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Curator And Educator Chon Noriega Discusses Protest And Activism In Latin American And Latino Art

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Autry Museum of the American West
La Raza

Photograph by La Raza Photographic Staff, "East L.A. High School Walkouts," 1968. La Raza Newspaper & Magazine Records, Coll. 1000. Courtesy of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

Art has been an integral part of social upheaval and disruption throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, both as a visual embodiment of revolutionary movements, and as an expression of protest against corrupt regimes or human rights abuses. [Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA](#)—the Getty's multi-venue initiative focused on Latin American and Latino Art—gives voice to the link between art and activism, a common theme running through several of the exhibitions.

Some of these will focus on art connected to the Chicano Rights Movement of the 60s and 70s such as *¡Murales Rebeldes! L.A. Chicana/o Murals under Siege* at La Plaza de Cultura y Artes, and *My Barrio: Emigdio Vasquez and Chicana/o Identity in Orange County* at Chapman University, which showcase LA's vibrant mural tradition, and a show at the Autry Museum focused on seminal bilingual newspaper *La Raza*. Contemporary Latino artists such as Laura Aguilar, who will have a solo show at the Vincent Price Art Museum, pick up on these issues of identity and race, broadening them with a focus on gender and sexuality.

Several other exhibitions will explore the ways that Latin American artists have supported political movements, or railed against social injustice. *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985* at the Hammer Museum, and *Memories of Underdevelopment* at the MOCA San Diego, respectively focus on feminist art traditions and artists who confronted the failed promises of modernism throughout the region in the period of the 60s through the 80s. *Below the Underground* at the Armory Center for the Arts features Mexican artists working outside the mainstream during the 90s, precisely the moment when contemporary Mexican art burst onto an international stage. *Talking to Action* at the Ben Maltz Gallery of Otis College looks at contemporary artists and collectives from Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, and the U.S. who combine their art practices with activism, community organizing, and performance. Even exhibitions that are not particularly focused on activism, such as LACMA's *Home: So Different, So Appealing*, which is about representations of the domestic, feature many works that embody a critique of political violence, corruption, or inequality. LAist spoke with that exhibition's co-curator Chon Noriega, also the Director of UCLA's Chicano Studies Research Center, about the links between art and activism throughout PST: LA/LA.



Hammer Museum

Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985

Marie Orensanz, "Limitada (Limited)," 1978. Photograph, edition 1 of 5, 13 3/4 x 19 11/16 in. (35 x 50 cm). Courtesy Alejandra Von Hartz Gallery.
©Marie Orensanz.

The connection between art and activism is very strong in both Chicano art in the US, and Latin American art in general, although the focus of the protest may be quite distinct (The Chicano Rights Movement vs. challenges to authoritarian regimes for example). How do the shows on art & activism in PST LA/LA explore these diverse expressions of outrage and solidarity, as well as points of overlap?

In one sense, modern art has always related to activism, worldwide. In the Americas, there are several strands of art-based activism that bear note:

1. Art defining the nation. This comprises nation-building efforts following colonial control or revolution, with artists aligned with the state. Think of art in post-revolutionary revolutionary societies (Mexico in the 1920s, Cuba in the 1960s)
2. Art critiquing the state. This includes art in response to authoritarian rule, state violence against citizens, and issues of civil and human rights. Think artists working in Argentina and Colombia during authoritarian rule.
3. Art participating in social protest. This art is more focused, either by issue or locality, with artists aligned with a politicized community. Think Chicano art, but also works taking on women's rights and/or sexual identity.
4. Art taking a more formal and/or conceptual approach to activism. While such art can also contribute to the above three strands, it is more notable for locating the activism within the formal language of visual art. Think Asco (US), Leon Ferrari (Argentina), Miguel Angel Rojas (Colombia).

Some of the shows in the Art & Activism umbrella feature work that is very clearly political while other works are less straightforward in their stance of resistance. What does it mean for a work of art to be "activist"?

