

Reviews

“Building Bridges. Chicano/Mexican Art From L.A. to Mexico City”

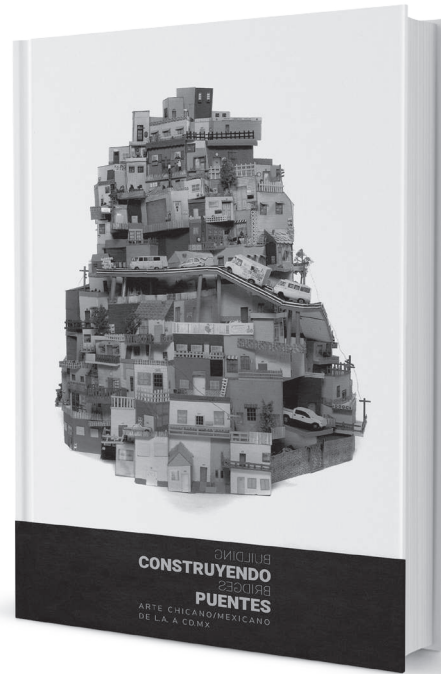
Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes
And Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil
Mexico City, 2018, 96 pp.

From September 21, to November 25, 2018, the Carrillo Gil Art Museum hosted the exhibition “Construyendo puentes. Arte chicano/mexicano de L.A. a CDMX” (Building Bridges. Chicano/Mexican Art from L.A. to Mexico City). The exhibit included graphic art, sketches, photography, performance, and paintings created over the last 50 years by a multi-generational group of Chicano artists. It was made possible thanks to the good offices of the Ministry of Culture through the National Fine Arts Institute, the Ministry of Foreign Relations, and Cástulo de la Rocha, president and CEO of AltaMed Health Services, a health care system serving marginal communities in Southern California.

In this diverse, multi-disciplinary exhibition, artists expressed their visions of existing racial and cultural stereotypes about the Latina population in the United States and about the conflicts arising with their border identity. The museum published a bilingual catalogue, including contributions from some of the authorities who made the exhibition possible, plus others by renowned specialists in Chicano art. Five crosscutting themes structured the exhibit, each of which was deserving of a brief chapter in the catalogue.

Exhibition curator Julián Bermúdez asks himself in the chapter “Rebel Diamonds from the Sun” how a countercultural, marginal art of resistance became, over the decades, a noteworthy current in the U.S. canon. Chicano art was born in the context of mid-Cold-War worldwide political ferment, at a time when U.S. minorities were demanding their rights and visibility. A contemporary of Black Power and the protests against the war in Vietnam, Chicano art sought to reconnect with its Mexican roots and formulate a consistent political critique. To do that, the artists used public spaces, and, with time, were able to place their pieces in art galleries.

The diversity of the pieces in this first section combines to present a Los Angeles urban landscape that includes social criticism: Ramiro Gómez’s sculptures of farm



workers, domestic workers, and janitors; *Paleta Cart* by Gary Garay; Frank Romero’s canvas *MacArthur Park*; Salomón Huerta’s paintings *Untitled House*; and Ana Serrano’s *Cartolandia*, which appears on the catalogue cover.

For Bermúdez, Chicano art is linked with what Umberto Eco called “semiological guerrilla warfare,” that is, taking the side of analysis and a critical outlook against mass culture. Its relevance today resides in the fact that it shows up the contradictions and conflicts of U.S. Anglo-American society, denouncing the marginality of Chicanos and Latinos in it. “They are Rebel Diamonds from the Sun, forged by the intense pressures of injustice and marginalization, only to emerge white hot and nigh unbreakable, as their creative expressions and processes expand, deepen, and mature.”¹

In the chapter “Imagining Paradise,” academic Chon Noriega of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center notes that L.A., the City of Dreams, developed thanks to the labor of Latinos. He says, however, that they rarely play leading roles in Hollywood movies. The minorities had to seek other spaces, and for that reason, Chicano art played a role in the struggle to make civil rights demands visible.

