

Art Interviews

One-on-One With Cyclona

Robert Legorreta, also known as “Cyclona,” discusses the origins of his performance art and ongoing political activism.



Dakota Noot February 5, 2023



Anthony Friedkin, “Cyclona, in the Garden, Los Angeles” (1971), gelatin silver print (courtesy Anthony Friedkin)

Editor’s Note: This is part of the 2022/23 [Emily Hall Tremain Journalism Fellowship for Curators](#), and the second of three posts by the author, the third of which will be an email-only exhibition sent to all Hyperallergic subscribers.

Long live Cyclona!

In this interview with Robert Legorreta, also known as “Cyclona,” we discuss the origins of his performance art, collaborations with the artist Gronk, and ongoing political activism. Legorreta (b. 1952, El Paso) was raised in East Los Angeles and began his first public performances in 1966. Noted performances include the debut of “Cyclona” in the 1969 play, “Caca-Roaches Have No Friends” and a 1971 wedding performance at California State University, Los

Angeles. He collaborated with the art collective Asco and his longtime friend Mundo Meza. Legorreta was also involved with the non-profit, VIVA, Lesbian and Gay Latino Artists.

Legorreta discusses the power of rock and roll music on his generation and parallel scenes that pushed the boundaries of gender, drag, and performance, such as John Waters, Divine, and Andy Warhol. As a Los Angeles artist, Legorreta pre-figured the “terrorist drag” of Vaginal Davis.

Legorreta considers himself a teacher and activist through the mediums of art and music. His work is currently in the collections of The UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center and the ONE Archives at the USC Libraries. Legorreta has most recently shown in the touring “Axis Mundo” exhibit, dedicated to his friend and frequent collaborator, Mundo Meza; in addition to “[Mundos Alternos: Art and Science Fiction in the Americas](#).” He is currently working on a podcast and book. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Dakota Noot: *You’re a living legend! So I guess just to start off: Where does the name “Cyclona” come from?*

Cyclona: It was a “Pachuco” name. During the zoot suit time, they would call the wild women at that time “Cyclonas.” [...] It also comes from the cyclone of “The Wizard of Oz.”

DN: *You’re a friend of Dorothy!*

For me, it represents an attack on society, because a cyclone will come in and cleanse the earth. It’s not a bad thing. People want to freak, but then they rebuild. They’re still living there. I see it as a cleanser of Earth and a cleanser of society, and a cleanser of ignorance, and something to confront it. That’s in your face and says: You’re not going to get away with that because I’m going to tell it like it is. I still carry the spirit of the 1960s because I was never on drugs. I was a young kid. I was in my young teens when the ’60s happened. So the hippies, to me, were a bunch of idiots.

DN: *Speaking of reactions, and being a cyclone coming in, how did the Chicano community react to your work?*

C: Crazy. Crazy. I was able to use it as a tool to confront first: the cruisers on Whittier Boulevard. Every Halloween for at least three or four years. And they would freak, they just loved it really. Guys wanted to take me home. Guys would open their car door. People would chase us. I would go into the bars even though I was like 13 or 14 years old. They didn’t know because I was all done up. And then in the psychedelic outfit. So I used to go in there and dance, and the drunks and everybody would have a crazy time.

During that time, Gronk used to follow us between the stores, and hide in the clothes on the walkways. He was a very weird character. And me and Mundo [Mundo Meza] were like two glitter queens, going up and down Whittier challenging everybody's mind and I loved it because I was being chased. I used to put two water balloons and tie with water on each one to look like I had breasts and I would wear those psychedelic outfits.



Dakota Noot interviewing Cyclona, 2022 (image courtesy Manuel Sena/Elicit Inc)

DN: *You're a trip!*

C: Yeah, definitely. That's when Gronk asked us to join "Caca-Roaches" [Caca-Roaches Have No Friends].

The guy [Larry Domasin] from "Fun in Acapulco" was with us. The little guy, that little Mexican guy that takes Elvis: he was the first "Cyclona" because he was supposed to be in the play. But then he was thrown out and I was chosen as "Cyclona." Gronk said, "Oh, there's something about you." But he didn't say what it was. Because he didn't want to admit that he was following us. Well, we knew he was. He was a leftover beatnik from that time. But he was also an artist. So it looked a little bit trampy because the artists at that time always looked a little bit trampy.

