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A fiery memo, crown-jewel archives: How Chon Noriega shaped our view of Chicano L.A.



Chon Noriega is retiring as director of the Chicano Studies Research Center at UCLA after 19 years. (Christina House / Los Angeles Times)

By [CAROLINA A. MIRANDA](#) | COLUMNIST
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The year was 1969. It was a time of social protest over civil rights and representation issues. Those protests echoed at UCLA, where Mexican American students were demanding improved access to higher education, as well as greater resources devoted to the study of the Mexican experience in the U.S.

Enter the university’s Mexican American Cultural Center, which was established to support research in what was then the new field of Chicano studies. In the 52 years since, that center — now known as the [Chicano Studies Research Center](#) (CSRC) — has grown from a small student- and faculty-led initiative to a full-blown academic center, supporting original research and publications, the maintenance of archival collections and a library.

Running the center for the last 19 years has been Chon Noriega, a professor in UCLA's department of film, television and digital media, who has been a tireless advocate of Chicano representation.

Key archives connected with figures such as [Edward Roybal](#), who in 1949 became the first Latino elected to L.A.'s City Council since 1881 (and later a U.S. representative), as well as caches of historic documents and photographs related to publications such as the Spanish-language daily *La Opinión* and the 1960s-era activist newspaper *La Raza* (which generated an exhibition at the [Autry Museum of the American West](#)), are some of the acquisitions Noriega was instrumental in bringing to the research center.

He helped launch “A Ver,” an artist monograph series that has chronicled the work of important Latino artists such as Pepón Osorio, Judith F. Baca, Carmen Lomas Garza and [Gronk](#) (born Glugio Nicandro).

He also helped curate key exhibitions related to Chicano and Latino art. Among them, the highly influential [“Phantom Sightings: Art After the Chicano Movement”](#), which he organized with Rita Gonzalez and Howard Fox in 2008, as well as [“Home — So Different, So Appealing,”](#) a group exhibition of international artists, executed with Mari Carmen Ramírez and Pilar Tompkins Rivas — both shown at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.



An installation view of “Home — So Different, So Appealing,” on view at LACMA in 2017, an exhibition that Chon Noriega helped organize with Mari Carmen Ramírez and Pilar Tompkins Rivas. (Museum Associates / LACMA)

Now, after 19 years, Noriega is stepping down as director of the Chicano Studies Research Center (though he will remain on the faculty at UCLA). In this conversation — which has been edited for length and clarity — he looks back at the work of two decades: the important acquisitions, the fiery memo he once sent to leadership at New York's Whitney Museum and that time a movie director he'd spent years trying to track down showed up at his house with the last remaining print of a rare Chicano film.

How has the center evolved in the time that you've been director?

When I came in, the center had been somewhat dormant. I had to figure out how to plug it back in. Before I started, I met with every previous director and tried to get a sense of what the center meant to them. Each director had a different view of the field, but they were all committed to research that makes a difference. We thought, that is going to be a tagline: research that makes a difference.

Not just basic research, where you have a tantalizing question and you pursue an answer. But taking that knowledge and asking, how does this fit in the world? So putting it to the purpose of a public exhibition or a conference — something that gives it another impact.

Plus, I needed to work on the archive. It was the crown jewel, but it needed more jewels added.



Chon Noriega, left, with artist and set designer Gronk, center, and director Peter Sellars at the L.A. Art Show in 2020. (Elon Schoenholz / UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center)

What are some of those jewels?

We got [the work of Nancy Tovar](#). She photographed in East L.A. — she photographed all the murals. When she became ill, she donated [her images] to the center and she gave us her copyright. She wanted us to be able to use them as a way of supporting the collection. Well, her collection became the cornerstone of [Sandra de la Loza's piece at LACMA](#) during Pacific Standard Time [in 2011, in a video installation titled “Mural Remix,” which reconfigured details of murals in various ways]. It was a beautiful exhibition.



“Ajax Muffler Mural,” 1975, painted by Robert Arenivar, David Botello, José-Luis Gonzalez, and Juan Gonzalez — as photographed by Nancy Tovar. (Nancy Tovar / Chicano Studies Research Center)

[There is] the [Cyclona collection](#). Robert Legorreta, of course, who went by the name Cyclona, was a performance artist and he was one of the main openly out artists in East L.A. during the Chicano movement. But he was also a collector [of] ephemera that used Latino imagery. He collected albums, for example, whether or not the recording star was Latino, but if the cover evoked Mexican culture, he collected it. He did that with everything — with food packaging, with everything. That collection describes the nature of our presence. It is being used to sell something. But where are we?

You also tracked down the only existing copy of director Efraín Gutiérrez’s 1976 film “Please Don’t Bury Me Alive!” — often described as “the first Chicano film.”



The original poster for "Please, Don't Bury Me Alive!" — "the first Chicano movie!" — directed by Efraín Gutiérrez and released in 1976. (UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center)

I wanted to write about Chicano cinema, feature films. There were only about a dozen that had been made by Chicano directors with the intent of telling stories about the Chicano community — and about half of those were missing. I was going through all of these community-based magazines, like "Caracol" in San Antonio and "ChismeArte" in California. They would write about Efraín quite a bit, but no one knew where he was.

I'd go to a film festival in San Antonio every year and I'd say, "Do you know Efraín Gutiérrez?" ? Have you heard of Efraín Gutiérrez?" I heard all these crazy stories - that he had disappeared, that he'd run off to Mexico.

