

"Phantom Sightings: Art After the Chicano Movement"

LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART
Julia Bryan-Wilson

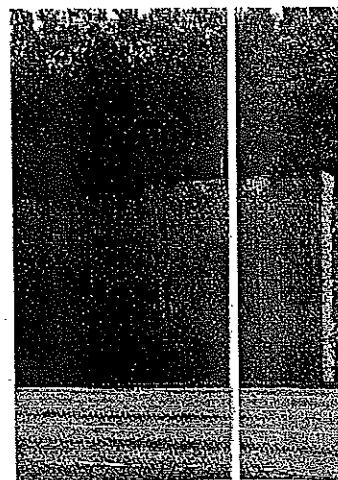
IN 1972, under cover of night, three members of Asco, the Chicano conceptual-art collective from East Los Angeles, tagged the Los Angeles County Museum of Art with their last names. The work was prompted, so the story goes, when a LACMA curator told Harry Gamboa Jr.—who founded Asco ("nausea" in Spanish) with Willie Herrón III, Patssi Valdez, and Gronk (Glugio Nicandro) in 1971—that Chicanos were not represented in the museum because they were gang members, not artists. Asco's graffitied signatures were at once a fuck-you defacement and a sly Duchampian appropriation—claiming authorship of an institution that stereotyped and excluded them.

The graffiti was removed the next day, but its impact lingered. Now, more than thirty years later, a photograph of *Spray Paint LACMA* greets visitors at the opening of the museum's "Phantom Sightings." From illegal outsiders to celebrated insiders at the very place that once dismissed them: The ambivalence of Asco's gesture and its meaning haunts the entire exhibition. Curated by Rita Gonzalez, Howard N. Fox, and Chon A. Noriega, "Phantom Sightings" positions itself as a redress to a long stretch of institutional exclusion while also challenging the rubric "Chicano art." This vibrant show features a diverse range of art, including drawing, painting, video, performance, sculpture, mixed-media installation, and photography by contemporary, mostly younger American

artists of Mexican descent who are indebted both to the interventionist moves of Asco and to the political possibilities opened up by the activism of the 1970s. By focusing on "conceptual art and urbanism following the Chicano civil rights movement," as the curators explain in the excellent catalogue, the title thus indicates a shift away from an emphasis on visibility or empowerment toward a more fugitive and mobile understanding of identity that accounts for in-betweenness and reinvention.

IN THIS VEIN, scholar and Asco expert C. Ondine Chavoya has written about the importance of punk, do-it-yourself style to Chicano art, and one especially strong room of the show highlights the role of self-fashioning. Valdez's Super 8 film *Hot Pink*, ca. 1982, features leopard-print- and rhinestone-bedecked fashionistas preening to a sound track of Devo's "Whip It." Carolyn Castaño's deftly rendered portraits combine deliriously decorative elements with sensitive character study. Similarly, Shizu Saldamando's glittery pop-inflected works include a drawing of a woman sporting a tattoo of British rock star Siouxsie Sioux (*Sandy and Siouxsie*, 2007). Such work suggests that the affective communities created through musical taste and other cultural affiliations can shape our identifications and sense of belonging as much as racial or ethnic ties do. Carlee Fernandez's series of photographs "Man," 2006, depict the artist in drag; in one, she poses as a dead ringer for her father; in others, she holds in front of her face pictures of influential "father figures," including Austrian artist Franz West. Fernandez's meticulous attention to proportion and her inventive costuming bring together feminist and queer masquerade with the long-standing art-historical imperative to acknowledge—and trump—one's influences.

The issue of passing takes a different cast in the beautifully wrought watercolor drawings of Julio César Morales that make up *Undocumented Interventions*, 2006–2007. With sure-handed lines and subtle washes of color, Morales depicts people secreted in cars, appliances, and other objects in order to cross undetected over the US border: a small child huddled inside a piñata; a washing



machine cut away to reveal a body contorted inside. The images are based on real photographs from US Customs and Border Protection. Set on plain white backgrounds and extracted from their context, they are depictions of ingenuity and desperation—although, in their human-object hybridizations, they are also inflected with a solemn surrealism. Repressive border control is also addressed in the landscape photographs of Delilah Montoya, such as *Humane Borders Water Station*, 2004, which captures three water tanks and a blue flag fluttering against the darkening sky. Such images are a stark reminder of the life-or-death consequences of (in)visibility for many migrant subjects—though cultural barriers might be somewhat fluid, national ones are forcibly policed.

