



# Roberto Chavez

Paintings and Drawings



# Roberto Chavez

Paintings and Drawings

Edited by Robert Ross



*hit & run press*

BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA



## Acknowledgments

This volume is published on the occasion of a major traveling exhibit of drawings and paintings by Roberto Chavez.

The originating venue of the exhibit is the Robert F. Agrella Art Gallery of Santa Rosa Junior College, Santa Rosa, California, running 14 November through 15 December, 2012.

Thanks to Renata Breth, Director of the Gallery, for attention to the administrative details. Much gratitude goes to Stephanie Sanchez of the SRJC faculty and gallery staff; without her energetic support, advocacy, grant-writing and gallery experience, the exhibit (and by extension this publication) would not exist. The Randolph Newman Cultural Enrichment Endowment was an early and generous grant donor.

The final venue for this exhibit is the Wiegand Gallery of Notre Dame de Namur University, in Belmont, California, running 23 January through 23 February, 2013.

Robert Poplack, Director of the Gallery, generated and curated this second exhibition. Appreciation to the Wiegand Gallery Advisory Board, members of the Directors Circle, and Notre Dame de Namur University, for their major assistance with the exhibit and the book.

Besides the professionals and institutions mentioned above, many people played significant roles in producing this book. Anatol Chavez, the artist's son, has been an indefatigable archivist of his father's work, and moved both exhibit and book along in so many larger and smaller ways. For careful text-editing, sincere appreciation to Adrienne Ross, a friend of Roberto since Los Angeles City College days, and to Zida Borcich and Mario Ross. Theresa Whitehill of Colored Horse Studios created the efficient and elegant design which makes this book so user-friendly.

Much credit is also due to those who generously offered access to their own carefully developed written resources: Terezita Romo, author and Lead Curator for *Art Along The Hyphen: The Mexican-American Generation*; Chon Noriega, Director of UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center and Co-Curator (with T. Romo and Pilar Tompkins Rivas) of the Getty Foundation's *L.A. Xicano* exhibits, for permissions, introductions, and ongoing encouragement; Rebecca Frazier, Senior Editor at UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, for permission to reprint the Chavez piece "Why Paint?"; Michael Duncan, Curator of the 2012 exhibit *LA RAW* at the Pasadena Museum of California Art; and Gordon Rice, lifelong friend, fellow painter, and LACC and UCLA colleague to Roberto, for his memoir about early days with Chavez.

Immense thanks to Roberto himself and his wife Janet Kassner for long-time friendship, invaluable mentorship, general enthusiasm, and great feedback at all stages. Finally, for sensitive reading of the text, for technical help, and for unflagging patience and support for this important project, the author gratefully acknowledges his wife Ayn Ruymen Ross.



## Contents

Foreword .....	1
Introduction by Robert Ross .....	3
Writings by Roberto Chavez	
Why Paint? .....	14
Some Remarks About My Work. ....	17
Reproductions .....	27
List of Reproductions .....	85
Biographical Timeline. ....	86



## Some Remarks About My Work

Roberto Chavez

Good Afternoon, I am very happy to be here. First, I would like to thank the Autry museum for including me in this important cultural event. It is an honor to be here.

I have come to talk about my work that is included in this exhibit. The title of the show, *Art Along The Hyphen: The Mexican-American Generation*, represents to me a blending of cultures of which I am definitely a product. I see the exhibit as a bridge between peoples, utilizing the visual arts.

I think that there is a positive, creative energy and excitement that occurs when different peoples come together. This can create a new entity. A third culture that is constantly renewed as it evolves with the parent cultures. The work on display here is a result of this kind of coming together. I would like to take a little time to tell you about what this means to me.

My parents came to Los Angeles from Mexico in 1920. I was born in East Los Angeles in 1932. I was the ninth of twelve children. This was in the middle of the Great Depression. And, although it was at a time of extreme economic hardship in this country, my parents and their friends were happy to be here. They had escaped the dangers and chaos in Mexico and could now live in safety. There was also the possibility of improving their lives and those of their children.

Keep in mind that this was, in many ways, a very, very different Los Angeles from what it is today. This was a time before television, freeways and smog; before Xerox and fax machines; before computers and cell phones. At that time the population of the city was just over a million.

The community where I grew up was a mixed working-class neighborhood that was predominantly Mexican in the immediate area. We called it *Maravilla*, which in Spanish means a marvel or a wonder. And it was that indeed.

