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CARMEN LOMAS GARZA

CONSTANCE CORTEZ

FOREWORD BY CHON A. NORIEGA



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FOREWORD

CHON A. NORIEGA

Carmen Lomas Garza's artwork represents a lifelong project of creating an alternative chronicle of Chicano familial, communal, and cultural practices in South Texas as refracted through personal memory. Her paintings (gouache and alkyd), prints, installations, and paper and metal cutouts challenge official histories, but they do not document racial oppression or violence, or political resistance. Instead, they tell of customs, communal events, local folk heroes, and family history. Their pleasing and deceptively simple appearance bears the weight of violent and exclusionary practices that have had institutional and societal force. This work is the product of Garza's *compromiso*, or commitment, to remember for her community—a project that is by no means finished.

Garza's art takes the form of personal memory within a visual "folk" idiom, suggesting a sharp contrast with a modern art that is understood as a break with the past, with tradition, and with religion. But such a view would be shortsighted, overlooking a significant tributary for American modernism, one that emerges from immigrant and nonwhite communities. The formalist understanding of modernism privileges the Euro-American appropriation of the nonwhite "folk" and "primitive" aesthetic, not its transformation into a modern vernacular. In this respect, Garza's art must be placed in the context of a protracted political struggle over public culture in the United States, a struggle played out *within* American modernism. Garza's aptly titled retrospective, *Carmen Lomas Garza: Pedacito de Mi Corazón (A Piece of My Heart)*, provides insight into the public and performative aspects of this process. Organized by the Laguna Gloria Art Museum in Austin, the exhibition opened in the fall of 1991. It then traveled to the El Paso Museum of Art, where it was on display from December 14, 1991, through February 2, 1992.¹

The exhibition came amid a national shift regarding the role of the museum and the function of art in civil society, one aspect of which was publicly debated in terms of "cultural diversity" versus "artistic quality." What was less frequently reported was

how changes in demographics and funding policies affected the internal structure of the art museum, with the result that the board of trustees, the museum director, and the various curatorial departments came to have different, and often conflicting, constituencies. And this is what happened in El Paso. The previous year, Becky Duvall Reese had been hired as the new director and given a mandate to bring about change for the first time in twenty-five years. The museum was 100 percent municipally funded, yet it was not responsive to the local community, especially the Mexican American community, which made up 70 percent of the local population. Instead, exhibitions and activities at the museum reflected the interests of the city's cultural elite, which oversaw the museum via the El Paso Art Museum Association. Duvall Reese set out to open up the museum to the general public, starting with an exhibition of Mexican colonial art in the permanent collection that was followed in quick succession by three exhibitions of Chicano art: the Garza retrospective; *Chicano and Latino: Parallels and Divergence—One Heritage, Two Paths*, organized by the Daniel Saxon Gallery in Los Angeles; and *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965–1985*. These exhibitions turned around declining attendance, increasing the number of visitors from a low of twenty people a day to an average of one hundred a day, with the Garza retrospective first setting a record of 6,500 people during its six-week run and *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation* then attracting 4,000 people to the opening alone.

The Garza retrospective became the occasion for a public struggle between the director and the museum association. In a front-page newspaper story published in late January 1992, the president of the association announced that he had taken a personal survey of the popular show and found that no one liked it. "I've asked people to rate the exhibit from one to ten," he told the *El Paso Herald-Post*, "and didn't find a single person who rated it above a one. To me, it's an embarrassment."² Off the record, the association complained about the "brown art" and "brown faces" that now filled the museum. Garza responded to the press statements by saying, "There is a strain of racism in that attitude, which is also a form of censorship. I'm not threatened by it. I think it's sad."³

Were it to end there, this story would not be that unusual, a sad-but-true tale of thwarted ideals and expressions. But Duvall

Reese and Garza went one step further. If the association had taken the seeming high road of cultural elitism, director and artist would take the low road of engaging political representation. They went to Freddy's Breakfast, where the town's leaders met before city commission sessions. Garza worked the room, talking with the mayor and council members, explaining her work, answering questions, and so on. Soon thereafter the city government moved to legally disenfranchise the association—it continued to exist, but it no longer governed the museum. Today the mayor and the city council appoint an advisory board, and the museum director reports directly to the mayor.

Garza's intervention within the museum, like the politics of memory in her artwork, was a local one. She speaks to a specific place and time, and she speaks for those whose silence and invisibility is presumed to be natural, an assumption that is merely corroborated by public funding for the arts, culture, and civic space. To look at this case strictly in terms of censorship misses the point. It is not just about an abstract concept of "free" expression but also about the platforms from which certain individuals and groups are allowed to speak. It is about the fact that discourse correlates to governance—what is said determines who gets to make the administrative and curatorial decisions that define our public culture, that define what it means to exist in the modern world.

