

The new Chicano movement

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JOSH KUN IS A LOS ANGELES-BASED FREELANCE WRITER AND CULTURAL CRITIC WHOSE LAST STORY FOR THE MAGAZINE WAS ABOUT THE MUSIC AND ART SCENE IN TIJUANA.



On the roof of a single-story house, a man is yelling into a megaphone. His hair is long, his white tube socks are pulled up to his knees, and his fist is in the air. He appears to be protesting.

But because this is a photograph, an image from Mario Ybarra Jr.'s "Go Tell It" series, we hear nothing, not a single slogan or plea for justice. There is no caption, no context, no clues as to where he is--just a man shouting on a roof in the midst of empty sky.

He is protesting alone, to no one, from nowhere, in silence.

Because Ybarra is 31 years old and Chicano, it's hard not to read the image as a next-generation commentary on the artistic legacy of the 1960s-'70s Chicano movement. The

empty skies could represent empty protest. The solitude of the protester in an unidentified neighborhood is perhaps a symbol of fading collectivity. For Chicano artists of Ybarra's generation, the title of his series carries an implied question mark: Go tell what? To whom? And is it even worth telling?

It's been more than 35 years since Chicano art grew out of the political urgency of the Chicano civil rights movement. The earliest examples of the work were aesthetically raw posters and banners inspired by the farmworkers' struggle and by protests over social issues in cities throughout the Southwest. It quickly grew into a more refined body of work that often was marked by familiar religious and cultural images--La Virgen de Guadalupe, Day of the Dead skeletons, pre-Columbian figures, lowriders. The genre, dominated by narrative painting executed with lush palettes, took its place as a distinct movement in the American art scene. Los Angeles--by virtue of its role as one of Mexican America's most important capitals, and the sheer number of artists working here--became the center of the Chicano art universe.

Today, a rapidly expanding pool of young Southern California artists is actively redefining what it means to make Chicano art in the new millennium. Where the social movements of the past once supplied muralists and painters with a rich iconography to choose from and social causes to speak to, the new school wants icons for the events and experiences of its own time.

The far-ranging diversity of these events and experiences has caused a shift in Chicano artistic consciousness. What once was a necessary and useful catchall category now

represents a more complicated set of choices and consequences for young artists who know their history from art school and MTV as well as Chicano Studies classes. This new generation of artists also reflects the larger transformation of L.A.'s Chicano community, which continues to grow and assimilate in new and unpredictable ways.

“There’s the old avant-garde idea that you’re better off if you rupture antecedent traditions and forge something new,” says veteran Chicano art critic Tomas Ybarra-Frausto. “But contemporary Chicano expression is not just about rupture, it’s a real negotiation between tradition and change. There is rupture, but there is also continuity. There are still murals, but the murals are being done through digital media. There is still figurative art, but it is more conceptual and abstract.”

The artists Ybarra-Frausto dubs “the millennial generation” are disciples of digital technology and fans of hip-hop and Japanese anime. They include known figures such as Ybarra, Salomon Huerta and Artemio Rodriguez, and newcomers such as Marissa Rangel and Shizu Saldamondo. They have the catalog to the landmark 1990 “Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation” exhibition on their bookshelves, but it’s right next to “Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the ‘90s,” the Museum of Contemporary Art’s 1992 show that featured provocateurs such as Charles Ray and Chris Burden.

“You can’t say there is one rite of passage the way you could 30 or 40 years ago,” says Chon Noriega, director of UCLA’s Chicano Studies Research Center. “They are coming up with different things and you think, Well, is it Chicano? How do you label this? The category is still useful, but it’s not entirely accurate. Sometimes it’s the only category by which these artists will get some sort of

recognition, but they are reaching out to other people as well.”

Perhaps no young artist better exemplifies the new rubric than Camille Rose Garcia, 34, who grew up in the suburban hinterlands of Huntington Beach and is the daughter of a Franco German muralist mother and a Chicano filmmaker father from Lincoln Heights. Her experiences and work perfectly reflect the crossroads at which this new generation of artists has arrived.

“I was always made aware that I was a ‘beaner’ by other kids, but I don’t have the same viewpoint of someone who grew up in East L.A.,” says Garcia, wearing an AC/DC T-shirt at the Merry Karnowsky Gallery in West Hollywood, where she recently had her first major solo show. “I don’t feel like I fit into a totally Chicano scene. I’m one foot in and one foot out.”

