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LUIS C. GARZA, left, and Harry Gamboa Jr. at the Autry Museum of the American West in Los Angeles, where two exhibitions they worked on are on display.

# Developing positive images

Photographers Harry Gamboa Jr. and Luis Garza push back against Chicano stereotypes at the Autry.

BY CAROLINA A. MIRANDA

Two exhibitions at Los Angeles' Autry Museum of the American West tell a wildly different story about Mexican Americans than the political punchlines so often in the news about bad hombres.

"La Raza," organized by Luis C. Garza for Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA, gathers photography and ephemera from the 1960s-era activist newspaper of the same name, Harry Gamboa Jr.'s "Chicano Male Unbonded" is 84 portraits of Chicano men who have affected his life. Both shows explore Chicano history and identity. They document activism, faith, community and culture. Gamboa's installation, in fact, reads like a map to the region's Chicano literary.

Garza, a curator and photojournalist, and Gamboa, a conceptual artist and founding member of the influential collective Asco, recently came together at the Autry to discuss issues related to Chicano identity. Their paths have been different, but their experiences often overlapped. Garza covered the 1968 East Los Angeles "blowouts," the school walkouts led by Mexican American students that helped ignite the Chicano movement. Gamboa took part in them.

In this lightly edited conversation, they chat about the ways in which photography was used to create a counter-narrative, about identity and representation, and how their respective exhibitions kick back at all the stereotypes.

**After experiencing the East L.A. "blowouts" of 1968, what's it been like to watch the current wave of school walkouts?**

**Gamboa:** The walkouts of '88 were a life or death situation. Young men were being drafted. We wanted to promote better education. But it required people to perhaps suffer the consequences of police brutality or being denounced in class. In the current era, you also have a life or death situation: where students are being sacrificed for the profits of the gun industry. That's unconscionable. Any other country would take care of its children. That was our argument then.

**Garza:** It's a pushback that is occurring in so many different forms — be it these walkouts, or the women's marches, or Black Lives Matter. I see time bending in. When I look at 50 years ago and I look at now, I see a wrinkle in time.

**Gamboa:** Maybe one or two extra wrinkles [laughs] — and they are all well deserved!

**Luis, how did you decide what to feature from La Raza's vast archive?**

**Garza:** The La Raza collection now stands about 26,000 images — negatives dating from 1967 to 1977, which was the life of the publication. Some depict major events like the East L.A. walkouts or Aug. 29 [the 1970 Chicano Moratorium protest against the Vietnam War]. But there was daily life too. There were children and families. There were people, their art, their food. I went through several thou-



HARRY GAMBOA JR., Autry Museum of the American West

GERARDO VELAZQUEZ, Synthesized Music Composer, 1991, from the exhibit "Harry Gamboa Jr.: Chicano Male Unbonded."



MARIA VERITA PHOTOGRAPHY

A YOUNG CHICANTITA hawks La Raza newspapers at the Poor People's Campaign, Washington, D.C., May-July 1968.

sand images for the show. It was a difficult process. We selected 250 photographic images, thereabouts, that are on the gallery walls. Other images are loaded into touchscreen computers. And it's more than just photographs, it's the graphic artwork too.

**Harry, what are the origins of "Chicano Male Unbonded"?**

**Gamboa:** I remember there was a preliminary meeting for the creation of the "Chicano Arts, Resistance and Affirmation" show [a 1990 Chicano art exhibition at UCLA's Wight Art Gallery]. I happened to attend a dinner where I was surrounded by artists and historians. Everything sounded so positive. When I got to my car to go back to East L.A., where I was living at the time, I turned on the radio — and I warned to be on the lookout for a Chicano male. It was this promotion of a negative stereotype.

I thought of all the males I knew who had influenced me: scholars, writers, poets, artists, family members. I thought it'd be interesting to photograph the men I knew who had influenced me. I wanted to make it film noir-ish. Chicano men, when they're shown in media, it was often as a mugshot. I wanted to do it so that the men were looking down at you — to generate some anxiety in the viewer because this would likely be the first time a Chicano would look down on them.

