



SOUTHLAND SESSIONS PRESENTS

Chon Noriega Talks Chicano Art and Power, Increasing Museum Diversity and How COVID-19 Impacts Latinos

Avishay Artsy | October 14, 2020



Southland Sessions Presents: From high school operas and drive-thru art exhibitions to Chicano comedies and underground DJ sets—we are showcasing the vibrancy of arts and culture across our city today.

Art historian, media scholar and curator, Chon Noriega, has wide-ranging interests: cinema and television, new media, arts curation and health policy. His approach to scholarship is “research that makes a difference” for the community.

Noriega is a professor in the UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television. Since 2002 he's served as the director of the [Chicano Studies Research Center](#) at UCLA.

He'll join a panel of UCLA scholars to explore the question "What Is Power?" as part of "10 Questions: Reckoning," the live discussion series led by the arts that tackles complicated topics. On this episode of Works In Progress, Noriega explores faith and community activism, Latinx representation in museums and health disparities in communities of color.

[Tune into the following link to listen to Chon Noriega's talk.](#)

<https://soundcloud.com/user-451207578/chon-noriega-chicano-art-and-power>



UCLA Arts · Chon Noriega: Chicano art and power

Faith in the Mexican American Community

Noriega's current project explores faith, spirituality and religion in the Mexican American community with a primary focus on Los Angeles since the 1940s. The Chicano Studies Research Center (CSRC) received a major grant in April from the National Endowment for the Humanities for a three-year archival preservation project. The CSRC has the largest archival collections related to Mexican American and Latino communities, with an emphasis on Southern California.

The archives include photographs, correspondence, diaries, documents, audio recordings and ephemera. They are organized around social, cultural and political frameworks, but Noriega said he plans to create pathways for researchers to explore the archives through the lens of faith as well.

According to Noriega, 91% of Latinos identify with religion or faith, and Chicano arts in Los Angeles are directly tied to the church. The Boyle Heights nonprofit Self-Help Graphics, for example, was founded by artist and Franciscan nun Sister Karen Boccalero in 1970.



Church of the Epiphany exterior | Carren Jao

One of the venues that Noriega is looking at is Church of the Epiphany, an Episcopal church in Lincoln Heights. Organizers of the Chicano Moratorium met in the church's basement and edited the underground newspaper, *La Raza*, there.

Noriega said his approach is to collaborate with community-based institutions so that the benefits extend beyond the university.

"We're trying to bring all of these constituencies together around scholarship, around research, around archival preservation," he said.

Diversifying the Museum

Noriega is an adjunct curator at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA)

He recently helped update a 1994 report called “**Willful Neglect: The Smithsonian Institution and U.S. Latinos.**” That 60-page report issued by a task force that the Smithsonian initiated found that the national museum complex excluded and ignored the presence of Hispanic and Latin Americans at every level, including in what it shows in its exhibition halls and who holds positions of power and authority within the institution.

Noriega said that while things have changed generally, the growth in the rate of Latino leadership in museums is overshadowed by the much larger growth of the community itself and diversifying the museum must begin with leadership.

“That's where change is going to happen. If you're at a university, you have to diversify the faculty. If you're at a museum, you have to diversify the curators,” he said. “That's the main issue facing the field of the arts and facing higher education.”

Noriega has spearheaded a curatorial program at LACMA to bring young people into the museum where they may not have felt welcome or invited in the past, and to show them that there is a career path for them in museums. That means encouraging young people from underrepresented communities to enter Ph.D. programs so they can compete for curatorial positions. Noriega worked with LACMA director Michael Govan, curator Pilar Tompkins Rivas and Brooke Davis Anderson, director of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, to create a nationwide mentorship program.



Chon Noriega | Harry Gamboa Jr.

Graduates of the diversity program, he acknowledged, have to face the challenges of rising to the high standards of curatorial work while also addressing their community's needs through their work.

"If a diversity program does not address that, does not make a space for it, they are not only failing the people they're bringing into it, they're harming them," Noriega said.

A New Idea of 'Home'

Noriega co-curated a 2017 blockbuster show at LACMA called "Home—So Different, So Appealing: Art from the Americas since 1957." The exhibition was part of the Getty Foundation's Pacific Standard Time: Los Angeles/Latin America (PST: LA/LA) and brought together more than 100 works from 39 U.S. Latino and Latin American artists.

Watch a video tour of 2017's "Home—So Different, So Appealing," below.

<https://youtu.be/FbHOj4ptaz0>

He and his co-curators, Pilar Tompkins Rivas and Mari Carmen Rameríz at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston, wanted to make connections between Latino, Mexican and Latin American artists who were all thinking about the concept of home and domesticity.

The show also examined how U.S. policies encouraged developing countries to pursue an American dream of single-family home developments, and how the post-WWII U.S. model of economic development "immediately turns one-third of the world's urban population into squatters and into people living in shanty towns. It creates middle classes in these societies. It creates the basis for a certain kind of nation state configuration. And it pushes a lot of people out onto the margins," he said.



Installation of María Elena González, "Magic Carpet/Home," 2003, 2017, at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) "Home—So Different, So Appealing: Art from the Americas since 1957." | Courtesy of

Latinos and COVID-19

Noriega recently moderated a panel discussion that LACMA hosted about racism and public health in the time of COVID-19. Noriega is on the advisory board of the UCLA Center for Population Health and Health Disparities in East L.A., and the UCLA Kaiser Permanente Center for Health Equity.

Since the pandemic began, Latinos have represented 60% of COVID cases in California and nearly half of the state's deaths, despite the fact that Latinos make up less than 40% of California's population.

Noriega attributes this to another example of “willful neglect,” calling Native American, Latino and African American communities “the object of racial violence.” Partly because they make up a large share of frontline medical workers, those groups are at greatest risk of illness and death.

The government’s poor response to the pandemic “increases the vulnerability of the worker [and] relies on their disposability, and in the case of Latinos, their invisibility,” he said.

Chon Noriega will join lawyer, scholar and environmental advocate, William Boyd and Black Studies scholar and anthropologist, Jemima Pierre, on Monday, Oct. 19 at 7 p.m. to explore the question “What is Power?” You can register for “10 Questions: What is Power?” [here](#) and learn more about the full program [here](#).