In one of the works produced after the retrospective, Garza offers her own definition, recalling a visit to her grandmother's house when she was about ten or eleven years old. Garza's friend, a teenager, had always wanted to visit the grandmother. In *Una Tarde/One Summer Afternoon* (1993), Garza depicts the moment of revelation in which she learns why her friend had been so interested in the grandmother's house: the boy next door. The friend sits on the bed and leans into the windowsill, and the boy, on the other side of the screen, faces her. The grandmother acts as chaperone, crocheting as she watches the interaction between the two teenagers from a chair opposite the bed, while a young Garza braids the bedspread fringe. Garza has flattened and exaggerated the perspective, organizing the figures along two diagonal lines that intersect at the boy—on the left, from Garza to her friend, and on the right, from the photographs on the dresser to the grandmother. At the bottom center of the painting, underneath the boy, is a cat feeding her



Carmen Lomas Garza, *Una Tarde/One Summer Afternoon*, 1993. Alkyd on canvas, 24 × 32 inches. Artist's collection.
 Photograph by M. Lee Fatherree.

three kittens. The cats and the boy form a line that leads up to an exposed lightbulb hanging from the ceiling.

The procreation narrative is at once overdetermined at an animalistic level (boy plus girl equals kittens) and counterbalanced by the cultural and intergenerational framework for couple formation in the Mexican-descent community of South Texas. Indeed, the latter adds an interesting dimension to the grandmother's traditional role as chaperone: the line between the grandmother and the boy originates at two black-and-white graduation photographs of, presumably, the grandparents in their youth. These photographs are echoed by the black-and-white portraits of the couple as adults that hang over the bed. Here the composition produces a visual narrative that links folk

tradition, religious belief, and coed education by connecting the graduation photos to the grandmother to the girl on the bed to the married couple above the bed. Similarly, a line runs from the graduation photos to the grandmother to the boy outside the window to a small statuette of Don Pedro Jaramillo, a renowned *curandero*, or faith healer, who died in South Texas in 1907.⁴ The statuette sits on a shelf in front of a portrait of the Virgen de Guadalupe and alongside a vase of flowers like those just outside the window.

The grandmother's crocheting serves as a metaphor—or makes the image a “gerund rather than a noun,” as Constance Cortez notes about another painting⁵—for how these elements form a cultural logic within the Chicano community. Neither the girl nor the boy belongs to the Garza family; their courtship is governed by a set of communal expectations for education, religious belief, and social hierarchies. Notice how the composition works from the top down: from Catholicism to folklore and parental authority, to youth, to education (as offered by the chaperone and represented by the graduates), to innocence (represented by the artist as a young girl), to reproduction (the cat and kittens). The grandmother's crocheting is echoed by Garza's braiding the fringe of the bedspread. Here we see the young artist being acculturated into the logic of the community, even as her braiding also appears to be a way of distracting herself from the revelation about her friend's motive.

What we see, then, is the visual representation of a “Chicano erotics” structured around religious belief, social expectations, and patriarchal authority, but we also see the self-reflective presence of the artist-as-artist. Garza describes her younger self in the following way: “I'd be braiding and braiding, but I would have to unbraid everything when it was time to go.” As with Penelope's weaving in the *Odyssey*, Garza's braiding can be seen as a way of forestalling an unwanted suitor who represents a danger to the community. In the myth, Penelope's suitors threaten the family-as-kingdom; in the painting, the teenage boy upsets Garza's prepubescent understanding of female-male relationships. But Garza's braiding is also a metaphor for the work of the artist, who weaves together the strands of memory, again and again. Each braiding becomes an unbraiding, for with each telling the narrator must forget in order to remember. Each artwork neither repeats the last nor retrieves a pure and unchanging

past; instead, it must create anew. Garza has outdone Penelope, braiding and unbraiding for four decades, not two, creating an alternative chronicle that situates Chicano culture in all its complexity as a dynamic and constituent element of American modernism.

NOTES

1. Carmen Lomas Garza and Amalia Mesa-Bains, *A Piece of My Heart/Pedacito de Mi Corazón: The Art of Carmen Lomas Garza* (New York: New Press, 1991). See also Carmen Lomas Garza, *Family Pictures/Cuadros de Familia* (San Francisco: Children's Book Press, 1990). The exhibition traveled to other sites in Texas and California.

2. Robbie Farley-Villalobos, "Museum President Embarrassed: 'Personal' Survey Shows Public Doesn't Like Current Exhibit," *El Paso Herald-Post*, January 25, 1992, p. A1.

3. Ibid.

4. Ruth Viola Dodson documented the cures in *Don Pedrito Jaramillo: Curandero* (San Antonio: Casa Editorial Lozano, 1934). See also Wilson H. Hudson, ed., *The Healer of Los Olmos and Other Mexican Lore* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1951), which reproduces some of Dodson's text.

5. See the chapter titled "A Tejana on the West Coast" in this volume.