

Never-Before-Seen Photos From the Chicano Movement Feel Timely 50 Years Later

BY LIZ OHANESIAN

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La Marcha por la Justicia, Belvedere Park, Jan. 31, 1971

Courtesy of the photographer and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center © Luis C. Garza

In 1967, as the civil rights movement continued to take shape in communities across the United States, bilingual newspaper *La Raza* emerged from Los Angeles as a voice of the then-burgeoning Chicano Movement. Now, 50 years later, pieces from the publication's massive photography archive will be on view at the Autry Museum of the American West. "La Raza," the exhibition, aims to shed light on an often overlooked part of the civil rights era through the work of the activist-photojournalists of the time. On display will be photography by Daniel Zapata, Devra Weber, Raul Ruiz and many others.

"It provides a portal, provides safe passage to go into a history that has been somewhat ignored or marginalized or forgotten," says Luis Garza, who was a photographer for *La Raza* and co-curated the show. "Ethnic studies is an outlet for this kind of material, but I think that American history is an outlet for this story, this exhibition, these photographs. ... We're not separate from, we are a part of, and that's what was documented in our efforts at *La Raza*."

La Raza published its first two issues on Sept. 4 and Sept. 16 of 1967. Garza notes the significance of the days: Sept. 4 is the anniversary of the founding of Los Angeles and Sept. 16 is Mexican Independence Day. *La Raza* began as a newspaper but after a few years morphed into a magazine format. "La Raza" opens Sept. 16, marking the 50th anniversary of the publication as well as the launch of the Getty's multi-institutional exploration of Latin American art, Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA.

Garza himself came into the fold a year after *La Raza's* inception. He had already gained a bit of experience in photography, having taught himself some of the techniques and also having worked with a mentor. He was a theater arts student at UCLA at the time and at a crossroads with where his work would be heading. Garza hit the streets on behalf of the publication, learning as he shot. Eventually, he branched out into other work, including documentary filmmaking and theater, but never fully left the world of photography. "My trajectory begins with photography and I've come full circle," Garza says. "I've come back to my roots as a photographer within this exhibition."

La Raza itself was a volunteer effort featuring the work of activists, students, writers, photographers and artists. They covered the major events of the time, like the East L.A. Walkouts in 1968 and the Chicano Moratorium of 1970, but the work was not just focused on the major protests. Garza himself recalls shooting stories about issues like employment.



Los Angeles County sheriffs at La Marcha por la Justicia

La Raza Newspaper & Magazine Records. Courtesy of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

Amy Scott, chief curator and the Marilyn B. and Calvin B. Gross curator of visual arts at the Autry, notes the power the camera has. "One of the big abilities of the camera that the photographers knew and exploited was its ability to provide evidence, specifically counter evidence within a court system that they felt was biased against them," says Scott. "For example, images of injuries obtained in scuffles with police provided important evidence of brutality and mistreatment at the hands of state authorities. They systematically documented bruises, bandages, scars, cuts, stitches, things like that."

Scott adds that another important function of the photos was their ability to capture the "power structure." The images show the size of the police force at events as well as the ways in which undercover officers surveilled communities. "One of the things that I find most exciting about it, as an art historian, is this sort of collective awareness of recognition," Scott says. "When you control the technology of representation, you control the political power or you can turn that kind of state power back on itself. It's basically the returning of the gaze as a means of taking power into one's own hands and redistributing it amongst the community and the camera as a critical tool of being able to do that."

Garza, too, points out the empowering nature of *La Raza*. "To look at the emergence of the Chicano Movement is to look at the emergence of a people that had long been denied access; at that time in the '60s – '67, '68 – there was no political representation from our community," he says, adding that there was little in the way of Spanish-language or bilingual media at the time, as well as little coverage of the community. "So, *La Raza* steps in to fill a void."

While the exhibition has been in the works for a few years, the subject matter has become increasingly relevant. That's not lost on the curators. "If the '60s and '70s were as convulsive as they were back then, we are entering into another period of that convulsiveness ... and that requires discussion," Garza says. "It's heated discussions at times. It's violent discussions at times. It's measured discussion, but it's a necessary discussion that is taking place and that's what we were doing at that time as activists. We were looking for discussion in terms of our rights as citizens for access to a system that had long kept us out of the system."

The Autry's show is slated to run through February 2019. Garza surmises, though, that this is just the first time you'll get to see *La Raza* photographs on display. Garza refers to the archives as akin to interest in the work of Vivian Maier, the photographer whose immense body of work was unearthed and published after her death. "You're discovering photographic work that nobody has ever seen," he explains. In the case of *La Raza*, it's an archive of 25,000 items.

"This is a work in progress," Garza says. Beyond the photographs that will appear on the museum walls, there is an interactive station in the works to give access to more images. "We're trying to provide access to that history and break it down to its various components and organize it in a manner [that is] viewer-friendly for ourselves and for the public," he says. Garza points out that, ultimately, this is just the beginning of a renewed life for these photos. He says, "I think that there are many exhibitions to make out of this collection."

"*La Raza*," 4700 Western Heritage Way, Griffith Park; opens Sat., Sept. 16, 10 a.m.-5 p.m.
theautry.org/exhibitions/la-raza.

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