Chicano artists are therefore committed to a cause, and their work generally includes two concepts: community and the world of art. Both, the specific and the universal, converge in an urban space characterized by segregation and critically recreated by the artists: in the

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urban landscapes of Carlos Almaraz, Gil Garcetti, and Cindy Santos Bravo; in the facades of Californian bungalows by Ana Serrano and Salomón Huerta; and in Patrick Martinez's neon lights reminding us that "America Is for Dreamers." Noriega argues that the demand for a City of Dreams, an imaginary paradise, where everyone has a place, persists in these works.

"Outsiders in Their Own Home" is how Rita Gonzalez, the curator of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, defines the Chicano artists. In contrast with Latin American artists exiled in the United States, whose identity is clear despite their being displaced, the Chicano artists live in permanent tension due to their bi-national identity, since they are "neither from here nor from there." And, perhaps because this conflictive hybridization is difficult to represent, all the works in this section are abstract: the brothers Einar and Jamex de la Torre, for example, offer a border version of Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*; Gary Garay uses street images and signs to create a personal aesthetic of the border; Viviana (Viva) Paredes, for her part, uses recycled materials to imagine ceremonial venues; Frank Romero suggests disturbances and repression in urban canvases; Ramiro Gomez's paintings and sketches, which include magazine cuttings, reflect the difficulties domestic workers face in integrating into U.S. families; Patssi Valdez paints domestic scenes with revealing windows; and Eloy Torrez uses large-scale photo-realism to present international migration.

The heterogeneity of the works may be linked to the artists' not belonging to a specific space and culture. In the words of Rita Gonzalez, this is something Chicanos experience as a permanent condition of being "foreigners."

"Mapping Identity" includes works created from 1980 until now. Pilar Tompkins Rivas, the director of the Vincent Price Art Museum, says that identity or the lack of it is a huge theme in Chicano art, and although noteworthy differences do exist between generations and decades, the feeling of "being in the middle" can generally be noted throughout the history of the current. Thus, the

works from after the 1980s move ahead toward the reaffirmation of community and a sense of resistance. And that is why it comes as no surprise that some of the artists from this section of the exhibition have also worked in art collectives. This is the case of Patssi Valdez and Gronk, members of the art collective Asco (Disgust), and Judith Hernandez, a member of Los Four. Here we see Gabriela Ruiz's domestic spaces intervened with isolating foam and color; figures darkened by anonymity in portraits by Roberto Gil de Montes, Yolanda Gonzalez, and Salomón Huerta; the playful images of Camille Rose Garcia; statistical data making up images in Linda Vallejo's *Brown Dot Project*; and Enrique Castrejon's multi-media collage.

Finally, in "Cruising the Hyphenate," Julián Bermúdez takes as his starting point the simple image of a hyphen, an apparently inoffensive punctuation mark, to remember its powerful meaning when it joins and at the same time separates places of origin and identities: Mexican-American, Latin-American, etc. In Chicano art we find such simple and powerful signs, like the automobile. In the paintings of John Valadez, the creator of the first Chicano murals, cars personify freedom, mobility, and refuge. For Johnny "KMNDZ" Rodriguez, a stalled car operates as a reason to express the profound, explosive passion of its drivers; Frank Romero, for his part, shows L.A. as a city made to drive in: free, open, and borderless.

"Construyendo puentes" came at a particular moment in relations between Mexico and the United States when we should remember the long road traversed by our two countries living together. Amidst the multitude of speeches about this, few are as free, critical, and frank as what art has to offer. Perhaps only art is capable of crossing the language and cultural barriers to offer us a deeper, more human look at our shared history. This exhibition of Chicano art was a clear example of how hybridization can create complex and profoundly significant expressions. The catalogue is proof of that. **MM**

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Notes

1 Exhibition catalogue, p. 71.