

Issue 59

ISSUE

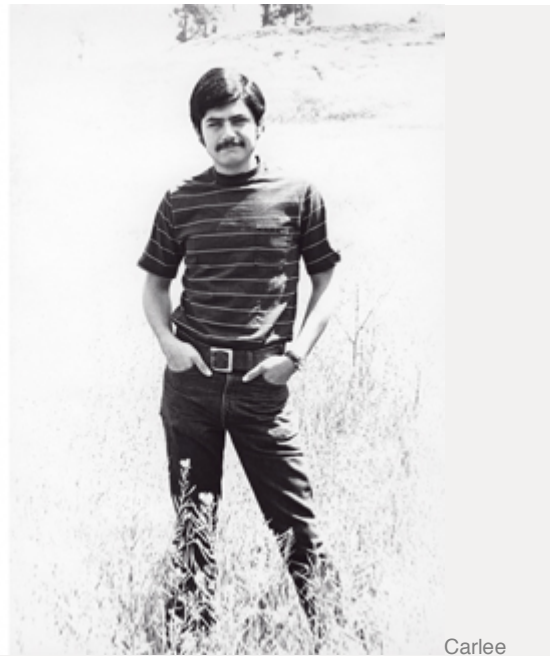
EDITOR

LETTERS

CONTRIBUTORS

Phantom Sightings: Art After the Chicano Movement

Tucker Neel



Carlee

Fernandez, *Self Portrait: Portrait of My Father*, Manuel Fernandez, 2006; C-print; 2 prints, each 18 x 12 inches; courtesy the artist and Acuna-Hansen Gallery, Los Angeles; © Carlee Fernandez



Christina Fernandez, *Lavanderia #1*, 2002; Chromogenic development print mounted on Sintra; 30 x 40 inches; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Ralph M. Parsons Fund; © Christina Fernandez; photo courtesy Gallery Luisotti, Santa Monica

“Chicanos don’t make art, they make graffiti.” This is what an unnamed Los Angeles County Museum of Art curator told Harry Gamboa Jr. in 1972. In response, Gamboa, along with other members of the art collective Asco, defiantly spray painted their names on one of the museum’s outer walls. In signing their names to it, they recreated the museum as a piece of conceptual art. Seeing Asco’s photo documentation of this event, *Spray Paint LACMA*, at the entrance to *Phantom Sightings: Art After the Chicano Movement* made this writer’s idealist heart pump just a little bit faster. This is the kind of radical gesture that gives one hope that art can actually do something, inspire a generation and raise important questions, as well as give the middle finger to people in power unwilling to see what’s right in front of their faces.

Selecting art by a younger generation of artists working after the ostensible end of the Chicano Movement, curators Howard Fox, Rita Gonzalez and Chon Noriega use this exhibition to highlight a turn away from “realist” practices saturated with overt symbolism and indebted to the didactic murals typical of 1960s radical art. Instead, they select work by artists laboring not under the Chicano label but alongside it, using the term as a conceptual springboard rather than an institutionalized straightjacket. As an exhibition built on investigating Chicano art today—a concept the curators self-consciously admit is problematic—*Phantom Sightings* is

comfortable in its willingness to embrace the notion that there is no monolithic Chicano identity or characteristic kind of “Chicano” art.

The exhibition fills the LACMA galleries to capacity with over 100 artworks by 31 artists, from Whitney Biennial art stars to relative newcomers. The walls look as if they are literally bursting at the seams thanks to this unfortunate curatorial gesture; likewise, architectural flourishes resemble shantytown housing. LACMA is known for going over the top with its exhibition design (bowler hats for guards in a recent Magritte show, for instance), but here—in a show addressing issues of race, class and the border—the cobbled together entrance signage and overhangs just look forced, distracting and offensive. Fortunately, the work in this exhibition remains largely unscathed by this poor decision.

Works that stand out harness the momentum of Asco’s conceptual slingshot, using the conceptual power of humor, a keen understanding of institutionalized racism and a fluid understanding of identity. A prime example is Ken Gonzales-Day’s Erased Lynching series in which the artist erases hanging bodies and ropes from nineteenth- and early twentieth-century spectacle lynching postcards; what’s left is a ghostly illuminated crowd staring into a void. The simple gesture of removal refocuses the viewer’s gaze and calls attention to the important role spectatorship plays in gruesome events. A visit to the artist’s website informs us that more Latinos were lynched in California than persons of any other race or ethnicity. Looking at Gonzales-Day’s work demands a sobering reflection not just on the past but on racist violence today, which, in light of the perennial police riots and crackdowns and state-sponsored executions inflicted on people of color, has a disturbingly resilient presence.



Asco, *Spray Paint LACMA*, 1972 (printed 2007); digital print of color photograph by Harry Gamboa Jr.; 30 x 40 inches; courtesy Harry Gamboa Jr.; © Asco; photo © Harry Gamboa Jr.; photo courtesy UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Archive



Delilah Montoya, *Humane Borders Water Station*, 2004; digital print; 14 ½ x 31 ¼; courtesy the artist and Patricia Correia Gallery, Santa Monica; © Delilah Montoya

Sandra de la Loza, working under the name The Pocho Research Society, also takes history to task with *Fort Moore: Living Monument*, a multimedia installation deconstructing the latent meanings behind the Fort Moore Pioneer Memorial, a huge bas-relief monument in downtown Los Angeles celebrating the city's independence from Mexico in 1847 during the Mexican-American War. In her multimedia installation of videos, objects in vitrines and explanatory wall texts, the artist charts moments of conflict near the memorial: a newspaper article from 1859 describes the lynching of a man named Juan Flores on top of Fort Moore Hill. A photo with accompanying text explains how students marched in front of the memorial during walkouts in 2006 to protest anti-illegal immigrant legislation. In her video, the artist uses subtle animation techniques to alter the existing memorial, making flags fall to the ground, walls crumble and words change. Taken as a whole, the installation poetically asks questions about what sorts of histories get overlooked in the process of constructing nationalist memory.

Taking another route, Alejandro Diaz embraces humor as a conceptual foil to frustrate expectations of Chicano identity. His *Sayings* are hilarious cardboard signs with hand-drawn one-liners like "Make Tacos Not War" and "This product was made with the use of inner-child labor." As art objects hung salon-style on gallery walls, these modest rib-ticklers echo David Shrigley's signature deadpan phrases in their brevity and wit. But Diaz' overarching politics are unavoidable, especially when one learns that the artist is known to hawk these signs outside the Plaza Hotel in New York while wearing a mariachi outfit—an action poking fun at both his perceived ethnicity as well as the socioeconomic power relations associated with his immediate environment. Fulfilling their intended purpose, Diaz' *Sayings* tease laughter from countless English-speaking viewers (there are no Spanish translations available). But there is

also a problematic space in the silence between these chuckles where one is left to wonder if the viewer is laughing with or at the racist stereotypes and economic realities that make these jokes possible—and so poignant.

Like most large group exhibitions interrogating hotly contested subjects, *Phantom Sightings* has its regrettable features: overcrowding and ill-conceived exhibition design aside, there was the inevitable brouhaha over who was not included (or refused to participate). But, as is the mark of any well-curated show, the exhibition is sustained by the artworks it showcases. If successful, the show will inspire more venues to revisit the identity-politics debates of yesteryear, but this time with voices that use the ambiguity, uneasiness and playfulness of identity as a tool to address pressing contemporary issues and lingering historical concerns.

Tucker Neel is an artist and writer based in Los Angeles.

[« return to table of contents](#)
