

# HYPERALLERGIC

INTERVIEWS

## Meet LA's Art Community: Chon Noriega Is Working on a Social Justice Sci-Fi Film Series and So Much More

An interview series spotlighting some of the great work coming out of Los Angeles. Hear directly from artists, curators, and art workers about their current projects and personal quirks.



Elisa Wouk Almino August 3, 2020

Welcome to the 25th installment of the interview series *Meet LA's Art Community*. Check out our past interviews [here](#).

This week, I interview Chon Noriega, professor of cinema and media studies at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), where he also has been director of the [Chicano Studies Research Center \(CSRC\)](#) since 2002. As part of the CSRC's multidisciplinary profile, he has developed extensive [archival](#) and [digital](#) holdings, scholarly [publications](#), public programs, and [policy studies](#) related to the arts. CSRC has also been a pipeline for students and arts professionals who have gone on to work as educators, curators, program officers, and arts administrators. In June 2021, Noriega will be stepping down as the director of CSRC. Over email, he shared that he will continue to be



Chon Noriega (© 2016, Harry Gamboa Jr.)

involved with the center, but added, “I’m ready for more time for my own projects.” (And as you’ll discover in the interview below, he has *many* of them!)

As a curator and co-curator, his major exhibitions include *Revelaciones/Revelations: Hispanic Art of Evanescence* at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University (1993); *Phantom Sightings: Art After the Chicano Movement* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) (2008); *Asco and Friends: Exiled Portraits* at Le Cartel in Marseille, France (2014); and *Home—So Different, So Appealing* at LACMA (2017). Since 2017, Noriega has curated installations for the LA Art Show as part of a collaboration between LACMA and the UCLA Chicano Studies

Research Center. He has also curated exhibitions on the work of Leyla Cardenas, Oscar Castillo, Sandra de la Loza, and Willie Varela, among other artists.

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Daniel Joseph Martinez, “IF YOU DRINK HEMLOCK, I SHALL DRINK IT WITH YOU or A BEAUTIFUL DEATH; player to player, pimp to pimp. (As performed by the inmates of the Asylum of Charenton under the direction of the Marquis de Sade)” (2016), an immersive re-envisioning of Jacques-Louis David’s “The Death of Marat” (1793). The installation image

## Where were you born?

I was born in Miami, Florida. My first birthday took place in the midst of the Cuban Missile Crisis. My father — a beat reporter for the Associated Press — helped uncover the missiles in Cuba. When he was a child in La Luz, New Mexico, he saw the first atom bomb explode early one morning while feeding the chickens. In 1962, he drove my mother and me to see the US missiles lined up along the beach.

is from the 2018 LA Art Show, in which Chon Noriega curated installations by Leyla Cardenas and Daniel Joseph Martinez as part of the DIVERSEartLA program. (photo by Elon Schoenholz)

## **How long have you been living in Los Angeles?**

I moved here in early summer 1992, just after the LA Uprising, to start teaching at UCLA. Prior to that, my only experience with Los Angeles was a brief trip in 1982 to visit my sister, arriving by bus from Morelia, Michoacán, where I had been living. Back then I joked that my sister lived her life like a postcard, while I lived out of a hiking backpack. We were the first in our family to graduate from college, but it took many years. We were itinerant students, traveling the world, always working, trying to find our place. After a decade living here, LA became my home.

## **What's your first memory of seeing art?**

In 1973, we moved to Chicago, and one of the first places my family went was the Art Institute. Going through a comprehensive art museum blew my mind. I kept coming back, plotting a course from Chinese antiquity to the Impressionists and back again. In 1976, Claes Oldenburg's "Clothespin" suddenly appeared in the passageway between these two sets of galleries and something just clicked in me. After that I would ditch high school, take the "L" downtown, and give my friends a tour.

