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Culture Monster

ALL THE ARTS, ALL THE TIME

PST, A to Z: 'Mapping Another L.A.,' at Fowler Museum, 'Mural Remix' at LACMA

December 15, 2011 | 12:00 pm

Pacific Standard Time will explore the origins of the Los Angeles art world through museum exhibitions throughout Southern California over the next six months. Times art reviewer Sharon Mizota has set the goal of seeing all of them. This is her latest report.



At the entrance to “Mapping Another L.A.: The Chicano Art Movement” at the Fowler Museum, a sculpture of a Quetzalcoatl head meets a suit of Spanish armor...and Chicano culture is born. Of course it’s not that simple, but this meeting of the New World and the Old, the indigenous and the colonizer—and the variety of ways in which they collided, intermingled, and fused—is the origin of what we have come to think of as “Chicano” culture.

As if to drive this point home, behind this pair is the mural, “The Birth of Our Art,” from 1971 by Don Juan, a.k.a. Johnny D. Gonzalez. It depicts the conquistador Hernán Cortés and his native lover and interpreter Malinche with their arms outstretched, Michelangelo-style, toward a blaze of light. The piece once adorned the façade of the Goetz Art Studios and Gallery, a community art center founded by Don Juan, José Luis Gonzalez, and David Botello in East Los Angeles in 1969. The neighborhood was a hot bed of the Chicano artistic movement in the 1970s, and “Mapping” features art works and ephemera associated with nine art centers or collaborative groups from that decade.

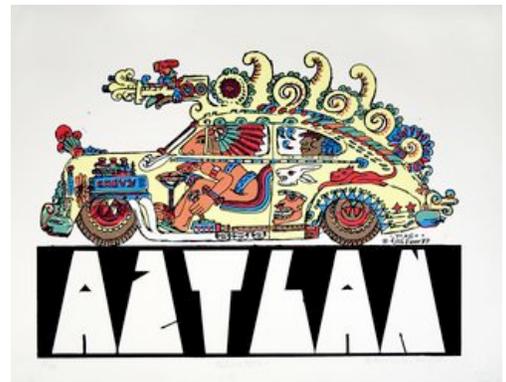
The other art spaces are Mechicano Art Center, Plaza de la Raza, Self Help Graphics & Art, Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC), and Centro de Arte Público/Public Art Center. These organizations combined exhibition opportunities with educational workshops and community engagement. The exhibition also focuses on three artist groups who created work collaboratively: Asco, Los Four, and Los Dos Streetscapers.

The show is valuable for teasing out the multiple influences on 1970s Chicano art—from neo-classicism and Surrealism to social realism and graffiti—but even more affecting is the intimate view it provides of a creative community. Mechicano Art Center published beautiful, inventive silkscreen calendars in all of the above artistic styles and more. Self Help Graphics ran a mobile art studio out of a converted van and held Day of the Dead celebrations where participants wore elaborately painted skull makeup or full, feathered Aztec headdresses.

There were even some attempts at injecting a little bit of Aztlan into architecture and urban design. Don Juan and Botello created detailed drawings of buildings that resemble the pyramidal structures of Aztec temples, as well as planters that look like stone Aztec heads. As the ‘70s waned, the aesthetic became less iconic, resulting in posters with a scrappy, DIY flavor for shows such as the “Punk Prom” at The Vex, a club founded by Self Help Graphics to showcase

Chicano musicians.

Chicano art of the period, the show argues, was much more than murals, although it remained closely tied to that tradition. Perhaps the highlight of the show is a selection of preliminary sketches for Judith Baca's magnum opus, "The Great Wall of Los Angeles." The sketches reveal various versions of the powerful panels that line a half-mile section of the L.A. River in the San Fernando Valley. Murals, due to their size, require careful planning, but these drawings show Baca exploring different storytelling options and compositions for sections such as "Farewell to Rosie the Riveter," in which the famed symbol of women's labor is sucked into a housewife's vacuum cleaner on TV, or "Division of the Barrio," in which Dodger Stadium hovers like a flying saucer over freeways that encircle the neighborhood's inhabitants like snakes. It's fascinating to get a "behind the scenes" look into such a major work, and to better understand the myriad possibilities of the mural form.



Such options are not lost on Sandra de la Loza, whose installation at LACMA revisits the same era as "Mapping." A self-styled "performative archivist," de la Loza began her project in response to a cache of over 600 slides of mural art in L.A. in the collection of Nancy Tovar. The artist was impressed by the range and variety of these images; she proceeded to make a series of art works and a short documentary film about the history and current state of mural art in L.A.

While conceptual art collective [Asco's LACMA retrospective](#) critiques the stereotyping of Chicano art as muralism; de la Loza's show celebrates and deepens our understanding of the form's meaning and importance in the community. The documentary in particular, running on a loop in the gallery, highlights the mural's importance as a public, civic expression of ethnic and cultural pride and as a way of claiming space in the crowded, often impersonal urban environment.

"Action Portraits," a three-channel video projection created in collaboration with Joseph Santarromana, makes these stakes viscerally apparent, depicting a variety of people painting their faces and torsos with a house painting brush. As they cover their nude bodies, the brushstrokes leave behind not paint, but images of the murals from Tovar's archive. The piece evokes body art and tattoos, but also an early Bruce Nauman piece, "Art Make-Up," in which he surrounded the viewer with four projected films of himself painting his body in four different colors. Like Nauman, de la Loza's participants are simultaneously covering their bodies and acting as a screen upon which certain assumptions and associations are projected. By collapsing the distinction between the public wall and the private body, the piece suggests that murals are both a highly communal expression of cultural pride, and something much more intimate and personal.

--Sharon Mizota

Fowler Museum at UCLA, North Campus of UCLA (Sunset Boulevard and Westwood Plaza), (310) 825-4361, through Feb. 26. Closed Mondays and Tuesdays. www.fowler.ucla.edu

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 5905 Wilshire Blvd., (323) 857-6000, through Jan. 22. Closed Wednesdays. www.lacma.org

Photos, from top: Don Juan/Johnny D. González with contributors Jose Luis González, David Botello, Ignacio Gomez, Gustavo Casillas, Richard Rueda, Robert Arenivar, David Lopez, David Ramirez, Richard Rodriguez, Richard Haro, Richard Jimenez, Manuel Venegas, and Danny Gaytan, "The Birth of Our Art," 1971, Mural façade for Goetz Art Studios and Gallery (Goetz) and The East L.A. School of Mexican American Fine Arts (TELASOMAF), 3757 East First Street, Los Angeles (1969-1981). Paint on wood panels.

Gilbert "Magu" Sánchez Luján, "Aztlan Rifa," 1977. Silk-screen print. Courtesy of Elsa Flores Almaraz.

Installation view, "Mural Remix: Sandra de la Loza," October 15, 2011 - January 22, 2012, Los Angeles County Museum of Art. © 2011 Museum Associates/LACMA.

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