

How Cheech Marin's Forthcoming Art Center Is Changing the Game for Chicanx Art



BY MAXIMILIANO DURÓN November 9, 2021 10:14am

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Cheech Marin posing with Cande Aguilar's 2020 painting *El Verde*, acquired earlier this year. PHOTO JASMINE MARIN

What does Rembrandt's *Night Watch* have to do with **Chicanx art**? For actor and comedian **Cheech Marin**, it was the inspiration for building a collection that could one day be the basis for a museum. In the 1980s, at the height of his Cheech & Chong days, Marin had started collecting Chicanx art. He visited the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and spent nearly an hour gazing at Rembrandt's 14-foot-wide masterpiece—"looking at the painting and taking in every aspect of it," he said—and it was then that he knew he wanted to build a museum-quality collection of his own.

“I’d seen it all my life growing up, in reproductions in books, but when I got there—it was a huge, huge painting, like a mural,” Marin said in an interview from his Pacific Palisades home. “When I saw it, I thought, Wow, I get it now. It made such an impression on me. I thought to myself, That’s what I have to do.”

Marin resolved to start collecting what he calls “museum-size art”: large pieces of Chicano art that were “not only historically significant but beautifully executed, and that would make an impression.” And small ones too—the Rijksmuseum’s four jewel-box-like Vermeers helped convince him how important it was to see artworks in person. “That’s the only time they’ll be fully lit for you,” he said. He dreamed that one day visitors to his own collection would have the experience he’d had in front of *The Night Watch*. “It’s not a dream I had ever had before,” he said, “because I thought it was too out of reach.”



A view of the exhibition “Chicano Visions: American Painters on the Verge,” which showed in 12 museums between 2001 and 2007. COURTESY CHEECH MARIN COLLECTION

Not every collector has ambitions to share their art with the public. Those who do often start by lending to institutions. For years, before opening his private museum in 2015, Los Angeles collector Eli Broad, through his foundation, created a lending library of his holdings, making pieces available to institutions around the world. Marin took a different tack: he sent his collection on the road.

Born to Mexican-American parents and raised in South Los Angeles, Marin had his first meaningful encounter with Chicano art in the mid-1980s, at an L.A. gallery. “It was familiar and different at the same time,” he said of the experience. “It was like hearing the Beatles for the first time: I’ve heard this music before, but not quite this way.” He’d always been a collector, starting with baseball cards when he was a kid, and later, as an adult, moving to Art Nouveau, the international style that sought to break down distinctions between fine art, design, and craft in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In the ’80s, his interest in Chicano art quickly eclipsed that; his first acquisitions were a painting each by George Yepes, Frank Romero, and Carlos Almaraz. He soon developed what he jokingly calls a “mania.” “The art was so intriguing and so good that I couldn’t help but keep on going. Just when you thought you’d seen it all, here comes another work.” His collection now numbers some 700 pieces, and is widely considered the largest collection of Chicano art in private or public hands.

In the late '90s, artists, curators, and other art world professionals who had seen Marin's collection encouraged him to create an exhibition around it. Marin said that people often think his first traveling exhibition, "Chicano Visions: American Painters on the Verge," which stopped at 12 museums across the country between 2001 and 2007, came together with ease. But that wasn't the case.

"Everyone thinks that you just decide one day, 'I'll tour my collection.' Good luck!" Marin recalled. "It was a lot of work, and it was a learning process, like learning how to do the cha-cha with footsteps on the floor. I had to go do my dog-and-pony show at practically every corporate boardroom in America. It didn't matter if it was General Mills or General Motors—if it had a 'General' in the title, I was there."

Working with the esteemed late Chicano curator René Yañez, Marin spent three years trying to find museums to agree to take the show, which included the work of Almaraz and Romero as well as Gronk, Patssi Valdez, Ester Hernández, Carmen Lomas Garza, and Rupert García, as well as sponsors who could help bankroll the tour. "The biggest obstacle was using the word 'Chicano,'" Marin said, "because it was a buzzword then, with supporters and detractors on both sides. None of them wanted to do that until the San Antonio Museum did. Then they all started lining up."

The impact of "Chicano Visions" can't be overstated. Though it wasn't the first traveling exhibition dedicated to Chicana art—"Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation" opened in 1990 in Los Angeles before heading to 10 other cities across the United States—

it's one of the most consequential in terms of bringing both the art world's and the general public's attention to Chicano, Chicana, and Chicana art—thanks to the draw of Marin's name.

