

RIOT MATERIAL

ART. WORD. THOUGHT.

La Raza and the Onetime Voice of Chicano Activism

February 6, 2019 By Nancy Kay Turner

at the Autry Museum, Los Angeles (through February 10)

Reviewed by Nancy Kay Turner

You know something is happening but you don't know what it is. Do you, Mr. Jones?

–Bob Dylan, “Ballad Of A Thin Man”

Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.

–George Santayana

The sixties was a tumultuous decade, filled with assassinations, race, student and antiwar riots. This traumatic and dangerous time, when the social fabric was being torn apart, also gave birth to many civil rights movements for marginalized people such as women, gay/lesbian/transgender and people of color. This exhibition at The Autry Museum focuses on the Chicano movement specifically and on *La Raza*, a newspaper/zine that was crucial to exposing, through text and image, the Chicano movements struggle for social justice from 1967-77.

Recently, a treasure trove archive of 25,000 previously unseen photographs from *La Raza* have been donated to UCLA to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the magazine. As part of the Getty Museum’s extensive Pacific Standard Time LA/LA (Los Angeles/Latin America) series, this ambitious historical exhibition aims to elucidate the profound effect the magazine had on the community. “The editors of *La Raza* adopted a groundbreaking format in which photojournalism combined with art, satire, poetry and political commentary... (to) inspire the Chicano community to activism...”

The curators have divided the exhibition into the following categories: “Place and Space,” “Portraits of the Community,” “Signs of the Times,” “The Body,” “The Other, The State” and “The Principals.” All of the images are film (no digital images, though the whole archive is being digitized for conservation) and in black and white. The consistently well written and historically accurate curatorial wall text is as much the star here as the photographs, which are often shot at rallies and speeches and can appear like snapshots — not particularly aesthetic though still powerful images.



Daniel Zapata, *Young families join La Marcha de la Reconquista along a rural highway through Southern California, 1971*. Courtesy of the photographer and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center. © Daniel Zapata.

The crisp, sunlit photograph by Daniel Zapata “*Young Families join La Marca de la Reconquista along a rural highway through Southern California, 1971*,” is painfully fresh and current in its depiction of an orderly, peaceful line of families that could just as easily be the now infamous Migrant’s Caravan of 2018 that sparked the controversial government shut down.

There are few iconic images of the stature of Dorothea Lange’s *Migrant Mother*, or Margaret Bourke White’s, *World’s Highest Standard of Living*. They were already topnotch professional photographers sent out by The WPA to document the depression — which was limitless in its possibilities. The photographers at La Raza were activist/citizen photographers, shooting on the fly frequently in dangerous and unsettled conditions — without the extensive training of the WPA photojournalists.



Maria Marquez-Sanchez, *Bail bonds agency engulfed in flames, East L.A., January 31, 1971*. Courtesy of the photographer and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center. © Maria Marquez-Sanchez.

However, Maria Marquez-Sanchez's *Bail Bonds agency engulfed in flames, East L.A., Jan. 31, 1971* is a striking image capturing an out of control blaze, with the fire sending up bilious gusts of smoke, bellowing out like a geyser. Backlit at dusk, this conflagration is right next to the bold sign, which reads "Bail Bonds." The subtext of this powerful image — the specter of racial profiling, unfair imprisonment and police brutality — makes this image both profound and startlingly contemporary.



Raul Ruiz, *L.A. Police officers at the Los Angeles Civic Center demonstration*, circa 1970. Courtesy of the photographer and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center. © Raul Ruiz.

Some of the most compelling images are in "The Other, The State" section. Terrifying pictures of squads of police, lined up, often in riot gear tensely waiting for action, speaks volumes. On a personal note, it reminds me of the People's Park riot which I witnessed and where I saw police brutality up close for the very first time. Raul Ruiz captures a more relaxed police force in *LA Police Officers at the Los Angeles Center demonstration circa 1970*, which depicts the police lined up and ready to roll. The repetition of the uniforms moving back in a diagonal creates a memorable image.



La Raza staff, *Protestors outside the 42nd Academy Awards, Hollywood, circa 1970*. Courtesy of the photographers and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center. © La Raza staff photographers.

"Signs of the Times" focuses on the hand made signs/banners of those activists marching as they clearly express their disappointments, frustrations and feelings with scrawled text. In the most recent Women's march on Washington, there were many humorous signs but here they are mostly plaintive or factual, while stating an opinion, such as the poignant "Why Do you treat us with bad and degrading roles on the screen?" in *Protestors outside the 42nd Academy Awards, Hollywood, circa 1970*. Last year's hashtag, #oscarssowhite, literally asked the same question. But the actors/directors had the advantage of a viral moment on social media and their already established name recognition to help spread their message, while these protestors only had their paper and paint. There have been many advances in the last fifty years, but as this exhibition proves there is still much to be done. And although some of the techniques differ, the cry for equality is the still same and still unanswered.



La Raza staff, *Activist Mary Perez is roughly handled by school administrator, Lincoln Heights, circa 1968.* Courtesy of the photographers and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center. © La Raza staff photographers.

There is also a parallel universe to the recent Marjorie Stoneman Douglas high school political activism after the mass shooting at their school. In 1971, the middle and high school protestors of Garfield, Jefferson, Belmont, Venice, Wilson and Roosevelt all walked out of their classrooms in solidarity with other political protests. These young Chicano activists walked to highlight the lowered expectations their teachers and counselors had for them, often telling them they were not college material and should prepare themselves for the inevitable manual labor jobs waiting for them. Of course, today with the advent of social media the leaders of the Marjorie Stoneman Douglas protest movement (in a decidedly affluent school) were totally tech savvy and used social media to spread their message becoming media darlings in the process. The protestors in 1971 in East LA did not have that advantage and though they remained anonymous, as a united group they did have a strong and lasting impact by forming UMAS (United Mexican American Students.)

“The Principals” section showcases the young, idealistic La Raza photographers themselves (before there were selfies). In one picture, two disgruntled female photographers — cameras slung around their necks — are being handcuffed carefully by two policemen. “Portraits of a Community” focuses the camera on sunny children, grandchildren, friendly parents and the vast, extended family network that make up the vibrant East LA communities. Beautiful, idealistic young adults, clad in all sorts of festive native attire and jewelry, smile optimistically for the photographers. Two nattily dressed teens (one with a pork pie hat perched precariously on his head) stare somewhat amused at the camera. A young child, excited to sell the stack of *La Raza* newspapers she carries, is perhaps too young to read the dire headline that reads — in all caps — LA RAZA RAIDED EDITOR STAFF IMPRISONED — artfully placed like the text of an e.e. cummings poem. The inhabitants, looking surprisingly contemporary, are lovingly photographed and their humor, style, forbearance and strong family ties are highlighted.

The curators walked the line carefully between all the beautifully painted wall text, graphics and the many black and white images on the walls, the sheer number of which can be overwhelming visually. This is an important exhibition, adding to our knowledge of the Chicano civil rights struggle, and as a cautionary tale for our own troubled and conflicted times.



Pedro Arias, Viva la Revolución, circa 1968. Courtesy of the photographer and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center. © Pedro Arias.

Nancy Kay Turner is Los Angeles Art Critic for Riot Material magazine. Ms. Turner is an artist, arts writer and educator who has written for [ARTWEEK](#), [ARTSCENE](#) and Visions Magazine. She fled NewYork for the sun and fun of California and has never looked back.