Perhaps the defining lesson for Clouthier's work and her life was that "humor makes art more acceptable. It allows you to say difficult things without people feeling like they're being attacked. Likewise, when you have to look death in the face so many times, you learn to look at life with humor. It's the only remedy left."

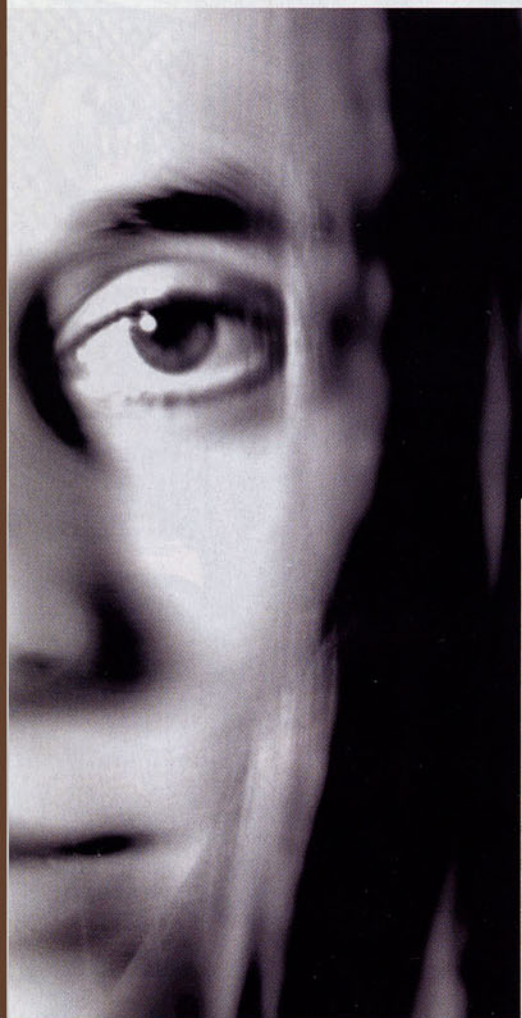
There are enormous doses of humor in Clouthier's work, not only because, as she admits, "the blank canvas is that play space where my memory hits a void," but rather because those personal experiences are mixed with the scenes of places she can capture like a sharp observer looking on from the outside

Clouthier's ideas for the Paisaje Regio series came about from looking at Monterrey's billboards, which somehow summarize the entire cultural mix of a border city. She came up with the idea to do a series based on three-dimensional billboards that "decorate" the city during a trip. "They are a humorous and critical comment on visual contamination and 'good taste' publicity and marketing in northern Mexico," Clouthier explains. "I have tried to recycle images, sometimes playfully and other times in serious reflection, [and] to actually take photos and make a contaminated urban landscape more beautiful."

Although her series of art may mask biting comments on consumption or environmental destruction, they do not lose the ability to make you laugh. However, in a similar way, those hybrid images, a mixture of Texas and colonial Mexico, that seem to be powerful expressions of popular art, "a natural kitsch," give you the feeling of being at home.

Irene Clouthier recognizes that, without a doubt, it was her studies in visual production in the United States and courses like the one she took in Los Angeles in architecture that allowed her to dominate the spatial handling of a technique that combines photography, the direct "scanning" of objects and digital printing.

However, she points out that during her master's degree in the United States, she never felt as intellectually challenged as she did with her teachers in Mexico. And, she points out that her country "is a paradise for comical objects" and for an imagery that produces both fascinating and incomparable popular, visual narratives. +



+ Artist Irene Clouthier.



works of art with plastic extol the material's malleability, the aesthetic pleasure aroused by contemplating it, but, at the same time, mock consumption and the contemporary world's love of perishables.

Clouthier resolved part of that dichotomy during her career working for an association that offered financing for micro-companies owned by women of limited means. Clouthier, the student, constantly questioned the function of art and its na-

also conceptual, realms of the boundaries between containers and content in more depth. Regarding Andy Warhol, she particularly laughed at his defense of shallowness and his carefree proclamation of art for all. "Liz Taylor used to drink Coca-Cola like any street sweeper. That's how Warhol saw his art with logic captivated by the media, capable of considering that appearing on TV made you a better person, with a dose of humor that penetrated American culture more deeply than any theoretical statement," Clouthier explains.