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ART REVIEW | 'PHANTOM SIGHTINGS'

They're Chicanos and Artists. But Is Their Art Chicano?

By KEN JOHNSON

Is it time to retire the identity-based group show? Back in the 1970s, exhibitions devoted to the work of women, blacks, gay people, American Indians and other disenfranchised groups brought into the mainstream all kinds of new styles and ideas. They changed the course of modern art history.

If it is hard to imagine that sort of exhibition making waves now, there is good reason. Artists of many different backgrounds and sexual orientations have been assimilated into the art world. There are more women than men in this year's Whitney Biennial. Questions of equitable representation probably will never go away, but at this point, many artists would balk at being included in an identity-based show. They want to go to the big dance.

These thoughts were occasioned by "Phantom Sightings: Art After the Chicano Movement," a confused and confusing exhibition at El Museo del Barrio presenting works by Mexican-Americans who have come of age since the 1990s. In the catalog the exhibition's curators acknowledge that some artists who were invited declined to be in a "surname-based" show. (The exhibition was organized by Rita Gonzalez and Howard N. Fox, curators at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, where it opened in April 2008, and Chon A. Noriega, of the Chicano Studies Research Center of the University of California, Los Angeles.)

In his foreword to the catalog, Michael Govan, director of the Los Angeles museum, observes that the 27 artists and collectives in the show are not grouped "by their own volition or consensus." Selecting by ethnicity is "a curatorial artifact, a device to reflect and speculate on the issues facing Chicano artists today."

It becomes readily apparent that the artists are not unified by any single style or conceptual approach. The work ranges from Victor Estrada's funky-surrealist paintings to Sandra de la Loza's complicated installation of old documents and a digitally manipulated video dedicated to Fort Moore, a historic site in Los Angeles.

Few pieces resemble the ideologically charged paintings and graphics of the Chicano movement,

which blossomed in the late '60s and early '70s. Christina Fernandez's large color photographs of laundromats represent an experience that people from many backgrounds know intimately. Without the works' titles, you would not know that Delilah Montoya's sumptuous, wide-angle landscape photographs depict stopping places on illegal-immigrant trails out of Mexico. Turning ugly subjects into beautiful pictures is something photographers do all over the world.

Some works relate to Chicano art, but with knowing, retrospective sophistication. Carolyn Castaño's brightly painted, cartoonish portraits of pretty Mexican women surrounded by flocked and glittery stripes or floral patterns could be mistaken for cheap beauty parlor décor (in a good way). Folksy, signlike paintings and cases displaying sneakers and sandals made of painted cardboard by Gary Garay similarly refer to low-budget commerce and extend to the present the Chicano movement's affectionate embrace of "low-brow" Mexican-American culture.

Eduardo Sarabia's room covered with faux-antique blue-on-white tiles with emblematic designs alluding to the drug wars adroitly combines popular tradition and contemporary political savvy. And Alejandro Diaz's display of distressed cardboard signs bearing hand-written messages, like "I beg to differ" and "Wet Back by Popular Demand," play with themes of homelessness and racism with unusual good humor. He first exhibited them while wearing a white suit outside of Tiffany & Company in New York.

The most impressive effort in this quasi-populist vein is Margarita Cabrera's sculpture of a full-size yellow Volkswagen Beetle, a car that was produced in Mexico from 1967 to 2003. Made of mainly sewn-together pieces of colored vinyl, it evokes the soft sculpture of Claes Oldenburg. According to the catalog, it also draws attention to the poor working conditions of industrial laborers in Mexico.

The curators explain in the catalog that the point of the exhibition is not to show the evolution of a particular visual or formal style but to demonstrate how Mexican-American artists have adapted mainstream conceptual strategies to more local concerns. It is the top-down opposite of the Chicano movement, which raised conventions of popular culture into the realm of high art, and it looks as if the biggest influence on most of these artists were M.F.A. programs.

"Black on Black," a sculpture by Juan Capistran consisting of a black Minimalist slab leaning against another bent one, as if with sexual intent, looks like the sort of postmodernist riff on formalist abstraction associated with artists like Peter Halley, Sherrie Levine and countless others who have toyed with Modernist semiotics.

Finish-fetish-style panel paintings by Rubén Ortiz-Torres, rendered in glossy and glittery auto-body paint, conflate Modernist abstraction and custom-car painting. "Rigor Motors," a pair of sculptures in the form of coffins by Ruben Ochoa and Marco Rios — one is half upright with an

automobile bucket seat inside — allude to a car culture of death.

Death is more grimly invoked by Ken Gonzales-Day's display of old postcards bearing pictures of people standing around under trees. Before selective erasure by the artist, they depicted lynched Mexican-Americans, and thus symbolize a pernicious historic amnesia.

Taken altogether, it is not clear what this show says about today's Mexican-American artists. Are they doing something unusual that the art world needs to catch up on? Not those in this show. Is it news that they are as creatively diverse as American artists in general? It should not be.

It has long been said that the identity-based show is an evil whose necessity would disappear in a more equitable world, but museums and grant-giving foundations will continue to support this kind of project because of its appeal to various interest groups. In truth, it as much a bureaucratic artifact as a curatorial one. A more astutely focused, judiciously selected exhibition might lead to different conclusions, but this one will not alter the impression that last rites for this type of show are in order.

"Phantom Sightings: Art After the Chicano Movement" continues through May 9 at El Museo del Barrio, 1230 Fifth Avenue, at 104th Street, East Harlem; (212) 831-7272, elmuseo.org.