

HYPERALLERGIC

Eduardo Carrillo, a Painter Who Took Chicano Art Beyond Identity's Borders

Carrillo's paintings re-envision the history of art through the heightened Chicano consciousness of his generation and the richness of his bicultural roots.

By Elaine O'Brien



Eduardo Carrillo, "Cabin in the Sky" (1966), oil on board, 72 x 58 3/4 inches
(private collection, all images provided by the Crocker Art Museum)

SACRAMENTO — [*Testament of the Spirit*](#), a monographic survey at the Crocker Art Museum, makes a convincing argument that the painter Eduardo Carrillo, who died in 1997, deserves broader recognition for taking Chicano art beyond the borders of identity.



Eduardo Carrillo, "Testament of the Holy Spirit" (1971), oil on panel, 47 3/4 x 60 inches (Crocker Art Museum Purchase with funds from the Maude T. Pook Acquisition Fund, 1972.24)

The sensual force of Carrillo's ripe forms, in rich tones of ochre and ultramarine, with dramatic chiaroscuro effects and otherworldly illumination, alerts viewers to his prodigious talent. But the artist's contemporary relevance lies in the wide, cosmopolitan range of art historical sources that he seamlessly integrated into his visual narratives. At once epic and intimate, Carrillo's subjects interweave the personal, political, philosophical, and religious. This is the work of a worldly artist-seeker who brought all that he loved to his art.



Eduardo Carrillo, "Self-Portrait" (1960), oil on canvas, 29 1/2 X 27 3/4 inches (private collection)

Earning bachelor's and master's degrees in the late 1950s and early '60s at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), Carrillo absorbed what he admired of the Western tradition, guided by notable professors Mary Holmes, William Brice, Jack Hooper, and Stanton

Macdonald-Wright. Yet he discovered the most important of his myriad artistic sources outside the classroom. In 1960 he traveled to Madrid and spent a year studying and making copies at the Museo del Prado, learning the techniques of Hieronymus Bosch, Diego Velazquez, El Greco, Francisco Goya, and Joachim Patinir. Carrillo's 1960 copy of the Prado's Bosch-attributed "The Temptation of Saint Anthony" (1490) is a foundation piece for the *Testament of the Spirit* exhibition, establishing a vital source for the magical realist-like character of Carrillo's greatest paintings.

The cinematic painting "Las Tropicanas" (1972–73) marks the achievement of Carrillo's mature style and content, uniquely synthesizing multiple sources, including the paintings he studied closely at the Prado. The immersive 84-by-132-inch oil on panel displays a night vision of fantastical spirits from the tropics, Carrillo's ancient and eternal Mexico. Bosch is present in the extreme shifts of scale. David Alfaro Siqueiros is there in the multi-perspectival, fragmented space, while El Greco is evident in the otherworldly elegance of the poses and elongated limbs of the foreground figures.



Eduardo Carrillo, "Las Tropicanas" (1972–73), oil on panel, 84 x 132 inches (Crocker Art Museum, Promised Gift of Juliette Carrillo and Ruben Carrillo)

Equally strong in "Las Tropicanas" is the artist's appropriation of Mexican iconography: the tower of calaveras, an homage to Posada; the pyramid; the jaguar; the giant iguana; and the hummingbird. Such figures populate many of Carrillo's canvases, drawn from indigenous Pre-Columbian and folkloric culture. The artist encountered such images and symbols in Mexico, beginning with family trips as a child to his mother's hometown in Baja. He spent three seminal years (1966 to '69) in La Paz establishing El Centro de Arte Regional and training in the traditions and techniques of Mexican art from Indigenous artisans.



Eduardo Carrillo, "Portrait of Don Leandro" (1987), oil on canvas, 34 1/2 x 38 inches (private collection, Davis, California)



Eduardo Carrillo, "The Aerialist" (1994), oil on canvas, 76 x 51 inches (private collection)

Living, working, and traveling in Mexico brought him in contact with *arte popular*, the art of ancient Mesoamerica, and the Mexican modernists, especially José Guadalupe Posada, David Alfaro Siqueiros, Frida Kahlo, and Rufino Tamayo — all of whom he avidly assimilated to his own vision. The Arcimboldo-inspired work “Vegetable Man” (1997) portrays a man made entirely of classic Mexican and Californian vegetables, fruits, and flowers. Seated in a Mexican equipale chair beside a massive California redwood tree, the man contemplates a translucent blue and golden globe taken from the exterior panel of “The Garden of Earthly Delights,” which shows the world on the third day of creation, before people arrived and there were only plants.

The early 1970s were also watershed years in Carrillo’s political education. He joined the Chicano civil rights movement in 1970, as a participant in the Anti-Vietnam War Chicano Moratorium, and was further politicized through friendships with members of the Sacramento artist group, the Royal Chicano Air Force, José Montoya and Esteban Villa, who were his colleagues at Sacramento State. From 1972 to ’97, he was a professor at Sacramento State and the University of California Santa Cruz, where he influenced many students. In his art, he found a way to reclaim his Mexican heritage. Carrillo’s paintings draw from the borderless history of art and re-envision it through the heightened Chicano consciousness of his generation and the richness of his bicultural roots.



Eduardo Carrillo, "Woman Holding Serpent" (1975), oil on panel, 55 x 33 inches (Crocker Art Museum, Gift of Jane and John Fitz Gibbon, 2009.71)

[Testament of the Spirit: Paintings by Eduardo Carrillo](#) continues at the Crocker Art Museum (216 O Street, Sacramento, California) through October 7.