

# A Defiant Exhibit by an Artist, at a Museum He Helped Create

El Museo del Barrio is presenting a retrospective of Raphael Montañez Ortiz's works to honor the 88-year-old artist and reinforce the institution's roots.



“The Memorial to the Sadistic Holocaust Destruction of Millions of Our Ancient Arawak-Taino-Latinx Ancestors Begun in 1492 by Columbus and His Mission to, With the Conquistadores, Colonize and Deliver to Spain the Wealth of the New World no Matter the Human Cost to the New World’s Less Than Human Aborigine Inhabitants” by Raphael Montañez Ortiz at El Museo del Barrio in New York City. Collection of El Museo del Barrio, New York

By Mark A. Stein

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This article is part of our latest [special section on Museums](#), which focuses on new artists, new audiences and new ways of thinking about exhibitions.

Raphael Montañez Ortiz was a celebrated avant-garde artist in 1969 when he helped a group of East Harlem parents, teachers and students create El Museo del Barrio, a museum that he said he believed would be more welcoming to Latin artists than New York’s established temples of fine art.

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He left El Museo in 1971 and resumed his pathbreaking career as an artist while also taking a tenure-track teaching position at Rutgers University. Now the man and museum are coming together again in a comprehensive retrospective of Mr. Montañez Ortiz's 60-year career.

The exhibition, "Raphael Montañez Ortiz — A Contextual Retrospective," opened at El Museo del Barrio on April 14 and is scheduled to run through Sept. 11. It will then travel to [Museo Tamayo](#) in Mexico City.

Ideally, the show will reintroduce a widely respected Latino artist to a new generation in his hometown and raise the profile of the museum he founded to connect Latino students to art.

Chon A. Noriega, a professor of cinema and media studies at the U.C.L.A. School of Theater, Film and Television, said this show exemplified why specialized museums were important for broadening art appreciation.

"We need all museums. We need every type of museum possible," he said.



Mr. Montañez Ortiz in a film in which he dismembers a piano is part of the exhibition, "Raphael Montañez Ortiz — A Contextual Retrospective" at El Museo del Barrio. Raphael Montañez Ortiz

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The show divides Mr. Montañez Ortiz's career into four periods centered on a rich assemblage whose title pulls no punches: "The Memorial to the Sadistic Holocaust Destruction of Millions of Our Ancient Arawak-Taino-Latinx Ancestors Begun in 1492 by Columbus and His Mission to, With the Conquistadores, Colonize and Deliver to Spain the Wealth of the New World no Matter the Human Cost to the New World's Less Than Human Aborigine Inhabitants."

The first section is Destruction, which includes films he made by randomly cutting and reassembling short documentaries and performances in which he dismembers pianos with an ax. Next is Decolonization and Guerrilla Tactics, which addresses the Brooklyn-born artist's Puerto Rican heritage and activism, including the foundation of El Museo del Barrio.

That is followed by Ethnoaesthetics, a word he coined to describe the resistance to cultural ethnocentrism. Last is Physio-Psycho-Alchemy, which shows how he incorporates meditation and ritual into performances. This section also includes digital video he made in the 1980s.

El Museo's curator, Rodrigo Moura, organized the show with the guest curator Julieta González. "It's been in the works for a long time," Mr. Moura said. "I've been at El Museo for three years, and this is one of the shows I wanted to do as soon as I arrived. It's part of a reconsideration of some of the museum's formative values" and history.

Mr. Montañez Ortiz's works are in the permanent collections of two dozen museums across Europe and the United States, so to mount the exhibition curators had to arrange to borrow works from institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, the Menil Collection in Houston, the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, N.Y., and the Chicano Studies Research Center at the University of California, Los Angeles. That last institution houses Mr. Montañez Ortiz's manifestos and photos of his performances, including his reputation-making participation in the Destruction in Art Symposium in London in 1966.