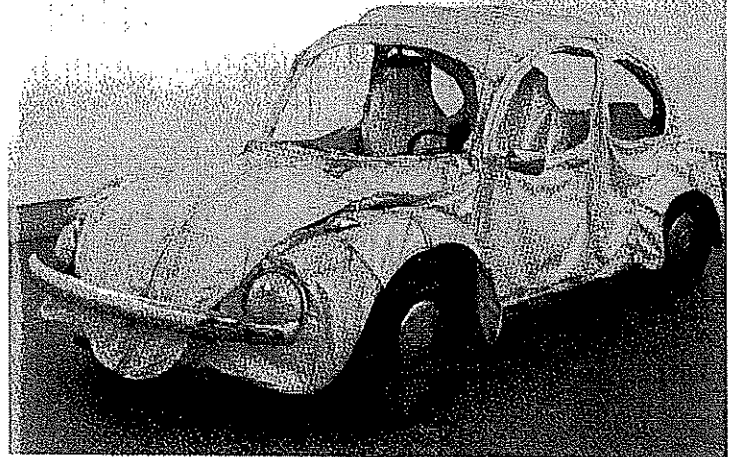
A digital lenticular print by California-based artist Ruben Ochoa broaches other issues related to the transgression of boundaries. It looks from one angle like a normal concrete freeway barrier, but from another it appears as if giant sections of that barrier have vanished, revealing the leafy growth behind it. Titled *What if walls created spaces*, 2007, the piece is based on the artist's site-specific work *Fwy Wall Extraction* from 2006/2007, in which he pasted photographic wallpaper onto a highway divider to make it appear as if chunks of the wall had been removed. Installed on the I-10 freeway that runs through Los Angeles, the mural envisioned a ruptured urban landscape in which nature and culture bleed into each other. "Phantom Sightings" also includes *Remnants of a Fwy Wall Extraction/Wallpaper with the Sound of Its Own Removal*, 2006/2008, which comprises remnants of the mural scraped off the freeway, along with bits of dirt and concrete from the divider, accompanied by a sound recording of the I-10. It is an irreverent rendition of Robert Morris's *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making*, 1961, as well as a tangible reminder of the physical labor of mural making.

Given the historical importance of Chicano murals, it is no surprise that several works in "Phantom Sightings" take up the genre. Some deconstruct or satirize the medium, such as Asco's *Instant Mural*, 1974, which features

Valdez stuck to a wall with broad strips of masking tape, cheekily literalizing the imperative that murals convey "authentic" Chicano self-representation. Others expand in more sober directions. An intricate, absorbing installation by Nicola López (*Fallout*, 2008) marries the outsized scale of muralism with detailed sculptural elements. In his effective *St. James Park*, 2006, Ken Gonzales-Day situates the viewer between two mirror images—wall-size photographs of the lynching of a Mexican-American in the American Southwest. Gonzales-Day discovered the photograph during a research project on the subject, and he has blown it up to a confrontational size but erased the dangling body. A woman, her figure blurred, is being escorted away from the crowd, but most of the white spectators gathered around the tree have their faces eagerly upturned; one of the photographs is printed on reflective Mylar, implicating the contemporary spectator in the scene. A cluster of similar, framed photographs from the series "Erased Lynchings," 2004–2007, are displayed on an adjacent wall.

Another compelling subtheme of the show is the role of handmaking within the globalized manufacturing labor force. Gary Garay remakes Nike sneakers out of cardboard (*El Otro Lado* [The Other Side], 2008), and Margarita Cabrera sews sculptural cacti and other desert plants using recycled US Border Patrol uniforms (such as *Agave* and *Yucca*, both 2006). In *Vocho* (*Yellow*), 2004, Cabrera also scrupulously re-creates a Volkswagen Bug, removing all the non-Mexican-made parts and replacing them with hand-stitched vinyl. Though it has real headlights and hubcaps, this floppy, Oldenburg-esque form has its threads still hanging to underscore its status as crafted object. Texas-based Cruz Ortiz uses Spanglish phrases on his deliberately sloppy constructions of cardboard and "low" materials. His slacker aesthetic fits within the modest, "unmonumental" look recently trumpeted at both the New Museum and the 2008 Whitney Biennial, but this thrifty scavenging and the raw energy of making much from little carry a specifically race- and class-based charge here.

