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Building bridges between Mexican and Mexican American art

Artists and curators on both sides of the border are creating networks that have resulted in more traveling exhibitions and exchanges. The latest is LACMA's 'Asco' show at a Mexico City museum.

By Reed Johnson, Los Angeles Times

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Mexican art and Mexican American art often have treated each other more like strangers or distant cousins than like the fraternal twins they really are.

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In the United States, apart from in California and the Southwest, many museums and art professionals until relatively recently tended to isolate or ignore Mexico's contributions to global movements such as Modernism or Conceptual and performance art. Similarly, in Mexico, U.S. Chicano art of the 1960s and '70s generally has been regarded as a weird mutation, a foreign fiber that didn't belong in the tricolored *bandera* of Mexico's nationalistic art-historical narrative.

"It probably has had something to do with both the academic structures in the United States and Mexico as well as the commercial gallery structure in both countries," says C. Ondine Chavoya, associate professor of art and chair of the Latina/o Studies Program at Williams College in Massachusetts, by way of explaining the breach.

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But that's changing. As scholars have dug deeper into the history of the countries' cultural connections, they've uncovered more parallels between what was happening, say, in Mexico City in 1930 or 1968 and what was unfolding around the same time in Los Angeles or New York (or Paris or Buenos Aires). Simultaneously, artists and curators as well as institutions on both sides of the border have been building networks that have resulted in more traveling exhibitions and cultural exchanges.

The latest example is last month's opening of the exhibition "Asco: Elite of the Obscure, A Retrospective (1972-1987)" at the Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC), on the campus of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) in Mexico City. It will show there through midsummer.

Originally organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Williams College Museum of Art in

Massachusetts, the show explores the influential legacy of the Dadaist-guerrilla L.A. Chicano art collective Asco, whose four primary members were Harry Gamboa Jr., Patssi Valdez, Willie Herron III and Gronk (née Glugio Nicandro).

Encompassing video projections, sculpture, painting, performance art and photography, the show documents the resourceful and varied aesthetic strategies used by Asco (the word is Spanish slang for "nausea") to create socially engaged, transgressively humorous work that, in the words of Times critic Christopher Knight, "found ways to flourish inside Chicano culture and outside it at the same time."

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Co-curated by Chavoya and Rita González, a LACMA associate curator of contemporary art, the exhibition was first mounted at LACMA in fall 2011 as part of the Getty-sponsored "Pacific Standard Time."

For LACMA, taking the Asco show to Mexico City represents the latest conversation in an expanding dialogue that the museum has developed with its counterparts across Latin America. A few years ago, LACMA brought its landmark 2008 show "Phantom Sightings: Art After the Chicano Movement" to the Museo Tamayo in Mexico City. The show was well received by Mexican art critics as well as the public.

The work of L.A. Chicano artists has been included in other group exhibitions in Mexico since the 1980s. But until now, it appears that no Mexican city has hosted a show on the scale of "Asco" devoted exclusively to a single Chicano collective. "For the most part, there hasn't been a huge, historical overview, nor had there been very many monographic exhibitions focusing on any one Chicano artist," says González, who co-curated "Phantom Sightings" with Howard Fox and Chon Noriega.

The reasons why are complex, not to mention sensitive. For one thing, González points out, until the 1980s, Mexico simply didn't have many museums or commercial galleries that specialized in contemporary art.

"It wasn't really until the Tamayo [opened], and the sort of efflorescence of contemporary art spaces and contemporary art museums [in Mexico City], that artists from the United States or artists from any other parts of the world had much exposure," she says.

Stereotyped mutual perceptions also contributed to the estrangement. Among the Mexican intelligentsia, for much of the 19th and 20th centuries, it was common to think of Mexicans who'd migrated north as having betrayed their culture, religion and language in pursuit of the Yankee lifestyle. Octavio Paz, the Mexican Nobel Prize winner for literature, contributed significantly to this enduring image when he wrote disapprovingly about young working-class L.A. *pachucos* in his classic study of Mexican identity, "The Labyrinth of Solitude."

Several factors have been undermining those perceptual barriers. Text messaging and the Internet allow Mexicans and Mexican Americans to share any cultural experience, even if it's taking place hundreds of miles away. And the end of Mexico's one-party rule in 2000 opened up discussion about many previously taboo topics, including the country's renegade art movements and artists who bucked the establishment during the politically turbulent '60s and '70s.

That has led to watershed art shows such as UNAM's 2007 exhibition "La era de la discrepancia: Arte y cultura visual en México 1968-1997." Curated by Olivier Debrouse and Cuauhtémoc Medina, that exhibition examined artistic production after the so-called post-World War II "Ruptura" (Rupture), when young Mexican artists broke ranks with the state-sanctioned mural art that had dominated Mexico since the 1930s. The exhibition also showed how new art movements intersected with key political events, such as the infamous

1968 Tlatelolco army massacre of student demonstrators and the mid-1990s Zapatista uprising, in much the same way that Chicano art was shaped by the Vietnam War and the civil rights and farmworkers movements.

"That's one of the shows we looked at as a model" for the Asco exhibition, González says. The curators also were inspired by a retrospective of Mexican artist Felipe Ehrenberg at the Museum of Latin American Art in Long Beach, and by an exhibition about "No Grupo," a sort of anti-collective of Mexican art provocateurs that ran at Mexico City's Museum of Modern Art two years ago.

As U.S. and Mexican art professionals increase their collaboration in years to come, more such connections between parallel art movements in both countries likely will be made, the "Asco" co-curators predict. And even bigger opportunities could arrive in 2017, when Southern California hosts another round of "Pacific Standard Time," which will focus on U.S. Latino and Latin American art.

"The Getty was very smart to recognize that the [project] following 'Pacific Standard Time' had to sort of break from the original model and to rethink Los Angeles' relationship as a city to a broader global reach," González says. "And they're certainly thinking about Los Angeles demographically and what the future of museum visitorship will look like in 2030 or 2050."

reed.johnson@latimes.com

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