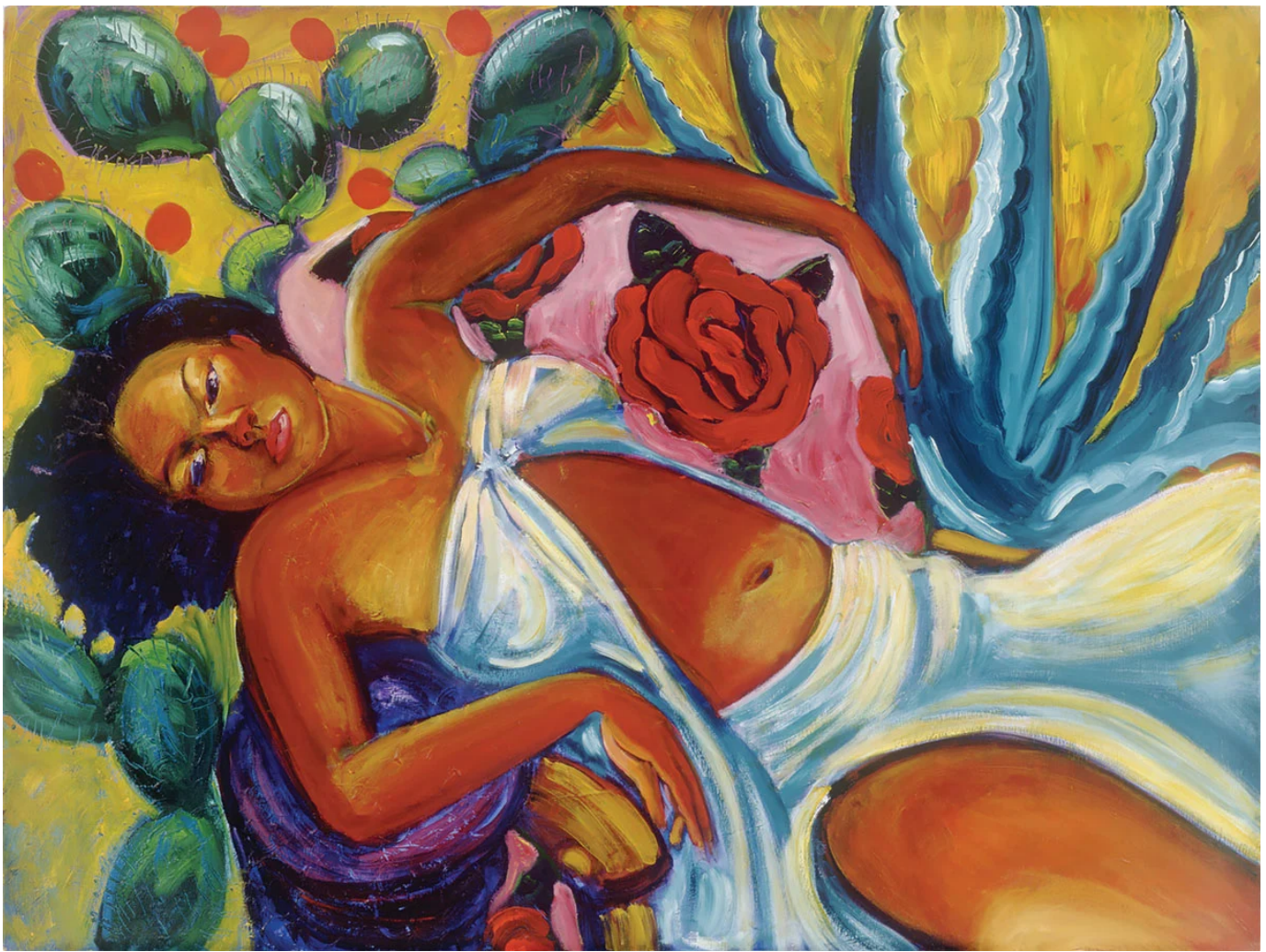
"I don't think there's anyone who's worked harder for the Chicano art community," said artist Margaret Garcia, the creator of more than 30 works in Marin's collection. "He's making room at the table for people who haven't gotten the attention that others have. Even if you're not in the collection, he's created so much more room and attention for the diversity of who we are. I don't think that would exist without him."

