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Life in Colors: the Chicano Canvas



Chicano art doesn't always get the attention it deserves, and neither do Chicano artists. But both creators and creations have a passionate champion — UCLA scholar Chon Noriega, who, as adjunct curator, channels his lifelong passion into *Phantom Sightings*, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's first exhibit of Chicano art in nearly two decades.

Most Chicago-area high school students take their girlfriends to a movie or a stroll through a mall, but when Chon Noriega planned dates growing up in the Windy City, he had a cultural destination in mind: the Art Institute of Chicago.

Noriega, now director of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center and an influential figure in Los Angeles' Chicano art community, said the first date he took to the museum couldn't stop raving about the museum's "Stack of Wheat" paintings by Claude Monet.

"Alas, the relationship soon ended," Noriega chuckles. "Turns out Monet can't buy you love."

Still, Noriega's passion for art — particularly Chicano art — remained, and today blazes as fiercely as ever. As head of the UCLA center, he's behind a flurry of arts-related projects, most notably the first exhibit of Chicano art in nearly two decades at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), titled *Phantom Sightings: Art After the Chicano Movement*.

The exhibit, which opens April 6 and ends Sept. 1 before traveling to other U.S. cities and Mexico, will feature 31 conceptual artists who explore such varied topics as the trees where Mexican Americans were lynched in the late 1800s and beauty salon art.



Christina Fernandez, *Lavandería #4*, 2002. Chromogenic development print mounted on Sintra. Fernandez documents evidence of vanished human presences in Los Angeles. Her photographs of lavanderías, or laundromats, capture brightly lit interiors that are curiously devoid of people. We see these spaces through the filter of the spray-painted and acid-etched graffiti on the windows.

"What we tried to do with the exhibit is look at conceptually oriented art from the Chicano community across the nation," says Noriega, who is the exhibit's adjunct curator, one sunny morning in January on a patio between the venue's cavernous exhibit halls. "The artists we selected work in a range of nontraditional forms, from performance to installation to 'guerilla' interventions in urban space.

"Their work mixes references to local histories, popular culture, alternative music, modernist art, and even Pink Floyd," he adds. "These artists show how different things influence each other, rather than only making art about social protest or the high-art canon or something that is exceedingly personal."

Rita Gonzalez, lead curator for *Phantom Sightings* and a UCLA doctoral candidate in the Cinema and Media Studies program, says Noriega's relationship with Chicano artists nationwide and his knowledge of Latino history have proved invaluable to the exhibit.

"He has both a mind for art history and policy, which is somewhat rare," she says. "And because he can speak to different brokers — from art historians to policy makers — about art, he has become an important mediator."



Noriega was just shy of 30 when he received a Ph.D. from Stanford University in modern thought and literature in 1991. His dissertation centered on the little-known history of Chicano film and eventually culminated in a book titled *Shot in America: Television, the State, and the Rise of Chicano Cinema*.

In 1991, UCLA's Wight Art Gallery asked him to advise them on adding a film program to complement its

hugely popular traveling Chicano art exhibit titled *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation*. As he participated on panels and other events related to the exhibit, Noriega became friends with some of the Chicano Movement's leading artistic figures, including Rupert Garcia and Amalia Mesa-Bains. "They became my art history teachers," he explains.



Margarita Cabrera, *Vocho (Yellow)*, 2004. Vinyl, batting, thread and car parts. In a series of ongoing sculptures, El Paso resident Cabrera, who grew up on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border, replicates products manufactured in maquiladoras, or border assembly plants — coffee pots, toasters, blenders and such — and replaces the plastic parts (produced in Mexico) with vinyl. The piece illustrated here is a life-sized VW Beetle, the so-called "people's car" of Mexico. Until recently, the VW Beetle was produced and sold within Mexico itself; hence, the sculpture is remade entirely out of vinyl.

The Whitney Museum of American Art in New York then asked Noriega to present a selection of Chicano artists to the museum's 1993 biennial committee. He was asked to present six Chicano artists, but decided he would show slides for 30 Chicano artists instead. "I wanted to increase the odds. Besides, there were a lot of great artists they needed to see."

