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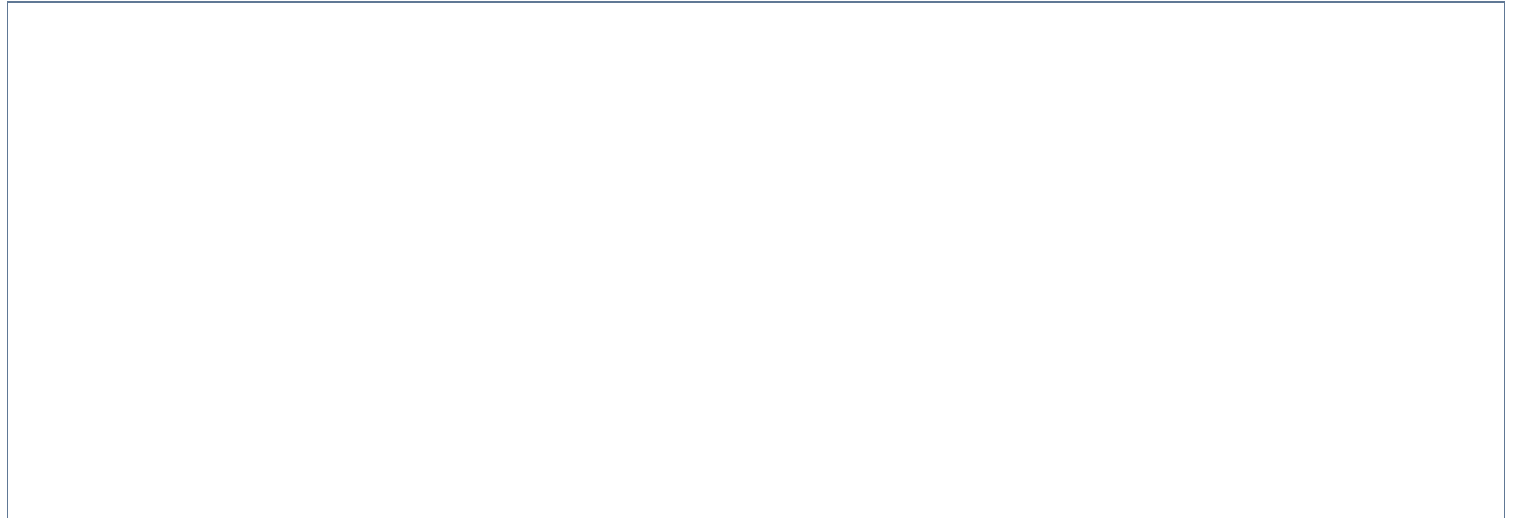
ART

LACMA EAST: "PHANTOM SIGHTINGS" CHRONICLES THE RISE OF POST-CHICANOISM

BY CHRISTOPHER MILES

Wednesday, April 30, 2008 - 12:00 pm

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"Phantom Sightings: Art After the Chicano Movement" begins with photos chronicling the art collective Asco (Spanish for *nausea*). Patssi Valdez, Gronk, Willie Herron III and Harry Gamboa Jr., aspiring artists, writers and filmmakers when they formed Asco in the early '70s, drew from Chicano traditions and contemporary art strategies to address hot-button issues — from representations of gang activity in the media and the underrepresentation of Chicano artists in museums to the war in Vietnam. (See the online version of this review for a link to a recent *L.A. Weekly* feature on Asco.)



(Click to enlarge)

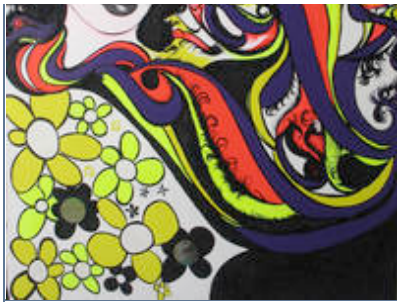
Carlee Fernandez, Self-Portrait:
Portrait of My Father, Manuel
Fernandez (2006)



The iconic image from the foursome's provocative tenure, before the group swelled to a larger organization and then disbanded in the '80s, is a 1972 photo showing Valdez, looking like a nervous spokesmodel, posing by a wall on which her cohorts' names are tagged. Though the photo yields few clues, the lines of architecture betray the transgression's location, as confirmed by the work's title: *Spraypaint LACMA*.

Gamboa Jr. referred to Asco's aerosol siege, spurred by a LACMA curator's derogatory comments about Chicanos and their art, as "the first conceptual work of Chicano art to be exhibited at LACMA," and that tongue twister of a description goes to the heart of Asco, which is presented as a touchstone for this exhibition of works by mostly much younger artists. Asco's art can be described using multiple choices from a long list of categories — guerilla, graffiti, performance, conceptual, postminimalist, interventionist, critique of representation, institutional critique, Chicano, post-Chicano and so on. Add art after any of the words listed, then add in photography, film, video, painting, drawing and sculpture, and you have a lexicon for delving into Asco and the rest of this impressive show.

The exhibition's curators, Howard N. Fox and Rita Gonzalez of LACMA, and Chon A. Noriega, director of the Chicano Studies Research Center at UCLA, brought together 120 works by 31 artists, with the goal of following "an idea rather than representing a constituency," thus focusing on a slice of art produced by young artists with mostly Mexican roots, working from "conceptual and interventionist tendencies."