DN: *I think they still do!*

C: Yeah, like the beats. They would carry their art and little pad. And that's the way he looked: He had wingtips and was wearing that shiny material from the '60s. And we were just totally in outer space. Crazy. Wearing women's clothing and jewelry, being all glittered out and dragged out and everything. He just couldn't believe us, and we knew nothing of Andy Warhol. We knew nothing of the Factory. We were secluded from that. All we knew was rock'n'roll!

DN: *I'm curious, what made you want to continue "Cyclona," past Caca-Roaches? How did you decide to take it on and make it your own?*

C: Because it was so powerful. That night, I did the first performance of “Caca-Roaches Have No Friends.” It was put in the Belvedere Citizen. “Caca-Roaches Have No Friends: a play for all audiences.” We were smack dab on in Belvedere Park. Next to Maravilla Projects, which is nothing but gang members. They all came to the opening night. We didn’t have a regular society and they fucking freaked out. They threw eggs. They started burning the place down. They called the police and we literally had to run for our lives! That was just opening night.

DN: *I mean, that’s a great reaction.*

C: We only did it twice! [...] on the lake was the first night, and the second night was in the indoor gym. at the Belvedere apart gym. Yeah, I’m a real wild character.

DN: *I’m also glad you’re just being so honest and candid. Because I feel like a lot of younger artists, when they work in groups, want to be very ‘fake-nice’ and get along with everyone. The reality is that personalities are going to clash.*

C: If you don’t take a fucking chance in life, you’re never gonna get anywhere. I’m not who I am because I just stood there and hoped somebody would recognize me.

DN: *Discover me!*

C: Discover me or see me. Like the shows on the stage and PBS. I don’t need to go on that stage. You just have to go to the people and give them a reason. And that’s what I did. So it blows me away to know that I’m teaching the children to be activists through art, through performance, and through music, because that’s what I was about. I’m not an artist: I’m a politician first, then I’m an artist because I do my politics through art and music. So I might tell you what I’m doing but you might recognize it a month later, and call me and say, “oh Cyclona, I got what you were saying.” Because it happens. That’s just the way I am. So if it’s not political, and if it’s not to teach society something, I don’t do it.

DN: *What did you think of the whole Warhol superstars?*

C: I think it was great. It was meant to happen. Because we were all coming through that. The children that were from the war, were very free and open. And so there was nothing tying us down. Yet until the ’60s happened, then when they realized all these children are starting to go nuts and have free sex and free art and all this shit. So they started to close down and stop trying to stop everything, but they never could, because art and everything is freedom, that’s what we were living on the freedom from our parents who have fought in the war.

DN: *What got you into singing, performing, and doing the blues?*

C: I think spirituals did because I was a little kid. I went down the block. And I bought some 78s for like a penny, which at that time were two cents. I got the spiritual song going home. I put it on. Very slow record. So it was spiritual. And then we had a Holy Roller church down the block, and they would scream, and jump and go crazy and everything with the music. And so I would look at that as an outside insider. And then, Elvis hit when I was four years old. So I saw him on TV for the first time. I was a big fan of his as a child. Then of course, the surfer movement came in, and we all became surfers, and everything on the radio was nothing but surf music, to Beach Boys, Jan and Dean, all that crap, all the original stuff, “Wipe Out,” and everything. So that was a part of our life for about five years till about 1963. And then people started to listen to the Beatles. And it just changed the whole fucking world. Completely. Everything changed. The next day, everybody in school was English, talking English, dressing English, listening to rock and roll, and everything. Everybody was freaked out. Because it was no longer what they want, what the school wants. It was what WE want.

DN: *How did drag queens react to what you were doing? Like, were they too formal compared to you?*

C: A lot of them liked me.

DN: *Okay, that’s good!*

C: Yeah, for what I did politically. They liked me, and knew that I’m not a drag queen. So they just admire me and just see that I’m there. I’ve been around a lot of drag queens and stuff, but they just respect me, and there’s no animosity, there’s no hatred.

God gives you whatever you’re going to be, and I believe that God gave me Cyclona. I really do.

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