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## ART

## He's just feeding the conversation

Chicano art, culture and history are everywhere in Southern California. Chon Noriega logs busy days stirring discussion of it.

BY REED JOHNSON

Every so often, Chon Noriega wakes up in the middle of the night and thinks, "I agreed to do *what*?"

Maybe he signed on to teach another UCLA graduate seminar in avant-garde cinema. Or curate an exhibition of new Chicano art. Or write a biography. Or lead a walking tour of East L.A.'s historic murals. Or co-host a segment of TCM's "Race and Hollywood: Latino Images in Film."

Or ... well, you get the drift. Noriega's list of cultural IOU's is long and — insomnia be damned — getting longer. "I love everything I do. It's about finding the balance," says the 50-year-old director of UCLA's Chicano Studies Research Center.

During most waking hours, Noriega is a deceptively easygoing UCLA film and media studies professor whose particular thematic focus is issues of ethnicity and gender. But describing the multi-tasking Noriega as an academic is a bit like describing Ashton Eaton as a guy who likes to hang out at the gym.

As head of the Chicano Studies Research Center, Noriega supervises the nation's most expansive library and archival holdings of materials related to the history and culture of Mexican Americans and other Latinos. In that capacity he also has edited several book series as well as the center's semi-annual *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies*.

Additionally, he oversees a Chicano cinema and media art DVD series and directs one of the most active academic presses in the California university system. Oh, and he's wrapping up a book-length study of Puerto Rican multimedia artist Raphael Montañez Ortiz.

"We've gone from a point 40 years ago where the center represented a minority population in L.A., and now it's representing the

majority population that continues to have disproportionately low levels of access to higher education and yet is the future of the state and of the nation," says Noriega, a Stanford University PhD.

But that's only the start of the activities that keep Noriega's eyes wide open in the wee small hours. In recent years he has become one of the country's most active curators of Latino and Chicano visual art, collaborating on well received shows at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and other venues. He has drawn attention not only to art that hangs in museums and gets hashed over in scholarly tomes but also art that pops up on the walls of Boyle Heights restaurants, below freeway underpasses and in other non-institutionally hallowed spaces.

"You won't find a better booster for Chicano art," says Abel Salas, editor and publisher of Brooklyn & Boyle, a Latino-centric L.A. arts journal. "He's almost single-handedly made it into a legitimate discipline or area of study, through the academic legitimization but also through his work in the community and uncovering some of the roots and showing how those are precedents for what's happening today."

As adjunct curator of Latino and Chicano Art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Noriega joined LACMA curators Rita Gonzalez and Howard Fox in mounting the museum's 2008 exhibition "Phantom Sightings: Art After the Chicano Movement," praised the show in which the curators "re-calibrate the meter" of Chicano art history.

Then last fall and earlier this year, Noriega was part of a three-person curatorial team, along with Terezita Romo and Pilar Tompkins Rivas, that put together "L.A. Xicano," four separate but interrelated exhibitions of Chicano art, as part of Pacific Standard Time, the massive multi-venue project that traced the history of Southern California art production between 1945 and 1980.

The four exhibitions, organized in collaboration with the Chicano Studies Research Center, were variously held at LACMA, the Autry National Center and the Fowler Museum at UCLA, establishing a bilingual dialogue among those in-



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**CHON NORIEGA** stands in front of "The Birth of Our Art" by Don Juan, a.k.a. Johnny D. González, and multiple contributors.

stitutions as well as among successive generations of Latino artists.

The two Fowler shows set an opening-day record for the museum by drawing 1,700 people, including many who trekked the freeways from East L.A. and the San Gabriel Valley to Westwood, a demographic that UCLA cultural events often struggle to attract.

"We may or may not have changed the numbers per se, but we sure shifted the dynamics of who was coming," Noriega says.

Noriega and his colleagues currently are assembling a new Chicano art show that will draw on their previous work and may travel to other U.S. venues.

Colleagues who marvel at Noriega's stamina are stumped to explain its source. "For many years it was a highly toxic Diet Coke and coffee bean intake," says Gonzalez, a LACMA associate curator of contemporary art who has known and worked with Noriega since she was a UCLA graduate student. "Now I

think he drinks green tea. He's got a lot of energy, that's for sure."

Through his multifarious cultural and art-related projects, Noriega has consistently pushed a central idea: that Latino culture, produced by the country's largest, fastest-growing ethnic "minority," should be regarded simply as American culture rather than as some exotic offshoot.

In exploring that theme, Noriega advocates taking scholarship out of the ivory tower and putting it in the street whenever possible. He stresses the importance of research that can be usefully applied to the world outside the academy — "research that makes a difference," he likes to call it.

"There's no reason that really complex, highly nuanced arguments can't be made in a way that can be understood by people that aren't necessarily specialists or professors or what have you," he says.

Noriega traces these beliefs, in part, to his own experiences before entering academia. Born in Miami and raised in Chicago, Noriega looked to his Mexican American father and Kentucky-born mother as models of how to make work and creativity compatible.

His father, Noriega says, "set me the example of somebody who read, who wrote poetry, who sang, who painted, besides working like a dog. And my mother cooked, she made clothes, she did interior decorating, she raised us. So I had parents who had no fear of finding ways to produce, to create."

He put himself through college by parking cars and other jobs.

Artist Harry Gamboa Jr. says that Noriega's efforts have helped to fill "the large gaping hole of Chicano and Latino representation" as well as "reconfigure the connection" between the varied cultures and subcultures of contemporary Los Angeles and the global village.

"He kind of acts as a dynamic, almost as a triggering device, to intercultural dialogue," Gamboa says. "Chon has served as a conduit, so many people from around the world in other museums will contact him with regard to anything to do with Chicanos."

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