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VISUAL ARTS

Interactive: A Chicanx Artist's Point of View

Samanta Helou Hernandez | November 19, 2018

Chicano art was born out of struggle. During the socio-political movements of the 60s and 70s, artists of Mexican heritage living in the United States created visual expressions to comment on police brutality, racism and inequalities in education, among other issues.

There's no single definition of Chicano/Mexican-American art; much like there is no single definition of American art. Through the decades, Chicano and Mexican-American artists have responded to their environment in unique ways, whether it be avant-garde performance art, neon sculpture, or elaborate cardboard structures. The variety of expressions and experiences of these artists across time, is telling of a Chicano/Mexican-American identity that is as diverse as their work. Ultimately, Chicano/Mexican-American art should be recognized as part of the American art canon.

A current exhibition in Mexico City titled "Bridges in a Time of Walls: Chicano/Mexican-American Art from L.A. to Mexico" uses the [AltaMed Health Service's unique art collection](#) to introduce Mexicans to Chicano and Mexican-American art across generations and artistic practices, and in the process, creating a much needed conversation about the experiences of those en el otro lado (on the other side of the border).

We spoke to four artists in this exhibition — two who began their practice in the 70s and two whose work came to prominence in the last 10 years — about their journeys, identities and artistic practices.

Patssi Valdez

Patssi Valdez is a prolific multimedia artist whose practice began in the 1970s with the Avant-garde Chicano performance group, ASCO. The work of ASCO directly commented on pressing issues of the time like racism, police brutality, and inequalities faced by their predominantly Mexican-American community. Patssi's evolution as a solo artist includes collage, photography, sculpture, film and her beloved medium: painting. Her photographic and collage work of the 80s showcased Latinos glammed up and highly decorated as way to comment on the lack of positive representation in mainstream media. Today, she focuses on creating what she calls "narrative paintings" that are often surrealist in nature but tell stories that are imbued with her Mexican culture and the inspiration she finds in objects and the energies of her environment.



During the Asco years, I remember even when I was in the group, it's three men and one woman right. So at our openings, somebody would come up to me go, "Is that your boyfriend?" They always thought one of the men in the group was my boyfriend or I was an art groupie. And I'd say, "No, I created that" "You created that? You're kidding!" I'm like, "No that's my work there." Why couldn't a woman who wore lipstick and eyeliner create something interesting?

The reason I became an artist in the first place is because I found my voice through art because as a young woman and especially a woman who maybe wears makeup and sort of dolls themselves up, people don't really listen to you. They just look at you. They don't really care what you have to say. Through art making I found my voice. I'm an artist because I found freedom there.

Well, I've come full circle. I came from looking outside myself and dealing with political issues. And then at one point, I started to look inside, looking at myself actually. That's when I started these interiors because they became a metaphor for myself.

I can be inspired by the smallest things sometimes. I mean even going into this Mexican bakery in East L.A. It sounds ridiculous, but just to see all those old glass cabinets with wood and the scent in that room. If I had my way I could knock on the door and say, "Could I please come in here with my easel so I could capture the essence of this space?"

I'm inspired by things like that. I mean they enter my being and I just need to find a way to capture that and share that with others.

I can't even imagine not doing art. I think that's what I was put here to do. It's actually in the DNA of my family. They just weren't able to practice it like I was. My aunt could have been a designer. My other aunt was an easel painter part time.

I always say it shows me I didn't choose it, but eventually I did choose it because I did resent it for a little while. I'm like why do I have to care about any of this stuff?! I just want to be normal and regular. Why do I care about the political things that are going on in my neighborhood?

So I sort of had battled with that for a while and then eventually I made peace with it and then accepted it. And I was not turning back.

Ana Serrano

Born in South Central but raised in Downey, Ana Serrano works primarily with cardboard which she turns into built environments informed by her observations of Latino neighborhoods, travels to Mexico and childhood experiences. By placing these imaginary yet familiar structures in the white box of a gallery, Serrano celebrates Latinx culture and its resistance against Eurocentric aesthetic ideals.



Ana Serrano | Samanta Helou Hernandez

I grew up in South Central up until I was nine and then I moved to Downey, California.

That drastic change, was always very obvious to me. The houses were different, you had lawns, you didn't have fences. So I think it really stemmed from that experience that I just became very aware of the built environment since I was little.

