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Three Questions for Ramón García

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IN 2007, the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center (CSRC), in conjunction with the University of Minnesota Press, published its first title in the “A Ver: Revisioning Art History” book series, which was designed to explore the cultural, aesthetic, and historical contributions of Chicana/o, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican, and other US Latina/o artists. Each volume includes a foreword by the series editor, Chon A. Noriega (UCLA professor and director of the CSRC), as well as a scholarly text, full-color illustrations, an exhibition history, and a selected bibliography of writings on the artist. The first book in the A Ver series was Gronk by Max Benavidez, which has been followed by seven more titles with another nine already commissioned.

Scholar Ramón García was tapped to write the book on the late Ricardo Valverde, a pioneer in documentary photography whose primary focus was the Chicano and Mexican communities of Los Angeles from the 1970s to the late 1990s, until his untimely death from brain cancer in 1998. García has a master's and PhD in Literature from the University of California, San Diego. Currently a professor at Cal State Northridge, his research focuses on visual culture and literary studies. García is also a poet with a collection titled Other Countries (What Books Press, 2010) and work featured in Best American Poetry 1996, Ambit, Poetry Salzburg Review, Los Angeles Review, and Mandorla: New Writing from the Americas.

For anyone growing up in Los Angeles during the 1970s through the 1990s (especially those of us who are part of the Chicano and Mexican community), Valverde's photography — which he sometimes manipulated with paints and stickers — captures not only images of people's lives, but also the political undercurrents that rumbled beneath the surface coming off the legacy of the Watts Riots through the Vietnam War, the AIDS epidemic, the 1992 Los Angeles Civil Disturbance, and everything in between.

While well researched and scholarly, García offers what can only be called an enthralling narrative that puts Valverde's work and development as an artist in historical and artistic context while painting a moving portrait of who Valverde was as a man, husband, father, and activist. García agreed to sit down with LARB to have a short chat about his new book.

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DANIEL OLIVAS: You note that when Ricardo Valverde was working on his MFA at UCLA during the 1970s, his photographic style was “dismissed as a continuation of a documentary tradition (one that ironically, he and many others were questioning).” Do you think this reaction was tied, in part, to his subject matter, the Chicano and Mexican community?

RAMÓN GARCÍA: Yes, I do think so, and Valverde also knew this. Artwork was not judged equally; I think it is still not judged without prejudice. Asco [the East Los Angeles–based Chicano artist collective active in the 1970s and 1980s that included core members Harry Gamboa Jr., Gronk, Willie Herrón, and Patssi Valdez] is an obvious case. Until very recently, Asco was not included in any surveys of Los Angeles art, conceptual art, or performance art. Why? Because there are structural and institutional changes that need to happen before there is any kind of equality or fair critical perspective. It took Latino art historians and curators for Asco to enter the art historical record. This is not new. Women art historians are still initiating the research on neglected women artists. Let us not forget that until very recently, Frida Kahlo was one of these artists. Ironically, there are many other Mexican women artists of Kahlo's generation who are as interesting, accomplished, and unconventional as she was; they remain understudied. I wish I could say identity does not matter, that we were over identity politics, but I don't think that is true.

Sadly, Valverde was diagnosed with a brain tumor in 1984 and eventually died much too young in 1998. Yet despite great debilitation, he continued to create art during his last decade of life. How does this later work compare with his earlier, precancer photography?

Well, his later work, in general, looks different — he was experimenting — he was painting and altering his photographs more than before. But as I point out in the book, he was always trying to take documentary photography somewhere else, or make it something more. I think he believed in documenting as an artistic practice, but his definition of documentation was broad, and experimental. He had a surrealist sensibility, and that became part of his documentary recording.

How would you describe Valverde's place in the Chicano art movement?

If there is such a movement, he's certainly a very important and essential artist of his generation. There were very few Chicano photographers at the time, and none with his training and commitment. One reason that I became interested in Valverde was because, in Mexico, photography has been such an important art; and yet, on this side of the border, there seems to be a near absence, despite the fact that John Valadez, Patssi Valdez, Gronk, Harry Gamboa Jr., Diane Gamboa all have worked with photography since the 1970s. This is not an issue that I take up in the book, since I don't have an answer for it. But how do we account for the fact that Mexico is one of the centers of photography in the 20th century? We would expect photography to have an important presence among Mexican Americans and Chicanos, but that is not the case. And while Mexico and Mexicans have been photographed extensively, Chicanos remain, photographically speaking, almost invisible. Valverde's photographic work undoes some of this unaccountable invisibility.

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