Garcia’s work looks nothing like how Chicano art is supposed to look. There are no traces of earlier iconography, no signs of cultural celebration. Instead, there are demonic princesses who froth at the mouth and spit profanities, wielding machetes dripping with blood. There are swarming armies of blood-sucking parasites that topple castles full of jewels. For her Karnowsky show, she turned the entire gallery into a gothic pop netherworld she calls Ultraviolenceland, full of cartoonish paintings and fantastical sculptures.

Yet she also was part of a group show at Self-Help Graphics, East L.A.’s venerable art space, and she counts the prominent single-named Chicano artist Gronk as a primary influence. Garcia sees her toppled castles and murderous princesses as critiques of wealth and power in general, with roots in Chicano

art's history of social protest. Her filmmaker father was active in the movimiento, and she grew up around artists committed to social and political change.

"The Chicano tradition of activism and social commentary is so important to me," she says. "But if your work is only about identity, a lot of people can't relate to it. I want people to care about my work because I want them to care about the world, about the Earth, about extinction."

Adds 29-year-old conceptual artist Ruben Ochoa: "Sometimes I feel like we're carrying this baggage on our shoulders, like we've been born into it. But if we just keep repeating the same iconography, it defeats the purpose of art: to grow and create and explore. Chicano art is so young. We can't start repeating ourselves. We need to mix and blend and make art from where we're from."

The story of Chicano art in Los Angeles is the story of Chicanos in Los Angeles. It's the story of a community in the midst of a massive transition, from a civil rights past to a multicultural present, from being a geographically bound vocal minority with focused political and social aims in the '60s to an amorphous demographic dispersed across a city that now has no majority ethnic population. (According to the 2000 census, Latinos make up nearly 45% of the L.A. County population, and 70% of those Latinos are of Mexican origin.)

For Chicano artists in Los Angeles, the transition has led to a difficult question that often leads to multiple answers: Do you make Chicano art, or do you make art?

"Why just because of my name should I be put in a show based on color, when all the white students I graduated with from Art Center and UCLA are being put in shows based on their work?" asks painter Salomon Huerta, whose pastel portraits of the backs of male Chicano heads caused a stir among collectors in the '90s and earned him acclaim in mainstream museums and galleries. Later this year, he will show alongside Cindy Sherman and Gabriel Orozco at New York's Robert Miller Gallery. "It is very important to me that I be recognized as an artist who is part of the world like everyone else. But I was inspired by the Chicano movement. When the old Chicanos recognize my work, it still means more to me than getting recognition from John Baldessari."

But as Chicano artists move away from strictly identity-based work, museums and galleries continue to move toward it.

"Museums are still trying to get Chicano art in their collections, but the artists have moved beyond that with their own work," says Rita Gonzales, who has become the Chicano new wave's leading critical and curatorial voice. "So how can we find a common language? I think a lot of people are tired of being curated by ethnic category. Artists will be supportive of galleries or museums that want to show Chicano artists, but they also want to be expanding the parameters of their identity as well."

In many ways, these debates started taking shape in the late 1980s, when Chicano art was introduced to widespread national audiences through two major touring exhibitions: the 1987 "Hispanic Art in the United States" show organized by Washington's Corcoran Gallery of Art, and, three years later, the UCLA Wight Gallery's "Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965-1985."

The exhibits presented competing tendencies that continue to divide contemporary Chicano art. The Corcoran show, which included Latino artists of various ethnicities and was organized by white curators, lobbied for Chicano artists to be included as part of a larger contemporary art scene, albeit as exotic, primitive outsiders. The UCLA show, organized by Chicano curators, lobbied for Chicano art to remain a strictly delineated identity-based genre, a singular entity with defined boundaries rooted in the struggle for civil rights and visibility.

When the genre went international in 1989 as part of what many observers hyped as a “Chicano art boom,” French curators managed to have it both ways, casting L.A. Chicanos as visionary prophets of the urban future. “It is now a must for Beverly Hills collectors to own their ‘Chicano!’,” declared an essay in the catalog for “Le Demon des Anges” (“Angels’ Demon”), a show that was seen in France, Spain and Sweden. “For the first time, Latinos have gained entry to the largest Los Angeles museums.”

Back home, the reality was a bit more sobering. Until the Los Angeles County Museum of Art hosted the Corcoran show in 1989, its recognition of Chicano artists hadn’t gone far beyond 1974, when it exhibited the work of the Los Four collective--Carlos Almaraz, Frank Romero, Gilbert “Magu” Lujan and Beto de la Rocha. Chicano artists might have been in vogue, especially abroad, but at home they remained on the fringes of the art establishment.