Chon Noriega, the former longtime director of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, recalled that when he first heard of Marin's exhibition, he conducted a little experiment: he Googled "Chicano art" and then "Cheech Marin." The search results proved telling.

"Cheech Marin was more famous than Chicano art," Noriega said. "He was more recognized. But he has been very successful in using his visibility. He brought visibility to Chicano art in a way that very few people could have."



Patssi Valdez's *Saturday*, from 1997, in from Marin's collection.
COURTESY CHEECH MARIN COLLECTION



Margaret Garcia's *Janine at 39, Mother of Twins*, a painting from 2000 now in Marin's collection. COURTESY CHEECH MARIN COLLECTION

For the past 20 years, Marin's collection has been traveling the country in one form or another. In 2017, it touched down at the Riverside Art Museum in Riverside, California, as "Papel Chicano Dos: Works on Paper," an exhibition of 65 pieces. By that time, there was rampant speculation in the museum world about the long-term plans for such a high-profile collection. Would Marin open his own private museum, like the Broads or the Rubell family? Would a hometown museum approach him to secure it, like the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art had done with Donald Fisher, or the Art Institute of Chicago with Stefan Edlis?

While Marin's collection was bringing visibility to Chicano art, U.S. museums were coming to the belated realization that they needed to expand their horizons. Too few followers of art were seeing themselves represented, even as the country's demographics transformed.

When the Riverside exhibition opened, more than 1,400 people showed up to the reception. The exhibition ended up being the museum's most-attended show, tripling admission revenue in the first month it was on view. After seeing the long lines, former Riverside city manager John Russo approached the Riverside Art Museum about creating a plan they hoped might entice Marin to move his collection to Riverside. Within a week of that first exhibition's opening, the City of Riverside and the Riverside Art Museum together pitched Marin the idea of becoming the stewards of his collection.

As Marin often recounts, he at first misunderstood exactly what they wanted: "You want me to buy a museum?" he remembered thinking at the time. "I don't know if I'm *museum* rich." But when he realized they were actually offering a space that would permanently house his collection and serve as a new center for research related to Chicano art, he warmed up to the idea. Then, about a week after "Papel Chicano Dos" wound to an end, the Riverside City Council approved a memorandum of understanding to begin negotiations on what would become the Cheech Marin Center for Chicano Art & Culture (aka "the Cheech"), which is scheduled to open next May.



Exterior rendering for the Cheech Marin Center for Chicano Art & Culture, scheduled to open in May 2022. COURTESY PAGE & TURNBULL AND WHY

For now, renovations are nearing completion on the historic 1964 structure it will call home, and the Cheech team—led by a **recently appointed** artistic director—is readying the two opening exhibitions: a collection show, naturally, and a solo show of the glassblower brothers Einar and Jamex de la Torre. Yet even with the physical setting and the program still forming, it's clear that the Cheech has the opportunity to become a leading institution set to break new ground in an underserved area of art history.

“The field of Chicano art is still in need of such attention and scholarship,” said Pilar Tompkins Rivas, the chief curator of L.A.’s forthcoming Lucas Museum of Narrative Art. “There’s so much art history that has yet to be written. A lot has been done in the field, but it’s still just scratching the surface—we need more. This is an important project for many institutions to be looking at. It’s been a hard-won fight to get the art world to come around to realizing the importance of Chicano art.”

Previously home to the main branch of the Riverside Public Library, which is moving to a new custom-built space, the Cheech’s future home is a historic Modernist structure in the city’s downtown core. The two-story, 61,420-square-foot space will accommodate multiple exhibition galleries, dedicated space for education programming, multiuse event space, art storage, and a gift shop.

Marin’s first donation to the Riverside Art Museum—a portfolio of 26 prints by Chicano artists made with master printer Richard Duardo, owner of L.A.’s Modern Multiples—came during the run of “Papel Chicano Dos.” He followed that with 11 other pieces, including Romero’s *Arrest of the Paleteros* (1996), Almaraz’s *Creatures of the Earth* (1984), and Gronk’s *La Tormenta Returns* (1986), which went on view at the museum in 2020. Once the storage area is completed, Marin will give some 500 more works. An additional 175 pieces will be available for loans, and the center bearing his name will have the option to acquire any additional works in Marin’s collection in the future.



