

The pioneering Chicano art group **Asco**—comprising **Harry Gamboa Jr.**, **Gronk**, **Willie Herrón III**, **Patssi Valdez** and occasional contributor **Humberto Sandoval**—has finally received long-overdue recognition as part of **Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A., 1945–1980**.

*CalArts* magazine visited with Gamboa, the co-director of the Institute’s Program in Photography and Media, at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) last fall as the museum was holding the exhibition *Asco: Elite of the Obscure, a Retrospective, 1972–1987*.

**CALARTS:** It must be deeply ironic that LACMA is mounting the Asco retrospective, since the group tagged this site in 1972 [in a work called *Spray Paint LACMA*], claiming the whole museum as your artwork by signing it.

**HARRY GAMBOA JR.:** One of the interesting things about the museum affirmation now is that, for many years, Asco—which means “nausea” or “disgust” in Spanish—was so ephemeral that much of the work would instantly disappear. *Spray Paint LACMA* actually existed only for a few hours. [Willie Herrón, Gronk and I] went in at 4 o’clock in the morning, spray painted the entrance to the museum, and I brought Patssi Valdez back at 9 a.m. to photograph her, and by 10 everything had been already white-washed. Not enough time for anyone to complain!

**CALARTS:** Asco’s work—unpredictable, hit-and-run street performance, stylish photography and direction, the early understanding of “media criticism”—was as sophisticated and multifaceted as the conceptual art coming from art schools, except that your work was emerging from everyday life in East Los Angeles.

**HARRY GAMBOA JR.:** I used to tell people that, when I was born, they shook the baby blanket and I flew out and landed in the street. And I went for it. The majority of time was spent on the street instead of school, but

the education there was super intense. We, as a group, had this sense of understanding of what the world was about. In 1972, the demographics in Los Angeles were obviously very different, as was the tone in accepting or understanding people across the city. East L.A. was very segregated, like a separate country, and it was just at the early stages of recovering from very violent social conflicts and police riots. What was in the air, unmistakably, was the intrinsic resistance of institutions accepting even an introduction to Chicano art, banning it from any mainstream systems. *Spray Paint LACMA* wasn’t directed at any one museum, but we felt [the city’s cultural institutions] were missing out on a whole swath of culture in Los Angeles, the second largest Mexican city in the world.

**CALARTS:** Can you talk about *Decoy Gang War Victim* [1974]—which was on the cover of the October 2011 *Artforum* issue on *Pacific Standard Time*—and use that piece to talk about the Asco process?

**HARRY GAMBOA JR.:** That piece was a commentary on two major newspapers [the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*] that were utilizing negative Chicano imagery to sell papers, showing Chicanos almost only as gangsters (the other option was “illegal aliens”). And [the coverage] would endanger people, because they would publish names and gang affiliations, home addresses of the victims, where the perpetrators hung out, basically providing a road map for more gang war. So my idea was to have a convincing image that I could present as that of being the last gang member ever killed in East L.A.—then that might break the chain the retribution. In the shoot, we staged Gronk as the fallen “gang member,” set up flares, and utilized the bluish tone of the vapor lamps, and we did it at a site in East Los Angeles where many people had lain dead only about a year earlier. So that added to the overall eeriness of the picture. And as I did with most of our projects, I would make multiples of the picture,

# ASCO

## Chicano Art Heroes

**BELOW:**

Asco members in 1975, *from left*, Gronk, Patssi Valdez, Willie F. Herrón III and Harry Gamboa Jr.



©1975, HARRY GAMBOA JR.



**TOP:**

*Asco, Decoy Gang War Victim, 1974.*

©1975, HARRY GAMBOA JR.

**BOTTOM:**

*Asco, Spray Paint LACMA, 1972.*

©1972, HARRY GAMBOA JR.



“I felt I had a bigger story to tell than to wind up in a negative place.”

— Harry Gamboa Jr.

write some texts—often contradictory texts—and then distribute them in packages to various people, at universities, publications, really anybody who I thought might be interested. For *Decoy Gang War Victim*, I wrote some more text, and then transformed myself, put on a suit, got a shave and haircut, trotted out a briefcase, and I was introduced to several news people on local television. I managed to convince them basically that “This was *the* last gang member ever to be killed,” and it was broadcast on several of the local television stations. It would be the still image with a newscaster talking over it. That was the idea: to disrupt the flow of the negative imagery.