"Explode," a 1967 photo silkscreen and rubber-stamped text by Mr. Montañez Ortiz. Collection of El Museo del Barrio, New York

In addition to stoking interest in Mr. Montañez Ortiz, 88, who recently retired from Rutgers after 50 years, most recently as a distinguished professor in visual arts, Mr. Moura said he believed the show would renew El Museo's ties to the city. "It's part of my curatorial interest in revisiting and reconnecting a new generation of museum goers with this history of El Museo and in this case, the work of its founder," he said.

Mr. Montañez Ortiz graduated from Pratt Institute in Brooklyn in 1964, when New York was asserting its status as the center of the art world and people were opening to the idea that art can be more than painting and sculpture. Mr. Montañez Ortiz was then doing traditional abstract painting and drawing, but long conversations with the Dadaist writer Richard Huelsenbeck, an early champion of the young artist, helped Mr. Montañez Ortiz take a highly intellectualized approach to what constitutes art. He concluded it need not conform to traditional ideas of "creation" and could include "destruction" as a means to reflect humanity's violent tendencies.





“Archaeological Find #22: The Aftermath” 1961, destroyed sofa on wood backing by Mr. Montañez Ortiz. Collection of Museo del Barrio, New York

Mr. Montañez Ortiz in 1962 wrote a manifesto on “destructivism” as an art form and four years later was invited to the Destruction in Art Symposium in London, where he made headlines by dispassionately dismantling a piano with an ax as an audience looked on. At other times in other venues, he destroyed chairs and other furniture.

The destruction belied the artist’s deep spirituality, gained from growing up in a Puerto Rican enclave in the largely Jewish Lower East Side of Manhattan. “I was open to so much spiritual stuff,” he recalled in a phone interview. He came to know and appreciate the high Episcopal faith of his father, the Catholicism of his mother and the Orthodox Judaism of his neighbors.

“The one thing that really was important for me was to discover that in Judaism, you could argue with God, and in Christianity you better not,” he said.

Mr. Montañez Ortiz said that when he was a boy, a rabbi told him about a loving couple who lost their daughter to polio. The couple spent most of the rest of their lives sitting in a tête-à-tête sofa where they felt the presence of their beloved child. After the parents died, the rabbi said that the sofa retained a warmth and glow that led many people to believe the family’s spirits stayed behind. Mr. Montañez Ortiz said destructing furniture was a way “to release a spirit as part of a reconciling.”

While museums show more women and artists of color than they did in 1969, institutions like El Museo are still important, said Mr. Noriega of U.C.L.A. He said students were the largest group of museum goers in big cities and Latinos were the largest segment of students in New York.



Mr. Montañez Ortiz at the 50th anniversary celebration of El Museo del Barrio in 2019. Aurora Rose/Patrick McMullan, via Getty Images

“It’s not like they need to see a gallery that only has Latino art,” he said, “but they do need to come out at the end of a museum visit with a sense that we are on the wall. And we belong in the world because what’s on the wall is a reflection of the world.”

The message resonates with large philanthropies. The [Ford Foundation awarded El Museo a \\$4 million grant](#) in 2020, and a year later the author and philanthropist MacKenzie Scott [donated \\$8 million, the largest single gift in the museum’s history](#).

The grants helped to ease El Museo’s perpetual financial challenges, letting the institution mount programs it might not otherwise have had the resources to attempt.

“This is a very overdue exhibition for the museum because the last time it presented a retrospective or any major presentation of Raphael’s work was in 1988, and he has been creating fantastic work since that time,” Mr. Moura said.

It is not easy for a museum to properly present a retrospective of an artist whose work ranges from randomly spliced films to methodically dismantled pianos to embracing spiritualism and opposing the cultural disenfranchisement of Latinos.

“His work benefits from being shown in a museum context, where people will be able to understand his career as a whole, look at work from different moments,” said Kevin M. Hatch, an associate professor of art history at Binghamton University. “He came up in an era, the 1950s and ’60s, where artists were really pushing the boundaries of what could count as art. He made many of those artists look conservative in just how far he was pushing the boundaries.”

“The art world has finally caught up to him,” Mr. Hatch added, “and I think this really is a nice moment for him to gain the recognition that maybe he hasn’t had along the way.”