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Walking Mural: Asco and the Ends of Chicano Art by Jim Hinch

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GRONK Untitled (Three Sisters) 1982 detail

LATE ONE NIGHT in April 1972, three young men from East Los Angeles drove to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in a red Volkswagen Bug. The men parked on a side street, out of sight of museum guards. They stepped from the car and crept through the La Brea Tar Pits toward the museum's Wilshire Boulevard entrance. Their movements were stealthy but the men decidedly were not. Long haired and barely into their twenties, each was heavily made up and wore an eye-catching assortment of clothes: red dinner coat with tails, green bowler hat, turquoise patent leather shoes and a World War I-era gray suit. They carried cans of black and red spray-paint. Arriving at the entrance, the men proceeded to tag their names — Herrón, Gronkie, Gamboa, Jr. — on the side of a bridge spanning a pond. They did the same thing to the museum's other entrances. Then they got back into the Volkswagen and drove home. It was 2:00 a.m.

The following morning at eight o'clock, one of the men, Harry Gamboa, Jr., returned to LACMA with his friend Patssi Valdez. Valdez, also heavily made up and dressed in a ruffled pink tank top and tight jeans with jeweled appliqué, posed on the bridge above the graffiti-ed names. She looked coyly to the side. Gamboa snapped her picture. A few hours later, museum attendants whitewashed the names away.

Spraypaint LACMA (Project Pie in De/Face), as this act of proto-street art was named by its perpetrators, was witnessed by exactly no one. But it has gone on to become one of Los Angeles' most famous graffiti tags. Gamboa's photograph of it twice has greeted visitors to major traveling museum retrospectives of Chicano art. The most recent of those retrospectives, *Asco: Elite of the Obscure*, premiered at LACMA late last year. The museum devoted nearly an entire gallery floor to celebrating the four-person East L.A. art collective that, beginning in 1971, single-handedly redefined what it meant to make Chicano art. *Spraypaint LACMA* is famous because it marks a seminal moment in American art history. Four kids from East L.A. with no art school education showed that Chicano artists, hitherto regarded by the art world as at best ethnic spokespeople, could match or even exceed the intellectual daring of the mainstream art world's avant-garde.

Asco means disgust or nausea in Spanish. When the four members of Asco — Harry Gamboa, Jr., Gronk (born Gluglio Nicandro), Patssi Valdez and Willie Herrón — tagged LACMA they expressed their own disgust at an arts establishment that had no time for Chicano culture. Hours before Asco's 2:00 a.m. escapade, Gamboa recalls that a curator at LACMA told him Chicanos "are in gangs; they don't make art." Using gang-style graffiti to transform LACMA into the world's largest piece of Chicano conceptual art was the inspired response to that put-down. Over the next decade and a half Asco would go on to produce some of the most original and provocative works of contemporary art — walking murals, fake monuments, stills from movies that never existed, bogus crime scenes — in the Chicano community or anywhere in America. They made no money and gained almost no recognition. But by word of mouth and gradual scholarly interest they ended up decisively influencing practically

every young Chicano artist working today. They told off LACMA, flouted conventions of established Chicano artists, offended almost everyone and wound up at the high table of the very institution that once scorned them.

Or at least that's how the curators tell it. A "remarkable trajectory," write C. Ondine Chavoya and Rita Gonzalez in their introduction to the 432-page catalogue for the Asco exhibit. The group's "provocative and inspiring history...contests the presumably accepted and canonical norms of art history." That's true. But the celebration of Asco's improbable rise sidelines a parallel, less straightforward story about the group's legacy. Asco members remained rooted in East L.A. and staged most of their art in the community where they grew up, albeit often to hostile or bewildered audiences. Their work only became famous decades later, when scholars and museum curators recognized in their innovative tactics a form of Chicano art the international art world could embrace wholeheartedly. Younger Chicano artists often cite Asco as a decisive influence. But those younger artists mostly direct their work toward the art market, not toward the Mexican American communities once seen as Chicano art's primary audience. Asco, like many early Chicano artists, saw themselves as vital players in an ethnic political movement. Today their legacy resonates most strongly with an audience of academics and art collectors.

