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How Chicano Is It?

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Young artists of Mexican American heritage are gaining visibility for work that often touches on their ethnic identity-along with other themes, from the conceptual to the formal. But they're conflicted about being defined by it.

On a spring night in 1972, a trio of Los Angeles artists - Harry Gamboa Jr., Willie Herron III, and Glugio Nicandro (who goes by the nickname Gronk)-spray-painted their names at the entrance to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. It might have seemed a simple act of vandalism. For the artists, however, a collective that operated under the name Asco, it was a defiant, if temporary, work of art.

Earlier in the day, Gamboa had casually encountered a LACMA curator and pressed him about the absence of Chicanos (Americans of Mexican descent) from the displays of contemporary art. As the story goes, the curator dismissively responded that Chicanos didn't produce art; they joined gangs. That night, Gamboa and his colleagues returned to the museum and sprayed their signatures on the institution's Modernist facade. The following morning, they returned with the collective's fourth member, Patssi Valdez, and photographed her standing alongside their handiwork. The piece, dubbed Spray Paint LACMA, turned the institution into a giant, conceptual work of Chicano art. The museum painted over the tags within hours, but Spray Paint LACMA was set to become a touchstone for generations of Chicano artists.

In the intervening 38 years, the institutional visibility of Chicano artists has improved. Individual works by some of Asco's former members now figure in LACMA's permanent collection, as do pieces by painter Carlos Almaraz and conceptualist Carlee Fernandez. Chicano artists, including Daniel J. Martinez, Ruben Ochoa, and Eduardo Ruben Ochoa, and Eduardo Sarabia, have appeared in Whitney Biennials-some more than once. (At the 1993 show, Martinez famously handed out museum-admission badges that read, "I can't imagine ever wanting to be white.")

On the commercial front, Chicano artists demonstrate the full range of experiences. While some established figures, such as Gamboa and Gronk, eschew the gallery scene to focus on institutional work, others show with leading American galleries, among them Ochoa, at Susanne Vielmetter in Los Angeles, and Sarabia, at 1-20 in New York. Mario Ybarra Jr., also a Whitney Biennial alum, is represented by Michael Janssen in Berlin, Mark Moore in Santa Monica, and Lehmann Maupin in New York.

Moreover, in the coming year, Chicano artists will figure prominently in a variety of programming, including a number of exhibitions tied to Pacific Standard Time, a cluster of California-focused shows supported by the J. Paul Getty Foundation that will open across more than a dozen major Southern California institutions in the fall of 2011. Most significantly; in late 2011, Asco will be the subject of a retrospective

at-of all places- LACMA. Although the group received little to no recognition from the gallery circuit or Southern California's principal arts institutions during its 70s hey- day; it had a significant underground following and touched a generation of artists who grew up hearing about the group's conceptual exploits. "It's long overdue," says the exhibition's cocurator, C. professor of art history and Latina/o studies at Williams College in Massachusetts. "Their influence and impact over time has been pretty significant."

Even as a growing number of Chicano artists achieve a higher profile, however, institutional acknowledgment remains spotty, especially from the powerful art centers in New York. The 2010 Whitney Biennial did not include a single Chicano artist in its survey of American art. (For that matter, it didn't include a single Latino artist either.) The same goes for the New Museum, which didn't include any Chicanos or Latinos in its 2009 triennial, "The Generational: Younger Than Jesus."

"Type in the word 'Chicano' on the Web sites of Sotheby's and Christie's and you get a big fat zero," says Gamboa, now a photography and media professor at the California Institute of the Arts. "Look at the collections of the major museums. That will also tell you something."

It's hard to know exactly how many Chicano artists are represented in museums, since institutions generally don't categorize their collections by the creators' ethnicities. But a cursory search for names of some of the most prominent contemporary Chicano artists indicates that they certainly aren't overrepresented. The Whitney can confirm the presence of three Chicano artists - Martinez, Ochoa, and urban-landscape photographer Anthony Hernandez-in its permanent collection, while the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim Museum can each confirm one, the same one: Hernandez. "If you look at the roster of any gallery or group exhibition, there is still not really parity," says Rita Gonzalez, curator of contemporary art at LACMA, who is working on the Asco retrospective and who cocurated "Phantom Sightings: Art after the Chicano Movement," a traveling show that started at LACMA. "If it's not in the curator's consciousness to think about these issues-about representing the breadth of the American landscape-then it doesn't play itself out."

