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Imagining a More Expansive Narrative of American Art

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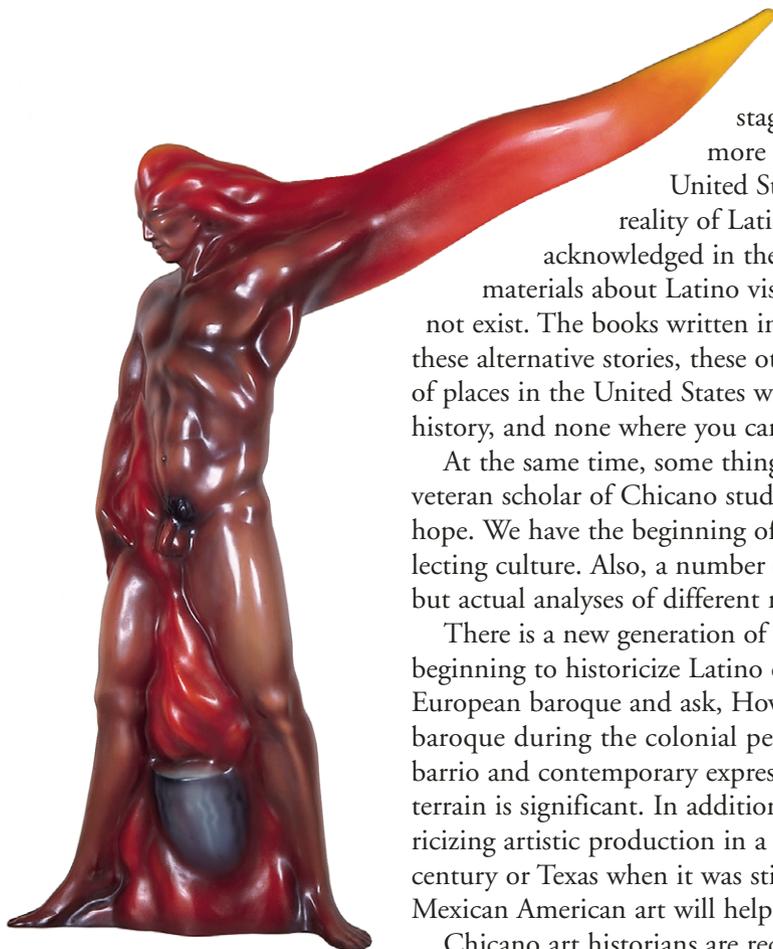
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## Imagining a More Expansive Narrative of American Art

*Papelitos (little bits of paper) . . . can become layered bundles of personal history. I have always been a pepenador (a scavenger) and saver of paper scraps.*

—Archivos Virtuales



Luis Jiménez, *Man on Fire*, 1969. Molded fiberglass, 106 ¼ x 80 ¼ x 29 ½ in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., Gift of Philip Morris Inc.

The study of U.S. Latino art history is at an incipient stage.<sup>1</sup> We have begun laying the groundwork, but much more needs to be done. There are 38 million Latinos in the United States. But this growing number, this almost unfathomable reality of Latin America having seeped into the United States, is hardly acknowledged in the art-historical literature and in the academy. Texts and materials about Latino visual art for high school and even college teachers still do not exist. The books written in the last ten years about American art barely nod toward these alternative stories, these other visions of American art. There are still only a handful of places in the United States where scholars can earn a PhD in Latin American art history, and none where you can earn a graduate degree focused on Latino art.

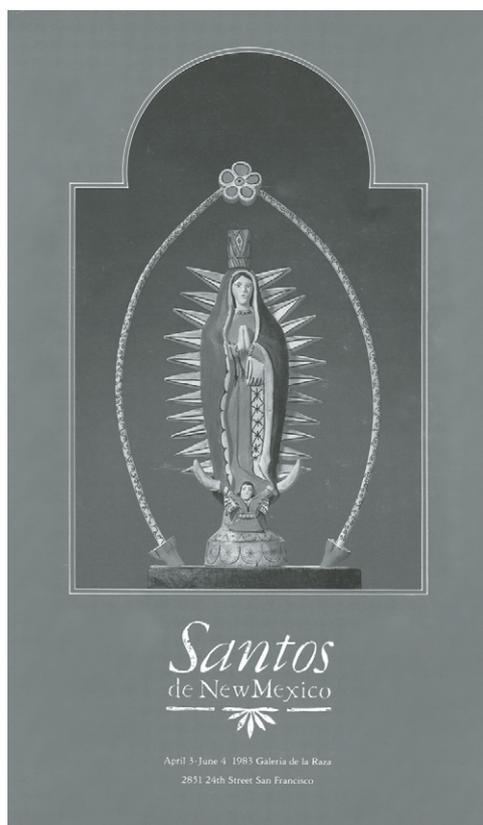
At the same time, some things are starting to happen that, from my perspective as a veteran scholar of Chicano studies and a collector of cultural artifacts, offer considerable hope. We have the beginning of a crucial archival base. We have the inception of a collecting culture. Also, a number of books are being produced that are not just catalogues but actual analyses of different movements and periods of Latino art.<sup>2</sup>

There is a new generation of Latino art historians. They are well trained, and they are beginning to historicize Latino cultural production. For example, they go back to the European baroque and ask, How is the European baroque related to the Latin American baroque during the colonial period? How is that spirit of the baroque related to the barrio and contemporary expression?<sup>3</sup> This expansion and thinking in a broader historical terrain is significant. In addition, some Chicano art historians are going back and historicizing artistic production in a regional way, looking at New Mexico in the nineteenth century or Texas when it was still a part of Mexico.<sup>4</sup> These attempts to lay the ground for Mexican American art will help to show its dimensions, depth, and historical trajectory.

