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Yolanda López

Profile of a Feminist, Conceptual, and Political Artist

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About the Author



Chon Noriega is a Professor in the Cinema and Media Studies Program at the University of California, Los Angeles. He is the author of *Shot in America* (2000), and co-author of *Phantom Sightings* (2008), and *L.A. Xicano* (2011). Professor Noriega is also Director of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, and Adjunct Curator at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

The profile below appeared in the foreword of the book Yolanda M. López, by Karen Mary Davalos, originally published in 2008 as part of the award winning A Ver: Revisioning Art

History book series. The A Ver series explores the cultural, aesthetic, and historical contributions of Chicano, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican, and other U.S Latino artists. Chon Noriega is the A Ver series editor.

In the 1970s, Yolanda M. López produced some of the most iconic and widely circulated images of the Chicano civil rights movement, addressing pressing issues related to social justice and human rights while also producing conceptually grounded alternatives to the social and cultural invisibility of women within these struggles. These works include *Who's the Illegal Alien, Pilgrim?* and the *Guadalupe* series (both 1978), which engaged pre-Columbian and Catholic iconographies that were already familiar in Chicano art and social protest. But López made several notable interventions. She introduced satirical humor as well as a sense of the female quotidian into political discourse, and she subverted the formal structures and techniques of both Mexican devotional art and American mass media. As Karen Mary Davalos notes about *Who's the Illegal Alien, Pilgrim?*, the poster's Aztec warrior figure appropriates both John Wayne in the revisionist Western *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962) and the "Uncle Sam" of Army recruitment posters, thereby insinuating the warrior's statement within U.S. political discourse itself. The *Guadalupe* series appropriates a religious icon used to sustain a Madonna-whore dichotomy in Mexican culture as well as to limit the scope of Chicana political participation to mere symbolism. Here, López uses la Virgen de Guadalupe as a template for Chicana portraiture, not as types (whether abject or active) but as individual women at work and play across generations and the life cycle. Because these and other works were based on photographic studies, López introduces an indexical underpinning in the creative process that tempers the works' iconic function by subtly cutting against the movement's own myth-building and cultural nationalism. Icons can be useful, but they also can be mistaken for the "real thing" rather than understood as a constructed image used for particular purposes. Davalos explains, "López's primary impulse as an artist is the investigation of images. She analyzes the production, function, and context of images that enter public culture."

In considering this primary impulse, it is important to note the diverse sources and influences that contributed to López's artistic practice. Growing up as a Chicana in San Diego on the U.S.-Mexico border had a profound impact on López, although not necessarily in the ways that one might expect. For López, these experiences manifested a paradox: living next to Mexico, she nonetheless grew up understanding Mexican culture in negative terms, an impression based less on lived experience than on media stereotypes, tourism, and commodity culture.

In addition, while her family provides a significant source for her art (expressed in terms of matrilineal genealogy), López's upbringing was in many ways a nontraditional one. She was raised in a nonreligious household by a single mother, then by her grandparents, and later by a gay uncle, and her familial identity focused more on working-class concerns and labor rights than on Mexican or Chicano culture. In the late 1960s, when she lived in San Francisco, López met Emory Douglas, minister of culture for the Black Panther Party. Douglas, whose radical graphic art appeared in the Black Panther newspaper, showed López quick and low-cost layout techniques. His visual style, a collage of mass media text and photographs, thick outlines, and declarative text, inspired her own efforts to develop an art of social protest within San Francisco's pan-Latino community. When López returned to San Diego in the 1970s to complete her graduate education, her teachers (notably Allan Sekula and Martha Rosler) helped her further

develop the conceptual aspects of her work through a formal art training that engaged semiotics, deconstruction, and feminism. These experiences proved transformative: López emerged as a political artist concerned with the politics of representation rather than with cultural essence, nationalist identity, or the recovery of an “authentic” and lost culture.



“Free Los Siete” (study) 1969. Photograph republished courtesy of UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center and Chon Noriega.

López’s *Free Los Siete* (1969) provides an excellent and early example of her commitment to a multivalent political art. She excerpts passages from the U.S. Pledge of Allegiance that foreground the flag as the emblem that unites citizen and nation, both “under God”: “I pledge allegiance / to the flag of the United States of America / one nation under God with free.” In the black-and-white poster, this text appears inside the representation of a frame with a padlock in the lower right corner, forming a “matted” border around an image of six Latino males imprisoned behind the stars and stripes of the U.S. flag. Below this frame is the title, written in boldface using the same style as the pledge: “Free Los Siete.” Derived from an earlier color drawing, López’s poster circulated widely in *¡Basta Ya!* newspaper as part of an effort to defend seven Central American youths accused of killing a police officer in San Francisco’s Mission District on May 1, 1969. Some eighteen months later, the youths known as Los Siete de la Raza were acquitted following accounts that police in the heavily pan-Latino neighborhood had used excessive force. The mass arrest and trial spurred mobilization of a defense committee, with support from the Black Panther Party, and also led to community-based programs and services through the newly formed La Raza Information Center. López’s poster, created while she was a member of Los Siete Defense Committee, appeared early during the year between the arrest and the trial that started in June 1970. It expresses the fear that Los Siete would not have the very rights promised by the pledge: democracy, liberty, justice, and equality. Indeed, in the poster, these rights are absent, not so much implied as replaced outright by the word “free” (which is not in the pledge itself). This last word, which appears at the top of the poster, must be read two ways at once: as a promise that has been cut off mid-syllable (syntactically, one expects “freedom” to appear; symbolically, the word contradicts the image it helps “frame”), and as the first word in the bilingual imperative at the bottom of the poster that names the defense committee and the artwork: *Free Los Siete*. In order to secure liberty for Los Siete—that is, to

bring together both articulations of “free,” as pledge and as demand—the community will need to mobilize to defend its rights.

In *Free Los Siete*, as with López’s subsequent artistic production, the work’s political message is clear and purposeful. At the same time, the work cannot be mistaken for art that merely illustrates a position, both because of the work’s formal complexity and because it is engaged in a more complicated project of repositioning the viewer with respect to language and representation. López’s *Free Los Siete*, and other artwork from this period, was arguably even more radical than the political art of her mentors, teachers, and peers in that it was unsigned. The artist actively withholds her authorship in order to have the poster circulate as an expression of the community itself, as a critique of the failure of the nation-state to secure “liberty and justice for all,” and as a free-floating icon within a social movement. Consequently, these images often reflect upon the movement itself but not upon the artist who created them. López’s political commitment, combined with the masculine framework for recognition within the social movement, served to obscure critical attention to her distinctive visual style, conceptual framework, and provocative investigations into what has been called a “politics of the signifier.” Indeed, as Davalos argues, “López is simultaneously a feminist artist, a conceptual artist, a political artist, and a portraitist working in and against the modernist tradition.” As the first major publication on López, this book explores the artist’s ongoing commitment to an art of social protest, elaborates the social and cultural history and intellectual currents within which she has worked, and brings much-needed attention to the artist in all her complexity.

This profile is published on Apuntes courtesy of Chon Noriega and the University of Minnesota Press.

To purchase Yolanda M. Lopez, visit the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center:
<http://www.chicano.ucla.edu/publications/book/yolanda-m-l%C3%B3pez>