**CALARTS:** This is long before “media criticism,” or “media intervention,” or “viral media” had entered our lexicon.

**HARRY GAMBOA JR.:** Growing up with the leftist politics of the late '60s, and having come to the attention of the authorities as a student movement leader, there was the threat of direct bodily harm, and imprisonment—this was the era of assassination. I felt I had a bigger story to tell than to wind up in a negative place. I also felt that where the hatred and the violence starts is in the manipulation of the attitudes of the public, and so my focus, in turn, primarily turned to altering the perception of the viewer. And the idea of altering the perception of the viewer would be part of the very elaborate and sophisticated understanding of what perception is all about. And it involved taking into consideration not only my own cultural background, but things that were going on in the American counter-culture. I taught myself to take photographs, with the idea of making sure the performances were directed and photographed in a way to create some level of impact. And to make a convincing argument, for us, needed the creation of something highly stylized and something that was up to a level of professionalism, so that the general viewer often wasn't aware that [the works] were stranger things to look at and assess than they first appeared. This also required me to learn English at a certain level and certain social cues.

**CALARTS:** What's remarkable about the Asco pieces from the early '70s is how seamlessly the work moves from life in East L.A. and iconic elements in Chicano culture to the pop styles of that era, from the modish French New Wave films to stylized glam culture. And that it was morbidly funny.

**HARRY GAMBOA JR.:** I would spend the weekdays in East Los Angeles, but spend the weekends on the Sunset Strip, and see all the big rock stars, and realize there was a whole flip-side to the experience I was getting in East L.A., only a few miles away. And when I first met Patssi Valdez outside Garfield High, she was with a group of other girls, and I thought it looked like a scene out of [Michelangelo] Antonioni. Growing up in

the barrio didn't preclude awareness of the Beatles, awareness of the earlier films. It was not taught in school, was not available in the libraries, and required a bit of research. Also, there were times when you encountered people who were either television or movie stars and you caught them off the set, and saw them drunk or yelling or trying to remind everybody they're famous, and you saw them almost as though they were in this psychological quicksand. The barrier between the screen and the reality and the surreality seemed penetrable, and pretty early on, I got the idea that it was all high and low theater. For us, every opportunity was an opportunity to perform, and every opportunity to perform was an opportunity to reflect and introduce the notion of a population undergoing a different experience in America and not being recognized for its deep involvement in production, creative output, and sacrifice in war on behalf of America.

**CALARTS:** Asco, in its early days, received considerable criticism from other Chicano artists.

**HARRY GAMBOA JR.:** Oh yes. We threatened the balance of people who wanted to be folkloric representatives of Chicano culture—who provided the visual experience for those eager to consume the visual experience—and who wanted to go back to a much earlier part of Mexico's history, even as far back as the pre-Colombian era, which was also mythical.

**CALARTS:** And teaching? When did you first come to CalArts?

**HARRY GAMBOA JR.:** My first teaching experience was at CalArts in 1988. [Longtime faculty member] Allan Sekula was at a panel discussion I did at UCLA, which became very chaotic, and at the end the only person who came up to me was Allan, who said he enjoyed the talk. I heard from him some time later and was asked to take his teaching slot during his sabbatical. I came back five years ago. I guess I couldn't stay away. I've been doing classes in which we bring the CalArts students out into the streets of L.A. and show them how to traverse the landscape, to integrate their bodies and imagery into the environment and to alter it. Couldn't stay away from that, either, I suppose.

In the 1980s Asco splintered into a series of side-projects and solo pursuits until the group disbanded in 1987. *Asco: Elite of the Obscure, a Retrospective, 1972-1987* next travels to the Williams College Museum of Art in Williamstown, Massachusetts, opening on Feb. 4. More material on Asco is available on the School of Art's online journal [eastofborneo.org](http://eastofborneo.org). See [pacificstandardtime.org](http://pacificstandardtime.org) for other exhibitions on Chicano art. Harry Gamboa Jr., in addition to co-heading the CalArts Program in Photography and Media, makes artworks such as fotonovelas, performs with a regular troupe, and writes.