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Making space for Chicano art

BY LETISIA MARQUEZ

Most high school students take their girlfriends to see a movie or stroll through a mall, but when Chon Noriega planned dates growing up in the Windy City, he had a cultural destination in mind: the Art Institute of Chicago.

Noriega, now director of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center and an influential figure in L.A.'s Chicano art community, said the first date he took to the museum couldn't stop raving about the museum's "Stack of Wheat" paintings by Claude Monet.

"Alas, the relationship soon ended," Noriega chuckled. "Turns out Monet can't buy you love."

Still, Noriega's passion for art — particularly Chicano art — remained. As head of the UCLA center, he's behind a flurry of arts-related projects, most notably the first exhibit of Chicano art in nearly two decades at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), titled "Phantom Sightings: Art After the Chicano Movement."

The exhibit, which opens April 6 and ends Sept. 1 before traveling to other U.S. cities and Mexico, will feature 31 conceptual artists who explore such varied topics as the trees where Mexican Americans were lynched in the late 1800s and beauty salon art.

"What we tried to do with the exhibit is look at conceptually oriented art from the Chicano community across the nation," said Noriega, who is the exhibit's adjunct curator and also a professor of film, television and digital media. "The artists we selected work in a range of nontraditional forms, from performance to installation to 'guerilla' interventions in urban space."

Rita Gonzalez, lead curator for "Phantom Sightings" and a UCLA doctoral candidate in cinema and media studies, said Noriega "has both a mind for art history and policy, which is somewhat rare. And because he can speak about art to different brokers — from art historians to policy makers — he has become an important mediator."

Noriega was just shy of 30 when he received a Ph.D. from Stanford University in modern thought and literature in 1991. His dissertation centered on the little-known history of Chicano film and eventually culminated in a book titled "Shot in America: Television, the State and the Rise of Chicano Cinema."

In 1991, UCLA's Wight Art Gallery asked him to advise them on adding a film program to

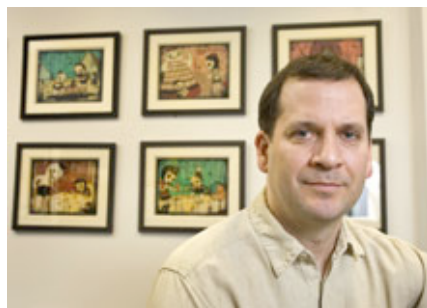
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Photo by Reed Hutchinson

complement its hugely popular traveling Chicano art exhibit titled "Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation." As he participated on panels and other events related to the exhibit, Noriega became friends with some of the Chicano Movement's leading artistic figures, including Rupert Garcia and Amalia Mesa-Bains. Since then, Noriega has been tapped by museums throughout the U.S. to guest-curate numerous art shows.

"Chon's work continues to create space for Chicano artists in academic and art institutions," said Sandra de la Loza, a Los Angeles-based artist. "His work writing and publishing studies on individual artists and curating exhibitions has definitely led to a better understanding of Chicano art."

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