

UNIVERSITY NEWS

# Destructivist artist Raphael Montañez Ortiz to receive UCLA Medal

The 83-year-old artist and justice advocate earned acclaim for destroying household objects and creating sculpture from the detritus

Rebecca Epstein | May 18, 2017

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Remi Villaggi

*Ortiz's Deconstructivist conceptual practice drew from Latino, indigenous and non-Western cultures to merge ritual with archaeology.*

**R**aphael Montañez Ortiz, a Puerto Rican American pioneer of the 1960s Destructivist art movement, and founder of the first Latino museum in the United States, will receive the UCLA Medal from Chancellor Block in a special ceremony June 8 celebrating Chicano art and culture in Los Angeles.

Hosted by the UCLA Institute of American Cultures and the Chicano Studies Research Center, the event coincides with a week of activity for the artist, including the opening of a career retrospective at LAXART in Hollywood and the opening of the group exhibition “Home — So Different, So Appealing” at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Ortiz, 83, is the longest-practicing artist in the LACMA exhibition, which features work by U.S. Latino and Latin American artists since 1957 on the topic of “home.” The exhibit is co-curated by Chon Noriega, director of the Chicano Studies Research Center, and co-organized by the resource center in collaborations with LACMA and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Materials from the Raphael Montañez Ortiz Papers, which are part of Chicano Studies Research Center’s library will be on display at the event, along with selections from other the center’s archival collections.

“In 1957 Ortiz created his first major work of art, which is now in the Smithsonian American Art Museum,” Noriega said. “His continued achievements in art, education and social justice merit recognition. For him to receive the UCLA Medal at the same time his work is on display at LACMA and LAXART is a great tribute to the artist, who, despite having made a tremendous impact on world art and American popular culture, has been largely overlooked in contemporary art history.”



Born  
in

John Prosser

*“Terrace Mattress Destruction” for the Destruction in Art Symposium. London, England, 1966.*

1934, Ortiz grew up on the lower eastside of Manhattan with a commitment to social and cultural equity. In late 1950s he pursued formal art training at Pratt Institute, and by the 1960s became a pioneer of Destructivist art. Ortiz’s practice involved destroying household objects, including pianos, and creating

sculpture from the detritus. At the time, his was one of the few non-white voices recognized in contemporary art grappling with the effects of global conflict, rampant consumerism and the threat of nuclear war. His conceptual practice drew from Latino, indigenous and non-Western cultures to merge ritual with archaeology as a way of reconciling rational thought with the brain's primal impulses.

Ortiz's mixed-media art practice, which includes painting, recycled films, sculpture, music, installation, performance and computer art, quickly drew international attention. But the artist, who served in the military during the Korean War, was particularly interested in affecting change at home. In the late 1960s, he integrated Latino artists into the Art Workers' Coalition protesting the exclusionary practices of major museums in New York City. As a way of countering racial inequality in the arts, and committed to the idea that art is fundamental to the human experience, in 1969 he founded the first Latino art museum in the United States: El Museo del Barrio, in East Harlem, New York. Ortiz's mission for the still-active museum was to represent an underserved Latino community, and to do so as a contribution to world art and culture.

"Dr. Ortiz's work embodies the diversity and global reach of American culture and art," said David Yoo, vice provost for the Institute of American Cultures at UCLA. "It's a pleasure to see this acknowledgement of Ortiz's achievements but also of the long-term presence and mainstream impact of Latinos in U.S. and world art."

Undergirding Ortiz's work is his interest in neo-Freudian psychoanalysis. His destruction performances at the "Destruction in Art Symposium" in London in 1966 became the inspiration for "primal therapy," which is known for its use of the "primal scream," developed by Arthur Janov, who received two degrees from UCLA, including his masters in psychiatric social works in 1948, and adopted by, among others, John Lennon and Yoko Ono. In the 1980s, Ortiz developed innovative computer and digital art, while he has engaged with such topics as pre-emptive war, the environment and childhood trauma. He pursued these ideas through academic research as well, and in 1982 he received his doctorate in education from Columbia University Teacher's College. Today Ortiz is a distinguished professor of visual arts at Rutgers University.

"In addition to having this incredible history, Ortiz is now influencing a new generation of artists seeking both political and spiritual relevance in the world," Noriega said. "UCLA will play a part in their success, as artists as well as students and scholars will soon be able to access an extensive collection of Ortiz's papers and ephemera at the Chicano Studies Research Center."

Active in the arts and education for 60 years, Ortiz's work is included in major museum permanent collections, including the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Tate Art Museum, the Smithsonian American Art Museum, and the Hirshhorn Museum. Work from a destruction performance at the 2017 LA Art Show was recently acquired by Chicano Studies Research Center community partner the Vincent Price Art Museum in Monterey Park. The exhibition "Raphael Montañez Ortiz: Shred Your Worries and Other Destructions," which includes photographs, video, and papers from his archival collection, is on view in 144 Haines Hall through the summer.

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