

# Introduction

## P'adelante, P'atrás

**Charlene Villaseñor Black**

When the historic *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation (CARA)* show took place from 1990 to 1993, I was in graduate school at the University of Michigan. I remember sitting in my study carrel in Tappan Hall, home of the Department of the History of Art, intensely examining the exhibition catalog (Griswold del Castillo 1991). Trained as a “Southern Baroque” specialist, I went on to write a dissertation on Spain, but I also began teaching colonial and modern Mexican art, as well as Chicana/o art, when I became an assistant professor in 1995. I thus have footholds in both the early modern and contemporary eras, in Europe and the Americas, in the elite world of art history and in the working-class Chicana/o community. Professionally, I have become a border-crossing art historian, working across geographic, chronological, and disciplinary *fronteras*, inhabiting a third space between art history and ethnic studies.

The conflicts between the rarefied and privileged world of art history and the practical, activist-oriented politics of Chicana/o studies are real. I experience them at my own institution, the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA); I witness them in my courses. Most art historians simply do not consider Chicana/o art to be “Art,” of high enough “quality” to merit inclusion within the hallowed canon of art history.<sup>1</sup> I am in the middle of my career, yet I have never mentored another working-class Chicana/o at the PhD level. And it is not for a lack of “qualified” students; it is that Chicana/o students are never admitted to UCLA’s doctoral program in art history, but instead go to other universities on full fellowship.<sup>2</sup> I wonder what this says about racial and class attitudes in the academy, and in particular about attitudes toward Chicana/os at my own institution, situated in Los Angeles—the city with the largest Mexican-descent population in

the world after Mexico City. Have academic art historians passed up their chance to make an impact on the study of Latina/o art?

Increasingly, in order to mentor Chicana/o students, I have begun cross-listing more of my courses with the Department of Chicana/o Studies; I have also begun advising more undergraduate students while also maintaining my graduate program. Such mentoring is extremely important to me. I remember clearly the only Chicano professor I ever studied with, *Profe* George Vargas, an art historian, artist, and activist at Texas A&M University, Kingsville. He was the first Chicano to earn a PhD in the history of art from the University of Michigan, where he inspired and mentored me in his muralism course back in the 1990s. *Profe* Vargas's encouragement at Michigan mattered; he was the first professor to tell me that I had written something of publishable quality: a term paper on colonial Mexican art.

It has been twenty-five years since the historic CARA show, which originated at UCLA and traveled around the United States. The exhibition, at that time the largest that had ever been held on Chicana/o art, sparked interest in the topic and inspired new research. Much has changed in the years since then, but as the essays in this dossier suggest, Chicana/o and Latina/o art still have not been fully accepted into art history. They move *p'adelante*, *p'atrás*—forward and backward, in *nepantla*—between art history and ethnic studies, between American and Latin American art.

My historical training compels me to ground *nepantla* in its original context. The term first appears in written sources in two early colonial Mexican dictionaries, by Andrés de Olmos (1547) and Alonso de Molina (1571), where it is defined as meaning *en medio* or “in the middle” (Olmos 2002, 112; Molina 1970, 69r; see also Maffie 2013, 13–14). A fuller and more suggestive definition is offered in Dominican friar Diego de Durán's *Historia de las Indias de Nueva España*, of 1581. When he reprimanded a native convert suspected of continuing pre-Columbian practices, the convert replied, “Padre, no te espantes pues todavía estamos nepantla” (“Father, don't be afraid since we are still *nepantla*”). Durán glossed the term to mean that the native converts were *en medio* (in the middle) between their pre-Columbian world and the newly imposed Spanish Catholic one, and that, furthermore, they were *neutros* or neutral. Additionally, according to Durán, *nepantla* is “el lugar de nada (no estar ni en un lado ni en otro) y el lugar de todo (estar a la vez en dos lugares incompatibles)” —that is:

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“the place of nothing (to be neither on one side nor the other) and the place of everything (to be in two incompatible places at the same time)” (Durán 1967, 237). It is this last gloss of *nepantla*, as a place of both nothing and everything, of being on neither one side nor the other, of being in two incompatible places simultaneously, that seems to best express where the study of Chicana/o and Latina/o art is currently situated. On a more personal note, it also explains where I am now, in the middle of my life and career as a Chicana professor of art history and Chicana/o studies.

