

'Bridges in a Time of Walls' Brings Chicano Art to Mexico City

Samanta Helou Hernandez | October 22, 2018

“Es arte Chicano,” explains a mother to her young daughter, *“de gente Mexicana que vive en Estados Unidos.”* (“It’s Chicano art, from Mexican people who live in the United States.”) The little girl has an awestruck expression as she walks up the winding path of Mexico City’s Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil. The pair stops to observe mural-sized paintings, sculptures and colorful installations, all made by Mexican-American and Chicano artists from Southern California.

“Bridges in a Time of Walls: Mexican/Chicano Art from Los Angeles to Mexico” is a wide-ranging, multigenerational and rare exhibit of Chicano artwork in Mexico’s capital on view until November 25, 2018. The exhibit, organized thematically rather than chronically, with work from artists like Patssi Valdez, Carlos Almaraz and Patrick Martinez, among many others, seeks to complicate the narrative and challenge misconceptions of what Chicano art is while contributing to a much-needed dialogue between Mexico City and Southern California.

“You have a group of people who are born with Mexican heritage who have chosen to explore themes to help them and others understand that they are more than just Mexican and more than just American,” explains Julian Bermudez, the exhibition curator.

Despite the violent rhetoric around immigration in the United States, 36.3 million people in this country identify as being full or of partial Mexican ancestry. It’s hard to find a person in Mexico who doesn’t have a relative or friend that immigrated to the United States. This makes understanding the conditions of Mexican-Americans and Chicanos that much more critical; and art is a poignant vehicle to do so.

“Mexico City is a significant art center, and there’s a significant exchange with New York. The same doesn’t necessarily happen with Chicano art,” explains

Chon Noriega, a professor of Chicano studies at UCLA, curator, and contributor to the exhibition's catalog. "It's an important dialogue to have between Mexico City and Los Angeles."

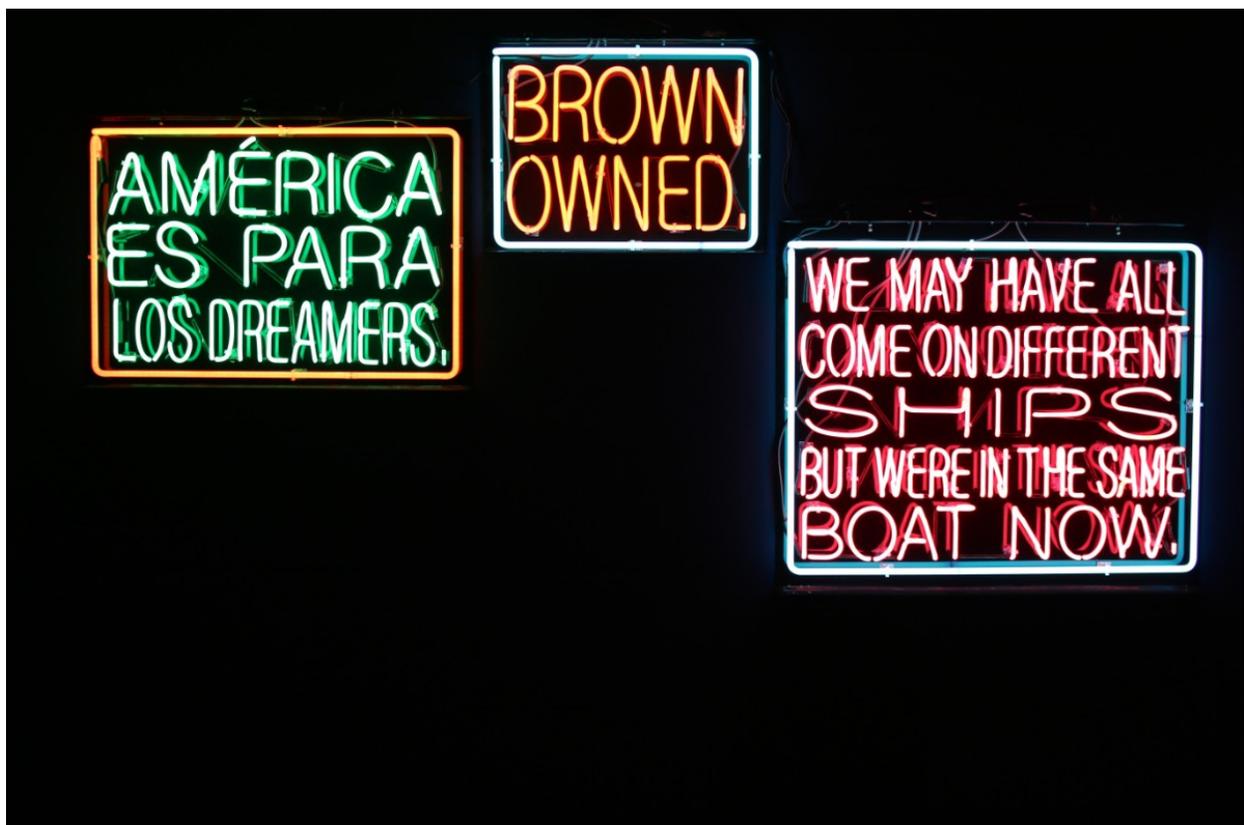


"MacArthur Park, the Arrest of the Taco wagon, an Attack on Culture" 2010 by Frank Romero and
"Paleta Cart," 2004 by Gary Garay | Samanta Helou Hernandez



“Bridges in Times of Walls” is a collaboration between the Mexican government’s cultural department and AltaMed Health Services — the United States’ largest federally-qualified health center, which also boasts an extensive collection of over a thousand pieces of art, many of which are by Chicano artists. The idea of inaugurating a Chicano art show in Mexico City came about after the overwhelmingly positive reception of “Before the 45th: Action/Reaction in Chicano and Latino Art,” an exhibit at the Mexican Cultural Institute in Washington D.C. by AltaMed.

