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Four Latinx Artists on Inspiration, Creation and Identity, in Their Own Words

BY CATHERINE WOMACK, CATHERINE WAGLEY, LIZ OHANESIAN

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Carlos Almaraz, *Suburban Nightmare*, 1983. The Buck Collection through the University of California, Irvine. © Carlos Almaraz Estate.

Bliss Photography

As the Getty's expansive arts initiative **Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA** opens in dozens of cultural institutions across Southern California, *L.A. Weekly* reached out to a few Latinx artists to learn about their own experiences creating artwork that uses identity as inspiration.

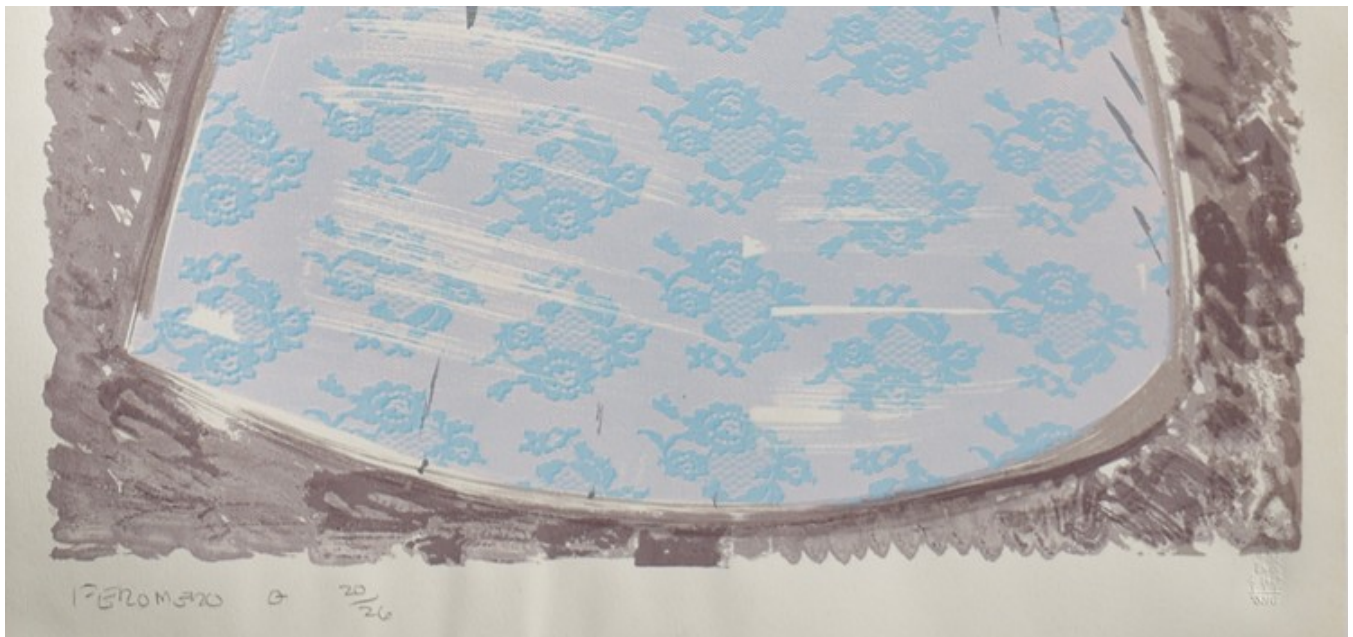
Chicano art legend Frank Romero on the genesis of "a strange phenomenon called Chicano art"

Born in East L.A. in 1941, Frank Romero was a founding member of the influential Chicano art collective Los Four, and his art – in which cars and L.A. landscapes figure prominently – has become iconic. Earlier this year, the Museum of Latin American Art in Long Beach exhibited "Dreamland," a retrospective of his work. He currently splits his time between L.A. and Paris.