I think the traditional distinction between art (as an autonomous realm) and politics (as an instrumental one) is false. In some way, art is always a product of its moment, sometimes explicitly in commentary, other times as a participant in "on the streets" social struggle, and always as a feature of human creative expression.



LA Plaza de Cultura y Artes
 ¡Murales Rebeldes! L.A. Chicana/o Murals under Siege
 Sergio O'Cadiz Moctezuma, Detail of "Fountain Valley Mural," 1974-1976, 6 x 625 feet. Destroyed 2001. Photographer unknown. Private collection of the O'Cadiz Family

In LA, we're pretty familiar with our great mural tradition, but are there certain shows, artists, or works you think will be really surprising and eye-opening for audiences?

Well, *Home—So Different, So Appealing* has a number of eye-opening works. [Note: Chon is one of the curators of that show.] Beyond that, I think *Radical Women* will surprise people in terms of the depth and breadth of work by women artists in the Americas. It also has the virtue and marketing hook of bringing together Latina and Latin American artists. My sense is the following will be surprising: *Found in Translation: Design in California and Mexico, 1915-1985*, *Memories of Underdevelopment*, *Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell*, *Recuerdos de un cine en español: Latin American Cinema in Los Angeles, 1930-1960*, *Visual Voyages: Images of Latin American Nature from Columbus to Darwin*, *Juan Downey: Radiant Nature* and *Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano LA*. Finally, the various Chicano-themed shows provide a follow up opportunity to the first PST: getting to get to know L.A. better through murals, fine arts, and performance-based work.



Armory Center for the Arts
 Below the Underground: Renegade Art and Action in 1990s Mexico
 Andrea Ferreyra, "Torbellino/Whirlwind." Documentation of street performance, Mexico City, January, 1993. Photo by Gabriela González. Courtesy of Andrea Ferreyra.

In light of current expressions of intolerance, racism, and xenophobia in the US, the need for vocal and visual symbols of protest seems especially relevant. What can we learn from earlier forms of activist art featured in PST LA/LA? Are there any artists currently working in this vein that you feel are exceptional, and are creating contemporary work that follows in this trajectory?

I think that is such an important question. Rather than answer, which would make it less interesting, I think you need to put the question forward as a provocation for audiences. Speaking as a curator, every time I do a tour of *Home* I am struck by how earlier works seem so relevant to the current political moment. Each time something new hits me. Leon Ferrari creating merged maps/floorplans in exile as a response to the Argentine "Dirty War" in which the government killed his son in the late 1970s. Doris Salcedo's untitled furniture pieces filled with concrete and clothing as a witnessing of the state terror in Columbia in the 1990s. She is not telling you the story, but instead makes you contemplate these strange objects that once structured the day-to-day lives of a home where the inhabitant has been killed by their own government. Pepon Osorio's *Badge of Honor*, which uses art styles (minimal, baroque) to show how communities of color are defined geographically by prison and public housing. The haunting tone of Cesar Julio Morales's *Boy in a Suitcase*, which you hear from four galleries away, only to find it goes with a tiny monitor on the floor with a pixilated animation that turns out to be an X-ray of an African boy escaping to Spain in a suitcase.

These are artists. So, they were not making throw away statements; instead, they are challenging viewers to spend time with the work and come to a deeper understanding about the human condition. Art has always had the power to change peoples orientation within the world, which is why it has been central to most political movements; and that power lasts beyond the political moment in which the art participated. Artists almost always draw upon inspiration from earlier artists. In *Home*, the art collective Mondongo does a direct homage to Antonio Berni and the Altar of Ghent in order to bring new critical attention to the ongoing shantytowns in Buenos Aires. Among Colombian artists there is a three-generation link between teachers and students around issues of art and activism within a historical context: Beatriz Gonzalez taught Doris Salcedo, who taught Leyla Cardenas.

Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA runs through January 2018. For more information, visit the website [here](#).

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