In a recent interview Gamboa told me Asco never intended this sort of abandonment. "We wanted to expand and renew the mix so people could be more effective in their ability to be introduced to a broader audience," he said. Asco succeeded, but perhaps not as they foresaw. Forty years later, headlining LACMA, the group doesn't just symbolize a Chicano art movement at long last getting its due. Asco's embrace by the mainstream art world — the LACMA retrospective made the October, 2011 cover of *Artforum*, and the exhibit traveled to the Williams College Museum of Art, where it showed from February through July, 2012 — suggests that Chicano art, once a form of politics, the aesthetic wing of a Mexican-American civil rights movement, is now simply another form of art.

LACMA's Asco retrospective was one of more than 65 exhibits staged across Southern California last year as part of Pacific Standard Time, the landmark effort led by the Getty Foundation to tell the story of Los Angeles' emergence as a world art capital. Though Los Angeles is arguably the birthplace of Chicano art and remains home to many of the movement's luminaries, only one group of Chicano artists was awarded a major museum solo show as part of Pacific Standard Time: Asco. The obvious implication of that curatorial decision might be that, as far as the arts establishment is concerned, Chicano art matters most when it turns away from politics and addresses itself to the aesthetic preoccupations of scholars and critics. Forty years ago Chicano artists tried to assert that art exists to teach, to inspire, and to ennoble people the rest of the world wants nothing to do with. The success of Asco is well deserved. But it demonstrates that those early ambitions of the Chicano art movement were never fully realized, and perhaps never will be.

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Asco's story begins in the late 1960s, when four smart, restless, culturally precocious teenagers — Gamboa, Gronk, Valdez and Herrón — met at East L.A.'s James A. Garfield High School. Quite apart from the rich artistic legacy already being forged by Chicanos in the late sixties, the milieu at Garfield alone was enough to prove Gamboa's snooty LACMA curator wrong. In addition to the pachucos, beauty queens, gang-bangers and low-rider clubs common to many inner-city high schools, Garfield was home to an array of future artists and musicians, including the members of the rock group Los Lobos and performance artists Mundo Meza and Robert Legoretta (later known as Cyclona, his cross-dressing alter-ego). In a recent phone interview Gamboa told me that Chicano teens at the time were "very educated on the dominant culture's values and icons and media, while maybe the members of the dominant culture felt there was no need to know about Chicanos." In a 1997 oral history interview conducted by the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art, Gronk recalled taking the bus to

Santa Monica to watch Ingmar Bergman films. Willie Herrón, an early David Bowie fan, attended gang parties dressed in glitter pants and platform boots. Andy Warhol, Fluxus, Dada, Minimalism, Body Art, performance art — all of these art-world enthusiasms were known in 1960s East L.A., Gamboa told me.

In 1968, Gamboa helped lead the Chicano Blowouts, a mass action in which ten thousand students from five East L.A. high schools walked out for a week and a half to protest substandard school conditions and the disproportionate drafting of Mexican-Americans to fight in Vietnam. Two years later, during a massive East L.A. anti-war street protest known as the Chicano Moratorium, Gamboa was recruited to guest edit a Chicano literary journal called *Regeneración*. Gamboa asked Gronk, Valdez and Herrón to help him.

Staying up late in the garage behind Herrón's mother's house, the four friends, all of whom had pursued art in high school, discovered they shared a common sensibility. Like other Chicano artists, they resented Mexican-Americans' exclusion from mainstream culture and wanted to make art that addressed the indignities of barrio life. At the same time, unlike their peers, the friends were just as incensed by what they regarded as the conceptual conservatism and crude ethnic stereotyping already hardening into a distinctive Chicano style. "I hated murals," Patssi Valdez told a magazine interviewer in 1987. "I was sick of them. We'd be driving down the street and I'd say, 'Gronk! Another mud painting!'" In his Smithsonian oral history Herrón recalled feeling offended by university trained artists using ersatz barrio motifs to bulk up their canvases' street credibility. "It just seemed contrived," he said of the work of Los Four, a Los Angeles-based art collective whose members incorporated graffiti and other inner-city tropes into their paintings and murals. In 1974 Los Four became the first group of Chicano artists to exhibit in a major American museum when LACMA staged a retrospective of their work.

