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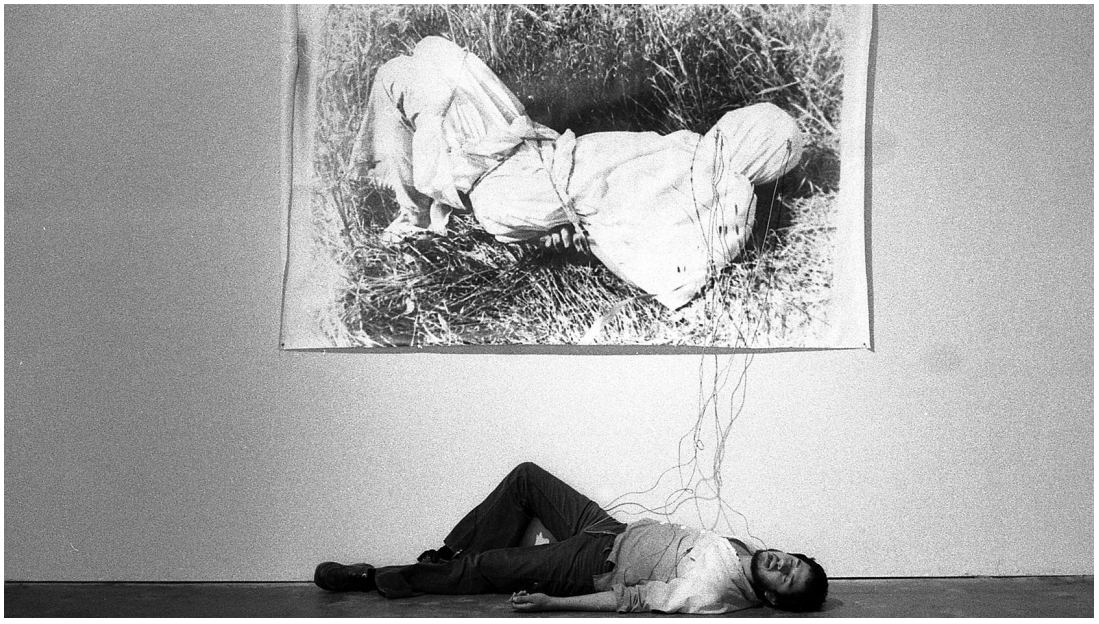
Queer Chicano Art Is as Timeless As It Is Vital

In a new exhibition of queer Chicano art from the 60s through the 90s, certain timeless questions about identity and protest ring true today.

MA **MURI ASSUNÇÃO**
Sep 15 2017, 3:30pm



Harry Gamboa Jr., *Roberto Gil de Montes*, 1978. Artist Roberto Gil de Montes is shown with his work *Tongue Tied* at LACE (Los Angeles Contemporary) © 1978, Harry Gamboa Jr. All photos courtesy *Axis Mundo*

the Gay Community Services Center in Hollywood that regularly attracted over three hundred people. On Friday nights, Terrill said, queer kids who lived nearby would lie to their moms, leave their house in conservative clothes and then change into platform shoes and glittery tops en route to the party. The crowd—a mix of artists, students, runaways and sex workers—was a "real mishmash of creativity and the dysfunctional underground scene," Terrill recalled. That's where he became friends with Edmundo "Mundo" Meza and Roberto "Cyclona" Legorreta, fellow Chicano artists from East Los Angeles.

Mundo, Cyclona and Terrill would later become major figures within the Chicano Art Movement, which sought to establish an artistitc identity for Mexican-Americans in the US and reinvigorate their cultural heritage through protest art. But the three young artists shared another cultural identity that would bring them even closer: their queerness.

As significant as the Chicano Art Movement was (and the Mexican-American civil rights movement it was intrinsically connected to, El Movimiento), queer art within it has received scant attention from academia and curators alike. Reasons why are complex, partly due to the nature of queer Chicano art at the time, which dealt with gender, sexuality and outsider culture, and partly due to the devastating effects of the AIDS crisis. But a wide-ranging and impactful Los Angeles-based art exhibit launched last week is seeking to change that fact.