Little has changed today. The number of commercial galleries showing Chicano work has not grown since the ‘80s (the Patricia Correia and Robert Berman galleries remain constants), though long-established cultural centers such as Self-Help Graphics, the

Mexican Cultural Institute and Plaza de la Raza continue as mainstays of the scene.

The latest effort to address this cultural void comes from L.A. County Supervisor Gloria Molina, who is spearheading the \$70-million Plaza de Cultura y Artes, which is scheduled to open across from Olvera Street in 2007. And LACMA has just inked a five-year strategic partnership with UCLA’s Chicano Studies Research Center to develop art exhibitions, publications and programming. The partnership already has led to the hiring of Rita Gonzales as an assistant curator and to a new acquisition for the museum’s permanent collection, “The Great Blind Huron,” a print by Camille Rose Garcia.

“The Chicano art scene has always been here,” says Correia, whose Santa Monica gallery shows only Mexican American artists. “The art world is still waking up to it. There is still so little exposure on a local and national level. Are we still living in an era with that much bigotry? I can’t think of any other answer. It’s still about exclusion.”

That is precisely why actor and art collector Cheech Marin decided to organize “Chicano Visions: American Painters on the Verge,” the first nationally touring exhibition devoted to Chicano painters. The show, which has support from media conglomerate Clear Channel, features major figures such as Frank Romero, John Valadez, Patssi Valdez and Gronk and is slated for LACMA in 2006.

“Ninety-nine percent of the country doesn’t know what a Chicano is, let alone what their art looks like,” Marin says. “The whole purpose of this thing is to give access to Chicano cultures in the mainstream. We’re done preaching to ourselves.”

Many worry that the show's emphasis on painting, the scant attention it pays to younger artists and its tendency toward the recognizable imagery of decades past misrepresents the diversity of Chicano art. But Marin disagrees. "The Chicano school of art is every generation's interpretation of what the Chicano experience is about," he says. "To every generation, it's a little bit different. They each have as much right to say what is or isn't Chicano art than anyone who went before them."

Mario Ybarra Jr. grew up in Wilmington, one of Mexican L.A.'s more unsuspected suburban capitals. Slanguage, the gallery/store/studio he and fellow artist Juan Capistran opened in 2002, is squeezed into Wilmington's industrial row, across the street from a body shop and a block down from a pool hall.

Slanguage used to be La Guadalupana Bakery. It now serves as Ybarra and Capistran's artistic home base, and it sells custom airbrushed Vans, thong underwear bearing portraits of rappers Notorious B.I.G. and Tupac Shakur, and classic hip-hop films such as "Style Wars" and "Breakin'." The work of Ybarra and Capistran's friends covers the walls, and on weekends neighborhood kids flood Slanguage for art workshops that include hat customizing, toy design and paper puppetry.

"These kids grow up in a homogenized space with freeways that close them in," Ybarra says. "We try to bring in as many different kinds of people to interface with them . . . so that they don't think the only people they can communicate with look just like them, speak just like them."

It's an attitude of openness and cultural contact that pervades Ybarra's own work. Although he respects earlier Chicano artists' political need to create a visual language for ethnic identity, he is more interested in how identities intersect and open up, creating new urban hybrids in which cholo action figures meet futuristic sci-fi low riders and Pablo Escobar is dressed in a Columbia space shuttle suit.

"I don't think I make Chicano art," says Ybarra, standing in Slanguage's backroom, which is cluttered with Mac computers, crates of records, an Osama bin Laden pinata and a spray-painted portrait of reggae singer Jimmy Cliff. "It's something I have learned as a history and acquired as a filter. But right now, I don't think I could say I'm making it. It's like saying I make abstract expressionist painting. I'm not an ab-ex painter. I can't go back and make that art. I make contemporary art that is filtered from a Mexican American experience in Los Angeles."

Ybarra thinks of it as the Edward James Olmos theory of Chicano art. He wants to be less like the actor in "American Me" and "Zoot Suit"--in which Olmos was prison tough and pachuco savvy--and more like Olmos' character in "Blade Runner." In the film's dystopian 2029 L.A. future, Olmos is Gaff--a digital urban polyglot, a Chinese Chicano detective who speaks a street patois of English, Spanish, French, Chinese, Hungarian and German.