My background is Hispanic. I had two brothers and 163 cousins. My mother is one of 14 children. So I always say that half of East Los Angeles is related to me.

My mother always had an inkling that I was visually gifted. I had teachers who were very strong influences. My fourth-grade teacher was a Sunday painter, Mrs. Martin, and she encouraged art – that's one of my earliest memories.





Frank Romero, *Untitled*, 1998

Courtesy Self Help Graphics

I was a member of the first freshman class at Cal State L.A. And the best thing that happened to me there was that I met Carlos Almaraz in 1959. He wanted to work for Walt Disney as an illustrator. I took him aside and said, "No, you want to be a painter." So in a sense, I created Carlos. And he and I became best friends and shared living spaces and studios for the next 30 years. Of course, Carlos died of AIDS 20 years ago.

Carlos was convinced of this strange phenomenon called Chicano art. The history of Chicano art starts with the walkouts at Garfield High. Carlos was much more aware of that because he was a graduate of Garfield. I'm a graduate of Roosevelt High. It was Carlos who brought in Gilbert Luján and Gilbert brought in Robert de la Rocha, whose son is Zack from Rage Against the Machine. Of course, Zack was just a 9-year-old kid in those days. Anyway, that's how we got together as Los Four.

In the 1980s, Suzanne Muchnic wrote a critique of my work in the *L.A. Times*. She called my style "bravura." I guess in a sense it is. Everyone always says, "The colors are so bright." I think it's just my Mexican heritage. I like bright colors. I paint straight out of the tubes. I do very little mixing of paint.

"She called my style 'bravura.' I guess in a sense it is." -Frank Romero

I also had a very active career in graphic design. I really enjoyed it, and I was good at it. I worked for Louis Danziger and Charles Eames.

In the early days, like for the Los Four exhibition at LACMA in 1972, I designed all the posters. For that exhibit, I designed a catalog that looks like a giant serape. In those days, it sold for 50 cents. I've seen one on sale recently for \$1,700.

Now I'm 76 and I'm the world's oldest Chicano artist. My best friend, Carlos Almaraz, is having a show at LACMA. I was involved in the Pacific Standard Time they did a few years ago. And now I'm involved in this one.

I'm living in France half the year now. My wife is a Francophile and so I said yes, I would go. Diego Rivera went to Paris and hung out with Picasso, so I had to do it. I understand everything my neighbors say because French is similar to Spanish, but it is very difficult to pick it up. My solution is to buy French pornographic comic books and read them. It's actually helping. –as told to
Catherine Womack

DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS: A CULTURAL LEGACY, PAST, PRESENT & FUTURE | Self Help Graphics & Art, 1300 E. First St., Boyle Heights | Through Feb. 24, 2018 | selfhelpgraphics.com

PLAYING WITH FIRE: PAINTINGS BY CARLOS ALMARAZ | LACMA, 5905 Wilshire Blvd., Mid-Wilshire | Through Dec. 3 | lacma.org



Laura Aguilar, *Nature Self-Portrait #2*, 1996. Gelatin silver print

Laura Aguilar

Chicana self-portrait photographer Laura Aguilar on stumbling onto inspiration

Laura Aguilar has been photographing her community and her body in Los Angeles since the early 1980s. Her former college professor, Sybil Venegas, curated her solo exhibition, "Show and Tell," at the Vincent Price Museum of Art.

I grew up in the suburbs, in Montebello, where we were the only Mexican family on the block. When I got to East L.A. College, I started finding out about the Chicano community and art. I went to a class called Chicano Studies, and I started laughing, because I grew up not using that phrase. My father was first-generation, born here, and all about being American. At the end of the first Chicano Studies class, the instructor, Sybil Venegas, was talking about Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, [David Alfaro] Siqueiros, [José Clemente] Orozco – all about Mexican modern art. I started going to art openings with Sybil.

Then I started meeting other artists. I would photograph them, because it's always easier for me to talk from behind a camera than in front of it. Pretty much everything in my life that turned out to be good is something that I stumbled into.

