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Whittier Daily News

Smithsonian exhibit to feature Pico Rivera photographer's historic shots

By [Peter Fullam](#), Whittier Daily News

Posted: 02/03/14, 5:58 PM PST |



Oscar Castillo, 67, of Whittier, has had some of his photographs depicting Latino life acquired by the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Castillo is employed as a photographer by the city of Pico Rivera. LEO JARZOMB — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

PICO RIVERA >> When Oscar Castillo was in high school, his mother gave him a Kodak Instamatic.

“I played around with it,” he said.

He took pictures of model cars and his friends’ vehicles.

But those humble beginnings proved to be a harbinger of things to come. Fast-forward to 1972, and a photo of a yellow 1947 Chevy standing in front of La Mexicana Market in Wilmington. “‘Fresh Meats,’” the store sign says, “‘Tamales menudo carnitas tortilleria ‘wine.’”

“I spent the morning with the owner (of the car) and went to different parts of town to shoot in,” said Castillo. “That one (location) really clicked.”

That photo is one of 12 that the Smithsonian Institute has acquired the rights to from Castillo. Some of the prints are included in a major Smithsonian exhibit, “Our America: The Latino Presence in American Art,” on display at the [Smithsonian American Art Museum](#) in Washington, D.C., until March 2. After that, it will begin a national tour to include the Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento Sept. 21-Jan. 11, 2015.

“‘[Our America: The Latino Presence in American Art](#)’ presents the rich and varied contributions of Latino artists in the United States since the mid-20th century, when the concept of a collective Latino identity began to emerge,” says the Smithsonian American Art Museum’s website. “‘Our America’ presents a picture of an evolving national culture that challenges expectations of what is meant by ‘American’ and ‘Latino.’”

Other photos the museum acquired from Castillo include a 1972 picture of civil rights leader Cesar Chavez being interviewed by radio and TV reporters in the parking lot of a Safeway Discount Center in Torrance, a wedding photo of two of his CSU Northridge classmates Monica Medina and Gilbert Salazar in 1971 in Callabastas, Lincoln Park as it was being dredged, Doctors Hospital in East L.A., with murals depicting the positive work being done and a trash-strewn empty lot and wall of graffiti in the foreground, and the graffiti-covered former Geraghty Wall in East L.A.

“They selected historic photos from across the U.S.,” Castillo said of the exhibit. “My particular ones they selected when I was in a 2011 Getty-sponsored exhibit at Fowler Museum at UCLA.”

Seven of Castillo’s photos from the Fowler exhibit are being shipped to France for a March exhibit in Marseille.

Castillo, who is the Pico Rivera’s city photographer and has lived with his wife in Whittier since 1989, said he was approached by E. Carmen Ramos, the museum’s curator of the exhibit, in 2012 about acquiring the prints. The acquisition was completed in the summer of 2013, he said

“We negotiated,” he said, declining to disclose details of the agreement.

Castillo said he didn't get serious about photography until 1966 when he was stationed in Japan as a 21-year-old Marine. He bought a 35 mm Petri and took pictures as a hobby. He continued taking pictures when he returned and started college at Northridge, then San Fernando Valley State College. He studied photography, two-dimensional design and sociology.

College also was when Castillo got a 35 mm Nikon and started his career as a professional photographer.

"One of my professors asked me to take pictures for a textbook he was writing," said Castillo.

"Cultures in Conflict" was a social studies textbook for seventh through 12th-graders.

In addition to his work for Pico Rivera, Castillo also does freelance work, works for corporations, does historical documentation, and shoots historical and cultural events.

"I work a lot with artists," he said.

He's also shot a lot of political figures, including Sen. Edward Kennedy, former L.A. Mayor Tom Bradley, Gov. Jerry Brown, and former Rep. Edward Roybal.

"I've done a lot of political events," he said.

He met Chavez about a dozen times and Castillo remains in contact with his family.

He said meeting Chavez was "one of the high points of my career."

Castillo said he's working on what may become three books, one of which would be about people who have influenced him and done good things for the arts.

"If I can use photography to encourage kids to interact with their families and their communities, that's kind of my hidden agenda," he said.