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'Phantom Sightings' Explores Social Injustice Through the Avant-Garde

The new LACMA exhibit uses an eclectic mix of media to explore the lives of Chicanos in an amusing way.

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A wall is swathed in glossy black and white and shades of gray.

It is a little fuzzy, but visible: A crowd has gathered around a looming, thick tree with nothing hanging from the branches; a gaping, dark hole fills the middle of the wall, burning uncomfortably at the absence of the hanged corpse that should be there.

The image, titled "Erased Lynchings" by Ken Gonzalez-Day, is a retouched photograph from the little known Mexican lynchings of the Jim Crow era, one of many provocative pieces in "Phantom Sightings: Art After the Chicano Movement," which runs at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art until Sept. 1.

A refreshing collection of mixed pieces produced after the Chicano movement of the 1960s and 1970s by artists of Mexican descent, "Phantom Sightings" connects its pieces through a conceptual framework.

The focus lies in the methods and different messages of the artwork and not in the themes of race or social statements. This creates an exhibition with varied media, style and context that informs, amuses and protests all at the same time.

The large exhibition can have a dizzying quality about it. Flashing colors dance on the walls on top of tempera paint, mixed media shining and shouting loudly from a projector.

Within the texture and changing colors, one can easily lose her way - sometimes, there just does not seem to be a point to the avant-garde.

Jason Villegas' "Celestial Situations" features a mural with an incomprehensible mix of machines and brand names that frame a central television showing the projected image of a rotund, balding man touching himself to the screeching soundtrack of television feedback.

One could easily surmise the symbolism of Villegas' statement about the hybridized nature of consumerism and industry. But the garish method of the message seems redundant.

The spectacle continues throughout the show, but the pieces with the relevant social commentary stand out strongly.

Props from Alejandro Diaz' outrageous cardboard sign experiment line a large wall. Diaz, who stood on street corners with these posters, screamed phrases such as "Happiness is expensive," "Bean and Cheese" and "Never mix never worry."

These signs, all grouped together, bring a new meaning to begging the question - one can only imagine the reactions given by the few passers-by who took the time to pay attention to a Mexican man holding a cardboard sign.

Christina Fernandez's photographs also bring to light unseen footage from a unique point of view. Her lavanderia series brings gritty scenes of different Laundromats, scratched with the territorial symbols of punks and the gravel of the inner city.

Fernandez's photographs show Plexiglass windows in Spanish-speaking neighborhoods with lavanderias with washed-out walls and the occasional lone immigrant inside, oddly pedestrian, lonely images that showcase not poverty, but an unexpected depiction of a class that shares its dirty laundry with the world.

Also provoking is "Undocumented Interventions," a series by Julio Cesar Morales, a set of watercolors that visualizes ways of hiding human beings in car parts.

Alluding to the practice of human trafficking across the United States-Mexico border, Morales envisions immigrants with their eyes closed, fitting in glove compartments, hiding in the bottom of trailers and filling passenger seats in the place of cushions and foam.

These images of smuggled strangers, curled up like fetuses, cause viewers to think about issues of poverty, immigration and desperation.

LACMA's "Phantom Sightings" does not just protest the wrongs of society; elements of beauty, love and even humor litter the gallery.

Juan Capistran gives us a 16-panel breakdown of a breakdancing move in his print "The Breaks," while Cruz Ortiz lets us into his epic, mixed-media quest for love, which involves a catapult, Billie Holiday and a star map.

Ruben Ochoa and Marco Rios even poke fun at cultural stereotypes with "Rigor Motors," which shows two coffins with glamorous speaker boxes bent into a sitting position, an ideal way to rest for the true car fanatic.

Though "Phantom Sightings" might showcase specks of social injustice, the exhibition paints the term Chicano in broad brushstrokes.

Thoughtful and fresh, "Phantom Sightings" brings to light the idea of culture through the conceptual - addressing both the deep and the mundane through mixed media - with pieces as diverse as the city central to the Chicano movement it has followed.

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