"A lot of my bodies of work are just an idea - 'let's see what happens' - and then it grows. I just trip into things, and things work for me, and I just want to trust that." -Laura Aguilar

Being gay and kind of coming out, I started photographing women who were very comfortable with themselves, and I did this series called *Latina Lesbians*. After I finished that I did the series *Plush Pony*, which was a bar in East L.A. It was more working-class kind of people there, getting by and just having fun on a Saturday night, while all the women from the *Latina Lesbians* series were professionals, lawyers and business folks. When I had the two bodies [of work] together, it felt more complete.

And then I started doing nudes. I was house-sitting for a friend whose name is Sandy. I'm in her bedroom, I'm naked, I have the windows open and there's sun and it's summertime, and there's a fan, and I'm sitting there naked and I have a soda in my hand. I called this photograph *In Sandy's Room*. That's one that got me in a lot more shows than I thought I would be in.

Everybody always asks me about [how I started photographing in the desert], but I just went to the desert and I needed to do some new work. I went to New Mexico the first time I did a self-portrait series, because I had a commitment. I called my friend who lives in New Mexico, and I said, "I need to do some work to send to England," and I came down to New Mexico. For two days, we did nudes, and then for the last piece from that series, I was standing somewhat close to a dirt road and this truck is coming and you can see the dust flying, and I'm going, "Give me my clothes!" She threw them at me. She went to the dirt road. She came back and said, "The old man and his dog had these big smiles because they saw you naked."

A lot of my bodies of work are just an idea – "let's see what happens" – and then it grows. I just trip into things, and things work for me, and I just want to trust that. –**as told to Catherine Wagley**

LAURA AGUILAR: SHOW AND TELL | Vincent Price Art Museum, 1301 Avenida Cesar Chavez, Monterey Park | Sept. 16-Feb. 10 | vincentpriceartmuseum.org



Shizu Saldamando, *La Sandra*, 2014. Colored pencil, glitter and spray paint on paper, 25" x 32".

Courtesy Japanese American National Museum

San Francisco–born artist Shizu Saldamando found her artistic home in L.A. subculture

Born in San Francisco and raised in the Mission District, Shizu Saldamando moved to Los Angeles to attend UCLA in 1996. Here, she became known for her portraiture, specifically her depictions of the city's alternative culture. For Pacific Standard Time, Saldamando, who is of Japanese and Mexican heritage, will have six pieces showing in "Transpacific Borderlands: The Art of Japanese Diaspora in Lima, Los Angeles, Mexico City and São Paulo." She also will have works appearing in PST: LA/LA shows at Self Help Graphics and Chapman University Art Gallery.

I don't know if I would do the same work had I not grown up in San Francisco. I think growing up in San Francisco allowed me to appreciate the really specific scene of L.A., the punk scene and the goth scene.

It was predominantly white people in those scenes up in the Bay. Of course, there are exceptions, always, but it predominantly was. I still felt like a minority going to those things. Being from the Mission District, I definitely felt different.

In L.A., it was interesting because it was predominantly Chicanos or Mexican-Americans that were in every scene. It felt really normal to be a part of those scenes.

When I was in high school in San Francisco, I would draw my friends a lot for art projects. So, in L.A., it was a natural progression that I would do that here. Then, being in the scenes, I would happen to draw my friends that I would hang out with and that was my makeshift family and community.

If I grew up in L.A., I would probably take it for granted that the majority [of Los Angeles] is people of color. I think that the artists that come up in L.A. kind of do that. They are free to explore different things that aren't tied to representation because they do see themselves already when they go out.

My parents are both activists. They're both very political-minded people, very assertive about that. They beat it in my brain, both sides of my heritage and being proud of it. I never really was confused.

**"I think I've always done political work, just by depicting people of color." -
Shizu Saldamando**

I grew up with a lot of political art, and I think that's another reason I choose to depict friends and people I hang out with rather than activists or Frida Kahlo or Diego Rivera or someone like Cesar Chavez. I took that for granted because I was already exposed to art like that.

