



ELAINE BYRNE
DUBLIN, IRELAND

In what makes for an engrossing sojourn, Elaine Byrne's *Message to Salinas* juxtaposes present-day Mexico with its recent past while directing attention to one of Ireland's most elusive residents [Oonagh Young Gallery; January 21—February 19, 2011]. Researched and produced during a residency at Mexico City's SOMA in 2010, the work scrutinizes the legacy of ex-president Carlos Salinas de Gortari's programs and policies. On the surface, the exhibition intimates a polarized state of affairs, which soon gives way to a much more complex—and ultimately rewarding—view mixing personal account and opinion.

The low scale of the gewgaw-like *I'm Yours for Money*, 2010, and its proximity to the entrance almost makes you trip. The abrupt encounter forces us to notice the title's four words, a theme that runs through the presentation. Illuminated in neon, the words wrap a black Perspex cube to form a slick conversation piece that recalls the unbecoming conduct of numerous leaders.

Standing in the center of the gallery, we occupy a position between the rich and the disenfranchised. To one side, several photographs of trash collectors idling on the roof of an overloaded garbage truck evoke entropy. The goods have been organized to suggest that the vehicle doubles as a redistribution center. *Solidarity*, 2010, is installed on the opposite wall. Its title derives from the program that Salinas devised to address a broad range of basic community needs. Here, Byrne focuses on the government's collusion with big business and its fraudulent intentions by cutting the title's letters out of a Mexican flag. The openings reveal portraits of individuals who made huge financial gains from Salinas' initiatives. While the irony conveyed by these static elements is certainly engaging, their abstract nature mitigates their impact. They take a secondary, supporting role to the time-based and textual components that not only share the exhibition's title, but also form its core.

The video and publication *Message to Salinas*, both

2010, stem from an invitation Byrne distributed through Facebook, encouraging all Mexicans to participate in a collective artwork to be shown in Dublin, Carlos Salinas' current city of residence. Messages could be sent by video or email. The collected responses, left unedited and supplemented by English translations, run from the astute to the inane. Many are heartfelt; some show respect. They can be callous or damning. Class distinctions also become apparent. Some emailers indicate that they operate businesses or are highly educated. These messages tend to be more supportive of Salinas. They praise him for bringing Mexico into the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Several merely reference websites on topics such as "Mexico's narco-political corruption" or "the Bush-Salinas connection," and an appendix includes emails from journalists interested in the project.

The video messages, on the other hand, communicate other forms of information. They enable the reading of facial expressions and the detection of emotional content in people's voices. Whereas some urge Salinas to restore Mexico's prosperity, others accuse him of theft. One woman speaks of his son Emiliano, a kind and handsome boy who assisted her with homework at the American school. The most disturbing accounts tell of family members who have been kidnapped or fallen into drug addiction. One woman even fears retaliation simply for participating in this art project.

Message to Salinas presents a compelling view of Mexico that sharply contrasts with recent news reports of rampant drug-cartel violence. A portrait of its people, it offers a heady blend of fact and fiction tempered by a host of feelings, desires, and intentions that, in its frank delivery, blatantly contradicts the clandestine lifestyle of the figure it addresses. Unlike the countenance projected by the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) during Salinas' term, Byrne's work is truly demo-

cratic. In speaking for themselves, the people remind us of Mexico's deeply convoluted history and the challenges that face this nation. Curiously, *Message to Salinas* also echoes developments in Ireland. In the early 1990s, the peace and prosperity effectuated by Salinas had convinced people they had joined the first world. Similarly, the Celtic Tiger convinced the Irish that they would never again be poor. But with the bursting of the economic bubble, financial havoc ensued.

—John Gayer

ABOVE: Elaine Byrne, still from *Message to Salinas*, 2010, DVD, 13 minutes, edition of 5 (courtesy of artist and Oonagh Young Gallery, Dublin)