(Click to enlarge)

Carolyn Castaño, Tropical Baby (Self-Portrait) (2008)

No doubt, much of what is on view at LACMA can squeeze into this curatorial garb. Consider Sandra de la Loza, who has placed unauthorized plaques around the city to commemorate overlooked, or, in the case of David Alfaro Siqueiros' 1932 *Tropical America* mural, literally whitewashed history. At LACMA, she creates a museum exhibit within the museum exhibit, offering documents and souvenirs that reveal brutal, ruthless, occasionally romanticized and at times downright bizarre ways in which white-Chicano relations have manifested themselves in Los Angeles culture, while her video work animates the terracotta figures in downtown L.A.'s Fort Moore Pioneer Memorial frieze so as to desolidify popular accounts of regional history.

Equally smart, conceptually rooted and interventionist in the most brilliant of ways is Ruben Ochoa, whose works of the past few years have utilized a variety of postminimalist strategies to breach ethnic, cultural and class barriers, as well as the literal barriers that shape the urban experience. His "Phantom" exhibit includes the documents and relics from

a project in which Ochoa covered sections of a freeway divider wall with digital photo wallpaper, creating the illusion that sections of the wall had been removed to reveal the hillside behind it.

But the more you examine "Phantom Sightings," the clearer it becomes that the curators didn't actually succeed in defining a slice of artistic production and then locate the artists within it. Rather, in an odd reductionism, perhaps even a kind of essentializing, they imagined a show, and a group of artists, narrower than either are.

I'm not convinced that the presumed framework of this exhibition has much to do with, or does any favors for, Nicola López's frenetic woodblock-printed Mylar cut-outs depicting colossal postindustrial infrastructural failures; or Rubén Ortiz-Torres' paintings of pure atmosphere produced by coating aluminum panels with Kameleon color-shifting auto paint; or Victor Estrada's constellation's of linked bulbous forms and cultural detritus that charm you until you begin to understand they are something like networks of receptacles for mental waste. I'm as happy to see all of the above in this exhibition as I am to see Carolyn Castaño's hyperdecorative and fanciful images from what seem an ethnically flaired postpsychedelic disco cartoon telenovela; Margarita Cabrera's sewn soft replicas of hard goods ranging from blenders to Hummers; and Ken Gonzalez-Day's conversion of a photographic history of Los Angeles lynchings into a provocative and deeply poetic, haunting experience. But I'm not sure how they wound up in this show. It's as if in developing the premise, the curators laid out a rule and then made a series of exceptions. (Yay!)

The good news is that what was likely a simplistic meeting-room common denominator was trumped by enthusiasms aroused by something else the trio of curators apparently share: well-tuned radar for sophistication and talent. And the artists who chose to participate — some invited artists turned down the gig for fear of a "surname-based" exhibition — had a good bit to do with such trumping. If the works here do share a tendency toward intervention, the biggest intervention seems to be something akin to talking your way in the door, and then taking over the party.

Walking through "Phantom Sightings" feels not so different from visiting the current "Biennial Exhibition" at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, where three of these artists (Ruben Ochoa, Eduardo Sarabia and Mario Ybarra Jr.) are among the 80-plus artists included, or the just-ended "Unmonumental" exhibition that inaugurated the New Museum's new building in Manhattan's Bowery neighborhood, or the Hirshhorn Museum's 2006 exhibition "The Uncertainty of Objects and Ideas: Recent Sculpture." Though filters regarding ethnicity, nationality and genres shaped these four exhibitions differently, the fact remains that you could take much if not most of the work from any of the four shows and plop it into any of the others, and it would fit nicely. That might attest to the contemporary art circuit's capacity for rapidly internationalizing just about anything, but it might also speak to something the artists in the exhibitions, as well as the curators, variously tapped — or backed into.

Pondering whether it might be a "biennial for a recession-bound time," the *New York Times'* Holland Cotter indulged the Whitney's curators, Henriette Huldish and Shamim M. Momin, in their invocation of "lessness" — a turn away from spectacle and toward sustainability, collaboration, ephemerality and nonmonumentality. But it seems in each of these shows something even less comfortable than that is afoot — a kind of collective conflictedness about where to stand in the world, as individuals and as groups, with regard to participation in the production and consumption of material, popular and high culture, particularly within the context of an urban experience.

You get an extra helping of such conflict in "Phantom Sightings," seen not so specifically from a Chicano perspective, or a post-Chicano point of view, but from the assorted vantage points, contexts, backgrounds, preoccupations, enthusiasms, neuroses, acuties and skills of artists who share variously overlapping experiences, and who happen to have surnames of a shared descent.

It's disappointing that artists who passed on this exhibition for fear of a label didn't have the faith that their work could participate in the terrific hijacking this show turns out to be. And the exhibition might well have been more untidy in an interesting way if the curators, in what might have signaled that the complexity of all that falls under the Chicano umbrella goes beyond surnames, had included works by artists whose parentage might hail from just about anywhere, but who, as living and breathing malleable and responsive beings in contemporary America (certainly in contemporary Los Angeles), give evidence through their work of the influence of Chicano culture on the production of contemporary art. All this said, LACMA shows via this exhibition that it does indeed have an edge, and as the three curators contend in the introduction to the exhibition catalog, this is an exhibition "you

need to see.”

PHANTOM SIGHTINGS: ART AFTER THE CHICANO MOVEMENT | Los Angeles County Museum of Art | 5905 Wilshire Blvd., L.A. | (323) 857-6000 | www.lacma.org | Through Sept. 1