Jerri Allyn, Documentation of *Laughing Souls/Espíritus Sonrientes*, a performance at LACE (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions), 1979

Organized by the ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives in collaboration with Los Angeles' Museum of Contemporary Art, *Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano LA* brings to light previously undiscovered work from the Los Angeles queer Chicano/a art community, produced from the late 1960s to the early 1990s. After years of extensive research, co-curators Ondine Chavoya and David Evans Frantz have brought together over 50 queer Chicanx artists for an ambitious two-gallery exhibition that seeks to unearth the hidden history of queer Chicano art in Los Angeles, its aesthetics and social importance, and to make the work available to a new public.

Chavoya, a professor of art and Latino/a studies at Williams College, said he wanted to highlight exchanges between queer Chicano/a artists at the time by showing the work and social networks surrounding one central figure: Mundo Meza. Meza, who died in 1985 from AIDS complications at the age of 30, was highly respected among his peers but virtually unknown to the public. The idea for *Axis Mundo* grew out of the mutual desire of the curators to recover and bring attention to Meza's body of work, much of which disappeared after his

Judith F. Baca, Documentation of *Vanity Table*, a performance for the exhibition *Las Chicanas: Venas de la Mujer* at the Woman's Building, 1976

Like Mundo, many of the artists in the exhibition hadn't shown their work in decades. Frantz, a curator at ONE, said that was partly due to homophobia, prejudice and racism many experienced from the white queer art world.

Joey Terrill—whose multidisciplinary work, featured in *Axis Mundo*, would inspire generations to come—agreed with Frantz. For years, he said he felt "invisible," both as a queer artist and as a Chicano artist within the queer community. "What we were doing—consciously, sometimes directly, but also subconsciously—[was] trying to expand the definition of Chicano art," he said. "A lot of Chicano art came out of needing to embrace our cultural identity. There was a lot of Mesoamerica, Aztec imagery, Viva La Raza, Brown Berets. But along with that Chicano power movement, there was an embracing of *la familia*. It was very apparent in political discussion that queers, gay men, lesbians were not part of the family, and our stance was: yes, we are."

Participants in the Christopher Street West Pride parade wearing

maricón and *malflora* shirts, 1976

Patrons will encounter work at the show as extensive in scope as it is in impact. Ray Navarro's *Equipped* (1990), a photo-triptych produced with Zoe Leonard, takes on HIV/AIDS with sexual humor. A collaboration between Terrill and fellow artist Teddy Sandoval, resulting in a series of t-shirts printed with the words *Maricón* (Spanish for "faggot") and *Malflora* ("dyke"), reinvested "a term of social disenfranchisement and offensiveness to empower it in a social project that allows for new ways of imagining your queer and Latino self," said Robb Hernández, a professor of Latino/a literature at UC Riverside. That spirit echoes in Los Angeles' Maricón Collective, a queer Chicano/Latino DJ and artist collective who were directly inspired by Terrill and Sandoval (but aren't part of *Axis Mundo*).

Much of the exhibition's other work will feel as relevant to today's queer community of color as it did to Meza's contemporaries. Gender and sexual transgressiveness plays a crucial role in much of it, as it did in the art of Robert Legorreta (Cyclona), whose work was about "liberating people's minds by accosting audiences through aggressive and unapologetic sexual display," said Hernández.

Mundo Meza, *Merman with Mandolin*, 1984. Photo by Fredrik Nilsen.