The cardboard pieces and all the pieces I make are never recreations of the actual places out in the real world. I'm really just taking all of my memories of the built environment and creating this new space but it always is very familiar. People look at the pieces and will comment like, "Oh, I know where that building is at" and I'm like, "Well, it's not even a real

building.” But it's so familiar to people when all of these things come together. When the shape of the building, the color of the building, the type of fencing, the type of landscaping come together, then it's so familiar that they think that they've seen this out in the real world.

There's beauty and there's a lot more to these spaces rather than just like the superficial and the aesthetics.

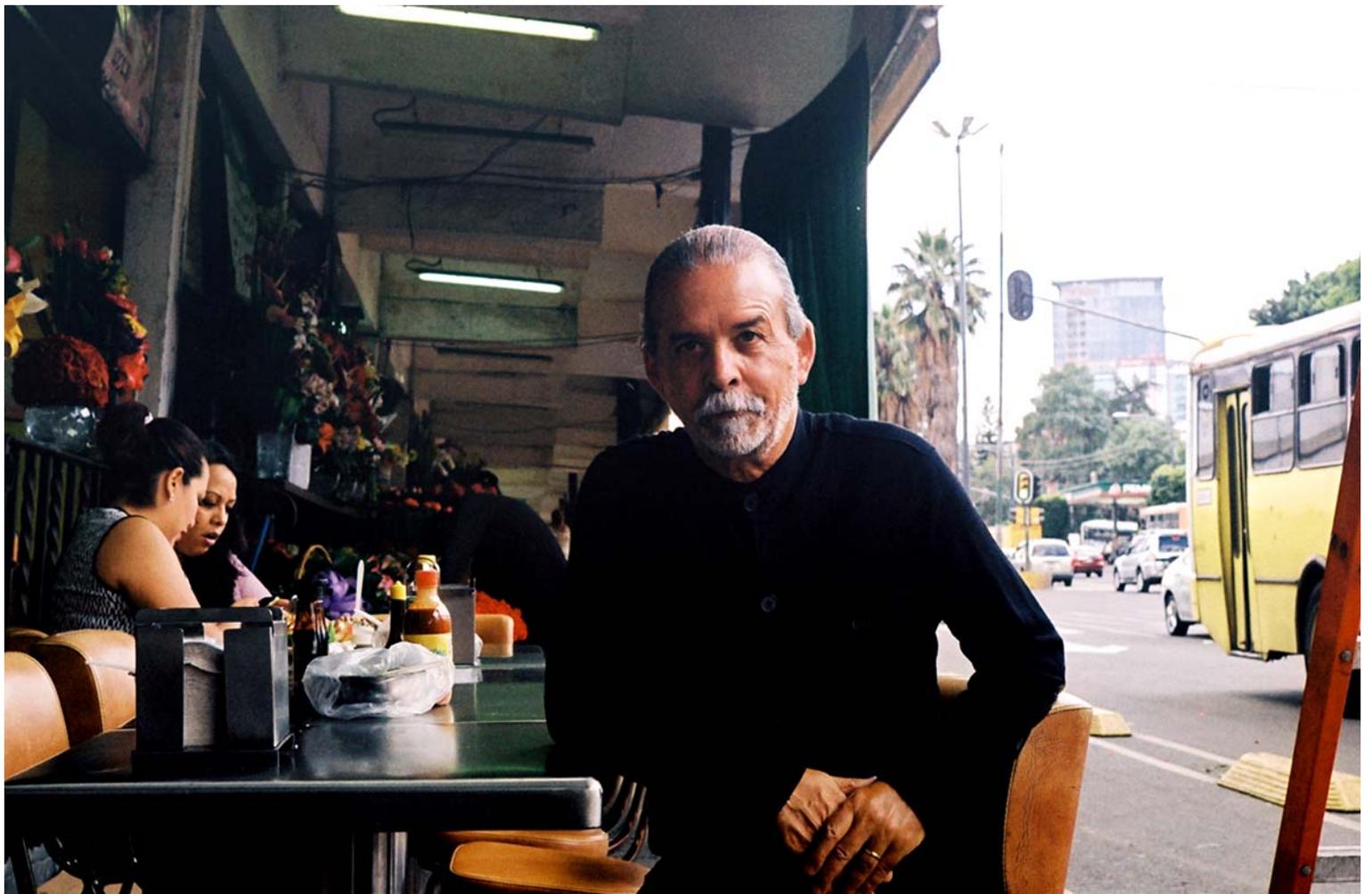
One of the pieces is a craftsman that has been stuccoed over, then there is a pool in the front yard and it's like a kiddie pool, plastic pool which you know is an indication of like a socioeconomic status.

