

The “Latin boom” in visual arts

*Richard Griswold del Castillo**

During the past decade there has been a flowering and maturing in the visual arts produced by those of Mexican and Latin American heritage in the United States. The term “Latino” has come to be accepted by many people as a way of describing the heterogeneous Spanish speaking population north of the Río Grande—a group that includes large numbers of non-Mexican residents from Cuba, Puerto Rico, Central America and South America, along with millions of persons of Mexican heritage.

The Chicano artists of the 1960s have been influenced by new Latin American immigration in their vision of *la raza* and their political messages. Bolstered by new creative energies coming from the Cuban, Puerto Rican and other Latin American cultures, Mexican-American creative artists have enjoyed a new popularity. One important aspect in “the boom” in Latino visual and performing arts was the growth of a Latino market. For the first time it was possible for many Latino artists to earn a living from their work by selling their art to other Latinos and to Anglo-Americans who were interested in this new exotica.

The main impetus in the change in Latino arts, however, came from the artists themselves who made a conscious choice to expand beyond

the barrio and movement audiences to gain acceptance and recognition from the larger society.

Perhaps the most dramatic evidence of the emergence of Latino culture has been in the film industry. After withstanding Hollywood’s exclusion of Latinos from producing and directing major productions for decades, the 1980s saw the exhibition of major motion pictures written, directed, or starring Latinos, based on Latino themes.

Perhaps the most artistically powerful statement tying the immigration to Latinos was the movie *El Norte* (1983), a moving saga about a Guatemalan brother and sister, and their adventures fleeing through Mexico to the U.S.

Produced and directed by Gregory Nava, a Chicano, and starring a well-

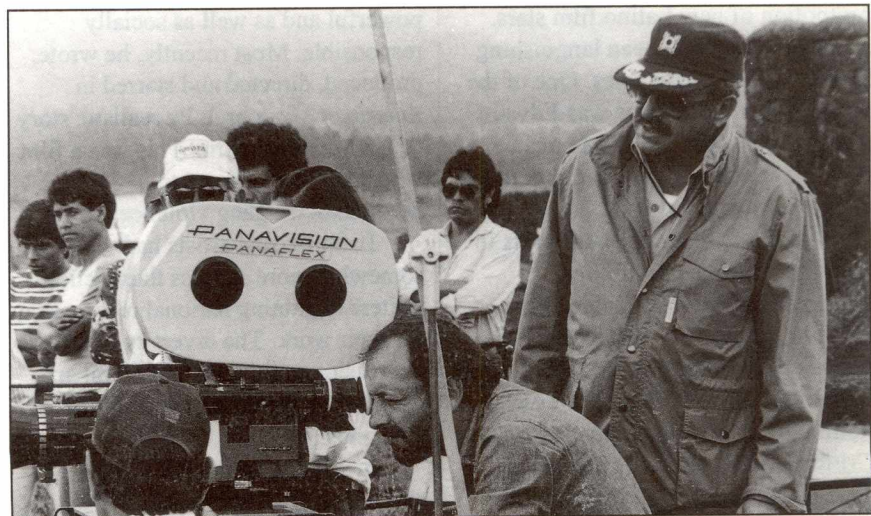
known Mexican actor, Pedro Arizmendi, the film made powerful statements about the tragedies of Latino immigrants in the US. It also highlighted the competitive and exploitative relationship between the Chicano and the newly arrived immigrant. However, *El Norte* had limited distribution.

The first in a series of box office hits was *La Bamba*, written and directed by Luis Valdez about the life and tragic death of Richie Valens, a popular rock-’n’-roll star of the 1950s. Earning more than \$55 million dollars, this film showed Hollywood that Latino themes could sell.

Next, Cheech Marin starred in the movie *Born in East L.A.*, a comedy with serious undertones about Mexican immigrants and their relationship to Latinos. This also was a modest financial success.

In 1988 Hollywood produced three major films starring Latinos and developing Mexican-American cultural themes. Robert Redford with Moctezuma Esparza did *The Milagro Bean Field War* with a large Latino cast and starring Rubén Blades, a well-known Latino recording artist.

Ramón Menéndez directed *Stand and Deliver*, starring Edward James Olmos, based on the true story of a



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Angela Caparoso.

The successful Mexican painter Frida Kahlo contributed to the "Latin boom" in visual arts.

successful barrio high school math teacher and Raúl Julia starred in the film *Romero*, a moving account of the life and assassination of Archbishop Romero of El Salvador.

In 1989 other films emerged to capture a portion of the market. Raúl Julia and Brazilian Sonia Braga starred with Richard Dreyfuss in *Moon over Parador*, a satire about a Latin American dictatorship. Jimmy Smits and Jane Fonda starred in Carlos Fuentes' *Old Gringo*, a story set during the Mexican revolution.

A consequence of these and other films produced in the 1980s was the promotion of new Latino film stars, many of whom had been languishing in stereotyped minor roles. One of the most promising of these was Edward James Olmos, the son of Mexican immigrant parents, who had grown up in East Los Angeles.

After a number of small parts in television series, Olmos was "discovered" by Luis Valdez who cast him as the Pachuco in the 1978 play *Zoot Suit*. Olmos; he later starred in the movie version, won a Tony nomination and a Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle award for his acting. This led to supporting roles in the films *Wolfen* (1981) and *Blade Runner* (1982).

Olmos was committed to accepting only roles that presented positive images of Latinos. His most important films in this regard were *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez* (1982), a drama based on Americo Paredes' book, and *Stand and Deliver* (1988). He accepted the role of Lt. Martin Castillo on the popular television series *Miami Vice* in 1984, only after promises that he would have creative control of the character.

By the end of the decade, Olmos had established his own production company with the goal of making Latino movies that were artistically powerful and as well as socially responsible. Most recently, he wrote, produced, directed and starred in *American Me*, a brutally realistic story of the Mexican mafia. This was a film whose message served to deromanticize gang violence.

Latino visual artists had somewhat more success than fiction writers in gaining national recognition for their work. The diversity of artistic expression multiplied and mural art declined as the dominant form for Chicanos.

In 1987, a national touring exhibition of Latino artists, "Hispanic art in the United States: thirty contemporary painters and sculptors",

showcased the rich imagery and vitality of modern Latino artists of diverse Latin American backgrounds. Another national touring exhibition, opening in 1990, "CARA: Chicano art resistance and affirmation," interpreted the Chicano art movement (1965-1975) within a larger historical and cultural framework. Another historical retrospective organized by the Brony Museum in 1990 was "The Latin American spirit: art and artists in the United States, 1920-1970" that focused on the international influences of Latin American art and artists on the United States. These shows, and many other locally organized art exhibits, publicized the emergence of new talent and energies, and challenged the conservative dominance of the American art academy.

In 1991, the Mexican government organized a major historical and contemporary touring exhibit of visual art entitled "Mexico, Splendors of Thirty Centuries." This exhibit made the public more aware than ever of the traditions of Latino art.

The main aesthetic directions of Chicano art in the 1980s were toward the private and away from the public. Artists sought commercial success in creating canvas paintings not public murals. A host of new talents sold their work in galleries in Los Angeles, Austin, San Francisco and San Diego.

As art collectors began to bid thousands for works by artists such as John Valadez, Luis Jimenez, Carmen Lomas Garza, and Carlos Almaraz, Chicano art graduated from the streets to the salons.

During the past fifteen years, a Chicano artistic renaissance of the 1960s and 1970s has been transformed into a Latino "boom." Because of the new waves of immigration and rising economic power of Spanish-speaking people in the United States, mainstream America has become more aware of the wealth of Latino cultural expression in the visual and performing arts. ❧