Interior gallery rendering for the Cheech Marin Center for Chicano Art & Culture, scheduled to open in May 2022. COURTESY PAGE & TURNBULL AND WHY

That the Cheech Center has come together so fast—less than five years from initial planning stages to opening date—is a testament to how much Riverside, which dubs itself the “City of Arts and Innovation,” is committed to supporting an institution dedicated to Chicano art in a region that itself is majority Latinx. Contrast that with the National Museum of the American Latino, which was established by Congress within the Smithsonian Institution only this past December, after an effort of almost 30 years. The first step toward creating that museum was establishing the Smithsonian Latino Center in 1997; it came three years after a now-infamous report titled “Willful Neglect: The Smithsonian Institution and U.S. Latinos” declared that the Smithsonian “almost entirely excludes and ignores Latinos in nearly every aspect of its operations” and that “[m]any Smithsonian officials project the impression that Latino history and culture are somehow not a legitimate part of the American experience.”

The Cheech Center is a partnership between the public and private sectors. The Riverside Art Museum will officially manage the center’s operations, and the City will pay the museum \$800,000 annually to do so for its first decade. (The City’s funding will increase thereafter by an additional \$25,000 yearly, at minimum, beginning in the second year.) The Riverside Art Museum is responsible for raising funds for the remainder of the Cheech’s operating budget. The City’s own state representatives also secured \$10.7 million from the California State budget to help with the \$13.3 million retrofit of the building it will occupy; the museum raised an additional \$1.2 million for incidental costs. “The City will not be micromanaging us about exhibition content or programming, but they’re invested in our success,” said Drew Oberjuege, the Riverside Art Museum’s director. In return, a study by economist John Husing estimates, the Cheech will have a \$300 million economic impact for the city, with hopes of drawing about 100,000 visitors each year—double the Riverside Art Museum’s current attendance figures.

Riverside City Manager Al Zelinka said the Cheech presents “an opportunity here to reinforce the city’s commitment to the arts and innovation” in a region where arts and culture only continue to grow. “The Cheech is a very big part of this step toward a more inclusive community in the whole spectrum of what community means.” City Arts & Cultural Affairs Manager Margie Haupt said that internal discussions have centered around “placemaking—changing space into place. It’s changing how we use our places and spaces here in Riverside.”

Earlier this year, the Riverside City Council approved a five-year strategic plan that focuses on “a triple bottom line” of economic prosperity, environmental stewardship, and social responsibility. To that end, there is within a seven-block radius of the Cheech approximately \$600 million in projects either recently constructed or in the works that demonstrate the local community’s commitment to imagining and building new possibilities for Riverside’s economic growth. Assistant City Manager Rafael Guzman said, “This is one of those drivers of why folks are choosing Riverside, the Inland Empire, and a different way of life.”

Marin himself agreed, adding, “I think it’ll be the next big art town. It’s set up to do that.”



Carlos Almaraz's *California Natives*, from 1988, in Marin's collection. COURTESY CHEECH MARIN COLLECTION

Several museums across the country focus on Chicana, Mexican-American, and Latinx art, among them El Museo del Barrio in New York, the Mexican Museum in San Francisco, and the National Museum of Mexican Art in Chicago. But Noriega believes that the Cheech is the first to originate with the holdings of an individual collector, a well-established tradition within the mainstream art world but a rarity when it comes to collectors of color. “In that regard, its counterpart is something like the Broad,” Noriega said. “In some ways, you can see that Cheech’s efforts have really paralleled those of Eli Broad in the development of a museum built around an individual collector’s work and then pushing out from that.”

Noriega continued, “These are museums that come into very large cities and add something that has been missing from the museum landscape. What Cheech has an opportunity to do is re-center the art institutions in Riverside around Chicano art.”

Marin’s ambitious ideas for growing the Cheech—which include a film department, a printmaking atelier, a glassblowing studio, and even potentially helping revive the city’s Orange Blossom Festival, a lively outdoor event with music, food, and more—may prove to be a tall order. But, he said, newly appointed artistic director María Esther Fernández is more than up to the task. A former chief curator and deputy director at the Triton Museum of Art in Santa Clara, which focuses on artists in the greater Bay Area, Fernández has experience as both a curator and an administrator. “We wanted someone who could hang a painting as well as start a print atelier,” Marin said. “This is a

big job. It may seem small, but it's a big job because it's so diverse."