Many artists in the show cite and repurpose various art-historical tropes, as in Juan Capistran's now-famous



performance *The Breaks*, 2000, in which he used a Carl Andre metal floor piece as a break-dancing platform. Capistran has also been at the forefront of collaborative artmaking in the Los Angeles area. Along with another artist in the show, Mario Ybarra Jr., he founded the alternative art space Slanguage, but such important local collective initiatives are unfortunately not much on display at LACMA. And although an installation by Sandra de la Loza, of the Pocho Research Society, includes a photo of the massive student walkouts in Los Angeles on May Day, 2006, little of the work here alludes to the vitality of ongoing Chicano activism. The demonstrations throughout the country that day were the culmination of protests that started earlier in the year against US immigration policy; radical youth and workers of all kinds came together to put to rest the lie that there is no on-the-street protest movement today.

GRAFFITI, MURALS, IMMIGRATION:

The artists in "Phantom Sightings" knowingly deploy these clichés of Chicano art in order to explode them. Ochoa's lenticular vision presents a compelling metaphor for the way in which this show operates—viewed one way, it is a show about the lasting, if malleable, ways that race and identity are articulated; seen slightly differently, it is a collection of post-Conceptual art practices. To exclude either aspect is to miss the point. "Phantom Sightings" functions less as a survey than as a set of interlocking arguments about ethnicity and artistic medium (both of which are posited as unfixed but not irrelevant). Such exhibitions risk instrumentalizing the art, as each work becomes an illustration in the service of a broader polemic, thus threatening to flatten art's unruliness and collapse its distinctions. But this is a pitfall that the present exhibition's intelligent selections and careful installations avoid.

Granting Asco's *Spray Paint* LACMA pride of place in the exhibition as an overdetermined point of origin indi-

cates a measure of institutional self-congratulation, but this smartly self-reflexive curatorial decision also raises questions—intentionally unresolved—about what it means when a work moves from resistance to inclusion. Asco's action was never simplistically *against* the museum; instead, it asserted a belonging even without an invitation—a survival strategy for artists of color who have been systematically shut out of the spaces and narratives of art history. According to the catalogue, some artists refused to be part of this "surname-based" show; but "Phantom Sightings" could serve as a model for how to curate with an attention to the complexities of multiple identifications and a recognition of the rewards and perils of institutional legitimation.

The show will travel to Mexico as well as to Houston and New York, two US cities with significant Chicano populations. But museums should think beyond the limiting demands that art exhibitions "reflect" some phantasmic "community" and welcome this dynamic exhibition regardless of its demographic appeal. Its issues are particularly significant now, given that

the upcoming election will be marked by the specter of racial difference, exclusionary immigration policies, the militarization of the US-Mexico border, and the aggressive courting of the Latino vote (viewed as a crucial, if moving, target). No Ohio venue? Boston? Vancouver? Their loss. □

"Phantom Sightings" is on view at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art through Sept. 1. The exhibition travels to the Museo Tamayo Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City, Oct. 16, 2008–Jan. 11, 2009; Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Monterrey, Mexico, Feb. 22–June 14, 2009; Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, July 25–Oct. 4, 2009; Centro Cultural Universitario, Guadalajara, Mexico, Nov. 8, 2009–Jan. 31, 2010; Museo del Barrio and Americas Society, New York, March 7–May 23, 2010.

JULIA BRYAN-WILSON IS ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF CONTEMPORARY ART IN THE DEPARTMENT OF ART HISTORY AND THE PH.D. PROGRAM IN VISUAL STUDIES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, IRVINE.

Granting Asco's *Spray Paint* LACMA pride of place in the exhibition indicates a measure of institutional self-congratulation, but it also raises questions about what it means when a work moves from resistance to inclusion.

Opposite page, left: Asco, *Spray Paint* LACMA, 1972, color photograph. Right: Ruben Ochoa, *What if walls created spaces*, 2007, acrylic lenticular lens over two color photographs mounted on dibond, overall 48 x 96". This page, from left: Margarita Cabrera, *Vocho (Yellow)*, 2004, vinyl, batting, thread, and car parts, 5 x 6 x 13". Patssi Valdez, *Hot Pink*, ca. 1982, still from a color film in Super 8 mm, 3 minutes. Ken Gonzales-Day, *E. First Street (1933)*, 2007, black-and-white photograph, 6 x 3 3/4". From the series "Erased Lynchings," 2004–2007.

