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'Phantom Sightings' about 'phantom (Chicano) culture'

[By Elda Silva](#) - Express-News

In "Migrant Campsite," a photograph of the Arizona desert by Delilah Montoya, a single work glove lies in the dirt. Nearby, a pink backpack leans against a scraggly bush, and a pair of black boots bake in the sun. The only witnesses are a pair of disembodied shadows — they, too, seemingly left behind.

Absence echoes through "Phantom Sightings: Art After the Chicano Movement," a traveling exhibition of conceptual work by Mexican and Mexican American artists, some of whom identify themselves as Chicano artists and some of whom do not.

Organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and currently on display at the Museo Alameda, the exhibit takes its title from the writings of artist Harry Gamboa Jr., a founding member of the Chicano arts collective Asco. Gamboa described Mexicans and Chicanos in L.A. as comprising a "phantom culture," that is, a group largely unrecognized by and cut off from the mainstream.

"The way identity and history and politics are circulating in the show is almost as that kind of phantom presence," says curator Rita Gonzalez. "It's more an allusion or allegory to identity and not so much the type of didactic or illustrative work that you think of when you think of Chicano muralism or more figurative work where (the artist is) trying to represent the essence of Chicano or Chicana identity."

The show features work by about 30 artists working in a range of media including Ken Gonzales-Day's "Erased Lynchings," a series of vintage souvenir postcards of lynched Mexican and Mexican Americans in which the victims have been digitally removed; Margarita Cabrera's "Vocho (Yellow)," a full-scale, sewn-vinyl sculpture of a VW bug; and Julio Cesar Morales' "Undocumented Interventions," textbook-like illustrations of tactics used to illegally transport people into the U.S., including one showing a child hidden in a piñata.

Though the show's roster skews toward Los Angeles, there are also artists from San Francisco, New York, El Paso and San Antonio, including Cruz Ortiz and expat Alejandro Diaz.

"They are all doing work that you could take out of an ethnic-specific show and put in any other contemporary art exhibition," Gonzalez says.

Then why group them in such a show?

"This is part of the problem of a number of curators, especially curators of color, are having," she says. "There's two different necessities. There's the necessity to move beyond race and ethnicity on one hand. But

there's also the necessity to deal with institutional racism and the racism or exclusionary policies of art history.”

“What the curators wanted to do is say there is a way to deal with ethnic identity within a show if you do it through the thematic premise — the conceptual undergirding. The phantom culture really allows you to deal with the presence and absence of the Chicano, of the Chicano artists, (through) all the metaphors that the artists are using about absence and presence.”

The subtitle of the show is intended to suggest both a “temporal shift” and a “lineage” between previous generations and the artists featured in the show. Active from 1971 to 1987, Asco is presented as a predecessor. The group, whose name means “disgust” or “revulsion” in Spanish, staged street performances, media hoaxes and interventions including one at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. As the catalog recounts, the collective famously tagged the museum's entrances in 1972 after a curator told members that Chicano artists were not shown there because they made graffiti, not art. In effect, Asco created what Gamboa has described as “the first conceptual work of Chicano art to be exhibited at LACMA.”

Though Alejandro Diaz doesn't call himself a Chicano artist, his work is socially and politically engaged.

“The Chicano movement was all about presence and making your presence known as loud as you can,” Diaz said. “I think (the work in “Phantom Sightings”) is more subtle politically. And I think it's a luxury we've been able to afford because people that came before us won a lot of the battles.”

Work by Diaz in the exhibit includes cardboard signs hand-painted with often pointedly humorous statements, such as “Wetback by popular demand,” and his “Miracle Cans.” The large-scale sculptures are based on donation cans sometimes found on the counters of mom and pop businesses that are used to raise money for medical treatments, funerals, beauty pageants or other expenses.

The sculptures speak to “The Mexican American community coming together to help each other at a time and a place when the government has failed them,” Diaz says. “Then from an art historical point of view, it's kind of like taking the Andy Warhol soup can and making it political and making it Mexican and making it about serious social issues.”

Cruz Ortiz, likewise, does not identify his work as “Chicano art.” For the exhibit, he created an installation that includes a hang glider made with plastic shopping bags and a functional catapult he used in a performance to launch love letters to the audience.

Ortiz says he was initially reluctant to participate in “another Chicano show” but couldn't pass up the opportunity to show at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

He sees the artists in the show as “reanalyzing our identity as kind of this springboard to work off of.”

“It's a lot different from the artwork that was done, I think, from the '50s to the '70s and the '80s where it was more of an affirmation of identity,” Ortiz says. “I think this is a little bit different where, ‘Yeah, we know who we are, but this is what I like to be' and ‘This is also what I'd like to become.' I hope it's the last of the identity shows.”

“Phantom Sightings” continues at the Museo Alameda through June 14.

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