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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Why this actor's art shouldn't be at LACMA



CONFLICT?: Cheech Marin's personal art collection, which includes "The Arrest Of The Paleteros (The Arrest Of The Popsicle Sellers) 1996," is on view at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Reed Saxon, Associated Press

Cheech Marin's 'Los Angelenos' has no place in a public museum like LACMA.

By Christopher Knight, Times Art Critic
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I'm no fan of public art museums exhibiting private collections. The negatives so far outweigh the positives that such shows hurt, rather than help, a museum's mission.

The latest example is "Los Angelenos/Chicano Painters of L.A.: Selections From the Cheech Marin Collection," which opened recently at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The clumsy title is the least of its problems.

"Los Angelenos" is a smaller, more focused version of "Chicano Visions: American Painters on the Verge." That show began a multiyear, corporate-sponsored national tour of about 15 small or regional museums and exhibition halls in the spring of 2001. (The Smithsonian in Washington, D.C., also hosted it, but not at one of the institution's six art museums.) The work is loosely characterized by a dual embrace of American pop culture and Mexican Modern art traditions.

Comedian and actor Cheech Marin has been an avid fan of Chicano painting for a couple of decades, and he's built a sizable collection. When I saw the original show four years ago, I wrote that it "includes several terrific works made since the 1980s. . . . But as a history of Chicano painting, which stretches to the dawn of the 1970s, this show is severely limited."

Those limitations persist at LACMA, where a whittled selection of some 50 works is on view. About 10 paintings come from sources other than Marin, including the museum's own collection. But the show doesn't come close to being an incisive historical survey.

The name game

The name-dropping in the title is also annoying. There are only two occasions when I care to see the name of someone who is not an artist in the title of an art museum exhibition.

One is when it accompanies a gift of art, as with the Museum of Modern Art's 2005 "Contemporary Voices: Works From the UBS Art Collection." The other is posthumously, in something like "Cézanne to Picasso: Ambroise Vollard, Patron of the Avant-Garde," the Metropolitan Museum of Art's 2006 study of a pivotal art dealer, circa 1900.

Like the art dealer (and like the Swiss bank), Marin is keen on certain painters. And he wants others to be keen on them too. Good for him. Lots of artists have likely benefited from his fervor. Unfortunately, promotional enthusiasm is not enough justification for an art museum to organize a show. Not by a long shot.

A better argument

The argument that we shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth, even if the gift is temporary, doesn't hold water either. It presumes that without the collector's loan a museum's galleries would sit empty. Nonsense. We'd simply have something else to see.

The usual explanation for why museums shouldn't host single-collector shows is also mostly nonsense. The claim is that it might influence the financial value of the art, to the unseemly benefit of a private collector, by lending museum imprimatur.

That intangible is what launched the initial dust-up over "Sensation," the Brooklyn Museum's notorious show of Charles Saatchi's private collection a decade ago. "Sensation" quickly exploded into a full-scale scandal when it turned out the collector had also chosen the art, installed it and financially underwritten his show -- at an ostensibly public institution.

Of course, museum imprimatur isn't what it used to be, thanks to cheesy antics like Brooklyn's. But that's just a symptom of the larger issue, which isn't about money.

It's about the art museum's curatorial independence, which a single-collector show substantially forfeits. (In Saatchi's case, the forfeiture was nearly complete.) We rely on art museums for free and thorough scholarship, which follows wherever the curatorial nose leads. But single-collector shows privatize that public museum role -- publicly funding it to boot.

Settling for less

Organizing a show that tells the story of L.A.'s Chicano painting is a complicated affair, far beyond the scope of one person's collection. "Los Angelenos" gives an important history short shrift, like a backhanded compliment. Why settle for that?

If LACMA was fulfilling its mission, rather than being lackadaisical, the museum would have produced a catalog to outlast the art's temporal visit. It didn't. The old "Chicano Visions" book is on sale in the museum shop, as if that's good enough.

Most tellingly, the show doesn't even have a curator. Someone on LACMA's staff was, of course, responsible for overseeing the exhibition, but it's the only outside show -- meaning not drawn from LACMA's permanent collection -- listed on the museum's website that doesn't have a living, breathing human being's name attached, except the private collector's. No curator claims it.

I don't blame him (or her). The show should not have happened.

How it happened

LACMA Director Michael Govan approved it for the schedule, even though the museum had rightly turned down the offer when the tour of "Chicano Visions" was being assembled seven or eight years ago.

Marin recently told a Times reporter that, back then, the reason given for the refusal was that the museum did not present individual private collections. But a month before the "Chicano Visions" tour was launched in San Antonio, LACMA opened the show "Jasper Johns to Jeff Koons: Four Decades of Contemporary Art From the Broad Collections." With work amassed by influential LACMA trustee Eli Broad given a splash, it would be reasonable to assume that Marin might have felt -- shall we say, suspicious?

Broad's private holdings are also now back at the museum, again on temporary view. Marin's private

holdings are next door, at LACMA West. Doubling down might be fun at the blackjack table, but it's lousy exhibition policy. A no-private-collections rule at LACMA, like the ones at MOMA and the Met, is long overdue.

christopher.knight @latimes.com

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Comments

I think Christopher Knight hit the nail on the head asking why there was not curatorial oversight.

Why didn't LACMA dignify a show about Chicano painters with the full academic rigor that it should command?

The fact is Chicano art has always been deemed on the verge of what institutions like LACMA want to incorporate into their scope of art.

The show, should have been much larger, it should have had several pieces of scholarship attached to it and a new catalog.

Posted by: Oscar | July 02, 2008 at 10:35 AM