

THINGS TO DO

See how bilingual newspaper La Raza shaped Chicano history 40 years ago

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La Raza only existed for ten years, but its impact remains.

Combining photojournalism with social activism, art, satire and political commentary, the influential bilingual newspaper La Raza, which published from 1967-1977, gave a voice to the Chicano rights movement during a tumultuous time.

It did thanks in large part to the compelling images of protests, mass demonstrations and individuals and their communities shot by its photographers as the publication became an active participant in the Chicano rights movement, an often overlooked but essential part of the civil rights era.

And while the last issue was published 40 years ago, the newspaper is once again speaking loudly for the community it helped empower in the form of hundreds of black and white images taken from its pages that are displayed on the walls of the Autry Museum of the American West in a new exhibit called “La Raza.”

“This exhibition serves as a way of capturing, re-capturing, embracing that history that is us, La Raza, we are all La Raza,” said Luis Garza, a La Raza photographer and co-curator of the exhibition, during a preview event at the Autry a few days before the public opening.

Presented as part of the Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA initiative, “La Raza,” opens Sept. 16 and runs through Feb. 10 at the museum’s Norman F. Sprague Jr., Gallery.

The exhibition features more than 200 images shot by the magazine’s young photographers, as well as a display of La Raza front pages to mark the 50th anniversary of its founding.

But the goal is not just to shine a light on the Chicano rights movement and the publication that witnessed it, but to also show the role of the photographer as an artist and an activist who used the camera as a tool for empowerment.

“It’s a really dynamic, I think graphically powerful, exhibition about the role of the camera as a tool of activism and photography in the organizing of the Chicano movement,” said Amy Scott, the Autry’s chief curator and co-curator of La Raza.

“It really is about how the camera played an instrumental role in articulating the cause and concerns that the Chicano movement was organizing around,” she added.

And these causes and concerns were captured in moving images that include a shot by Garza in 1971 at a march for justice at Belvedere Park in East L.A. It shows a woman wearing a black dress with short hair and a mic in one hand speaking to a crowd as she raises her right fist. The crowd in front of her listens intently while a video camera can be seen in the lower corner recording her speech.

For the young photographer back then, it was an exciting and even scary time, but with camera in hand he realized they were doing something that went beyond just recording history.

“The newspaper, the magazine was an organizing tool. It was meant to communicate to the community at that time what was taking place and what was affecting them,” said Garza.

The Los Angeles resident helped select the photos from an archive of nearly 25,000 images created by La Raza photographers that are now housed at the Chicano Studies Research Center at UCLA.

Other images on display include more intimate portraits of the community.

One such portrait is a shot of young members of a street theatre group called Teatro Popular de la Vida y Muerte performing at a college campus in the early 1970s.

Another image shows a large family sitting together on a curb in front of a home watching the Mexican Independence Day Parade in East L.A.

One of the focal points of the exhibition, which is displayed as a picture on one of the walls and also projected onto a center wall in the gallery, is a humorous yet captivating image of a five-year-old girl.

With her long hair braided in two ponytails and her tiny arms clutching a stack of La Raza newspapers, the girl's mouth is wide open as she screams out loud trying to get people to take copies of the paper during a 1968 rally in Washington D.C.

Maria Varela was the young La Raza photographer who shot the picture after the little girl caught her attention.

"I believe her mother was quite the activist and she (the little girl) was out there hawking La Raza newspapers, she was great," Varela recalled with a chuckle as she sat on a bench in front of a wall where her photograph hung.

"We were not photographers of celebrities, we were photographers of people who did the heavy lifting in the civil rights movement...I didn't know we were so good," she added with a laugh after looking around at the images throughout the gallery.

When: Sept. 16-Feb. 10.

Where: Autry Museum of the American West, 4700 Western Heritage Way, Los Angeles.

Tickets: Museum admission is \$14 for adults, \$10 for students and seniors and \$6 for children ages 3-12. Free admission on second Tuesday of every month.

Information: www.theautry.org.

La Raza opens in conjunction with "Harry Gamboa Jr.: Chicano Male Unbonded," a 90-portrait exhibit at the museum that explores Chicano male identity through a series of nighttime portraits. It runs through Aug. 8.



Richard Guzman

Richard Guzman writes about music, art, theater and pop culture. He's married and has two kids and a dog named Frida. Fun Fact: He's the world's greatest thumb wrestler. Simply can't be beat.

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