

Chicano Males Stare Down Stereotypes

by BRIAN DE LOS SANTOS

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Courtesy of Harry Gamboa, Jr.

When Harry Gamboa Jr. saw Chicanos in the mainstream media, he didn't see himself, or the people he knew. And he wanted to change that.

Growing up during the 1960s Chicano movement, the Los Angeles-based artist resented how Chicanos were often portrayed, he says. His photo series *Chicano Male Unbonded* was his response.

"What was used in the media was this idea of creating inferiority or guiltiness," he says. "But these [Chicano] men had contributed to

and saved my life."

He says his peers were shipped off to Vietnam to fight in the war, and many didn't think they would live past 21 years old. Those who stayed home were often stigmatized.

Since 1972, Gamboa has created art in various media and formats interpreting the contemporary urban Chicano experience. After years working with a group he co-founded called Asco (Spanish for nausea), he started his photography series in 1991.

He chose people who have "a stance of being affirmative in their own lives," he says. His subjects are professors, activists, fathers, war veterans and anyone who has contributed to his life.

Since starting his series, Gamboa has photographed over 100 different men. Some look Chicano, others don't — which is part of his point. They include his father, Harry Gamboa, fellow Asco member Humberto Sandoval and photographer Gregory Bojorquez.

Gamboa makes his images using available light — a lamppost or a storefront's illumination — and shoots with a 24 mm wide-angle lens from a low viewpoint. Subjects wear dark clothes; their eyes pierce the camera looking down from above. The composition and lighting are all part of his statement.

"They [the subjects] don't present a threat. They're assertive; they look like they won't back down," Gamboa explains. "They aren't physical fighters, but in a way they have stood up for themselves. It just shows their strength of character."

He says his somewhat unconventional portrait style has led some to question *his* portrayal of Chicano men. Others have reacted positively. And that, he says, is his ultimate motive — to call into question the viewer's preconceived notion of what a Chicano male should look like.

Next month, new photos from this series will be shown at the Artifex exhibit in Culver City, Calif. View more of Gamboa's work on his blog.

Brian De Los Santos is an intern with NPR's Digital News.