I think I'm trying to question the notion of exceptionalism within communities of color, like, you have to be this perfect example, a shining star of perfection, assimilation or radicalism. You can be a kid that gets drunk on the weekend, and goes to shows and still be human and relatable and deserving of equal rights.

I think I've always done political work, just by depicting people of color that aren't normally depicted anywhere at all. I'm not going to kid myself that what I'm doing is going to change the world or anything. It's just art. I'm not proclaiming that I'm doing anything incredible but, in my mind, there's definitely a reason why I do what I do. —**as told to Liz Ohanesian**

TRANSPACIFIC BORDERLANDS: THE ART OF JAPANESE DIASPORA IN LIMA, LOS ANGELES, MEXICO CITY AND SÃO PAULO | Japanese American National Museum, 100 N. Central Ave., Little Tokyo | Sept. 17-Feb. 25 | janm.org/exhibits/transpacific-borderlands



Kukuli Velarde, *Chola de Mierda*, 2006. Terracotta with engobes and wax, 20 x 17 x 17 inches.

Courtesy Doug Herren

Peru-born artist Kukuli Velarde on discovering indigenous people's shame

Philadelphia-based artist Kukuli Velarde was born in Cuzco, Peru, and raised in Lima. Her work often draws inspiration from pre-Columbian art and explores the impact of colonization on Latin America. For PST: LA/LA, Velarde's installation Plunder Me, Baby will be showing with a few other of the multidisciplinary artist's works at the American Museum of Ceramic Art in Pomona.

My parents were very interested in preserving and being proud of our cultural roots, which, at the time of my upbringing, was a difficult task. To be proud of who we are – more than to be proud, to love who we are – was not fashionable in Peru. Now, people are beginning to respect and love those things that make us different, but for many years, there has always been this desire to be like the colonizer, to follow, to look beyond to the ocean, to the other side where we had never been but where everybody says that it's better. My parents were "Peruvianists," if that word exists, and in our home, it was always important to recognize our cultural background.

We had somebody who was taking care of the house chores [named Lorenza] and I remember we went to a festivity that was happening somewhere in Lima and there were some dancers. The dancers were speaking Quechua to each other. My father was not there at the moment and I asked Lorenza, "What are they saying?" She looked at me with anger and she told me that she didn't speak Quechua. Now, I knew she did. I was 8 or so, and I realized that she was not going to acknowledge that part of her being.

That was something that followed in my mind, that shame that many people have to belong to the mountains, to be part of that part of the country and the humiliations that these people have to go through when they come to the city. It's heartbreaking, but it's a reality. It's not one case every hundred years, but it's something that happens daily even now, that you can see people are ashamed.

When I did *Plunder Me, Baby*, I thought about how this part of us, these beautiful pre-Columbian pieces, are loved and respected and admired in a museum like the Metropolitan [Museum of Art], or any other museum, while the people who made them are denied to come to live here. For instance, like what is happening now with immigration. The human beings are always left aside.

"The human beings are always left aside." -Kukuli Velarde

Plunder Me, Baby is a series that I began around 2006. They are to work as an installation. This series, or this installation, is supposed to be a group of pre-Columbian pieces that are waking up in a museum for the first time in many, many years, and they are having different reactions to their new surroundings. Some of them are upset, angry. Some of them are hysterical. They don't know where they are, who are the people surrounding them.

The titles are all slurs that are used everywhere in Latin America to show disdain. I painted my face because if I use other people's faces, I felt like it could be interpreted like I was using the slurs toward them. I felt that it was necessary for me to own those titles. –as told to Liz Ohanesian

PLUNDER ME, BABY | American Museum of Ceramic Art, 399 N. Garey Ave., Pomona | Sept. 16-Jan. 28 | amoca.org/kukulivelarde

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