Since then, Noriega has been asked by museums throughout the United States to guest-curate numerous art shows on such varied topics as the photography of the American West, Latino installation art and Chicano poster art. So it was no surprise that LACMA tapped Noriega in 2003 to help lead its Latino arts efforts as part of a five-year agreement with the UCLA center.

In addition to partnering with LACMA on Chicano art exhibits, events and research, Noriega's center also is conducting an extensive Latino art survey of Los Angeles with support from the Getty Foundation and digitizing more than 5,000 photographs by Oscar Castillo documenting the Chicano community in Los Angeles since the 1970s for an online searchable database. In 2005, the center also launched a national book series on Latino artists titled *A VER: Revisioning Art History*.



Julio Cesar Morales, *Undocumented Interventions #6*, 2005. LightJet print on watercolor paper. This watercolor series was inspired by a story in the *San Diego Union-Tribune* recounting an attempt to smuggle a 4-year-old girl into the United States inside a "Powerpuff Girls" piñata. The 20-image series is based on coyote stories Morales heard and from the INS Web site, which documents various tactics used

to cross the border. In this piece, an automobile seat provides cover for a man trying to make it across the border.

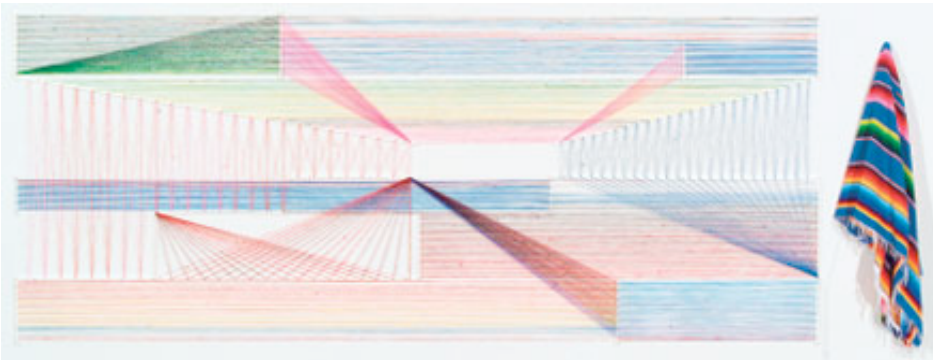
Such efforts are crucial because UCLA research by Gonzalez, now a LACMA curator, revealed that there are few books about Latino artists and that few artists are mentioned in art history books.

"What the center is trying to do is create a space that is as inclusive as possible of all Latino artists and to document what is happening in the Latino arts community," Noriega explains. "We want people 100, 200 years from now to be able to read about an artist and see that person's slide collection, letters, notes and other documents."

The more accessible documentation there is on an artist, the more likely he or she will be studied, written about, and taught in the classroom; hence, the more likely a museum will include them in their exhibitions and permanent collections, Noriega adds. And he's also helped artists with individual projects that expose their art to a larger audience.

One such artist is Gronk, a Chicano art pioneer who rose to prominence as a member of the conceptual art collective "Asco" in the 1970s. Gronk recalls how he couldn't find a planetarium theater to show a short digital piece he'd produced with the University of New Mexico. Noriega lined up a state-of-the-art planetarium theater at Glendale Community College and the center organized a daylong series of screenings that drew an overflow audience. The Walt Disney Company is now supporting an effort to make the program available to L.A.-area high school students.

"Chon's work continues to create space for Chicano artists in academic and art institutions," says Sandra de la Loza, a Los Angeles-based Chicana artist who will show a video installation in the *Phantom Sightings* exhibit. "His work writing and publishing studies on individual artists and curating exhibitions has definitely led to a better understanding of Chicano art."



Adrian Esparza, *One and the Same*, 2005. Serape, plastic trim and nails. Esparza playfully takes the color palette of the serape, one that originally was developed out of the colors available from plant-derived dyes, and charts the composition of a 1922 Audley Dean Nichols landscape painting, *View of El Paso at Sunset*, which Esparza knew from the collection at the El Paso Museum of Art.

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