The friends' response was to stage a series of increasingly sophisticated set pieces using Chicano art conventions to mock both the injustice of America and the amateurish Chicano response to it. Accounts differ about just when they began conceiving of themselves as a group called Asco. What's not in dispute is that the name derived just as much from the disgust the group's work aroused in Chicano audiences. One by one, Asco took on cherished components of Chicano art — murals, Catholic iconography, Mesoamerican imagery, pachuco style — and travestied them to the point of nihilistic absurdity. The larger aim was to demonstrate the ugliness visited upon Chicano communities by an oppressive dominant culture. But that point was often lost on working-class audiences bewildered or repelled by the avant-garde techniques Asco shoehorned into Chicano art's stylistic repertoire.

Asco's first performance took place on Christmas Eve, 1971. Gamboa, Herrón and Gronk marched down East L.A.'s Whittier Boulevard bearing a fifteen-foot-tall cross made of cardboard to a Marine Corps recruiting office. Called *Stations of the Cross* the piece ostensibly highlighted the unjust sacrifice of Chicanos in Vietnam. More noticeable to passersbys were the anti-Catholic costumes: Herrón dressed as a skull-faced Christ; Gronk as a gay Pontius Pilate sporting an oversized fur purse; Gamboa as a zombie altar boy.

Walking Mural, staged exactly one year later the following Christmas Eve, lampooned Chicano muralists' presumption that they could immortalize the barrio simply by affixing it to a wall. Returning to Whittier Boulevard, Patssi Valdez strode down the sidewalk in black crêpe, a cardboard halo and an aluminum skull — an anti-Virgin of Guadalupe. Gronk wore green chiffon and blue ornaments — a Christmas tree. Willie Herrón decked himself in a fantastical assemblage of painted cardboard later described by Gamboa, who took the pictures, as "a multi-faced mural that had grown bored with its environment and left."

In 1973 Asco embarked on a series called *No Movies* — still photographs from movies that never existed. The *No Movies*' stated purpose was to highlight Chicanos' absence from mainstream American

cinema. The images, however — glam-rock muggers axing a man in a suit; a serial killer setting a doll's head on fire — mostly communicated the degradation of inner-city life. The following year the group had another go at murals when Gronk taped Valdez and an artist named Humberto Sandoval to the wall of a Whittier Boulevard liquor store in a piece called *Instant Mural*. Anxious passersbys asked Valdez and Sandoval if they needed help.

By that point Asco pieces were becoming directly confrontational. When the Los Four retrospective opened at LACMA that same year, Asco paid a visit. “We costumed to the max,” Herrón recalls in his oral history. “We painted our faces. We hung things from our bodies. And we went to that exhibit like we were going to a costume party or like we were going trick or treating. And we just went...wanting people to see some part of Chicano art that still didn't exist, that wasn't in that show that we felt had to be in that show.”

On November 2, 1974, Asco crashed a Day of the Dead celebration at a Boyle Heights cemetery. The celebration was sponsored by Self-Help Graphics, the community art center founded three years previously by activist Catholic nuns. “Costumed to the max” — Valdez in rainbow tissue paper and gold sequins, Herrón as a cardboard tri-plane, Gamboa as “Archangel Blackcloud,” Sandoval as a tank, Gronk as a giant camera — the group burst out of a special delivery envelope just as the nuns were readying Mass. The artists laughed hysterically, danced around and ran away.

