



Working on the Zoot Suit mural with artist John Valadez in 1978

Harry Gamboa Jr.

## One of Muralist Barbara Carrasco's Most Powerful Works Was Nearly Censored for Being "Sexist"

LEAH ROSENZWEIG | OCTOBER 17, 2017 | 6:32AM

When maverick artist and activist Barbara Carrasco sees an opportunity to tell a story, she takes it. Before becoming one of L.A.'s most iconic muralists, Carrasco was the first woman editor of UCLA's Chicano newspaper, *La Gente*. "I was so pissed off that all these men were in control that I decided to run for the position," she recalls. "All the men running against me quit."

She's currently one of 120 female artists whose works are featured in the Hammer

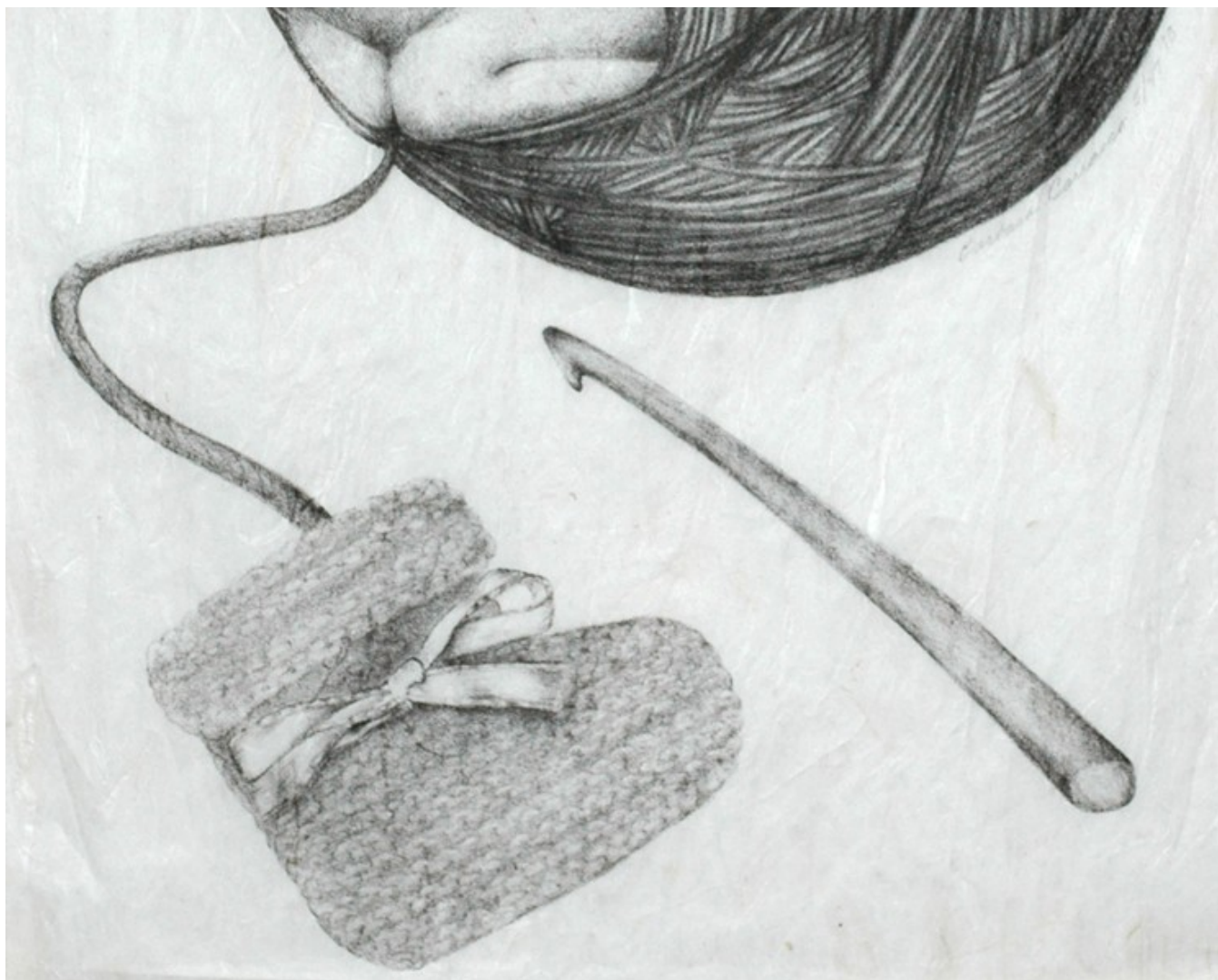
## Museum's Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA exhibit "Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985."

