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PST, A to Z: 'Art Along the Hyphen' at the Autry

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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.



Chicano art has been defined as a mix of murals, posters, and graffiti that accompanied the rise of the corresponding political movements of the 1970s. At least that's the stereotype lambasted by [conceptual art collective Asco](#) in their cheeky performances. But while Asco forecasted the future of Chicano art, the Pacific Standard Time exhibition at the Autry, "Art Along the Hyphen: The Mexican-American Generation," looks at the work of six artists who were "Chicano" not only before it was cool, but before it existed.

Eduardo Carillo, Roberto Chavez, Dora de Larios, Domingo Ulloa, Alberto Valdés and Hernando G. Villa were part of a generation of Mexican American artists educated or working in Los Angeles during the post-WWII era. It is one of the failures (or perhaps just the slowness) of multiculturalism that most people haven't heard of them. Perhaps because they worked in more traditional modes — painting, drawing, and sculpture — they were not taken up by the Chicano movement, even though they often dealt with similar themes of racism and cultural hybridity.

Still, even in their own time, they knew they were "uncool." A poster for a 1964 exhibition at Ceeje Gallery, a space dedicated to then-unfashionable figurative art (and one of the few spots on La Cienega's gallery row committed to the work of ethnic minorities and women), reads: "6 Painters of the Rear Guard." And indeed, many of the works in the show seem to invoke the early 20th century more than the turbulent decades of the post-war era. The paintings of Villa in particular, who died in 1952 at age 71, hark back to the pastoral traditions of the late 19th century, depicting a mix of "Spanish" street scenes, dancing girls and stoic Native Americans. This is the stuff of kitsch and cliché nowadays, but Villa's work does shed some light on the limited options available to an ambitious painter whom the press described as of "Spanish heritage."

From there, the show takes a jump into midcentury with De Larios' charming ceramic sculpture. Her impish, rotund figures are symphonies of abstract shapes — tubes, discs and slabs — influenced in equal parts by pre-Columbian statuary and Japanese funerary sculpture. Mapping yet another vanished part of L.A., De Larios traces her interest in Japanese art to the Temple Street district near Silver Lake where she grew up amid a mix of Mexican and Japanese American families.

The rest of the show focuses on painting, and a suite of small works by Valdés is easily the highlight. A reclusive artist who left a house full of art when he died in 1998, he created intensely colored, intricately detailed images of figures and animals (and a few human-animal hybrids) somewhat in the manner of Swiss-German artist Paul Klee. Both visionary and modern, they appear to glow with devotion, like little stained glass windows.

Surrealism was a big influence for most artists in the show. Ulloa's paintings of agricultural workers and other underdogs are more in line with notions of "Chicano" art, but are flecked with Surrealist details. A linocut from 1948 depicts scabs crossing a picket line, their snake-like bodies slithering between the legs of the protesters. The crowd of angry whites surrounding the group of African American school children in "Racism/Incident at Little Rock" are depicted as monstrous white specters with gaping, threatening mouths.

Similarly, Chavez's brushy, expressionistic works have a dark, sardonic edge: There's a still life of fruit and a severed doll's head; a diptych of Adam and Eve as odd mannequins, á la Hans Belmer, and a family portrait stolen by a fierce blur of a little black dog smack dab in the center of the picture. His friend Carillo's still lifes and fantastical landscapes are even more indebted to Surrealism, but also evoke Dutch painter Hieronymus Bosch, Catholic imagery, and in later works, a high-keyed palette reminiscent of Wayne Thiebaud.

This *mestizaje*, or cultural mixing, marked the work of these artists long before the notion of a hybrid identity such as "Chicano" emerged. Like another PST show, "MEX/LA," which looks back to the Mexican muralists, "Art Along the Hyphen" gives us the long view of Mexican American art, reminding us that the term "Chicano" was developed not only as a political designation but as a new name for an old way of life.

-- Sharon Mizota

The Autry, 4700 Western Heritage Way, (323) 667-2000, through Jan. 8. Closed Mondays. www.theautry.org

Photos, from top: Domingo Ulloa, "Racism/Incident at Little Rock," 1957, acrylic on canvas. From the Collection of Mark-Elliott Lugo.

Dora de Larios, "Mother and Child," 1968, glazed stoneware. From the Autry National Center.



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