Other pieces make calls to diversity within the LGBTQ community, as in Laura Aguilar's *Judy* (1990), the immigration/deportation debate, as found in Teddy Sandoval's *ALARMA! Fue "Illegal" y ya la Deportaron!* (1978). Judith F. Baca's *Documentation of Vanity Table* (1976) speaks to femininity and Chicana representation; the feminist artist Jerri Allyn *'s Laughing Souls/Espíritus Sonrientes* (1979) tackles sexual violence, mental illness and aggression. All are themes as important to queer artists of color now as they ever were.

marginalized identities find themselves uniquely imperiled in today's political climate, the questions that the queer Chicano/a artists featured in *Axis Mundo* contemplated at the time—questions having to do with identity, artistic protest and American culture—are made newly relevant by recent history. Experiencing the art of this many queer Chicano/a artists simultaneously will help the community fill in historical gaps and serve to spark a dialogue about queer history that should not be forgotten. It's also a renewed chance to celebrate the legacies of less known—but still brilliant—pioneer artists.

Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano L.A. runs from Sept. 9 to Dec. 31 as part of Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA

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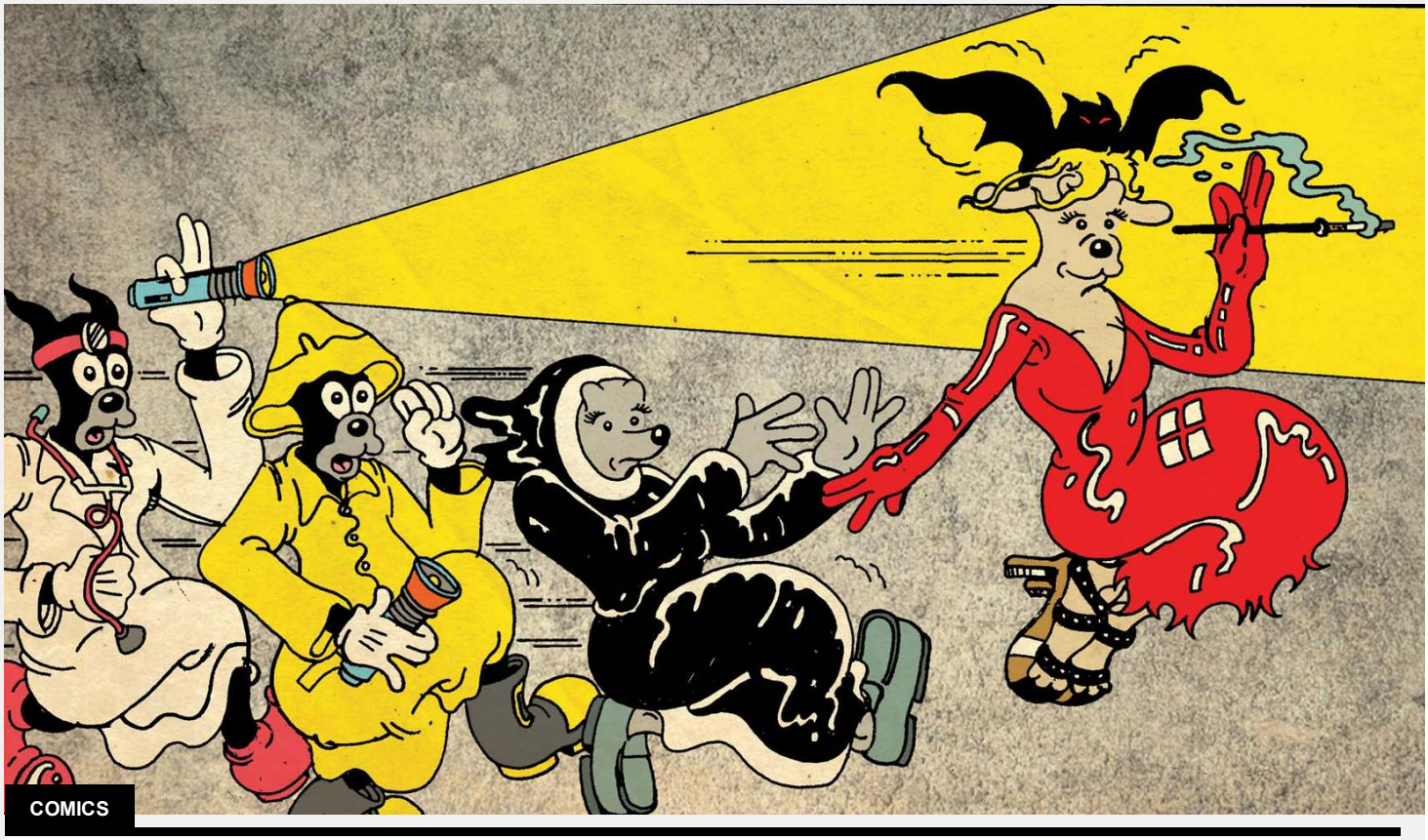