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In 2007, then-*L.A. Weekly* writer Daniel Hernandez published a 5,500-word story documenting in gossipy detail the myriad feuds, rivalries and failed love affairs that by 1987 had caused Asco to dissolve. That inglorious end might have been it for the group except that just as Asco was falling apart a small but growing number of graduate students, scholars and curators began championing the group and making them the lead figures in a new, more complicated narrative about Chicano art. In this new assessment Chicano art was not simply the aesthetic wing of a Chicano civil rights movement. Instead, Asco demonstrated that from their earliest days Chicano artists were in full communion with the artistic mainstream and capable of addressing the contemporary art world's knottiest theoretical preoccupations.

In 2005 critic Josh Kun wrote in a *Los Angeles Times Magazine* cover story that a new generation of artists in Los Angeles, inspired by Asco, was “actively redefining what it means to make Chicano art in the new millennium.” Kun quoted artists whose critically acclaimed work — flat color paintings of the backs of heads; giant cage-like structures made of rebar — bore no resemblance to the barrio-based art of an earlier generation. Installation artist Ruben Ochoa (whose rebar piece was exhibited at the 2008 Whitney Museum Biennial) told Kun the Chicano tradition sometimes felt like “baggage on our shoulders.” Artist Mario Ybarra, Jr. called *Spraypaint LACMA* a cherished part of his artistic heritage.

Kun's article sparked heated debate in the Chicano artistic community, as did a major Chicano art retrospective three years later at LACMA titled, provocatively, *Phantom Sightings: Art After the Chicano Movement*. The LACMA retrospective, which opened with Gamboa's photo of *Spraypaint LACMA* and traveled throughout the United States and Mexico, explicitly cited Asco as the galvanizing influence on contemporary Chicano art. There were no “mud paintings” and no Mesoamerican imagery in *Phantom Sightings*. Instead, there was artist Juan Capistran break-dancing on a Carl Andre floor sculpture. Or Los Angeles-based conceptual artist Arturo Ernesto Romo walking from his studio north of downtown to an art gallery five miles away, wearing a rabbit-head mask. The exhibit catalog's description of contemporary Chicano art could have been an Asco mission statement: “that which privileges conceptual over representative approaches, and articulates social absence rather than cultural essence.”

Asco's resurgence is generally heralded as a victory for Chicano art, a long-awaited moment of recognition for the full range of Chicano artists' artistic accomplishments. With Asco reintegrated into the earliest days of Chicano art history, the movement comes into focus as "much more engaging and sophisticated than people give it credit for," Chon Noriega, director of UCLA's Chicano Studies Research Center, told me recently.

And yet even Noriega, who has been championing Asco from the moment he first learned about the group as a film studies graduate student at Stanford University more than 20 years ago, acknowledged that "there's an upside and a downside" to Asco's resurgence. "The downside is, it's a very selective engagement with art being produced by Mexican-descent artists working in the U.S.," he said. What Noriega means is that focus on Asco risks coming at the expense of the more traditional Chicano artists whose own work Asco once disparaged. "In the 1960s and '70s there was a feeling [art] should serve the community," Noriega said. "But that didn't mean the artists weren't in fierce dialogue with their peers around the world."

Malaquias Montoya, an early Chicano painter and printmaker who went on to teach art and Chicano studies at U.C. Davis, told me in a recent phone interview that it was social-activist goals, not conceptual timidity, that sometimes limited the range of early Chicano art. "Our role was to build community," Montoya recalled. "If your work is to empower a disenfranchised people, you have to be clear in what you're saying. They have to look at it and walk away thinking about it rather than wondering what you're trying to say or miss the point altogether."

Thirty years ago, Montoya, who continues in retirement to run a non-profit community art center in a farm-worker town near Davis, wrote a controversial essay castigating Chicano artists who had succumbed to the temptations of the art market and forsaken their activist roots. Montoya told me that the reemergence of Asco — whose members he has occasionally joined on academic panels — is simply another sign that the divide he identified in 1980 remains intact. Except that now, instead of curators dismissing Chicanos as gang members, it's academics and young artists turning their backs on the unglamorous work of community activism. "It's not a paycheck, but it's a different type of satisfaction, and it's very rewarding," Montoya said of social activist art. "But for some it's not rewarding enough."