I came home one day and there is a message and it's like,, "Hey, Chon

Noriega, this is Efraín Gutierrez. I hear you are looking for me." He said, "I heard you are looking for the film and I have it. It was in the garage of my producer. She had a print and it's been stored in a metal garbage can with paper around it. It seems in good shape. We tried showing it and it only broke three times."

I was like, "Stop showing it!" I said, "Can you ship it to me?" He said, "No, man. Give me your address. I'll bring it." Three days later he shows up at my house in this station wagon with his wife and their daughter and the daughter's friend and the friend's child and the print.

I asked him, "Where did you go? People thought you were dead."

It turns out that he hid in one of the ways that you can truly hide in society. The first way is by being a teacher — you don't exist. The other way is to be a union rep to teachers. For 18 years, he was a union rep in South Texas. He then returned to San Antonio. We spent the next several years tracking down his films.

Your background is in film. How did you get into curating?

I got into curating by way of film. [John Hanhardt](#) reached out to me from the Whitney Museum. This would have been 1989 or '90. He was one of the key figures bringing video art into museums. He contacted me to see if I would curate a program on Chicano film. I did a number of programs at the Whitney.

That led to me being an advisor on the 1993 biennial. They wanted to bring in an expert in Chicano art to advise them. I gave them a list of people. But one day I get a letter from the Whitney saying, "Dear Chon, can *you* be an advisor?"

I figured at most, they would feature one man and one woman, perhaps the Adam and Eve of Chicano art. Well, I wasn't going to do that. So I went out and bought three slide carousels and presented 30 artists. They picked two: [Miguel Gandert](#) and [Daniel \[Joseph\] Martinez](#).

I told [the Whitney], you need to think more expansively about the Chicano community. I wrote [this multipage letter](#) and I cc'd every Latino arts organization. I figured I would never curate at the Whitney again. [Laughs.] But since curating doesn't pay the rent for me, I didn't have that worry.

That is not the last time I did anything with the Whitney, though.

Martinez's piece was very controversial: a series of museum badges that, when put together, read: "I Can't Imagine Ever Wanting to Be White." The show was lambasted by some critics, yet that biennial is one we still talk about.

Daniel Martinez's piece continues to define that biennial. It is one of the pivotal pieces of protest art that shows how protests can happen in a museum.

A lot has been written about that work, but very little has been written on the formal qualities of the work. It is turning the audience into an overture. There is an element to that in Daniels's work — that opera he did, ["Ignore the Dents"](#) [with artist Harry Gamboa Jr., who did the libretto, and composer VinZula Kara]. What gets written about [the Whitney piece is] the politics of it. But not the other qualities. The interactions create the meaning.



Daniel Joseph Martinez is seen before one of his installations at the 2017 exhibition, "Home — So Different, So Appealing" at LACMA, which Chon Noriega helped curate. (Mark Boster /Los Angeles Times)

You showed the Whitney 30 artists and during the first Pacific Standard Time series, you helped curate four separate shows related to Chicano art. It sounds like you don't like to settle for scraps of representation.

For the first Pacific Standard Time, Joan Weinstein [of the Getty Foundation] met with me because we had been working on research grants. She suggested doing a show. I said, "I don't want to do a show. I want to do three shows simultaneously at three museums." And Joan, without batting an eye said, "OK, great." And then I had to figure out how to do three shows. We mapped out three shows and then it morphed into four. We ended up doing two shows at the Fowler, one at LACMA and another at the Autry.

I thought, if I do one show, it gets everyone else off the hook. Like, "OK, we have a Chicano show. It's all located there." But if I'm doing [multiple] shows, I'm showing that there are [multiple] things to say about Chicano art concurrently.

I felt like we were really insane when we were installing all four shows in the same two-week period. This was really bending the time-space continuum.



Chon Noriega has helped bring key archives to UCLA — from artists, political figures, and Spanish-language and Chicano media. (Christina House / Los Angeles Times)

There have been pendulum swings in terms of how so-called “ethnic” studies are regarded. Why does the field remain important to you?

That’s the eternal question. In 2002, I had dinner with [UCLA’s] chancellor before I became director. He was pretty blunt and said, “Why do we need the Chicano Studies Research Center?”

In my mind, that was very easy. In 1969, when the center was created, Chicanos were a minority population in this country and in Los Angeles. Shoot ahead 33 years and Chicanos and Latinos are a very large part of the population in Southern California. But the levels of access have not kept pace. The relationship of the student body to the population in the state is

completely out of whack. [Less than a quarter of incoming UCLA students are Latino, even though almost 55% of California public school students are Latino.]

So, you have to look around and say, how do we correlate to the population around us?

The center is important because it is a hub to support research that can advance knowledge production in the academy. It can influence education. It creates the books and the articles that inform how we teach things. We still do an uneven job of telling national history. We haven’t effectively told that story in a way that really gives presence to all of the groups. It only brings them in as points of conflict.



Chon Noriega, right, with actor and art collector Cheech Marin, at a gala in support of the Vincent Price Art Museum in 2017. (Monica Orozco / Vincent Price Art Museum)

You've written a lot about Latino representation in film. What's your fantasy Chicano film project?

What we don't need is another story where you have a boxer, a lawyer and a gang member and the daughter who is an educator. The most boring story Hollywood continually tells is that Hollywood is about telling stories. What a story is and what is recognized as a story — nobody questions that. What needs to happen is a fundamental shift in how stories are told.

What about a movie about a Chicano curator? It could be an interesting piece of speculative fiction.

Who would play you in this movie?

I insist it's Ben Affleck or no one. We must keep him employed. We don't want him on the streets.