The local shops were owned by Mexicans, and business was conducted in Spanish for the most part. Some of the products sold were of





Right to Left: the artist's mother Ester Chavez, his father José Chavez, his father's sister and her son, just before his father came to Los Angeles; Chihuahua, Mexico; 1919; Photographer unknown



Chavez standing at his next door neighbor's car, with the neighborhood grocery across the street; Corner of Michigan and Marianna Avenues in the *Maravilla* neighborhood of Los Angeles; Circa 1948; Photo: Victoria Alaniz



Mexican origin. We loved going to the *panaderia* with its heavenly smell of *pan dulce* that sparkled with sugar toppings of many colors. The *tortilleria* had its distinct aroma of toasted corn and the sound of the women chatting as they made the tortillas by hand. When we paid for our purchase, the owner would hand us a fresh rolled tortilla, hot off the griddle, to eat as we walked home, the warm package of tortillas cradled in our arms.

We walked everywhere, to the shops, to the movies, and to school. We, the children who were in school, were exposed to a world that was considerably different from that of our parents and their friends. The people portrayed in our classroom English readers or in the movies we saw did not resemble the people that we dealt with in the neighborhood or at home. There was so much to learn. So much to see.

In the same kitchen where my mother cooked pigs' heads for *tamales*, my sister baked a lemon meringue pie. She made Jell-O and other American dishes that she learned about in school. One Sunday we might have *menudo* for breakfast and the following week pancakes with Karo syrup.

In one theater we watched Mexican movies with actors like Cantinflas and El Chato Ortin, while in another we saw American films starring James Cagney and John Wayne. After the movies, we could buy a hot dog or a *raspada* sweetened with red, green, and yellow syrup.

We heard popular Mexican songs and Big Band music on the same radio. In church we saw the luminous, brightly colored, life-size statues of saints, and in the street young men in their shiny sharkskin Zoot suits. We learned American history in school and heard about Mexican history from the adults at home.

Spanish was our first language but we children used English as readily as Spanish. We often mixed the two, creating words and phrases that neither our parents nor our teachers understood. In our house we read Spanish language newspapers and Mexican magazines, along with the Sunday Examiner. I devoured school books and other books that my father brought home from the salvage shops that he did business with. I remember books on geography, history, medicine; an unabridged English dictionary and, best of all, for me, a thick book of pictures with hundreds of engravings of cowboys, Indians, cattle stampedes, and all the romance of the American West.

Besides language there were many other contrasts of culture that were a part of my growing up. The three Catholic churches and the sound of their bells were a background to the hymns we heard being sung in the Baptist church across the street. At school we brought *burritos* for lunch unlike the sandwiches some of the other kids had. We heard a variety of programs and music on the radio: such as the Mexican comic Agapito one night and *The Shadow Knows* on another night. Records of Harry James and Pedro Infante were played on the same record player.

The barrio was a vibrant mix of color and sounds. There were flower gardens with pink, red, and white blossoms, and chickens clucking in



the back yard. In the homes one could see red, green, and white *sarapes* draped over the living room couch, iridescent saints calendars on the wall, and terracotta water jugs adorned with blue, brown, and white geometric bands on the kitchen counters.

On certain days we heard the sound of street vendors hawking their goods door-to-door. Shouting out "*Naranjas, tamales, cabezas.*" The clanking iron wheels of the weathered horse-drawn cart alerted us that the *garrero*, the rag man was here to collect metal, rags, newspapers, and other recyclables in exchange for pennies.

Yes, *Maravilla* was indeed a marvel; a diverse and rich environment. I know that others have written about and described the barrio as well and in more depth. However, I wanted to share with you today some of the impressions of my youth that are the source and inspiration of my art.

In college I learned to paint based on European models, but these elements from my culture of origin are recurring influences that emerge in the pictures I conceive, as are the feelings associated with them.

I became interested in drawing at the age of four when I watched my father writing a letter. I saw that he was decorating it with drawings on the margin of the page. He was creating funny faces with pencil lines like the ones in the magazine cartoons. I got a pencil and tried to do the same, and with my first success I was hooked. Permanently.

From that time on I was always drawing. I studied the illustrations in the papers and magazines to see how they were done. I saw pictures differently now: as constructions of lines, dots, textures, and shapes. I have to say that I was very lucky that my family and teachers encouraged me in this, and praised my efforts.

At home, using machine parts that were a part of my father's metal recycling business, I made toys that were my first ventures into sculpture. This made me very aware of form and structure. They are the essential building blocks that I have used for effective pictorial composition.

While I was in high school, two incidents occurred that helped guide me in the direction that I took. I had an art teacher who liked my work and suggested that I take art as a major in college. At the time I had planned to go to college but I had not known that art was an option. The idea was very exciting to me.

Secondly, I saw an exhibit of modern art that really opened my eyes as never before. In that exhibit I saw several paintings of flowers by the French painter Renoir that helped me see the potential of paint. They seemed to be not pictures of flowers, but rather paint that was alive on the surface of the canvas that created patterns, patterns that conveyed the forms of flowers to the eye. It was a totally new visual experience for me. It was as if they were animated in a way that I may have imagined, but had not ever seen. I found myself looking at things in a new way. Seeing them as brushstrokes and color shapes, painting and drawing them in my mind. I knew then what I wanted to do. I wanted to make paintings that had that kind of magical energy.





