



Chicano movement of 50 years ago reflects today's turmoil



By Sarah Favot, April 22, 2018

Arturo Flores and Antonio Solis Gomez were at the Moratorium protest in East Los Angeles with their families on 47 years ago when sheriff's deputies declared an "unlawful assembly" and began to release tear gas into the crowd of nearly 30,000.

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“When we were attacked by sheriff’s deputies, literally our first thought was “get the kids’,” Flores said. “Everybody grabbed a kid and ran.”

On a recent weekday Flores and Gomez revisited that eventful day on Whittier Boulevard in East L.A. at the Autry Museum of the American West at a photography exhibit about La Raza, the influential bilingual newspaper turned magazine that documented the Chicano Rights movement in East LA of the 1960s and 1970s.

They recognized people they knew in the photographs.

“We were very much involved in all of this,” said Flores, who taught Mexican American Studies at East LA College at the time of the uprising.

The exhibit displays about 200 black and white images from the archives of La Raza, which published from 1967 to 1977. The publication used photojournalism, art, satire, poetry and social activism to be a voice for the Latino community, a group that was largely ignored by the mainstream media.

The exhibit shows many sides of “El Movimiento” including large protests and marches, like the Moratorium, and small demonstrations, images of families, the police presence, the walkouts of 1968 and the death of Ruben Salazar. Luis Garza, the exhibit’s co-curator was a La Raza photographer.

“You are entering into the actual pages of La Raza magazine,” Garza said. “You’re surrounded by graphic artwork, words and phrases and quotes that are derived from the actual newspaper magazine. You’re experiencing firsthand what we experienced at that time 50 years ago.”

Garza said it was a laborious process to select just 200 from the 26,000 images archived at the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center where the film negatives were digitized. Garza said the process began with him and co-curator Amy Scott, who is also the Autry's chief curator, sitting in a small room staring at a computer screen looking at images. Then UCLA was able to put the images online for Scott and Garza to view. The process took several years.

The covers of all the editions of La Raza are also displayed.

The black and white images are displayed in the exhibit by different categories. One section shows the police brutality that many people suffered during the protests and demonstrations. Another highlights resilience, strength and pride. Another highlights the importance of family.

One featured image on a light box in a prominent place in the exhibit is a young girl, hair in pigtails, hawking copies of La Raza with her mouth wide open. The front-page headline reads: "La Raza Raided Editor, Staff Imprisoned."

The exhibit includes an interactive display where visitors can tap through the archive system searching by dates, locations and other categories to view the entire collection of 26,000 images. The museum is asking visitors to identify people they see in the photos.

Presented as part of the Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA initiative, the exhibit has been extended through February 2019. It will be the museum's longest running exhibit.

“It speaks to the current politics that are taking place in the country,” Garza said.

Garza said the overriding comment that he’s received from those who visit the exhibit is the similarities of that time to today.

“It’s a bit of a blending of time to 50 years past and 50 years present. It’s like time bends in,” he said.

Not only are the protests happening around the country like the Women’s March and student protests, but also the importance of family in the Latino community continues today, Garza said. The era was also more than just about Mexican Americans’ rights, but also women’s rights and the civil rights of African Americans. There were also anti-Vietnam protests.

Garza said the Mexican Americans in East L.A. were also part of a broader movement internationally for civil rights.

For him, working as a photographer at La Raza, Garza was able to sharpen his skills.

“For me personally it was an experience that cultivated our intellect, our emotions, our idealism, our commitment, our desire for change and a better life for those in our community,” he said.