

Anatolian Cultures
and Food Festival 2011



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Culture Monster

ALL THE ARTS, ALL THE TIME

PST, A to Z: 'Icons of the Invisible: Oscar Castillo,' Fowler Museum

September 29, 2011 | 1:15 pm

Pacific Standard Time will explore the origins of the Los Angeles art world through museum exhibitions throughout Southern California over the next six months. Times art reviewer Sharon Mizota has set the goal of seeing all of them. This is her latest report.



In terms of subject matter, the 38 photographs in Oscar Castillo's *Pacific Standard Time* retrospective at the Fowler Museum fall roughly into three categories: walls, people and cars.

Culled from an archive of over 3,000 of the photographer's images housed at UCLA's Chicano Studies Research Center, the exhibition opens with one example of each: a wall of graffiti in East L.A., a portrait of two tough young brothers in Crystal City, Texas, and a 1972 image of a lemon yellow '47 Chevy, a low-rider, parked in front of a store in Wilmington, Calif. In color, the car echoes the façade's cheery yellow English-language signs; as an example of Chicano folk art, it also complements the other offerings detailed on the store's exterior: tamales, menudo, carnitas, tortillas.

Castillo, who began taking photographs of the Chicano community in the late 1960s, has an eye for such visual rhymes, but never lets it get in the way of documenting everyday moments with plainspoken immediacy. Very much in the tradition of street photography (and to some degree, the family snapshot), Castillo's work has a fresh, unpretentious quality that makes you feel as though you just arrived on the scene yourself. More than 30 years after they were taken -- the show spans 1969 to 1980 -- the photos bring to life a tumultuous moment, when Chicanos began to assert themselves culturally and politically.

There are several images from important protests -- the antiwar Chicano Moratorium march in 1970 and the United Farm Workers' boycotts of grapes and Safeway supermarkets -- but the most interesting photos are less expected: portraits Castillo took of Chicano journalists and other media workers.

Castillo, who worked for a time as a producer at KCET-TV on the public affairs program, "Acción Chicano," snapped photos of the figures responsible for Chicano-oriented programming in the 1970s. There's actress Carmen Zapata on the set of the bilingual children's show "Villa Alegre," director Sylvia Morales peering into the lens of a camera at KCET, and a remarkable image of musician Daniel Valdez sitting in front of a set painted by artist Malaquias Montoya. Featuring a large Aztec eagle and silhouettes of figures with raised fists, it captured for television a bold, idealistic cultural pride.

The last image in the show's sequence reminds us of the power of this movement. Taken during the Chicano Moratorium march, which turned out to be one of

the biggest police melees in U.S. history, it depicts a huge stream of people walking down one side of an archetypal L.A. boulevard. Wide, lined with gas station signs and other advertisements, it looks like a street that another PST artist, Ed Ruscha, might have photographed just a few years before -- except he would've portrayed it as empty.

-- Sharon Mizota

Fowler Museum at UCLA, North Campus of UCLA (Sunset Boulevard and Westwood Plaza), (310) 825-4361, through Feb. 26. Closed Mondays and Tuesdays. www.fowler.ucla.edu

Upper photo: "Roosevelt High School Walkouts," 1970. Credit: Oscar Castillo

Lower photo: "Crowd at September 16th Parade in East Los Angeles," 1970. Credit: Oscar Castillo



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