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Tere Romo and a Seven-Year Quest for Art Along the Hyphen

Posted by [luckyqrrr](#) on December 22, 2011 · [Leave a Comment](#)

As much as Domingo Ulloa's painting *Braceros* has become a symbol and one of the most admired works in the Autry's current exhibition *Art Along the Hyphen: The Mexican-American Generation*, there was a time when its very existence was little more than a theory.



Braceros, by Domingo Ulloa, 1960, oil on Masonite (Autry Image)

The large canvas, which depicts a group of Mexican farm workers behind barbed wire, evokes the pathos and humanity of those who work for our food but remain out of our radar. It also clearly conjures the very similar, haunting images Allied soldiers encountered as they liberated Nazi concentration camps at the end of World War II: gaunt, dazed, barely clothed and starving men and women — mostly Jews, but also other outcast victims of the Holocaust — walking out of desolate barracks, not quite believing that their Hell was over.

Because these are workers and not merely victims, the portraits show a certain determination, a clue that they retain some control over their own fate. But present there is also a question to the viewer, implicit, perhaps, in the WWII footage, but here posed by the workers themselves: "Is this a morally defensible way to treat fellow human beings?"



Racism/Incident at Little Rock, by Domingo Ulloa, 1957, acrylic on canvas (Autry Image)

According to the notes, Ulloa painted the work in 1960, after a visit to a migrant farm worker camp in Holtville, California. But he was no newcomer to social commentary in his paintings, and he certainly came by his labor sympathies honestly.

Born in Pomona and a son of Mexican migrant workers, Ulloa three years earlier had finished *Racism/Incident at Little Rock*, inspired by the 1967 Supreme Court decision that ordered an end to public school segregation in Arkansas and across the nation, also in the exhibition. The painting, based on news photos of the Little Rock Nine, a group of black high school students seeking to attend one of the most prestigious high schools in Little Rock, Ark. and who were beneficiaries of the Supreme Court's decision. Even so, when they showed up for their first day at the school, they had to be escorted by National Guardsmen, so great was the public sentiment against desegregation in general and their presence in particular.

Ulloa's education as an artist, after military service in World War II, placed him in a local print shop whose output was modeled on the socially conscious work of the *Taller de Gráfica Popular* in Mexico City, which under the direction of artists Luis Arenal and Pablo O'Higgins turned out pro-labor and progressive political broadsides, prints and posters through the 20th Century. The TGP remains active today. Ulloa also briefly worked as a house painter in Los Angeles, and one of the works in the exhibition that extols his pro-Union sympathies is based on a painters' strike that occurred here.

Tere Romo, one of three guest curators that made the exhibition possible, says that, because the show focuses on artists who received little attention during their lifetimes as members of the Chicano aesthetic, finding and identifying the works that form part of the show became a separate task during the preparation of the exhibition. This meant that the whole project, from initial research to opening night, took seven years. In fact, the *Braceros* painting became the object of a search worthy of a detective novel.



Romo at the opening of Art Along the Hyphen, chatting with patrons (Photo by Tessie Borden)

"It was lost for so long, and images were the only things that were being circulated," Romo said. "People knew it existed, but no one knew where it was."

Romo said she didn't even know where to start to go looking for the piece. All her usual sources and academic references just didn't apply here. On a hunch, she asked the owner of *Racism/Incident at Little Rock*, with whom she was already in talks to arrange its loan, if he might have an idea of who might own the other Ulloa work.

"I said, 'You know, this is a long shot, but I'm asking everyone who's ever had any of his work if they know where this piece is,'" she said. "He's the one that actually gave me a lead that then led to another lead, and then I was able to find it. And I was so happy."

Romo said the owner of *Braceros* had wanted to keep the collection, and her ownership of the work, private, but in the end, she graciously agreed to lend it to the exhibition.

"It wasn't exhibited very much when he made it," Romo says. "In a sense, this is going to be the first time it really has gotten a much larger exposure. In one exhibition it's going to be seen by more people than it has been in its

whole existence! I think that, to me, was one of the highlights, to be able to not only find the piece but also to be able to show it to a larger public.”

Art Along the Hyphen: the Mexican-American Generation remains on view at the Autry until Jan. 9, 2012.

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