



# Larger than life, in great detail: MFAH show explores 'home' through Latino prism

By Molly Glentzer | November 24, 2017



Photo: Molly Glentzer



**IMAGE 2 OF 10**

A view of "Home: So Different, So Appealing," looking through Daniel Joseph Martinez's "The west bank is missing: i am not dead, am i." The major exhibition of works by Latin American artists is on view [... more](#)

One might need at least two visits to absorb all that's happening in the ambitious show "HOME - So Different, So Appealing" at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

The first pass could feel visceral to viewers in this city's post-Hurricane Harvey environment, where thousands of people are still displaced or newly homeless: Some of the conceptual art looks all too familiar, made from exploded box springs, a lifetime's belongings piled onto a shopping cart, a room reduced to a sliver and an entire apartment's carpeting extracted and hung up, as if drying.

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More than 130,000 visitors filed through the Los Angeles County Museum of Art after the show debuted there in June and ran to October. Even without a hurricane to consider, Angelinos responded so emotionally, they surprised the curators.

"We were thinking of art history, the quality of the art, the significance of the artists - just like we do any show," said Mari Carmen Ramírez, the MFAH's top Latin American art scholar. Ramírez co-curated the exhibition with Chon Noriega, director of UCLA's Chicano Studies Research Center, and Pilar Tompkins Rivas, director of the Vincent Price Art Museum at East Los Angeles College.

They chose 100 works dating from the 1950s to the present to explore issues such as immigration, political repression, diaspora, personal memory and utopian ideals through the universal lens of "home." Their choice of 39 artists breaks new ground by showing U.S. Latino and Latina artists alongside their peers from Latin America for the first time in a major museum show - the exhibit's seven thematic sections mix artists of different nationalities and generations.

But all that really matters to most visitors is that art speaks to them personally. In that respect, "HOME" is big, big, big.

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#### MORE INFORMATION

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'HOME -

**So Different, So Appealing'**

**When: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Wednesdays, 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Thursdays, 10 a.m.-7 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays, 12:15-7 p.m. Sundays, through Jan. 21**

**Where: Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1001 Bissonnet**

**Info: \$7.50-\$15; 713-639-7300, [mfah.org](http://mfah.org)**

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Entering the MFAH's Upper Brown Pavilion, one can hardly see beyond the monumental installations, which dwarf viewers like rides in an amusement park. A second visit might be needed to focus on and process the show's also excellent small works, including drawings, paintings and videos.

The show's title borrows a bit ironically from a famous Pop art piece that is only about 10 inches square: Englishman Richard Hamilton's naughty and funny 1956 collage "Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?" Hamilton's collage depicts a midcentury living room as a romper space for two nude figures who may be making a porn film.

Nothing so louche appears in "HOME," although Hamilton's title appears as a text-based piece made of coca leaves.

Here dwellings look more onerously unstable, suggesting the failure not of morals but of postwar urban development policies and authoritarian regimes that have pushed roughly one-third of the world's urban population-about 1 billion people-into squatter settlements.

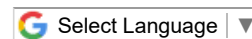
"What if home embodied the uncertainty of a question rather than the security of a point of origin or a refuge?" Noriega asks in one of the show's catalog essays.

Many Houstonians can relate in ways they might not have a year ago, whether contemplating their own circumstances or reading recent news about how the city is dealing with homeless people who build communities under freeway overpasses.

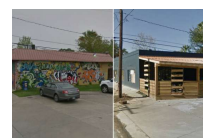
Although they might scratch their heads about the first massive piece they must navigate around, Los Angeles artist Daniel Joseph Martinez's "The west bank is missing: i am not dead, am i." Its two pieces might represent the apertures of a giant camera, with enigmatic raised symbols in their clear vacuform surfaces. They have something to do with reflecting how the design of gated urban developments in California influenced the layout of Israeli settlements in Palestinian territories in the Middle East.

**TRANSLATOR**

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Martinez's "The House America Built," which bookends the show's other end, is easier to grasp. It's a scale replica of the Montana cabin where the Unabomber, American terrorist Ted Kaczynski, wrote his manifesto and plotted to kill high-tech workers across the U.S. in the 1980s. Each time the piece moves to a new gallery space, the artist repaints it in seasonal colors from Martha Stewart's Signature paint collection - pointing to another convicted criminal, albeit one who traffics in domestic perfection.



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Noriega, speaking to a group of docents the day before the show opened, noted that Stewart and Kaczynski are both children of Polish immigrants, "to shift that discussion."

Nearby, Pepón Osorio's two-room "Badge of Honor" deserves deep examination. One side depicts a prison cell, empty save for a pair of sneakers and a mattress; the other is the exuberant New Jersey bedroom of the inmate's son, a teenage boy who has plastered every inch of his walls with baseball cards and posters of his sports heroes. The two characters appear on videos in their respective rooms, answering each others' questions as if they are having a face-to-face conversation.

Mexican artist Abraham Cruzvillegas, who grew up in a squatter community outside Mexico City, has built a complete shanty interior of recycled furnishings. His "Autoconstrucción" installation has been used as a set for a performance; a recording of it plays on a TV monitor, and visitors can sit for a spell on the car-seat sofa to watch.

"It's the most comfortable seat in the house," Noriega said.

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Everywhere a viewer turns, complexity and ugliness seem to abound in this show. Perhaps that is why I gravitated to a piece that seems almost meditatively clean: a corner that holds Amalia Mesa-Bains' "Transparent Migration," an installation with a mirrored armoire surrounded by shards of broken glass and a pair of glass agave plants. Inside the armoire, however, more tales of oppression can be imagined in the small images of 19th-century paintings that depict mixed-race parents and their potential offspring in Spanish Colonial America.

UCLA's Noriega may have had the best advice about how to approach "HOME," whether one is breezing through or has all the time in the world to come back and think. "Pay attention," he said, "because the artists have spent time presenting details for you."

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**Molly Glentzer**

Senior Writer and Critic, Arts & Culture



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