Chicano art historians are recovering historical figures, genres, and artists. They are beginning to talk about the work of certain artists like Javier Martínez, a Californian who was a part of American art of the early twentieth century and yet had Mexican roots and was related to modernism in Paris. Scholars are beginning to uncover regional figures, such as Consuelo “Chelo” González Amézcuea from Texas or Martín Ramírez from California, who are rapidly gaining fame as so-called outsider artists. This complicates the situation. Art historians are researching the contributions of artists who were not part of the “Chicano movement” but were Mexican American and belong in the history of contemporary American art. California artists like Manuel Neri, Robert Graham, and many others were never directly involved in the Chicano movement but are certainly significant figures in contemporary American art.

It is a wonderful moment for historicizing, recuperating, and investigating the sweep of Latino art through its Puerto Rican, Cuban American, and other variants. Were there

*Santos de New Mexico*, 1983  
exhibition announcement,  
Galería de la Raza, San Francisco.  
Tomás Ybarra-Frausto Research  
Material on Chicano Art, 1965–  
2003. Archives of American Art,  
Smithsonian Institution,  
Washington, D.C.



regional movements and groupings of artists in specific urban centers, just as there were in the wider scope of art history? What were these different movements and specific local genres? How were they related to each other? How were they related to mainstream American art and Latin American art? Now we can even do comparative analysis and look for affinities between Mexican American artists and artists in Latin America, because there is a foundation. All of a sudden we can juxtapose a Chicano artist with an artist from Latin America and see that in two different cultures artists are dealing with the same materials or genres or themes. We can even do generational comparisons, between an artist of the 1950s and an artist of the new millennium.

Today in conceptualizing Latino art, we have what I would call a three-legged stool. One leg of the equation is the canonical culture of the United States. Another is Latin American visual culture. And the third leg is Latino culture,

which is the most wobbly. We still have to create the archives and write the narratives. For the metaphorical stool to become sturdy, all three legs have to be present: U.S., Latin American, and Latino components. I think this is doable, and that archiving data is a key step toward building a more inclusive narrative.

We need to ask the question, Is culture a renewable resource? When those individuals who are the sources of embodied knowledge and wisdom are gone, how can the culture be renewed? This is a wake-up call for archiving material while our elders are still with us. Culture is both resilient and fragile. We tend to think that these communal stories and this cultural material will be around forever. But culture is fragile—languages die off, people die off, stories die off. That gives us a trenchant reason to build archives. There is almost an “archival imperative” to preserve, conserve, and maintain historical memory so that we can draw sustenance from the past to envision our future. Knowledge involves the constant reinterpretation of a few key narratives across time and space.

In Latino communities archives exist in multiple forms. People have collected a compendium of embodied knowledge—information that is passed on by the body through rituals, cooking, dancing, and oratory. Latino artists today can draw from this repertoire. If you look at their work, it is an image bank of sources, concerns, and aspirations. In addition, many groups have established oral and written archives by collecting the stories of ordinary folk, asking them about their experiences and artistic traditions, particularly the vernacular expressions.

Currently we are seeing initiatives like the *A Ver* project at UCLA, which is producing a series of monographs on U.S.-based Latino artists. We also see regional attempts at archiving. At UCLA, the focus is on the United States and various Latino groups. But the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, is attempting to put together materials and information

on Latin American as well as U.S. Latino artists. Both of these programs are discussed in Taína Caragol's essay in this issue of *American Art*, and both approaches are essential. One helps us to understand a national picture, and the other examines international and U.S. currents together. These two approaches are compatible because of our globalized reality, with the simultaneity of national and transnational imaginaries.

