L.A. Chicano life during the ’70s will be in a new exhibit at Fowler Museum

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A typical visual account of Chicano life in ’70s East Los Angeles may summon images of poverty and violence – that is, if one sifts through much of the photography produced by mass media of the time.

A new exhibition at the Fowler Museum, “Icons of the Invisible: Oscar Castillo” presents a more complex vision: one of the Chicano community from within, rather than without, as witnessed by prolific L.A. photographer and artist Oscar Castillo.

Part of both the Southern California art initiative Pacific Standard Time and the L.A. Xicano project, “Icons of the Invisible” features 37 images drawn from UCLA’s online archive of Castillo’s work, which contains more than 3,000 photographs.

The archive was culled from about 300,000 images Castillo has shot throughout his career, according to Chon Noriega, curator of the exhibition and professor and director of UCLA’s Chicano Studies Research Center.

The exhibition title refers partly to Noriega’s first impression of Castillo’s work as possessing an iconic quality unusual for portrayals of Chicanos in the 1970s, a time when there was little photographic material of the community not created by the media or police.

“His photography documents the barrio and spaces overlooked by a great majority of Angelenos: a post-industrial East Los Angeles cut off from the rest of the city and sliced up by highways,” said Colin Gunckel, UCLA alum and professor at University of Michigan. “This population had limited visibility in the media and was struggling for political visibility.”

As a teenager, Castillo moved from Texas to Los Angeles, where he attended high school. Afterward, he enlisted in the Marines but eventually returned to Los Angeles where, according to Gunckel, Castillo became part of a cadre of Chicano artists seeking to fill a void of popular representation.

Gunckel described the Chicano Moratorium, an anti-war movement that came to a halt on Aug. 29, 1970 with a bloody clash between police and protesters in Los Angeles.

Gunckel said local news outlets such as the Los Angeles Times painted stories of wild, destructive protests, while Castillo’s photographs showed less sensational scenes of communities coming together from across thousands of miles for a cause they believed in. What happened on Aug. 29 was a pivotal moment for artists like Castillo, Gunckel said.

“They were present, saw what happened, went home after watching the police beat mothers and children and watched TV and read accounts in the newspaper,” Gunckel said. “It was framed by the police and city as a riot – that the people provoked the police and the police just responded.”

Gunckel said after artists like Castillo recognized this disjunction between the media and the reality they experienced firsthand, they were empowered to build another body of visual representation.

Noriega said unlike other photographers working strictly in a photojournalistic vein, Castillo experiments with approaches to his subjects, combining photojournalism, portraiture and fine art.

This ability to balance aesthetic and professional concerns amounts to a true feat, said artist Harry Gamboa Jr., director of photography and media studies at the California Institute of the Arts and a contemporary of Castillo.

“To be a documentary photographer, you have to be quite open and aware of the external environment, but as an artist you have to be in touch with an internal subjectivity,” Gamboa Jr. said.

Castillo’s work neutralizes the need for Chicano stereotypes, both positive and negative, by documenting events as they unfolded, Gamboa Jr. said.

According to Gunckel, Castillo’s photography does not shy away from looking at the graffiti and run-down buildings of East L.A. neighborhoods, but rather, it shows the true barrio. Castillo’s images show the dichotomy of these spaces – that the barrio is a product of discrimination, inequality and poverty, but it is also where people have families and is a site of rich community and cultural expressions.

“I think his work encapsulates this ambivalence, if not, (the) complexity of barrio life,” Gunckel said. “It’s not just celebrating it but also recognizing the negative things and finding beauty in a space, because that’s where these people live their lives.”