"My main drive," says Ybarra, "is not to learn Nahuatl, but to learn Mandarin or Cantonese."

Like many of his peers, part of Ybarra's interest in juggling multiple cultural realities comes from his experiences in art school. In

the '70s and '80s, art school was less common for Chicano artists--a luxury that distracted from the political urgency of the movement. Now it's the norm. Ybarra graduated from Otis Art Institute and then pursued an MFA at UC Irvine. He studied with Chicanos and non-Chicanos alike, including renowned L.A. artist Martin Kersels and Daniel Martinez, an acclaimed conceptual artist who often has kept his distance from identity politics.

"I needed my degrees," Ybarra says. "I needed to be official. I'm not going to operate from a handicap position."

Ybarra's art school training taught him how to get gallery shows (he's exhibited, often alongside Capistran, in London, San Francisco, Vancouver and Berlin), but he insists that the early Chicano muralists and performance artists taught him the importance of carrying on public art traditions. He's painted the message "sublime" over signs advertising plumbers in South Los Angeles, installed a graffiti-viewing bench in downtown L.A.'s Belmont Tunnel, and is now designing a series of harbor-view benches for the Port of Los Angeles.

"Chicano art is not a dead history," Ybarra says. "It informs my artistic sensibility. How could it not? They are the little voices in my head that help me process my own work. What I take from them most is the idea of producing art under extreme circumstances with an imaginative and critical stance."

Ybarra cites the influence of ASCO, the edgy, pioneering Chicano performance art collective whose name is Spanish for "nausea." The group became known for its

conceptual, iconoclastic performance art pieces.

But it was ASCO's 1972 "Pie in the Face" piece that had the greatest impact on Ybarra. In response to a LACMA curator who said he was not exhibiting Chicano work because it was all "folk art" (code for "naive" or "unschooled"), ASCO members Harry Gamboa, Willie Herron and Gronk spray-painted their names on LACMA's entrances, making the museum itself the first piece of Chicano art to be exhibited there. They returned the next day and took a photograph of ASCO's fourth founding member, Patssi Valdez, posing with their handiwork hours before it was whitewashed.

Ybarra beams: "That was the most relevant act of graffiti I can think of, as both a Chicano and an artist in Los Angeles. I feel proud that I carry that with me."

Gamboa was 21 when he tagged LACMA; now 52, he's still proud of "Pie in the Face."

"I sprayed that museum only because I couldn't lift it and toss it into the tar pits," he says.

Gamboa, who has taught at several local universities and whose groundbreaking video art from the '70s and '80s is newly available on DVDs released by UCLA's Chicano Studies Center, hasn't stopped making work since he began in the late '60s. Nor has he stopped thinking about his art through the politicized eyes of a teenager who participated in the student walkouts at Garfield High School in East L.A.

"When I became involved with ASCO," he recalls, "we were developing artwork within

the concept of 'Chicano.' It was particularly important to utilize that term at that point. Now I find an even more pressing need to utilize it, because since that time our numbers have expanded while our representation everywhere has dwindled."

Yet when ASCO began in the '70s, it was Gamboa and his colleagues who were often told by other Chicano artists that their work--which played with concepts of glamour and sexual convention--wasn't "Chicano enough."

"There was the preconceived idea of what Chicano art was supposed to be," says Diane Gamboa, Harry's sister, who joined ASCO in the '80s and works as a photographer, painter and designer. "The reality was our lives--everything from cross-dressing to the Marx Brothers and Soupy Sales. We were part of the unpopular culture."

Eschewing the more overt political messages of many of their contemporaries, ASCO experimented with punk barrio existentialism--sending out mail art, taping each other to walls and throwing dinner parties in the middle of traffic islands. As a result, they were often criticized for being too conceptual, too ideologically slippery, too arty.

In the '80s, Gronk's solo career as a painter began to take off, and he soon became the Chicano art world's first star, showing his work nationally and internationally. His more recent work has found him collaborating with the Kronos Quartet and Peter Sellars.

Gronk's willingness to move across genres and defy expectations has made him one of the more frequently cited role models for

younger Chicano artists looking to develop their own aesthetic.

"I think a lot of young artists approach me because I'm one of the people that came out of that whole thing without doing the lowrider or the cholo," Gronk says. "That wasn't in my vocabulary. It would have been dishonest of me to say, 'Yes, I'm Chicano and here are the images.' It was more like doing a mural in East L.A. and making a reference to a French film. The possibilities are wide open."