As Chicano artists seek recognition within this arena, they tread a path fraught with politics. The easiest alternative for many seeking exposure has historically been the regular group shows organized around a narrow gamut of ethnicity centered works. ("Cinco de Mayo shows" is how one artist describes them, sardonically.) But these can leave many artists feeling boxed in by their identities. "If they get exhibited under that category and then they don't get exhibited elsewhere, it becomes the totality of what they are," says Chon Noriega, director of the Chicano Studies Research Center at UCLA, who cocurated "Phantom Sightings" for LACMA, where he is adjunct curator. "That can be frustrating for artists who are broadly engaged with the world."

Some are wary about being dubbed a Chicano artist out of concern that their work might be automatically categorized as "Chicano art" - a label often associated with the graphic-heavy; narrative-style imagery that accompanied the Chicano civil rights movement of the '60s and 70s. In fact, a number of artists approached for this story declined to be interviewed. And many of those who did speak, especially the

younger ones, gave highly nuanced views of how they see themselves. Ybarra is a 36-year-old Southern California-based artist whose pop-infused installations have appeared at Tate Modern in London and the Art Institute of Chicago. "I am a Chicano, but do I make Chicano art?" he asks rhetorically. "I do not."

Chicano art, as a category, emerged during the civil-rights and antiwar movements of the '60s, when migrant farm workers were striking for better working conditions and Mexican American students in Los Angeles were staging walkouts in demand of improved educational services. It was during this time that the word "Chicano," once used pejoratively to describe Mexican immigrants in the United States, came into broad use as a term of empowerment.

The art that was tied to and emerged from the movements served as both political broadside and cultural affirmation. Poster artists-influenced by turn-of-the-20th-century Mexican printmakers and the stark Cuban revolutionary posters of the '60s-created flyers to announce protests. Painters incorporated images from indigenous history and Chicano popular culture (think zoot suits and lowrider cars) in ways that paid tribute to Latin American folk art and the Mexican muralists. A couple of iconic figures to emerge from this period are Frank Romero, who paints vivid scenes of barrio life, and Carmen Lomas Garza, best known for depictions of domestic settings. They, and others working in this vein, were featured in a high-profile traveling show, "Chicano Visions: American Painters on the Verge," curated by Rene Yanez from works in the collection of actor Cheech Marin.

For many historians, art writers, and curators, it is this socially minded work that defines the category. But the scene was hardly monolithic. "There were a variety of ideologies," says Rupert Garcia, a Bay Area artist who will have two decades' worth of his prints on view in "Rupert Garcia: The Magnolia Editions Projects," opening at San Francisco's de Young Museum on February 26. "It wasn't as black and white as many would like to say it is. It was fluid and exciting." Garcia is a case in point: a trained artist, he has crafted well-known political posters, but has also produced lesser known paintings that reflect his abiding interest in art history. A 1989 pastel in "Phantom Sightings" riffed-in an abstract way-on Gustave Courbet's troubles following the Paris Commune of 1871.

Other Chicano painters have paid tribute to art-historical figures as diverse as Marcel Duchamp and Leonardo da Vinci. And, of course, there is Asco, the group that explored performance, conceptual photography, and guerrilla theater as early as more prominent 70s artists like Chris Burden and Paul McCarthy. In Walking Mural, a well-known Happening from 1972, the group dressed up as parodic versions of traditional Chicano mural images-including a Goth-looking Virgin of Guadalupe-and paraded along Whittier Boulevard in East L.A. The piece was a flamboyant deconstruction of the cliched imagery used by many Chicano muralists.

Ignored (or reviled) by figures within the Chicano movement for not adhering to traditional forms, Asco was also at a remove from art-world power centers. "We fell into a state of not being accepted on either front," recalls Gronk, one of the group's founding members, a successful painter and photographer who has shown at international venues, including the Pompidou Center in Paris, and who this past spring created a mural at UCLA's Fowler Museum. He thinks that this lack of critical

acceptance "allowed us a lot of creative leeway for exploration. There were no limitations to the possibilities we had with Asco. We could be critical of ourselves."