A number of Chicana writers have productively retheorized and rethought the term, and their work inspires me: they include Gloria Anzaldúa (2009), Pat Mora (1993), Laura Pérez (2007), Alicia Gaspar de Alba (2014), Laura Medina (2006), Emma Pérez (1999), Clara Román-Odio (2013), and various artists such as Yreina Cervantez and Santa Barraza. Anzaldúa writes, “Nepantla is the Náhuatl word for an in-between state, that uncertain terrain one crosses when moving from one place to another, when changing from one class, race, or sexual position to another, when traveling from the present identity into a new identity” (2009, 180). *Nepantla* is like a bridge: “Bridges span liminal (threshold) spaces between worlds, spaces I call *nepantla*, a Nahuatl word meaning *tierra entre medio*. Transformations occur in this in-between space, an unstable, unpredictable, precarious, always-in-transition space lacking clear boundaries” (Anzaldúa and Keating 2002, 1). AnaLouise Keating, writing about Gloria Anzaldúa, describes *neplantera/os* as

threshold people: they move within and among multiple, often conflicting, worlds and refuse to align themselves exclusively with any single individual, group, or belief system. This refusal is not easy; nepantleras must be willing to open themselves to personal risks and potential woundings which include, but are not limited to, self-division, isolation, misunderstanding, rejection, and accusations of disloyalty. (2006, 6)

It is this recent retheorizing of *nepantla* as a space of transformation, of potential innovation and new perspectives, that I find inspirational, as it builds upon and improves the colonial definition of *nepantla* as in-between, in the middle, or even neutral. It is this revised definition that I now willingly embrace, after many years of struggle, as I teach Chicana/o art. I still ponder the words of Audre Lorde, though, as I employ strategies from my art historical training: “What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy?” And I think about her famous quote, used as the title of a speech delivered

in 1979 and later published: “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde 2007, 110–11; see also Gaspar de Alba 1998). Can I dismantle the master’s house using the traditional tools of humanism?

These issues are becoming increasingly urgent as US demographics change. According to the US Census Bureau (2013), 17.1 percent of the population is now Latino. As college campuses receive more black and Latina/o students, racial tensions are coming to the fore: witness student-led movements such as “I, Too, Am Harvard,” or the recent viral video produced on my own campus, “Black Bruins” (Bean 2014; Stokes 2013).<sup>3</sup> These frictions are not surprising given that, according to a recent article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 75 to 80 percent of tenured college faculty are white men (Greenberg 2012). As I wrestle with my interdisciplinary quandary and still struggle at times against *nepantla*, I am reminded of the inspirational words of César Chávez, which guide me as a researcher and teacher:

We cannot seek achievement for ourselves and forget about progress and prosperity for our community. . . . Our ambitions must be broad enough to include the aspirations and needs of others, for their sakes and for our own.<sup>4</sup>

On a more positive note, in 2008 the *Los Angeles Times* art critic, Christopher Knight, proclaimed that “Chicano art” was the “new monarch ascending the throne to extend the line of succession.” This assessment appeared in his review of *Phantom Sightings: Art After the Chicano Movement* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), curated by Rita Gonzalez, Howard Fox, and UCLA’s Chon A. Noriega (Knight 2008; González, Fox, and Noriega 2008). Indeed, since the historic CARA show, there have been significant new exhibitions of Chicana/o and Latina/o art that have produced groundbreaking new research. In 2011 the Getty Foundation’s blockbuster initiative, *Pacific Standard Time: Art in LA 1945–1980*, featured over sixty exhibitions in Southern California; of these, an unprecedented six shows focused on Chicana/o art. LACMA and the Williams College Museum of Art were the sites of *ASCO: Elite of the Obscure, a Retrospective, 1972–1987*, the first monographic show dedicated to the East LA conceptual and performance art group Asco; it was co-curated by C. Ondine Chavoya of Williams and Rita González of LACMA (Chavoya and González 2011). *LA Xicano* was a coordinated grouping of five art exhibitions highlighting artworks from 1881 to 1983 (Noriega, Romo, and Rivas 2011). Four of the shows were curated by Noriega,

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Terezita Romo, and Pilar Tompkins Rivas: they included *Mapping Another LA: The Chicano Art Movement*, at UCLA's Fowler Museum; *Art Along the Hyphen: The Mexican-American Generation*, at the Autry National Center; *Icons of the Invisible: Oscar Castillo*, at the Fowler; and *Mural Remix: Sandra de la Loza*, at LACMA. A fifth show, *Chican@s Collect: The Durón Family Collection*, was curated by Armando Durón at the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Library. These 2011 exhibitions and the accompanying publications made an astonishing amount of new research available to a wider public. Ironically, it was that same year, on September 11, 2011, that pioneering art historian Shifra M. Goldman, one of the creators of Chicana/o art history, passed away.<sup>5</sup> At her moving memorial service, many remarked upon her early role as architect of the field.