First of all, the type of pool it is and also the fact that it's the front yard like Latinos use front yards as like social spaces. Where a white American want to use it as a social space. The front yard is always to be kept immaculate. And it's like a symbol of like class right? But in Latino neighborhoods the front yard is just an extension of your home. And it's a social space and they're able to use it and really utilize it in any way.

When I see these spaces that Latinos use however they want to use it or however they're used to using it back in their homeland, I see that as a form of resistance and as a form of resisting assimilation which I think is important. We shouldn't always have to live up to this American ideal. We can live in that country and still keep our identity.

Harry Gamboa Jr.

As part of the group Asco, Harry Gamboa Jr. worked alongside Patssi Valdez where they staged performances they dubbed the “No Movie Movies.” These stills, photographed by Gamboa Jr., were from films that were never actually made as a way to show the lack of Chicanos in Hollywood. Today, Gamboa Jr. is a prolific multimedia artist, professor, and writer. He’s known for staging what he calls “Foto Novelas” where groups of artists tell stories imbued with social commentary that he then photographs and turns into comic strip-like publications.



Harry Gamboa Jr. | Samanta Helou Hernandez

I guess I'm referred to often as a conceptual artist, but I always remind everyone that I'm Chicano also.

Princeton University a couple years ago were the first to ever refer to me as an American artist.

I had to live 60 years before someone accepted me as an American artist even though I was born alongside the Hollywood freeway.

I'm always insistent that I'm recognized as being Chicano so the idea is that the term Chicano has to be accepted as being American in the first place.

I'm perfectly at home in Los Angeles. My grandfather and great-grandfather were born here in Mexico City and I'm perfectly at home here, but I'm perfectly at home in Europe also.

Within all the chaos, artists are the ones that are able to point out and maybe manifest some of the beauty that exists between the various unfortunate accidents or the shadows and bring it all towards the light.

I was in an exhibition here at the Museo Carrillo Gil way back in the 70s.

These fliers, which was a series called "The Young Boy in the 50s," and it was sort of a characterization, a narrative of a young boy. He was conducting guerilla warfare against the INS and other people who were involved in harming other Mexican and Chicano children, and in the end he was very successful in freeing them from capture. It actually generated a lot of dialogue about the specific subject of deportations at the time

Because of the art market in the United States, and because the way the system is designed in the United States, they will be more welcoming of Mexicans from Mexico than they would be Chicanos because Chicanos represent the group that resisted against the power structure and they're too close. And of course it's a thing about class. They're not about to allow people that they perceive to be from the lower class to be ingrained into what other people would call the higher class. You will get representation of high class Mexicans in top spots but you simply won't see too many Chicanos in there.

I think Chicano is a very important terminology. The way I've always interpreted it and the way I continue to push it, is to be a diamond, to cut through anything and to not be able to be broken and we are a result of intense pressure and heat but the result is perfection. And at the same time diamonds are the most common element in the universe so at the same time we're unique but we're very much what's been here the whole time.

Patrick Martinez

Patrick Martinez is a Filipino-Mexican-American artist from Los Angeles known for his neon work that flips the script on typical signage to include socio-political phrases. Drawing inspiration from hip hop, graffiti, and Los Angeles's diverse neighborhoods, Martinez's work celebrates working class culture and comments on the social issues faced by people of color in America.



Patrick Martinez | Samanta Helou Hernandez

The neon is just another form of sculpture for me but it's a contemporary sculpture in the sense that it's just around me, it's representing the time that we're living in. It's just something you'd see in the liquor store front or market front, people advertising. Small mom and pop stores advertising business, their business.

When I when I started the neon stuff I wanted the aesthetic to look like you can take it off of the museum wall or the gallery wall and put it into a liquor store. I wanted that directness. I wanted it to be familiar to people

With the work that I'm doing now, first and foremost it represents the times that we're living in. That's what I want to do when I have a show or I'm included in a museum exhibition is represent that.

You know people go to museums shows a lot and they feel kind of excluded and not represented and I feel like I want to do that represent people that are not seen.

I identify with being American. Growing up with so many different people around me different nationalities and that's how it happened. I didn't grow up in Mexico, I didn't grow up in the Philippines, I don't speak Spanish, I don't speak Tagalog, but I can relate you know to some of the narratives.

In L.A., we're driving everywhere because everything is left to right, not up and down like New York. I'm in the car a lot you know, there's is so much, different pockets to L.A. I feel like that's what it is with me, I have different pockets to me and I can access those.

Top Image: "Bridges in Time of Walls" exhibition / Samanta Helou Hernandez