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Object Lesson: Roberto Chavez's dusty shelf of famous men

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Roberto Chavez, the influential Chicano artist, has a retrospective on view at the Vincent Price Art Museum through Saturday. His painting "Some Famous Men of the 20th Century" from 1960 captures the artist's skill and dry humor. (Collection of Anatol Chavez / VPAM)

One of the best outcomes of [Pacific Standard Time](#) (PST), the series of Getty Foundation-funded exhibitions first staged in 2011, is that it got Southern California to study its own art history — bringing to light the work of artists who had been somewhat overlooked. Case in point: painter and muralist Roberto Chavez, who was born and raised in East Los Angeles.



Chavez portrays himself in many of works, such as this wry self-portrait from 1959, "The Artist as Tokyo Joe." (Collection of Anatol Chavez / VPAM)

Chavez (who now resides in Arizona) is an accomplished painter who has shown his works at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, in Washington, D.C., among various other institutions. In the 1970s, he completed a number of mural commissions around L.A., including a piece titled "The Path to Knowledge and the False University" for East Los Angeles College (ELAC) — which, unfortunately, was whitewashed in 1979.

But he is best known within Chicano art circles for his influential role as an educator at ELAC, as well as for being the first head of the college's Chicano Studies Department.

PST helped shine a brighter spotlight on Chavez's painting career. (He was included in the exhibition ["Art Along the Hyphen: The Mexican-American Generation,"](#) at the Autry Museum.) And, thankfully, that spotlight has remained.

This fall, he was the subject of a full-fledged retrospective at the Vincent Price Art Museum (VPAM), ["Roberto Chavez and the False University,"](#) now in its last day of exhibition. The show closes Saturday.

What does this say about American culture and who is famous and who has power and influence? - William Moreno

"He was a rare beast," says curator William Moreno, who helped organize the show at VPAM. "He is aware of other practices, other artists, other points of view. But he really crafted his own path. He was really something of an iconoclast."

Chavez's singular vision is perhaps best captured by the funny-grotesque painting shown at the top of this post: "Some Famous Men of the 20th Century," an oil painting from 1960, produced

early on in the artist's career. In it, a row of boxy shelves display half a dozen dusty-looking male heads. In their style and color, they seem to recall the unsettling portraits of [Francis Bacon](#).

"It's really a bit disconcerting," Moreno says. "It's got this unique painterly aspect to it. If you look at the figures, the way the paint is applied, it has this luminous quality. And it makes you repelled and compelled at the same time."

But the title of the piece — "Some Famous Men" — makes it sardonic. Clearly, the men are not famous. In fact, they all seem rather dull and unrecognizable.

"There's a commentary about homogeneity there, a subtle dig there," adds Moreno. "They're all white guys, these body-less men who all kind of look alike. And it's not a natural take. Their faces look almost similar to a death mask. That's what it reminds me of. And what does this say about American culture and who is famous and who has power and influence?"

What did Chavez intend with the piece?

That's hard to know. "He really leaves it up to the viewer to draw their conclusions," Moreno says. "I've asked him about things in some of his paintings and he'll just say, 'It's something I wanted to do.' He just doesn't give it up."

Even more reason to look.

["Roberto Chavez and the False University: A Retrospective,"](#) is on view at the Vincent Price Art Museum through Saturday. Open noon to 4 p.m. on Saturday. 1301 Cesar Chavez Ave., Monterey Park, vincentpriceartmuseum.org.

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