The increased visibility of Chicana/o art in museum exhibitions has been accompanied by a dramatic expansion of digital resources. New websites have facilitated the production of original research by making available artworks and other primary sources such as archival documents, interviews, and videos/film. Two of the most comprehensive and significant Internet sources warrant mention. Numerous digitized images of Chicana/o and Latina/o art can be accessed via the Calisphere, originally from the database Digital Chicano Art, hosted by the California Ethnic and Multicultural Archives (CEMA) at the University of California, Santa Barbara. This website also provides access to streaming media, including video, interviews, art, music, and theater, as well as virtual exhibitions.<sup>6</sup> The International Center for the Arts of the Americas, directed by Mari Carmen Ramírez, Wortham Curator of Latin American Art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, oversees a similarly ambitious archiving project. Focused on the art of Latin America as well as Latino art, the archive, Documents of 20th-Century Latin American and Latino Art, was launched in 2002 and now stores almost 5,000 documents available without charge to researchers and students. This collection, notable for its wide-ranging coverage of all of Latin America as well as the United States, includes many important primary sources, including documents, rare printed sources, and early newspapers, as well as secondary sources.<sup>7</sup>

While these two digital archives are currently the largest on the Web for the study of Chicana/o and Latina/o art, several smaller digital databases feature more specialized collections useful for teaching and research. The Early Chicano Murals Archive hosted by UCLA @ SPARC Digital Mural Lab, founded by artist Judy Baca, documents Los Angeles-area murals. The UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Digital Collections are rich in

photographs and murals. The University of Houston Libraries hosts a particularly good Web page on digital resources, Primary Sources for Mexican American Art and Humanities Research.<sup>8</sup>

The availability of new resources should inspire growth in the study of Chicana/o and Latina/o art, especially innovative dissertations and new professor positions. This dossier thus opens with an inquiry: What is the current state of Chicana/o and Latina/o art history? Is it in crisis? To answer that disquieting question, Adriana Zavala of Tufts University analyzes data on the development of these fields since 1992, including who is teaching the subject, their training, and the number of new dissertations produced. Her comparison to the development of Latin American art history is sobering. *Profe* George Vargas, of Texas A&M University–Kingsville, begins with a brief personal narrative detailing his family’s journey from Texas to Michigan (“El Norte”) and his own path to academe. One of a small handful of Chicana/o art specialists in Texas, Vargas writes about the challenges of creating a new field as he conducted research in and taught Chicana/o art history, as prelude to his analysis of the state of Chicana/o art.

I am co-author with my UCLA colleague Alicia Gaspar de Alba of the next essay, which reflects on our experience developing and teaching a new course called Protest and Praxis in Mexican and Chicana/o Art. This team-taught, interdisciplinary, writing-intensive course drew on the fields of Mexican and Chicana/o art, ethnic studies, gender studies, and art history. What is the state of activist art in the post-*movimiento* world? Artist Alma López’s provocative essay on Chicana artists as the migrant workers of academe challenges us to rethink the status quo. Why are there so few Chicana artists teaching full-time at the college level? What do artist-activists offer in the classroom? The dossier concludes with an essay by emerging scholar Kency Cornejo, a new professor at the University of New Mexico. A former UCLA undergraduate who grew up in Compton, California, Cornejo taught the first-ever course on Contemporary Central American Art at Duke University, where she earned her doctorate. Her insightful observations on how Central American art intersects with and differs from other fields of Latina/o art provide an outline for new teaching and research.

What has happened to the teaching of Chicana/o art since the historic CARA show? What about Latina/o art? Who is teaching the subject and where? How have recent exhibitions affected research and teaching? This dossier addresses these issues as well as methods and resources for teaching Chicana/o and Latina/o art—new digital initiatives, availability of primary

sources, and model curricula. The final section presents course descriptions from scholars at a range of institutions across the country, including, online on the CSRC website, their complete syllabi. ¡P'adelante!

## Notes

1. See the dismissive commentary in the chapter entitled “Identity” in Robertson and McDaniel (2010, 37–71).

2. Based on admission records and conversations with colleagues, I can identify only three Chicana/os who received PhDs from UCLA in art history, two in pre-Columbian and one in modern—all some years ago. None has been admitted to the program since I was hired in 2001.

3. Also see the recent powerful publication edited by Gutiérrez y Muhs et al. (2012).

4. From a selection of quotes provided by the Cesar E. Chavez Foundation on the United Farm Workers website, [http://www.ufw.org/\\_page.php?menu=research&inc=history/09.html](http://www.ufw.org/_page.php?menu=research&inc=history/09.html).

5. An important selection of her essays on Chicana/o art will be published in 2015 by UCLA's Chicano Studies Research Center and distributed by the University of Washington Press (Goldman, forthcoming).

6. For more information, see <http://cemaweb.library.ucsb.edu/calisphere.html> and <http://www.library.ucsb.edu/special-collections/cema/digitalChicanoArt>.

7. Documents of 20th-Century Latin American and Latino Art can be accessed at <http://icaadocs.mfah.org/icaadocs/>.

8. For more information, see the following websites: Early Chicano Murals Archive, <http://digitalmurallab.com/early-chicano-murals-2/>; CSRC Digital Collections, <http://www.chicano.ucla.edu/library/csdc-digital-collections>; Primary Sources for Mexican American Art and Humanities Research, <http://guides.lib.uh.edu/ARTH>.

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