From her demeanor to her ink work, paintings, murals and prints, not a single trace of fear is detectable – only an unadulterated urgency to narrate. Carrasco was the first person in her family to graduate college. At 19, she heard Cesar Chavez speak at UCLA, and immediately following the speech, volunteered with the United Farm Workers movement, helping to create banners for protests. She was one of the very first artists to join with the activist.

On a recent walkthrough of the exhibit, she moves to a large-scale work of acrylic on canvas, a stylized and saturated depiction of a young woman entangled in a ream of Scotch tape as she paints Chavez's likeness beneath an imposing classified folder. Carrasco says the 1984 work, *Censorship*, is a direct response to controversy surrounding her 1981 mural "History of Los Angeles: A Mexican Perspective." Until recently, the mural was only displayed once due to push back from government officials, who felt it was too critical of certain events in American history.

Carrasco's Chicana identity is central to much of her work. There's a certain tension, an uneasy toying with both assumed and prescribed identities. For Carrasco, it was her physical appearance – she's light skinned with bright green eyes – that caused an early struggle. From being told to take advantage of the opportunities afforded by her perceivably more "European" features to being teased for not looking Mexican enough, she was constantly told to disavow who she was. But instead, she chose to uphold it.





Barbara Carrasco (American, b. 1955), *Pregnant Woman in a Ball of Yarn*, 1978

Collection of Barbara Carrasco

Circling the gallery, we arrive at a finely textured, gray-lined lithograph, an aesthetic divergence from the seamless geometry of *Censorship*. The 1978 work *Pregnant Woman in a Ball of Yarn* is one of her earliest and most significant. It depicts woman's struggle against male dominance, and also addresses stereotypes associated with motherhood. The inspiration for the entangled woman was, in fact, her own sister-in-law.

"She was pregnant at the time that she wanted to go to college," says Carrasco, referring to her then sister-in-law. "And he [Carrasco's brother] said she had to stay home and take care of the kid when the kid was born. I was so upset that I went home and I did this in one night."

Strands of yarn cover the pregnant woman's face; her body is most prominently depicted through the smeary lines of a large pregnant belly. The yarn streams from the woman's own hair, according to Carrasco, as a demonstration of her own complacency. "She allowed my brother to treat her that way," Carrasco says, alluding to her sister-in-law's adherence to her own male-dominant upbringing, the sort that Carrasco deemed "traditional, both at the time and in her culture."

“This small but powerful work was almost censored in the seminal exhibition, 'Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation,' or 'CARA,'" says "Radical Women" co-curator, Cecilia Fajardo-Hill. The exhibition, which toured 10 major U.S. cities, featured over 128 individual works by about 180 different Chicana artists. It was the first time an exhibit that exclusively displayed the work Chicana artists received major press attention and collaborated with major museums.

Despite the groundbreaking curation, Fajardo-Hill says that the curators of "CARA" deemed Carrasco's *Pregnant Woman in a Ball of Yarn* too offensive and sexist. Fajardo-Hill refutes this condemnation: “In its depiction of the subjugation of women in a male-dominated society, [*Pregnant Woman in a Ball of Yarn*], in fact, precisely critiques sexism.”

A single string flows from the ball of yarn and connects to a baby bootie based on one her sister-in-law was knitting at the time of her pregnancy. Each element, from the orb-like ball of yarn, to the protruding belly and carefully V-ed collar bone, is executed simply and with varying degrees of shadow.

“I drew with a crayon on a zinc plate,” explains Carrasco, “It’s a really complex project. You have to put a base of acid on it and then you can ink it up.”

The lithograph is a traditional Chicano form of art-making, which Carrasco uses here to provide a commentary on the treatment of women both in and outside her own community. It’s not clear whether Carrasco intended to use the lithograph in this way, but then again, she’s not averse to viewers formulating their own interpretations.

“I can’t believe how many women have told me that they thought this was about forced sterilization. I actually kind of like it.” Carrasco says there’s going to be a film on forced sterilization in this very gallery on October 27, a screening of the 2015 documentary *No Más Bebés*, which tells the story of Mexican immigrant mothers who were forcibly or unknowingly sterilized while giving birth at the Los Angeles County-USC Medical Center during the 1960s and '70s.

Carrasco speculates that her own mother was one of the many unwitting victims: “I was about 15 at the time and I remember asking, ‘Hey mom, why did they do that to you? Why did they take your entire uterus out?’ And she responded saying there were tumors in there. I asked if they showed her any pictures or X-rays and she told me no.”

Though it feels like one of the simplest works on view in "Radical Women," *Pregnant Woman in a Ball of Yarn* might, in fact, be one of the most radical. Over time, it has been

interpreted and reinterpreted to mean whatever we need it to mean. Perhaps creating work that refuses to mean just one thing is the ultimate form of resistance.

*"Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985," the Hammer Museum, 10899 Wilshire Blvd., Westwood; through Dec. 31. [hammer.ucla.edu](http://hammer.ucla.edu).*

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