That shift in priorities comes despite the fact that many of the injustices early Chicano artists labored against remain entrenched in the social imagination of the art world. As the curators of the *Phantom Sightings* exhibit themselves acknowledged, "four decades after the social movement that first named and debated the term, Chicano art remains a marginalized category within the art world." At the same time, a recent Pew Hispanic Center analysis of Census data showed that nearly 30 percent of Latinos live in poverty, the highest proportion of any American ethnic group. 40 percent of East L.A. residents have no job. Garfield High School, Asco's alma mater, scored in the bottom 10 percent on recent California statewide tests. 87 percent of students at the school qualify for free or reduced-price lunches.

From this perspective, the downside of Asco's rise to prominence is not simply that some worthy Chicano artists get ignored, but that the political goals of the older *movimiento* artists, the artists Asco found naïve, become obscured. Los Angeles-based conceptual artist Sandra de la Loza told me she tries to stay true to the Chicano movement's radical roots by giving time to community art centers such as Self-Help Graphics even as her work is exhibited internationally. And she pointed to other young artists doing the same, including Mario Ybarra, Jr., whose Slanguage Studio brings classes and exhibits to his hometown of Wilmington, Los Angeles' gritty port community.

Still, said de la Loza, the reality of the contemporary art market is such that it's no longer possible to make a living as a muralist, or as a graphic artist teaching kids how to silkscreen politically charged T-shirts. "Chicano artists today who are represented by galleries have to participate and engage in tendencies or questions or ways of working that are in play at the current moment," de la Loza said. The market seeks "what's going to be a good investment, what's new and cutting edge. And Chicano art never had a lot of currency as a market."

Asco's *Spraypaint LACMA* has always been interpreted as a story of insurgent triumph, of outsiders whose brazen wit ultimately forced a big, bad arts institution to sit up and take notice. But that's only one possible story. Insulted by that snooty curator in 1972, Harry Gamboa could have walked away, still knowing that his path, making art for an embattled community, was one of integrity. Instead, the members of Asco returned to the museum, unable to let the slight go. Gamboa told me that over the years he carefully documented everything Asco did, then packaged the photos in envelopes and mailed them off to as many art world luminaries as he could think of. He didn't get many replies. Instead, when the Asco costumes came off, Gamboa went back to his day job — driving an RTD bus. A few miles west LACMA beckoned.

When the museum finally called, it wasn't because the art world at last had opened itself to the insurgent energy of a restive Chicano community. It was because scholars and curators had discovered in Asco a group of Chicano artists they could readily identify with. At its creative peak, Asco created works of genuinely unsettling artistic brilliance. But few places in this world are less unsettling than the clean, well-lighted space of an art museum gallery. The institution brought the unruly graffiti taggers inside and domesticated them. The art world appropriated them — or, perhaps more accurately, that world became more cosmopolitan and incorporated them. In either case, a new generation of Latino artists, attuned by their professors to the conceptual preoccupations of a fickle art market, followed Asco's lead.

Near the close of our interview I asked Gamboa who Asco's audience was — that is, to whom the group had envisioned themselves speaking. Gamboa replied: "To some extent I believe some of the most elaborate poems have been written and inserted into a bottle and tossed into the sea." Whether Gamboa meant Asco was speaking to everyone, or to no one, I'm not sure. What I do know is that plenty of people in places like East Los Angeles still desperately need to hear from artists like Harry Gamboa, Jr., and Gronk, and Patssi Valdez, and Willie Herrón. East L.A. — and the rest of polyglot America — still need that message in a bottle.

Recommended Reads:

- "Droll Ontology": Sesshu Foster on A Giant Claw by Gronk
- "Words, Words, Words": Pete L'Official on Glenn Ligon
- The Art & Architecture page