Part of Fernández's work will be connecting with the local Riverside community, particularly its majority Latinx population. Riverside County and neighboring San Bernardino County, which together form the Inland Empire, are the fourth- and fifth-largest counties in California—yet, as Robb Hernández, a leading scholar on Chicanx art, said, the counties "remain a really underfunded and undernourished cultural landscape to attract artists and opportunities. What the Cheech will stand to do is hopefully rectify that for publics that are largely Black, brown, and Indigenous."

Fernández, who officially joined the museum in August, sees the Cheech as a way to "rethink how we work within this museum model that at times does or *does not* serve our community." She said that she plans to meet with various community members and leaders to learn about what they hope the Cheech might do for them.

The city's Eastside neighborhood, which is predominantly Latinx, is less than a mile from the Riverside Art Museum. But only recently has the institution begun to seriously connect with that community—as well as other neighborhoods in the city, like Casa Blanca—with initiatives such as an artist-in-residence program. "The juxtaposition between a collection renowned throughout the world and [the fact] that, as an art museum and a city, we have a deep commitment to our region and our communities, is what makes this project so fascinating," said Oberjuerge. "I think museums across the nation are reconciling the fact that they may not have visitorship within a mile of their location—that they may not know their neighbors."

For Fernández, a focus on the local resonates with the art in Marin's collection. "When you think about Chicanx art, it comes from a political movement that was concerned with social justice and issues of equity," she said. "You can't have a center that's focused on this kind of art without thinking locally. It's important to understand its roots in community."

Artists of course understand the role that art can play in changing the self-perceptions of Chicanx people. "So much of our experience has been criminalized," said artist Margaret Garcia. "It's important to look at that and realize that it's a shame that was put onto us, and it's important to remove that shame. Having this resource in the community gives the next generation something to aim for, something that makes them say, 'This represents me.' Culture is the way we define ourselves. There's a way for us to recognize ourselves."

In its present form, Marin's collection doesn't represent the full scope of Chicano art. It's heavy on male artists, with pioneering Chicanas like Judith F. Baca, Amalia Mesa Bains, Yolanda M. Lopez, Yreina D. Cervantez, and Delilah Montoya noticeably missing. It doesn't account for the breakthroughs of the current generation, like rafa esparza, Carmen Argote, Guadalupe Rosales, and Gabriela Ruiz. And the absence of photography by the likes of Laura Aguilar, Luis C. Garza, Christina Fernández, or Star Montana is a blind spot. But comprehensiveness is not to be expected. "It's very much a collector's collection," said Noriega. "It's not an encyclopedic view of Chicano art but of [Marin's] particular points of engagement with it."



The job of expanding the Cheech Center's purview now belongs to Fernández. "Chicanx art means a lot of different things to a lot of different people," she said. "Our community is complex, and Chicanx art is often presented as a monolith that comes out of the Chicano Movement. It has evolved and grown. The Cheech Center should be a place to have this dialogue."

Scholars like Hernández, who organized the acclaimed 2017 exhibition "Mundos Alternos" at UCR Arts, have high hopes for the Cheech and ideas for how it can expand the scope of Chicanx studies. Hernández said the Cheech should also look to "recover the important visual archive" of the Inland Empire (I.E.) and "think about what Chicano art means, not from the lens of L.A. but from the lens of the I.E. That stands to encourage a rethinking of Southern California anew."

Artists also stand to benefit from an expanded view of the tradition in which they work. Raúl Guerrero, an artist in Marin's collection who identifies more as Mexican-American than Chicano, hopes the Cheech will "broaden the definition of what Chicano art is. If you have a broader presentation of the landscape of what we're thinking—we who come out of this history—it'll help celebrate who we are but also broaden the knowledge base that we all have. In that, it's not only for Chicanos but for everybody else as well."

For Marin, the center is a long time coming. "It is meant to be—it is time," he said. "My mantra during all these years has been: You can't love or hate Chicano art unless you see it. You can have an image of what you think it's going to be, but when you see it in person, it is totally different from what you presumed. I've heard it said all the time: 'I didn't know what Chicano art was—but I *liked* this.' Well, that was the goal: to get as many people as possible to see Chicano art."

A version of this article appears in the October/November 2021 issue of *ARTnews*, under the title "Fully Lit."

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