



"Las Tropicanas," begun by Eduardo Carrillo while he was teaching at Sac State in the 1970s. Courtesy of the Crocker Art Museum

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Crocker showcases diversity of Eduardo Carrillo's work, from realism to myth and fantasy

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Eduardo Carrillo (1937-1997) - artist, scholar, teacher, activist, visionary and mystic - was one of the most imaginative, searching and skillful artists to emerge in California in the early 1960s.

"Testament of the Spirit," a spectacular career survey of 60 works from 1958 when he was a student to 1997 when he died of cancer, on view at the Crocker Art Museum through Oct. 7, illustrates the depth and range of his work.

A Californian of Mexican descent, he is most often associated with the Chicano art movement that arose in reaction to the Vietnam War and in support of Cesar Chavez's United Farmworkers labor movement, but his work is much broader than that and difficult to pigeonhole, both in terms of subject matter and style.

Carrillo moves easily from straight realism to magical realism to the realms of myth and fantasy; from seemingly straightforward portrait and still life subjects to surrealist phantasms that reflect his fascination with the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch; and from earthy depictions of humble workers to ecstatic religious paintings, such as the powerful "El Vuelo de Sor Juana (The Flight of Sor Juana)," 1982.

Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz was a 17th century Mexican nun, poet, and self-taught scholar considered to be the first published feminist writer of the New World. Carrillo presents her in an ecstatic swoon - pen in one hand, rosary in the other - her arched body bent to God's will. It's a towering dreamlike visionary painting of a woman we should know more about.

Religious in feeling, too, is "Testament of the Holy Spirit," 1971, a painting done during the period from 1970 to 1972 when Carrillo was an art professor at California State University, Sacramento. Leaning towards Latin American magical realism, it blends Mexican Indian spiritual elements with Renaissance Italian Catholic symbolism.

Crocker curator Kristina Perea Gilmore points out, while the painting is a realistic still life of a 1950s formica kitchen table, "it is also strangely surreal, seamlessly evoking the sacred within the mundane." The coiled snake on the table (actually an ashtray) is, she notes, an important pre-conquest symbol that signifies spiritual awakening, rebirth, and renewal. The light streaming in the windows is reminiscent of the light in Renaissance paintings of the Annunciation and Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary. Fido, the dog under the table, is a symbol of faith and fidelity as well as a beloved family pet.

Around the corner is a truly impressive copy of Bosch's "The Temptation of Saint Anthony" at the Prado Museum that Carrillo did on a sojourn in Spain in 1960-61 between studies with William Brice and Jack Hooper at the University of California, Los Angeles. It leads the way into raw and fanciful paintings, such as "The Aerialist," 1994, a chaotic but compelling image of Christ on the Cross with Coatlicue, the Aztec goddess of the earth, and "Couple in the Garden," 1985, a naked couple not being banished from Eden but heading for a picnic in the garden with a bottle of wine.

Arranged in two galleries on the museum's second floor, Carrillo's paintings range from depictions of violence ("Two Brothers Fighting," 1985) to romance ("The Two of Hearts," 1983) and the concept of "the other," as seen in a painting of an African man and a Mestizo in a desert setting sharing a bottle of water, which calls up the current fear-mongering about immigrants and people of color taking place in our country now.

The installation in the first gallery ends with Carrillo's masterpiece, "Las Tropicanas," 1972-73, begun while he was teaching at Sac State and completed after he accepted a position as an assistant professor at University of California, Santa Cruz. The monumental 84-by-132-inch painting draws on an amalgam of sources - Mexican, European, African, Egyptian, Greek - and has the woozy surreal quality of an opium dream. Sumptuous, sexy, scary, it takes you to another world, both

ancient and futuristic that Carrillo scholar Terezita Romo describes in the informative bi-lingual exhibition catalog as "The Aztecs meeting Las Vegas in Los Angeles."

In it, a nude woman archer, bathed in golden light, lies on a balcony aiming at a tortoise. Behind her, intricately tattooed nude women enter a world with modern and pre-columbian structures, an acrobatic pyramid of menacing Day of the Dead skeletons looming over a giant iguana, the surreal scene watched over by a giant hummingbird and a UFO.

It's a tour-de-force visionary image that former San Francisco Chronicle art critic Kenneth Baker lauded as one of "the most remarkable paintings made in the Bay Area in the 1970s" and New York's The New Museum curator Marcia Tucker described as combining "an extraordinary intensity of color and a wealth of rich surface texture with a startling, luminous, majestic, otherworldly quality of light."

Bringing together Carrillo's deep knowledge of art history, study of pre-columbian art and culture, and mastery of Spanish, Flemish and Italian Renaissance painting techniques, it commands and deserves extended viewing.

In the neighboring gallery are more intimately scaled works, among them numerous playful self-portraits, beginning with an engaging image of a young, quirkily off-balance Carrillo in a suit with a palette, and an extremely eccentric painting of a plain woman with a fanatical gaze holding a serpent as she balances on one foot at the top of a staircase. There is also in that gallery a must-watch 33-minute documentary video, "Eduardo Carrillo: A Life of Engagement," which explores his roles as artist, teacher, social activist and inspiring leader in the Chicano Art Movement.

As you leave the exhibition, please take time to study "Chicano History," 1970, a monumental mural done for the Chicano Research Center at the University of California, Los Angeles, installed in the hallway outside the exhibition galleries.

One of the earliest Chicano murals, it was a collaborative painting by Carrillo, Sergio Hernandez, Ramses Noriega, and Saul Solache that depicts in graphic, angry, and at times extremely disturbing imagery, the struggles of Mexicans and Chicanos for independence from colonialism, government corruption, and the Catholic Church and their revolutionary quest for self-definition and self-expression. It reminds us again of the racism and social inequities Chicanos, Mexicans and other Latin Americans have faced.

If you go

Testament of the Spirit: Paintings by Eduardo Carrillo

Where: Crocker Art Museum, 216 O St.

When: Through Oct. 7. 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday; 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Thursday.

Cost: \$12-\$6; free for Crocker members and children 5 and under; every third Sunday of the month is "Pay What You Wish Sunday."

More info: (916) 808-7000. crockerart.org