COMICS

'I Dream of Drongjen,' Today's Comic by Brian Blomerth

After a dreamlike wild goose chase to find a murderous woman in a red dress, a nun finds herself in bed with actors.

For more of Brian Blomerth's work, visit his website, Twitter, and Tumblr.

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GERMAN ELECTIONS

Germany voted far-right nationalists into parliament for the first time since World War II. We spent election night with some of the Syrian refugees they hate.

RB REBECCA BADEN
Sep 27 2017, 1:25pm

All photos by Rebecca Baden

This article originally appeared on VICE Germany.

On election night in Germany this past Sunday, I joined a group of friends in Berlin's Neukölln district to watch the results come in on television. My fellow spectators were are all refugees, and for them and the rest of Germany, the question of the day was whether the far right, anti-refugee party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) would win its first ever seats in the German Bundestag, or parliament. It would represent the first real electoral breakthrough for any far-right party in the country since World War II.

Before the exit polls came in that night, 24-year-old Qussai, who fled Syria three years ago, still seemed pretty relaxed. "Of course I don't like the AfD," he explained. "But if 12 percent of the German voters back them, it's only right they're represented in parliament. That's how democracy works." Everyone in the apartment nodded in agreement.

Joining us were Hossam, 25, Venous, 21, and brothers Oday, 26, and Alaa, 28. They hail from As-Suwayda in southwest Syria, and arrived in Germany between 2014 and 2016, where they were welcomed by Chancellor Angela Merkel's center-right government. All are either working or studying, and, apart from Alaa—who is a civil engineer—each has gained refugee status.

According to the AfD, however, my friends should not be allowed to live in Germany.

Oday (right) watches as the first

"As Syrians, we envy your democratic system," Alaa told me. "The AfD has a lot of support right now—we'll see whether they're able to maintain that over the next four years." Twenty minutes before the exit poll was announced, Qussai added, "I can't see them getting more than 12 percent."

At 6 PM, the early numbers seemed to confirm an historic day for the AfD, which was projected to snag 13.5 percent of the vote nationally. "Shit," Oday sighed, lighting a cigarette as the party's supporters celebrated on-screen. When he first arrived in Germany two years ago, Oday lived in the town of Bautzen, in the country's east. "In Bautzen, I saw how much racism there is in Germany," he recalled.

A few minutes later, we learned the AfD had become the largest party in Oday's old town, pulling 23.3 percent of the local vote.

Alaa (left) and Venous (right) discussing their concerns over the rise of the AfD

Over the past few years, members of the AfD have said Germany's borders should be protected with guns, compared the arrival of refugees to a broken water pipe, and lured voters with fears of "Überfremdung" (which roughly translates to "over-foreigning"). It's safe to say many Germans—and my Syrian refugee friends—will take some time to come to terms that kind of party doing so well nationwide.

"Merkel contributed a little to the success of the AfD," Alaa offered when the chancellor appeared on television to defend the worst result in 70 years for her party, the conservative Christian Democratic Union. "If she'd had a plan for taking in refugees, she probably wouldn't have lost so many votes to right-wing populists." Qussai disagreed: "The refugee crisis was an emergency. How could she have planned for it?" (By this point in the evening, Qussai had demonstrated the most passion for German politics of anyone in the group, often leading

My friends didn't all support the same party. One sympathized with the Greens, another with Merkel's CDU, while a third was split between the Social Democrat SPD party and the liberal FDP. They discussed Merkel's refugee policies, the global economy, and the role of Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Russia in the ongoing Syrian crisis.

