Editor’s Commentary
Los Angeles is often called the City of Dreams. Ironically, one of the first artworks to capture the failure of this dream for the city’s Mexican-descent population does so by way of a dream deferred elsewhere and for another racial minority group. On September 4, 1957, nine black students attempted to enter Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, only to be turned away by the National Guard amid an angry mob of white adults and students (this is the subject of a book released in late 2011). The next day, photographs of fifteen-year-old Elizabeth Ann Eckford being hounded off the campus as she cradled her schoolbooks appeared in newspapers around the world, providing a catalyst for ongoing efforts to desegregate public schools in the United States. Domingo Ulloa (1919–1997), an LA artist, saw these images and almost immediately painted *Racism/Incident at Little Rock* (1957). Working in the social realist tradition, Ulloa foregrounded Eckford alongside five other black children, depicting the angry mob as white froglike figures with exaggerated mouths and no eyes or ears. The image, Norman Rockwell meets Salvador Dalí, captures the emotional impact of the news photos, shifting viewer identification from an aggrieved white citizenry to the black children who were being denied the American Dream.

Three years later, Ulloa’s iconic painting *Braceros* (1960) drew upon his visits to a bracero camp in San Diego County, depicting individual faces peering through a barbed wire fence that defines the picture plane, thereby reducing the “space” between subject and viewer. This closeness is by no means sentimental, but rather draws out the viewer’s complicity with the class and racial boundaries established by fence and picture plane, labor policy and studio art. The binational Bracero Program (1942–1964) provided temporary contract workers from Mexico to meet labor shortages in US agriculture, shortages caused initially in part by the wartime internment of Japanese American tenant farmers. Ulloa juxtaposes the individual...
humanity of several workers, registered in their faces, with the inhumane and anonymous conditions signaled by the rows of hats and shacks in the background.

In the decades before the civil rights movement, racial violence and segregation in schools, restaurants, and public spaces targeted both the African American and Mexican American communities. That violence included lynching. Ulloa, as well as other Mexican American artists born in the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s, is part of a hyphen generation that developed what Terezita Romo calls a “bicultural aesthetic synthesis” of Mexican tradition and American modernism. This can be seen in Ulloa’s work in *Art Along the Hyphen: The Mexican-American Generation*, an L.A. Xicano exhibition at the Autry National Center.

In the early 1960s, the hyphen generation gained access to the emerging gallery scene along La Cienega Boulevard. While this area is now remembered for the Ferus and Landau Galleries, and the “cool” artists associated with them, ethnic and women artists found support for their “un-cool” figurative work at Ceeje Gallery. The gallery’s inaugural show in 1962 featured four artists, including Roberto Chavez (b. 1932) and Eduardo Carrillo (1937–1997). Chavez’s painting *The Group Shoe* (1962), based on the photograph used in the exhibition announcement, provides a humorous take on this hoped-for turning point in Los Angeles art. The title resonates with Ed Sullivan’s signature pronunciation of a “really big show” at the start of *The Ed Sullivan Show* (CBS, 1948–1971), a variety TV show notable for integration of black performers into the programming and for introducing the Beatles to American television audiences in 1964. Ceeje co-owner Jerry Jerome used Sullivan’s pronunciation to tell the young artists that “It’s going to be a big shoe!” While the title puns on American media culture (and gallery hype prevalent on La Cienega at the time), the “group shoe” directly references Vincent van Gogh’s *A Pair of Shoes* (1886). Van Gogh’s painting has been central to debates in the philosophy of art, most notably in Martin Heidegger’s *The Origin of the Work of Art* (1935). Like Heidegger, Chavez’s *Group Shoe* finds “under the soles . . . the wordless joy of having once more withstood want,” but with a crucial difference. If van Gogh had a pair of worn-out shoes, these four artists have just one.

Chavez’s *Group Shoe* exemplifies a “bicultural aesthetic synthesis” that combined art history with popular culture, and social activism with continental philosophy. But it also proved prescient with respect to the larger demands of the Mexican American generation for integration into US society following their disproportionate contributions to the war effort.
Neither demands nor contributions would be recognized. But there may be another way of looking at this period, and at these artists. Ulloa was classically trained as an artist in Mexico in the 1930s. After serving in the US Army in Europe during World War II, he returned to Los Angeles, where he studied with Italian-born Rico Lebrun. Lebrun’s figurative expressionism stood in contrast to the hard-edged abstraction that now defines the emerging Los Angeles art scene of the late 1950s and 1960s as a “cool school.” That less recognized, uncool approach represents a precursor to the Chicano art movement of the 1970s. This explains in part why in 1993 the California State Assembly proclaimed Ulloa “the Father of Chicano Art.” But it also signals something that both the cool and uncool artists of the period understood about the City of Dreams, even when they looked elsewhere, as Ulloa did with Racism/Incident at Little Rock and Edward Kienholz did with Five Car Stud (1969–72): “In dreams begin responsibilities.”6 And that is a big shoe to fill.

Notes


