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Phantastically Snooty

The press preview for LACMA latest exhibition Phantom Sightings: Art of the Chicano movement from April 2 was painfully typical.

Journalists, museum curators and other people who like to think that they're important met in the a.m., nibbled on catered croissants and sipped fancy French Roast mid-morning coffees. Artists featured in Phantom Sighting were also in attendance. Looking scruffy but stylish, they mingled with just a hint unkempt attitude to prove that they have bigger things to worry about than their appearance. Figureheads for LACMA graced the podium, emphasizing how the art speaks for itself while still managing to spew one run-on sentence after another, chalk full of obscure references and analogies. For example, one curator used the word "unruly" and compared the exhibition to Chernobyl, of all things.

Thank God the art was more intriguing than the press conference, and more importantly it didn't take itself as seriously. There are very few exhibitions that I've been to where I have actually laughed out loud in front of a piece (at least not without belittling whatever the work was trying to accomplish). But at Phantom Sightings I couldn't contain myself, while taking in Alejandro Diaz's series of cardboard signs that capitalize on whacky wordplay. It only takes little more than a passing grade in the comparative world literature class comic spirit here at Cal State Long Beach to realize just how meaningful and effective humor can be, if executed properly. Diaz's unique approach proves that sometimes putting more traditional aesthetic values on hold can be a powerful technique to allow the overall message of an artistic work to shine through.

After my run through the exhibition and the press hoopla, I decided to take a moment to ponder these artsy thoughts and walked around the side of the museum to smoke a Marlboro in the LA sunshine. Sitting on the stairs, just steps away from the overpaid high art Chicanos of the budding exhibition, I had a "Phantom Sighting" of my own.

With matching red hats and t-shirts under neon orange safety vests two gardeners, who I presumed to be LACMA employees dutifully cut a patch of grass on the side of the museum. Unlike Diaz's witty cardboard banter this Chicano work was purely aesthetic. Vivid blades of green were being cut symmetrically in a pattern of unnaturally straight lines, with no meaning or motives besides a job well done and a paycheck. Then for the second time that morning, I laughed – but this time to myself. This time the joke was on LACMA.

Posted by Cynthia Romanowski at 1:42 PM 0 comments