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Roberto Chavez Maintains His Sense of Humor

Posted by [luckyqrrr](#) on November 17, 2011 · [Leave a Comment](#)

Probably my favorite artist in the Autry's show *Art Along the Hyphen: The Mexican-American Generation* (part of the mammoth Getty initiative *Pacific Standard Time*) is Roberto Chavez. The six artists show a range of styles from frankly abstract to realist to surrealist. Chavez, 79, falls largely in the representational, figurative category, though there is much use of symbolism and skewing of perspective. But what really gets the viewer about Chavez's work is the sense of humor. His work can make you laugh.



"The Group Shoe" by Roberto Chavez (Image courtesy Autry National Center)

One of the most celebrated paintings in the show, for example, is "The Group Shoe," a portrait of Chavez and three other artists/colleagues: Charles Garabedian, Louis Lunetta, and the late Eduardo Carrillo, whose work is also in the Autry show. The painting style is loose, with facial features sometimes obscured and blocks of strong color with little definition. The men appear to sit expectantly behind a table, and on it is a large brown shoe, its laces undone. Such an image might leave the viewer with a few questions: What are the men waiting for? What is the shoe doing there on the table? Is the shoe the meal of the day?

The canvas could harbor all kinds of symbolism. It could be a political commentary, or an evocation of someone who is absent, or a study in how much definition is actually required to suggest a person in paint. It could be all these things, that is, if the artist were someone other than Chavez.

But the explanation is in its back-story: Chavez was one of several Chicano artists who in the sixties helped launch the local CeeJe Gallery on Sepulveda Avenue. Its goal, at a time when the entire art world's axis was New York, was to show and sell the work of artists from Los Angeles. The four in the painting were the inaugural artists, and the image is taken from the announcement for the opening show in 1962. The joke is that gallery co-owner Jerry Jerome had a quirky way of pronouncing the phrase "group show." It came out as "group shoe." Hence, Chavez's painting.



The announcement for CeeJe Gallery's inaugural show, featuring Chavez and friends (Photo courtesy the Autry)

One sees this again and again. Another painting in the show is a self-portrait of Chavez, as a much younger man, wearing a bowler hat. It shows him looking forward but with a serious, even dour expression on his face. Behind him, one can see a table, part of a lampshade, a surrealist work on the wall — and a glass with Speedy Gonzalez silk-screened on it.

This is not to say Chavez is a one-dimensional artist. There are political statements and difficult subject matter, including a dark sketch of what appear to be the emaciated bodies of concentration camp victims at the Belsen concentration camp in Poland.

When the show opened in October, Chavez gave a gallery talk, and I had a chance to briefly chat with him. He admitted he never saw those bodies in person. Though he served in the military, he was too late for World War II, instead serving from 1952 to 1954. Even so, he could envision the violence because of what he had heard from his parents.

“From my mother and father and grandmother I heard about some of the horrible things that happened in Mexico,” he said. “And ‘Belsen Landscape,’ which is a painting of one of the German death camps in Europe, to me it was the same thing. My grandmother described a pile of dead bodies, and that stayed with me. It seemed no different, the Mexican Revolution and World War II.”



Roberto Chavez chats with patrons at the opening of "Art Along the Hyphen" (Photo by Tessie Borden)

I asked Chavez if he had a favorite of the works in the show.

“The best one is the one of T’amalito del Hoyo,” he said. It’s a painting of a young man, a boy really, wearing high-water pants and a long blue button-down shirt. He has an inscrutable expression on his face.

“El Hoyo was one of the neighborhoods in East L.A. where I grew up,” Chavez said. “(Tamalito) was a one of the — they call them *cholos* now — a gang member that I knew. For the purposes of this exhibit I think this is a better painting because it shows stuff of me and my background and all that. But this one shows the essential difference in the place where some of us grew up, the kind of culture, the kind of blending of cultures that was happening, that I don’t think had ever been represented very well, until more recent times. And I even think that some of the younger artists who have tried to approach that didn’t get the full picture. Because it’s been changing all along.”

Chavez said he never knew the young man’s real name. Everyone just knew him as *Tamalito*.

“That was his nickname,” Chavez said. “He belonged to a rival gang. so I wasn’t buddies with him, but I saw him around the neighborhood. And I talked to him, even. I passed by his house every day on the way to school. But I didn’t know he was going to be up on my wall (one day).”

Chavez also talked about the significance of what he and his colleagues were doing at CeeJe.

“When I was exhibiting at the CeeJe in the sixties, the local galleries were more interested in the New York artists,” he said. “One art historian, he was a reporter. He wrote articles for *Art Forum*. And he said, ‘You know, why are you bringing in Warhol and all these other clowns? You got Chavez. Natives of the place who are exhibiting.’ And it was work that was worth paying attention to and supporting, but instead they are importing people from New York. In a sense, this is making up for it to some extent. It’s balancing the oversight.”

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