

ART

Chicano art, beyond rebellion

'Phantom Sightings: Art After the Chicano Movement' provides a rare showcase at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

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VISITORS to the sprawling Chicano art show opening today at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art are greeted by a display of photos depicting a group of daring guerrilla street artists known as ASCO. Spontaneous for "smoke." The photographs are from the early 1970s — which seems to deny the show's title, "Phantom Sightings: Art After the Chicano Movement."

In one famous photo from 1972, in the midst of the movement, the museum itself "the target of those Dada-esque subversives promoting the exclusion of Chicano art from its galleries, the 'Soy Pasa LACMA.' ASCO member Pina U'Kuk is seen posing outside the museum's walls, which had been tramped overnight by her rebellious cohorts, Gato, Willie Harris III and Harry Gamboa Jr. This act of creative defiance — turning the building into a Chicano canvas — is now considered the very place that inspired the present by treating Chicano art in the phantoms of the art world. So does this mean the Chicano artists have finally found the acceptance they sought? That they are now put down their spray cans and peace candles as equals in a mainstream, "post-ethnic" art world?

"I have a feeling if I was a young person today, I don't think I would spray paint the museum," Gamboa, 58, an author and college lecturer, answers slyly. "Because now, [tagging] has been tolerated, and so just three signatures on a county building might result in those strikes. Who knows if we would still wind up in prison for life and never have the chance to pursue careers as artists?"

Half the artists in the current exhibition weren't even born when Gamboa and company tagged the museum, but they carry on the ASCO conceptual tradition by expressing their own set of social concerns in bold, albeit at times oblique, ways. Thus, the choice of ASCO is problematic in an intriguing invitation to rethink Chicano art, past and present.

"Phantom Sightings" (a phrase adapted from Gamboa's writings) features more than 120 works, including 10 commissioned specifically for the occasion, by 31 artists from across the country, some of whom don't call themselves Chicano. Most came of age in the 1960s and several have just recently started to draw international attention. Three — Ruben Okubo, Eduardo Serrano and Maria Ybarra Jr. — are currently represented at the contemporary reputation-making Whitney Biennial in New York.

Curated by Rita Gonzalez, Howard Fox and Chen Noreiga, this is the first major Chicano group exhibition presented at LACMA since 1987's "Hispanic Art in the United States," which was organized by the Hispanic Museum of Fine Arts. And it's the first such show organized for LACMA, and it's more than three decades since its ground-breaking "Chicanos on Art: 1975 and 'Los Four' the year before.

Unlike past Chicano art shows that focused heavily on painting, the new collection highlights work in an array of styles and formats, including sculpture, mixed-media installations, photo-based pieces and so-called interventions, art that invades life in public spaces or social settings. Since much of the work is conceptual, "Phantom Sightings" is likely to leave some viewers scratching their heads, seeking help deciphering what artists had in mind with saturated blebs that change shape (Rita Ora Torres) or droopy replicas of Lichten's appliances made of vinyl (Margarita Cobos). Essays and artist bios are included in a 240-page companion catalog that is bound to become a reference work.

Variety, not ethnicity, is the show's hallmark. Artist Ken Gonzalez Jr. deals with the lynching of Mexican Americans in California by digitally recreating the victim from historic photos. Sandra de la Lanza, meanwhile, fills in the gaps that history erased by placing plaques (that are quickly removed) in places such as the whitewashed aqueduct meant to obscure Fresno. And Julia Cesar Merino reveals the reconfigurations of immigrants trying to cross the border illegally by exposing them in their hiding places, such as the little girl inside a pitana, through transparent water-color illustrations based on real cases.

The art is by turns provocative, fanciful, stirring, strange and even noisy, in the case of one audio installation titled "Migrant Dubs." Fox calls the show "a visually cacophonous and steady bang." To some extent, it reflects the indefinable nature when some of these artists were nurtured. That street aesthetic is reflected in the design for the exhibition, with rough-hewn plywood structures, and in signage and promotions using old-fashioned wheat paste posters.

Big expectations

THE show is generating intense expectations, partly due to how rarely the museum turns its attention to Chicano art in its own backyard, as opposed to Mexican or Latin American art. Galleries from Santa Monica to East L.A. are staging shows to ride the coattails of "Phantom Sightings."

Even for the few mid-career artists in the show, participation can mean validation. "It's wonderful that I'm showing with a lot of up-and-coming or emerging artists," says Dalila Montoya, 52, a Texas-based photographer. "It makes me feel as though I've been going down the right track."

But the show is also stirring debate, starting with the subtitle, which draws its own line of partition. "Art After the Chicano Movement," it suggests not only a generational but an aesthetic break with Chicano artists who emerged during the civil rights struggle, known for illustrative paintings and murals, political content and traditional iconography, such as revolutionaries, borderlands and the Virgin of Guadalupe.

With its emphasis on younger artists who don't wear their ethnicities on their sleeves, "Phantom Sightings" seems to be inaugurating a "post-ethnic" Chicano era. Coming at the height of a presidential campaign in which some had Sen. Barack Obama as the first "post-racial" candidate, the timing seems propitious.

Yet some worry that implication is demeaning. "The inherited plight and struggle and history of the Chicano art movement is not one you can try with, say, without expecting any sort of questioning," says Reyes Rodriguez, director of Tropico de Nopal, a gallery near downtown that has exhibited several of the artists in the show. "Do we just keep quiet and allow LACMA to declare that Chicano art is dead? What does that really mean? That you want to be more European or more a part of, let's call it the Anglo-world, or whatever it is that validates you? Is that really success? Do we not have a voice of our own?"