The artist with some of his paintings on the porch of his studio; Main Street, Venice, CA; 1958; Photos: Hal Glicksman

After graduating from high school, I enrolled at Los Angeles City College as an art major. From there I transferred to UCLA and obtained both a Bachelor's and a Master's degree in Pictorial Arts. As a graduate student I began teaching lower division art classes. After that I taught in the UCLA extension program and part-time in the Community College District. In 1969 I was hired full time at East Los Angeles College and with another instructor initiated the Mexican-American Studies Program. I taught classes in Art and Chicano Studies there until 1981 when I resigned my post and moved to Northern California for ten years.





Chavez in his Morrison Street studio, Sherman Oaks, CA; Publicity for his solo show at the historic Ceeje Galleries in Los Angeles; 1965; Photo: Ben Jackson

I have continued painting and teaching. I worked in many places with many different populations, the last being sixteen years teaching art to inmates, both men and women, in California State Prisons. I retired from teaching in 2008.

My first solo exhibit was my Master's Thesis in 1961. This gave me greater confidence that my way of working could be appreciated. Less than one year after graduating from UCLA I began to exhibit at the newly opened Ceeje Galleries on La Cienega Boulevard, in Los Angeles. I mounted the first one-person show in that space. I continued to exhibit there for many years. Since then I have exhibited in many venues and places. And now here, at the Autry.

Now I would like to say a few words pertaining to the work that I have in this show. All the work of mine that you will see here was done over forty-five years ago. The oldest, entitled *John Bananas*, was fifty-three years old this past summer. The paintings were all done when my old neighborhood was very much the way that I have described it. But it no longer exists.

Neither does the person that painted those pictures. Many things have changed in the world since then and I have changed as well. I am still painting but my painting has evolved, although, for me, the excitement I felt when I was drawing as a child remains alive in my work. The remembrances of the neighborhood of my youth are as much a part of me as is my Mexican accent. They influence my work when they will and however they will, I really don't have to think about it – as in the background in the painting of *Tamalito del Hoyo* (page 24), which reminds me of the feel





John Bananas  
20" x 15 7/8"  
Oil on Canvas  
1959

of that time and place. The old frame house, the worn, dusty cement, and the graffiti, simple and unadorned as Tamalito himself, in his tired Khaki pants and war-surplus combat boots.

All of the portraits in the show were done from life with two exceptions: *Emiliano Zapata* (page 34) and *The Group Shoe* (page 35). The portrait of Emiliano Zapata is one of five studies that I did from a photograph of the Mexican Revolutionary leader. The work was inspired by what I knew of the period of revolution from reading I had done, and from listening to the accounts of my father, my mother, my grandmother and my father's brother. They were, all of them, refugees from the horrors of war in their home state of Zacatecas.





*Tamalito del Hoyo*

25" x 40"

Oil on panel

1959

Collection Smithsonian American Art Museum



I tried to portray in *Zapata* the dilemma and disillusion of the idealistic warrior, a look I believe that I saw at times in my father's eyes. I have never liked working from photographs, but in this case and in *The Group Shoe* my pictorial intent got the better of me. In *The Group Shoe* I was celebrating the excitement, and inserting a note of insouciance into the whole affair. The idea of me and my painting buddies having our first professional show. Having our debut as it were.

I have painted many still lifes and self portraits for practice, much as a musician might play scales on an instrument, to refine my compositional and painterly skill in working with different surfaces and spatial elements. But, rather than arranging the usual or exotic subjects often depicted, I have preferred to select familiar objects that I find around the house – things like fruit from my garden, a milk bottle, a clay dish, and a doll that my daughters had abandoned. Much more challenging, and for me, more meaningful.

But really, the most important thing that I wanted to say was a bit of how I perceive painting and what it is good for. I strongly believe that painting is best experienced when it is approached without preconceptions, before words and concepts get in the way.

I am referring to that moment when we see something, but before we attach a label to the experience. This moment of mystery is an opportunity to perceive reality in a fresh, unexpected way; to be aware of seeing outside of our usual point of view, the way you might look upon a flower or a bird that you had never seen before. To be able to do this, as one teacher told me, we have to bypass our brain and connect our eyes to our hearts. To see in the way that we saw before we learned the names for things. To feel, more than to analyze. One can then experience the visual world for the marvelous place that it is – a place that inspires feelings of wonder and delight, and of connection.

As an artist I have tried to give form to that way of seeing the world. I work in the spirit of the painters that have inspired me.

I hope you enjoy the show. Thank you.

Address by Roberto Chavez prior to opening the Autry Museum Exhibit  
*Art Along the Hyphen: The Mexican-American Generation*, October, 2011