Walking up the ramps of the museum, visitors are greeted with a bilingual text introduction detailing the experiences of Chicanos in the United States and the art created in response. Eighty-eight pieces of art take up the third floor. The glow of a liquor store-like neon sign with the phrase “Brown Owned” by Los Angeles artist Patrick Martinez fills the right side of the room, its words cleverly celebrating everyday imagery we take for granted. Photographs of performance art by the avant-garde 1970s collective Asco follows soon after. Proceeding in a circular fashion, the exhibition is thematically divided into five sections: Rebel Diamonds from the Sun, Imagining Paradise, Outsiders in their Own Home, Mapping Identity and Cruising the Hyphenate.



"America is for Dreamers" 2016-2017 by Patrick Martinez | Samanta Helou Hernandez

“Rebel Diamonds in the Sun” serves as an introductory section to the inception of Chicano art as a visual response to the social movements of the 1960s and 70s. The conceptual work of Asco is placed alongside the overtly political paintings of 70s Chicano art collective, Los Four. By showing a diverse set of visual and conceptual styles made from the 1970s to today, the exhibit contradicts false ideas around Chicano art as limited to one set of forms or subjects. “An exhibition like this gives an opportunity for an audience in Mexico to see a much more expanded array of art,” says Pilar Tompkins Rivas, the curator of Vincent Price Museum and an advisor on the project.

In “Imagining Paradise,” we see the way artists across generations respond to their built environment in vastly different ways. The explosive brush strokes and vibrant colors in Carlos Almaraz’s depiction of Echo Park finds itself next to Shizu Saldamando’s representational painting of a Highland Park kickback created on Japanese multi-panel rather than canvas. Saldamando celebrates everyday life in the historically Latino neighborhood while using elements that represent her own identity as a biracial woman of Mexican and Japanese descent.



"Highland Park Luau," 2006 by Shizu Saldamando | Samanta Helou Hernandez

In the middle of it all is Ana Serrano’s “Cartonlandia,” a mountainous cardboard structure of colorful homes inspired by neighborhoods in Mexico. Serrano’s work conveys the ways in which Latino barrios often resist Eurocentric

aesthetic standards of visually-unified neighborhoods through a liberal use of color and texture. The multicolored neighborhood could easily be found in Mexico City, Tijuana or South Central.

Contemporary artist Ramiro Gomez places domestic workers on the pages of luxury home magazine in "Outsiders in their Own Home" conveying the experience of being *ni de aqui ni de alla*, (neither from here nor there,) of not being fully embraced by Americans or Mexicans. By re-imagining photographs of perfectly manicured backyards and clean homes, we are confronted with the often forgotten labor behind these realities.



Visitor views Ana Serrano's "Cartonlandia," 2008 | Samanta Helou Hernandez



"A Lunchtime Conversation," 2015 by Ramiro Gomez | Samanta Helou Hernandez

Performance artist Gabriela Ruiz, also known as Leather Papi, created a monochromatic room of re-imagined furniture found during her excursions of through Mexico City's streets. By giving these disposed objects new life, Ruiz questions her own relationship to the idea of home in "Mapping Identity." Artists in this section created work that explored questions around belonging, sexuality, gender and immigration.

"Today it really is more about one's own perception of self," explains Tompkins Rivas. Artists in this section looked inward to create work that explores questions around belonging, sexuality, gender and immigration. "Historically there's been a tendency and need to make the term [Chicano Art] mean one thing or a movement of specific images that came out of maybe only muralism or printmaking. While those are important, art production is so much more complex than that," explains Tompkins Rivas.

As the circle comes to an end, "Cruising the Hyphenate" uses the metaphor of a car to show the in-betweenness of Chicano identity while celebrating an object (the car) that has a vast cultural relevance for Chicanos in Los Angeles. That the exhibition physically comes full circle is a reflection of its non-linear curation but also of the non-linear nature and evolution of Chicano cultural production.

Through various conversations with Mexicans in Mexico City viewing the artwork, it was apparent that stereotypes are still persistent. Many mentioned films like “Blood in Blood Out” as their introduction to the idea of a Chicano, while others described the art of *cholos* as their only exposure to Chicano art. Yet, all were pleasantly surprised to see the scope of artistic production by Chicanos ranging from sculpture, surrealism, realism, performance, video, conceptual art and beyond. “What impresses me is the great diversity of the exhibit and an array of artwork that still preserves a Mexican essence,” describes one attendee in Spanish.

Whether it’s through questioning alienation, migration, environment, politics, sexuality or gender, each artist, across different time periods engages with their identity in myriad ways. Ultimately, it exposes Mexicans in Mexico to sides of the Chicano and Mexican-American experience that they otherwise might not have seen. Throughout the opening weekend, curators and art workers from both sides of the border reiterated the importance of understanding the shared experiences between Chicanos and Mexicans, especially during a time where the livelihoods of Mexicans in the United States are in constant threat. They stressed in Spanish and English that, “*la cultura no tiene fronteras*,” (“culture has no borders.”)



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Samanta Helou Hernandez is a freelance multimedia journalist covering food, culture, music, and Latinx issues. Her work has been featured in publications such as LA Weekly, Mitú, and Remezcla among others. You can find her work at samantahelou.com.