The notion of ethnic identity as good is pervasive in contemporary American society, not only in the arts but in pop music, politics, journalism and literature. At some schools, being post-ethnic is almost an admission requirement. Yet some young artists still question the border that the post-racial other places exclusively on racial minorities.

"People say multiculturalism is dead and we're, like, 'OK, who's the post-white show?'" says Emma Ortega, who holds an MFA from UCLA and collaborated on the "Migrant Dubs" exhibit. "Nevertheless, it's almost as if your identity is erased, in a lot of ways. But at the same time, you are who you are, and that's what you're going to represent."

"Phantom Sightings" emerged from LACMA's Latino Arts Initiative, launched in 2004 under former director Andrea Rich and designed as a collaboration between the museum and UCLA's Chicano Studies Research Center. Noreiga was named an adjunct curator and put in charge of the five-year plan to develop exhibitions, publications and other projects.

One of the projects already on the books that was a plan to exhibit highlights from the Chicano art collection of actor and comedian Cheech Marin. That show, a spin-off of Marin's larger exhibition called "Chicano Visions," is now scheduled to open at LACMA in June under the title "Los Angeles/Chicano Painter of L.A.: Selections From the Cheech Marin Collection."

What the artists release about the initiative did not mention was the controversy, behind the scenes negotiations between Marin and the museum, which originally turned down his show outright. The actor attempted to go public with the issue before museum officials agreed to the scaled-down version of "Chicano Visions," which has since toured the country to sell-out and sometimes record crowds.

The museum's initial resistance, explains Noreiga, was based on his reluctance to showcase private collections.

But Marin scoffs at the rationale, pointing to LACMA's gleaming new wing named after billionaire developer Eli Broad, who has his collection for display. "It was ironic to me," says Marin. "You would think L.A. would be the first museum to step up for the show. But, in fact, it was the last."

The very timing of these back-to-back shows raises some questions. Is the museum again signaling a generational split? Is it drawing a line between the young artists of "Phantom Sightings" and the older ones in the "Marin Collection"?

"I would hope not," says Noreiga. "I would hope that people would attend both shows and come out and go.

"Wow, these are some pretty big bookends for a category called Chicano art! I would like to see some of the stuff that comes in between."

"Phantom Sightings" does not attempt to present a survey of Chicano art from the last show to the present, as if the mission were trying to pick up where it left off in 1978. "We thought it would be a disservice to the field to do that kind of show because in some ways it would sanction the idea that institutions can kind of catch up every one to three decades," says Nierste. "Besides, it's an impossible task in many ways doomed to failure like the Whitney Biennial. No, we do much better if we accept the institution's commitment to ongoing activity in this area."

Changing times

CONTEMPORARY Chicano artists are working in a social environment vastly different from the days of the Chicano movement. In Los Angeles, to begin with, the Latino population has boomed, putting demographic pressure on cultural institutions to respond. Recurrent waves of immigrants constantly revive the issues of marginalization and social acceptance, even as the offspring of previous generations progress up the social ladder, taking leadership roles as politicians, academics and curators, which were practically nonexistent 30 years ago.

Most of the artists in "Phantom Sightings" were born in the 1970s and live and work in Los Angeles. The oldest is 52 (not counting ASCO); the youngest 27. All have advanced degrees, 20 with masters of fine arts, most from California schools. Only two were born in Mexico.

Whether they call themselves Chicano or not, several artists explore issues of class and culture inherent in their backgrounds. In many cases, artists transform mundane objects from their everyday experience to make imaginative or pointed statements with the byproduct.

El Paso artist Adrian Espares, for example, unspools the threads of a multicolored Mexican serape to create an abstract geometric pattern, thereby "taking ancestral traditions and using them in a postmodern way," as Fox puts it. Margarita Cabana, also from El Paso, uses fabric from U.S. Border Patrol uniforms to create realistic cactus sculptures that conjure "a conceptual link between an unforgiving landscape and the relatively recent criminalization of border crossing," as Nierste explains in the catalog.

Perhaps the most obvious example of the reinvention studied as art is Oshita's use of his family's vintage Chevy van and "just trucked it out" with white walls, track lighting and lockless flooring and invited his friends to create projects for the road.

He called it "Class C," for the DMV's commercial license category, and did 75 shows from 2001 to 2009, "bringing contemporary art to the neighborhood and not dragging it down." "I was the collaborator, curator, driver, installer and mechanic," says Oshita, one of five artists in the exhibition who attended Otis College of Art and Design and one of six with MFAs from UC Irvine. "I'd move it around as far as my Triple-A miles would take me because it would break down and I had to tow it back."

Oshita, born in Oceanside to Mexican immigrants, was practically raised inside that van, recruited like so many of his first-generation peers to work in their parents' business. Yet he represents a new generation of Chicanos who want to be identified primarily by their work, not their background, even though their heritage shapes their art.

"It's laid in the work, but it doesn't have to be highlighted," he says. "A lot of my work deals with different class tensions, boundaries and barriers, but it doesn't have to be solely the Mexican American experience."

For Gamboa, the former ASCO member, it doesn't matter what you call it as long as you give it a chance. "It's always been my contention that Chicanos are a co-equal culture and capable of participating and sharing and contributing," he says. "At some level, [the show] just gives people hope that it's possible to actually create work and have it recognized as being art."

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