



Rita Gonzalez: LACMA Curator and Defender of Subtlety

By Catherine Wagley

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Kevin Scanlon

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Five months after a 340-ton rock officially became part of Michael Heizer's massive *Levitated Mass* sculpture on the grounds of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, curator Rita Gonzalez installed the much smaller *Lost Line* sculpture on the third floor of the museum's Broad Contemporary building.

Made by artist Gabriel Orozco out of string and Plasticine, a claylike material

Rita Gonzalez

that never completely dries, the sculpture was

a gray, small, imperfectly shaped ball set in a corner, an antidote to Heizer's boulder. Gonzalez also titled the exhibition it appeared in "Lost Line" and installed other artworks from LACMA's collection that made similarly modest gestures. In Analia Saban's painting *Erosion*, the canvas looks like it's delicately decaying. In Amalia Pica's photocopied self-portrait, the artist looks out at a landscape much bigger than herself.

"We were thinking, what's the opposite of monumentalism?" says Gonzalez, the only curator in LACMA's contemporary art department who worked at the museum prior to the 2006 appointment of game-changing director Michael Govan.

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A native of Whittier, Gonzalez, 42, wears her hair in a tasteful boy cut, has a quiet energy and expresses her knowledge of art and its history in an unpretentious way. She has organized or co-organized a number of landmark exhibitions in the last few years. The most notable of these, "Phantom Sightings: Art After the Chicano Movement," which included experimental art made since the 1970s, and "Asco: Elite of the Obscure," about the influential L.A. performance art group, dealt with Chicano cultural history, a subject that major museums have barely begun to explore.

"It was daunting," Gonzalez says of "Phantom Sightings." "We didn't want it to feel like now LACMA had done the big exhibition of Latino artists. We wanted a certain looseness."

She and her collaborators achieved it. The show, like "Asco" and even "Lost Line," felt more like a free-form starting point than a definitive statement about what matters.

After studying art as an undergraduate at UC Santa Cruz, Gonzalez enrolled in the MFA program at UC San Diego, still planning to be an artist. While in San Diego, she helped scholar Jesse Lerner, now a professor at Pitzer, research the history of video art in Mexico. "I got more interested in the research, and started to realize what I could do," she recalls.

She finished Ph.D. coursework in UCLA's film, television and digital media program and in 2004 started working part-time at LACMA — which she preferred to academia. "I was raised to be much more of a dilettante," Gonzalez says, and the Contemporary department at LACMA allows for dabbling and boundary blurring. That openness has grown since the arrival of new head curator Franklin Sirmans and associate curator of contemporary art Christine Kim, both vested in diversifying LACMA's collection. "There are certain things that we don't question — the merit of a group like Asco, or of [African-American artist] David Hammons," figures historically marginalized by museum programs.

"There might have been a grittier or more exciting time," says Gonzalez, who sits on the board of Los Angeles Filmforum and is a regular presence at experimental spaces around the city. "But there's really not been a better time in terms of sheer number of possibilities."

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