**How does your work contend with the way society views Chicano and this political moment when Mexican and Mexican American men are depicted as "rapists" and gang members?**

**Gamboa:** The major event that contributes to [Donald] Trump denouncing Mexicans is the vast vacuum that exists, the lack of a multitude of representations of Chicano and Chicana. This allows people to insert negative ideas into the vacuum. And this justifies the mean-spirited behavior on behalf of our government.

**Garza:** Our exhibition is a counterpoint. It's a pushback. It's an exploration of our humanity in general — of Latinos. My work begins with my family when I first pick up a camera and I start capturing my family and my environment in the South Bronx. [My family comes from Mexico, the south Texas area, but they migrate to New York in the 1920s.] And I'm brought up in a very diverse community and I begin to capture that. And then I come here in the mid-1960s and I become involved with La Raza and I am introduced to a whole new world.

You look at the collection and you see the expanse. There are people in Harry's collection that were part of La Raza. That's the interesting thing about this project. It traces a genealogy. You see how it intersects with the arts community, academic community, with artists, musicians.

**Gamboa:** I knew people who had been involved in La Raza and they influenced me. I was the editor of a Chicano magazine called *Regeneración*. That's how Asco started. Invited Willie [Herrón], Gronk [Glugio Nicandro] and Patssi [Valdez] to participate. It introduced me to ideas of media and counter-media. Mainstream media insists on a vacuum, but there is no vacuum. That

required us to generate our own media. This predates the internet, so it's graphics, films, photographs. Asco was our foray into interrupting some of this. A lot of it was in response to this insistence to remove the Chicano from the conversation. That persists today.

**What significance did photography have to the Chicano movement and to Chicano art?**

**Gamboa:** I'm born in 1951 — when they initiated the first nuclear test in Nevada, which means I was born at the onset of post-Modernism, and this notion that things needed to be deconstructed, reevaluated and redefined. The focus [then was] the language of cinema, which requires a great amount of funds. Cinema, however, is a sequence of stills. I decided early on to simply take a photograph. That became the "No Movie" [Asco's send-up of film stills]. Stylistically it could be at the same level [you'd find in any magazine or any film]. It would engage in conversation with multi-million-dollar productions, but it would come from East L.A., for zero budget. Photograph wasn't cheap, but it was accessible.

**Garza:** That's where La Raza as an organizing tool and informational tool begins — with photography. [It] was one of the arrows, with poetry, with cartoons, with Journalism. La Raza emerges out of this sense of frustration and futility, in challenging the system so you can be heard.

The collection is part of a larger civil rights movement going on at the time. We cover police brutality, indigenous rights, Catholic issues — all things that continue to this day. People see their reflection. And it's not just the Latino community. Why? Because the power of the photograph speaks to the humanity in us all.

**What kind of record has your work created?**

**Gamboa:** Because this project began in 1991, I feel like it's captured my own changes in perspective. Some of the people in "Chicano Male Unbonded" I catch at a particular point in my career and their careers. Many are upwardly mobile. Willie Herrón, who I met when we were both 15, and we have gone through like 10,000 different stages. Is in there. [Documentary director] Phillip Rodriguez is in there. Chon Noriega [director of UCLA's Chicano Studies Research Center] is in there. I photographed him when I first met him, then I re-photographed him when he became director of the center. My son is in there. He was 15 and thinking about something that would be actualized. He served 15 years in the military.

Many people I catch in the moment of aspiring to be. And everyone on the wall has made something or done something that has contributed to the fabric of America. On that level, it's in complete contradiction to the insult that Trump has made upon us.

**Garza:** That's the challenge of these exhibitions. *Agui estamos — en frente*. [We are here — before you.] That is the statement. That is the stand that we take. And it's a stand that has a long history. As younger people walk into the exhibition, we are passing the baton for them to carry on.

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