In recent years, curators have attempted to emphasize the broad range of mediums and subject matters employed by Chicano artists. LACMA's generally well-received "Phantom Sightings" -which took as its lynchpin Asco's early works was key in this regard. The survey, featuring the work of more than two dozen artists, examined the conceptual, abstract, and art-historical practices of Chicano artists working in the 70s and '80s. There were works that referred to everything from California Minimalism to the environment. The show also extended to another generation, by including artists in their 20s and 30s - some of them biracial, others from the suburbs, few of them with a direct connection to the Chicano civil-rights movement. By and large trained in art schools, this younger cohort works in the conceptual idioms that for so long have fallen outside of the definition of Chicano art. Much of their work tackles the issue of identity in a diffuse and abstract way. In the 2006 self-portrait photo series "Man," for example, Los Angeles-based artist Carlee Fernandez, now 37, explores her physical relationship to men whom she considers influential, from her Mexican father to Austrian artist Franz West to Megadeth guitarist Dave Mustaine. In the series, she mirrors their looks and poses. It is a subtle exploration of identity by an artist who is biracial and who spent much of her youth living in Europe. "I've always felt as if I've had one foot in and one foot out," she explains, a common sentiment among many of the artists I spoke with. Cruz Ortiz, a 38-year-old San Antonio-based artist who does performances as a post-punk antihero named Spaztek, echoes the idea. "It's difficult for me when people call me up for Chicano shows," says Ortiz, who this past summer had a solo project at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston. "I'm like, 'Really?' It's much more complex than that."

"Phantom Sightings" explored this complexity-which is now playing itself out among two generations of Chicano artists. Part of the struggle is putting a name to what they are doing: these artists are not working within the established parameters of Chicano art, yet they are Chicano, and in many ways their ethnicity informs their work. But it's not the central aspect of what they do. So what do we call it? Everyone I spoke with seemed to have a different answer. (Variations on "I'm a contemporary artist who happens to be Chicano/a" was a favorite refrain.) Noriega likens it to the condition facing that nebulous grouping known as feminist art. (Is it feminist because it's made by women or because it displays feminist themes? Discuss.) Interestingly; the "Phantom Sightings" curators chose not to label the work Chicano art, opting for the subtitle "Art after the Chicano Movement."

Despite the issues with classification, LACMA's Gonzalez says that broad themes unite these artists. "There's a sense of fluidity and hybridity," she says. "You're talking about artists who, for the most part, are living in an urban environment and who interface with a multiethnic cast." And while the ways in which they express these ideas are varied, there is the shared experience of having to navigate more than a single reality. Ortiz says he is particularly fond of the term "negotiator" - "people who jump back and forth, playing hopscotch, trying to figure what works and what doesn't."

The amorphous and tenuous categories of ethnic identity have led some critics to declare that art should not be presented through that prism. Yet many curators, who

say that Chicano artists remain woefully underrepresented, disagree. Pilar Tompkins, an independent curator based in Los Angeles, has organized exhibitions for the city's department of cultural affairs and is at work on three shows related to Pacific Standard Time. "I think more articles have been written about whether Chicano art exists than there have been art exhibits dedicated to exploring the idea," she says. "This has not been fleshed out."

Moreover, in a society obsessed with issues of race, many artists see ethnicity as a potentially interesting organizing principle for a group show-provided it's rigorously and sensitively done. "I'm not boxed in," says New Mexico-based photographer Delilah Montoya, an artist whose border photographs were featured in "Phantom Sightings" and whose images will appear in the group photography show "With Open Eyes" at the Museo de las Americas in Denver next February. "The subject is really deep. I'm digging a well and haven't hit water yet."

As with all things relating to race, it's a tricky balance. The artists I spoke with found that Chicano culture provided them with a rich source of inspiration - but it wasn't the only source. And they are ready to move beyond the notion that they can be identified with only one style of art making. Ybarra provides an interesting personal metaphor to explain the phenomenon. As a child, he used to visit his great-grandmother in her San Francisco apartment. Since she had a lot of grandchildren, those visiting would have to clearly identify themselves before being buzzed in. "You'd ring the bell and then you'd say; 'It's Mario-the son of Mario, the son of Salvador,'" he recalls. "Well, that's what Chicano art is for me. Something that has been passed down, that I feel an affinity for-in the same way I feel an affinity for other artists that came out of L.A. - but it isn't the only thing that defines me."