Qussai (left) says he will decide whether to go back to Syria when the civil war ends.

As the evening wore on there was a strange mixture of discomfort and resignation in the air—at one point, the refugees tried cracking jokes to pass the time and break the tension. We noted that FDP leader Christian Lindner looked ike a "typical German," and laughed at the SDP's Martin Schulz—it seemed obvious he was wearing TV makeup on his bald head. But try though they did, my friends couldn't mask their unease with the success of such a hostile force in their new home. "We're making a joke of it now," Alaa said, "but we're scared, too."

"Why do people vote for a party they know is racist?" Venous asked. "Because they think that the AfD offers them solutions," Alaa answered. "It's all about sharing a common enemy," Qussai added, rolling another cigarette. "If you ask me, the Nazis had the Jews, the AfD have refugees." We then heard a car driving by, tooting its horn in celebration. Even in Neukölln, one of the most multicultural areas of Germany, the AfD had won 10 percent of the vote.

Over the past few years, the AfD presented angry Germans with a very specific target for their rage: refugees, like the ones in that living room. Qussai, Venous, Hossam, Alaa, and Oday worried that with the AfD doing so well, they might now be more inviting targets for racist attacks. But their hope was that even if (more than) 12 percent of German voters ultimately supported a party that hates refugees, roughly 88 percent of their new countrymen might be willing to stand up for them.

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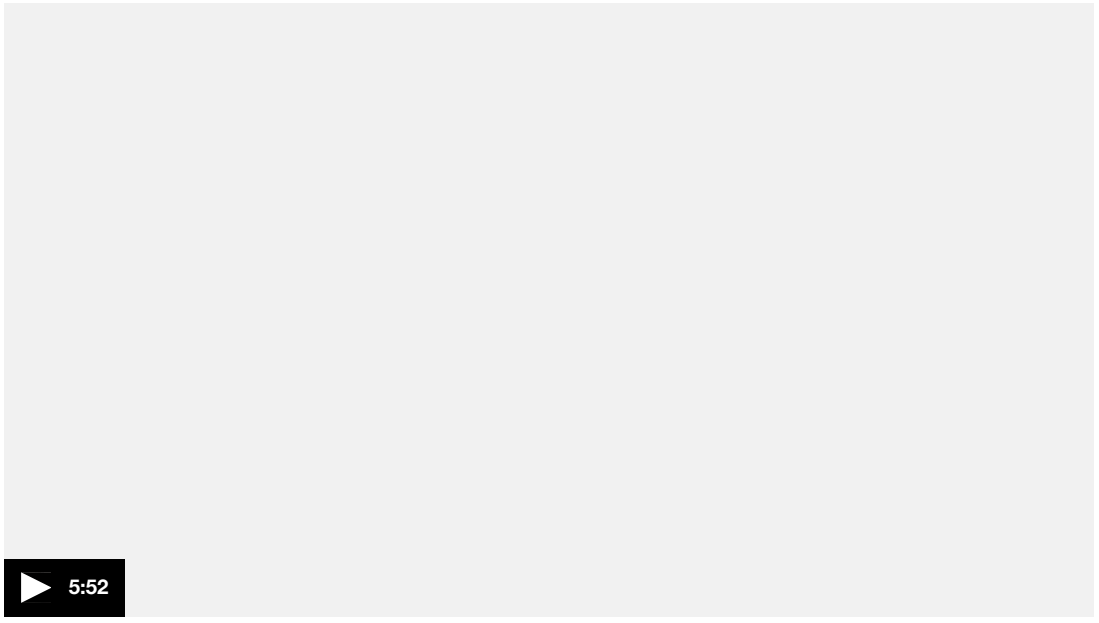

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