## **Do you like to photograph the art you see? If so, what device do you use to photograph?**

I tend to photograph art as a reference for my research and curatorial work. Today I use my iPhone, but when I started curating in the 1990s, I used a Polaroid, laying out a hundred or more images on my living room floor. Still, sometimes I want to possess an image — to carry it with me as an object, or digital object, and not just a memory. This March, I was visiting the Harvard Art Museums and found myself shooting works in their [\*Painting Edo\* exhibition](#). I especially liked the pair of screens by Ikeno Taiga, which offers an 18th-century restaging of canonical moments in Chinese antiquity, pushing them toward vernacular simplicity and abstraction. And Martha Tedeschi, the director, had already given me the catalogue!

## **What was your favorite exhibition in Los Angeles this year?**

I'm going to cheat and go back to December 30, 2019: hanging out in Gronk's

studio with my friend Max Benavidez. In the nearly 30 years I've known Gronk, his studio has been an evolving exhibition / installation / way of life. Since the quarantine, I take pleasure in his daily postings on Facebook, which mix images from his daily sketches and stunning "food porn" meals.

### **What's the best book you've read recently?**

That's hard to answer, since I read a handful of books at the same time, and they become like the Borg "Collective." My most current hive mind includes tiny book writer César Aira's [\*Artforum\*](#); speculative architect Madeline Gins's collected writings in *The Saddest Thing Is That I Have Had to Use Words*; playwright Sylvan Oswald and designer Jessica Fleischmann's *High Winds*; poet Matt Sedillo's [\*Mowing Leaves of Grass\*](#); and curator Kimberly Drew's [\*This Is What I Know About Art\*](#). The through line has to do with language as art and object, not in a formalist sense, but as driven by what Drew calls "loving art so much that you want to see it change for the better."

### **Do you prefer to see art alone or with friends?**

I go with friends, but I inevitably break away from them to engage the art at my own pace and meandering. The one exception was about 10 years ago when I went through the Metropolitan Museum of Art with Destructivist artist Raphael Montañez Ortiz. We walked into a Post-Impressionist gallery and he did a work-by-work formal critique that destroyed most of the paintings. I'll never look at Cézanne the same, but I am also more insistent about going it alone....

### **What are you currently working on?**

I'm trying to step away from the black hole of pandemic-driven Zoom meetings to finish a book on Ortiz. I'm also completing an endless oral history with Daniel Joseph Martinez for the Smithsonian. We're having too much fun. Between November and March, we recorded about 20 hours of interviews in his studio. We'll have to cover the last 20 years on Zoom. ./ On the curatorial side, I'm taking part in several collaborative projects that start the research phase this summer, including a film series on social justice Sci-Fi around the world, and a 30-year survey of Christina Fernandez's photography.

### **What is one accomplishment that you are particularly proud of?**

Making sure that [Laura Aguilar](#) had a [retrospective](#) in her lifetime. She was one of the first people I met when I moved to LA. She had an amazing eye as a photographer and a playfulness that kept things open for difference and complexity to enter the frame. I really admired that about her and worked with her on various efforts over the years. When the Getty Foundation launched its [Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA initiative](#), I worked with Karen Rapp, then the director of the Vincent Price Art Museum (VPAM), and Sybil Venegas, an arts professor at East Los Angeles College, to develop the exhibition. The CSRC and VPAM had already collaborated on several projects. I wrote the proposal for the research phase, enlisting scholars, artists, and graduate students working across a wide range of fields and approaches. The idea was to bring a diverse and expansive set of perspectives to Laura's work, including Laura's own voice thanks to an oral history by arts journalist Carolina Miranda. This was a labor of love for everyone involved. Laura was quite frail by the opening, but you could see her drawing strength from the exhibition, the audience, and the long overdue attention to her work.

### **Where do you turn to for inspiration for your projects?**

It's not so much turning toward something as it is letting go of intention, both will and willfulness. You have to let inspiration come to you, since it represents everything inside you and in the world that is beyond your control yet somehow comes together in a new way, for you. It's a gift. But inspiration is not enough. You have to do the research and challenge your work at every turn.