There is a white 1985 Chevy van parked at the end of Chung King Road in Chinatown. It is a cold fall night, and instead of taking refuge in one of the nearby galleries, a crowd of people is trying to glimpse the image that dominates the van's interior--a panoramic black-and-white photograph of Los Angeles by Sandra de la Loza. Titled "View From the East," the image is less striking for the city landscape it depicts than for its perspective--from an Eastside hilltop that is a favorite Chicano hangout. "I wanted to force people to reflect on L.A. from another vantage point," she says.

Asking people to see the city, and the art that's inspired by it, through different eyes is also the point of the van itself, which doubles as a mobile art gallery complete with white walls, fake wood floors and track lighting. Its creator and director, Ruben Ochoa, dubbed the van "Class:C," a reference to the common driver's license code, because it was once the tortilla delivery truck for his parents' restaurant.

The van now delivers art. Ochoa curates exhibits on or inside the van, then drives it around Southern California for public viewings in neighborhoods and locales--

parks, banks, parking lots--where cutting-edge contemporary art is typically not shown. The Chinatown venue was on the itinerary for Ochoa's contribution to the Orange County Museum of Art's 2004 California Biennial.

"A major concern of artists of my generation is to create our own space instead of waiting around for exhibits," explains Ochoa, who recently imagined car seats as customized coffins for his show with Marco Rios at the Laguna Art Museum. "Where most of my work is headed now is less about any singular ethnic identity and [more toward] where different identities intersect and mix us up. I hope that you don't see my work and all you get from it is that I'm Chicano."

Ochoa is quick to flash his influences as proof: lurid Mexican tabloids and British sci-fi novelist J.G. Ballard, seminal L.A. assemblage artist Ed Kienholz and pop music parodist Weird Al Yankovic, ASCO and toy characters the Garbage Pail Kids. "I don't just go to Dia de Los Muertos events," quips Ochoa, who like Ybarra studied under Daniel Martinez at UC Irvine.

At Chung King Road, Ochoa's van also features "The O.C.," a bumper sticker show about Orange County that De la Loza co-curated. The commissioned stickers, displayed on the van's back doors, include Rios' appropriation of the Irvine ZIP Code 92697, and Capistran putting Richard "The Night Stalker" Ramirez in Mickey Mouse ears. Though most of the artists are Chicano, the show makes no mention of ethnicity.

"My work is about L.A., a place that is constantly changing," De la Loza says. "The earlier generation, their essential question was defining the Chicano aspect of their work. I don't think I need to do that all the

time. It's more about my interaction with this place."

This last point echoes the loudest among these artists: They may be Chicanos, but more important, they are Chicanos in Los Angeles, and they want more than anything to make art in dialogue with their city--with traffic and freeways, globalization and immigration, police brutality and, yes, even Richard Ramirez.

Of course, the artists in Marin's "Chicano Visions" show also were making art about place. John Valadez's "Getting Them Out of The Car" said as much about the struggle for everyday Chicano survival as it did about the border between the barrio and the beach and the failed promises of L.A. sunshine. Carlos Almaraz's "Flipover" and "Sunset Crash" found toxic beauty in freeway death and the twisted metal of crushed cars. And Patssi Valdez's paintings of house interiors are inverted dreams of the exterior world--the East L.A. neighborhood she was born and raised in, separated from the rest of Los Angeles by bridges and offramps.

The difference is that the place, and the role of Chicanos in that place, has changed. Populations have come and gone. Koreatown is also Oaxacatown. Little Tokyo is hip. Echo Park is expensive. Suburbia is Latino. Hip-hop is the dominant force in pop culture.

The shift is perhaps best registered in De la Loza's 2002 sound installation at the African American Museum, "Whatcha talkin' 'bout"--originally part of her master's thesis at Cal State Long Beach. De la Loza interviewed her friends, all from her generation, collected their stories and then chopped them into phrases. In an empty gallery room, their

voices poured out of numerous stereo speakers.

There was the “punk rock dyke Salvadoran MacArthur Park crazy girl,” the environmental activist from Commerce and her friend from UC Berkeley who studied acupuncture. Their stories moved in and out of one another, layered on top of a looped recording of a traditional corrido mixed with hip-hop beats.

“It’s my way of not rehashing what’s been done,” she says. “We live in a very different moment than 30 years ago. I want to find different ways to tell the stories of what I live.”