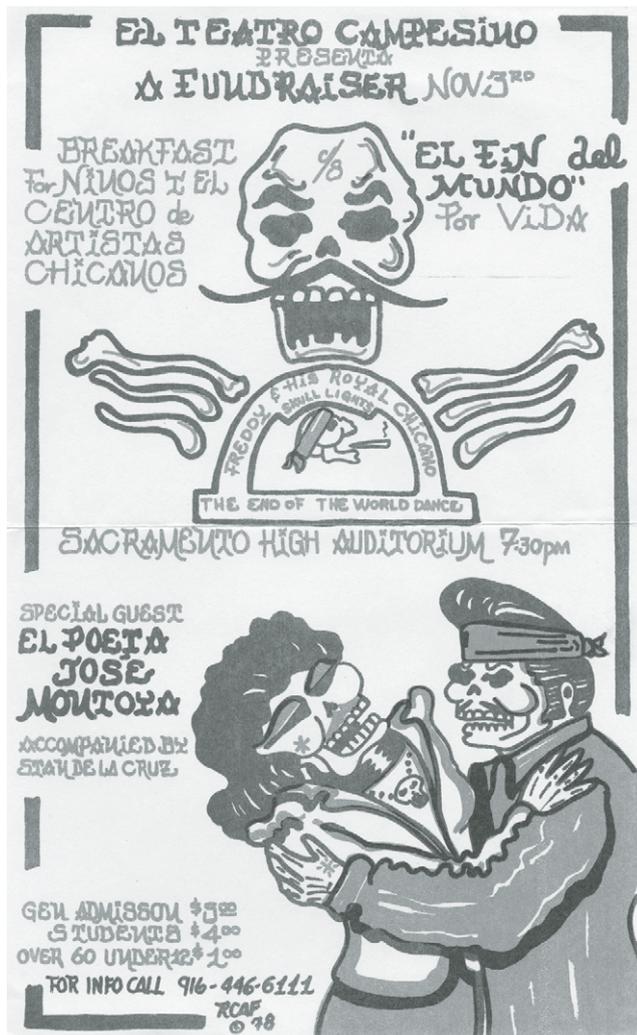
A big question is, How can we imagine a new narrative of American art history that focuses on respect for difference and variation, but at the same time builds conviviality and two-way sharing across social divides? That is the next step. We now have stories and visions of African American art, of Asian American art, and Latino art. How can we build points of contact across them? That is what American art is all about—not an individuated ethnic base of narratives, but all these stories calling and responding to each other. Somewhere in this “dialogic imperative,” simultaneous with global tensions, are the contours of a new cartography of the imagination, of a new sense of American visual culture that is not restrictive but open and expansive; that is not national but integrates the local with the global; that offers a possibility of ongoing dialogue and two-way communication. All these materials need to be codified so that they can be used to tell this incipient story of who we are and who we are becoming culturally.

The turn of the millennium is a crucial moment to be concerned with archiving

this legacy. Many people with individual archives have been crating around materials for thirty years and are now willing to part with their collections. Latino cultural and arts organizations in the United States are in their midlife crisis, wondering, What do we do with all the reports, newsletters, announcements, and other ephemera we have accumulated? Many community organizations have already given their materials to local universities for preservation. Still others retain their collections, and much more material is in private hands. I think people are just waiting to be asked.

My own involvement in the Chicano art movement started when I was in graduate school at the University of Washington in Seattle in the early 1960s, and there the first seeds were planted for the construction of my personal archive. I convinced the dean to let me do an interdisciplinary PhD in art history, music, and literature that focused on Latin American and Chicano cultural production. As part of my studies, I took a Greyhound bus across the mountains to the Yakima Valley, where many Mexican American immigrants and migrant farmers lived. In a little town called Granger, Washington, I witnessed racial exclusion and inequities and began thinking, How can what I know be helpful? How can I use culture to improve social relations among groups? We arranged for a group of students from the University of Washington to spend the summer working with this community, and together we created a Chicano *calmecac* (*calmecac* is a pre-Columbian word that means “a school for nobles”)—cultural programs with the townspeople. Somebody was a noted storyteller, another could play guitar and sing *corridos* (folk ballads), and another woman was a respected cook of traditional foods. It was a coming-of-age for me. I learned that art and culture, writ large, can really

Royal Chicano Air Force, *El Teatro Campesino Fundraiser*, 1978. Poster, 14 1/8 x 8 5/8 in. Tomás Ybarra-Frausto Research Material on Chicano Art, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.



inspire and coalesce community. Ordinary folk are not only retainers but generators of culture and lived experience, and their deep reservoirs of belief and tradition can be mobilized for social action.

Local activists like Antonia Castañeda, Ricardo Garcia, and legions of others joined collective struggles for migrant health, education, and well-being. In a tiny abandoned church, I established a Chicano museum displaying my own collection of Mexican folk art together with objects from area households. Local residents gained a sense of empowerment as their cultural assets were communally acknowledged and validated. In the activist spirit of the time, I also organized a Chicano theatre group named *El Teatro del Piojo* (The Lice Theater). Composed of community members of all ages, the traveling ensemble acted out short skits focused on pressing social problems for Spanish-speaking people in Washington, Idaho, and Oregon, and audiences were urged to take action in the social arena.<sup>5</sup>

Later, I was invited to become an assistant professor at Stanford University, where I made a career teaching mainly Latin American and Chicano literature. I really started working with the visual arts in the mid-1960s, when I settled in San Francisco's Mission District. The civil rights movement was beginning, and San Francisco was a microcosm echoing all of the larger social, cultural events worldwide—the French student movement, the Tlatelolco massacre in Mexico City, the Cuban Revolution. This was the time of the formation of the Galería de la Raza and the Mission Cultural Center for Latino Arts in San Francisco and the Third World Liberation Front strikes at the University of California, Berkeley. It was the height of the Chicano civil rights movement in the Bay Area—a transformative moment, raucous and fun as well as deeply serious.

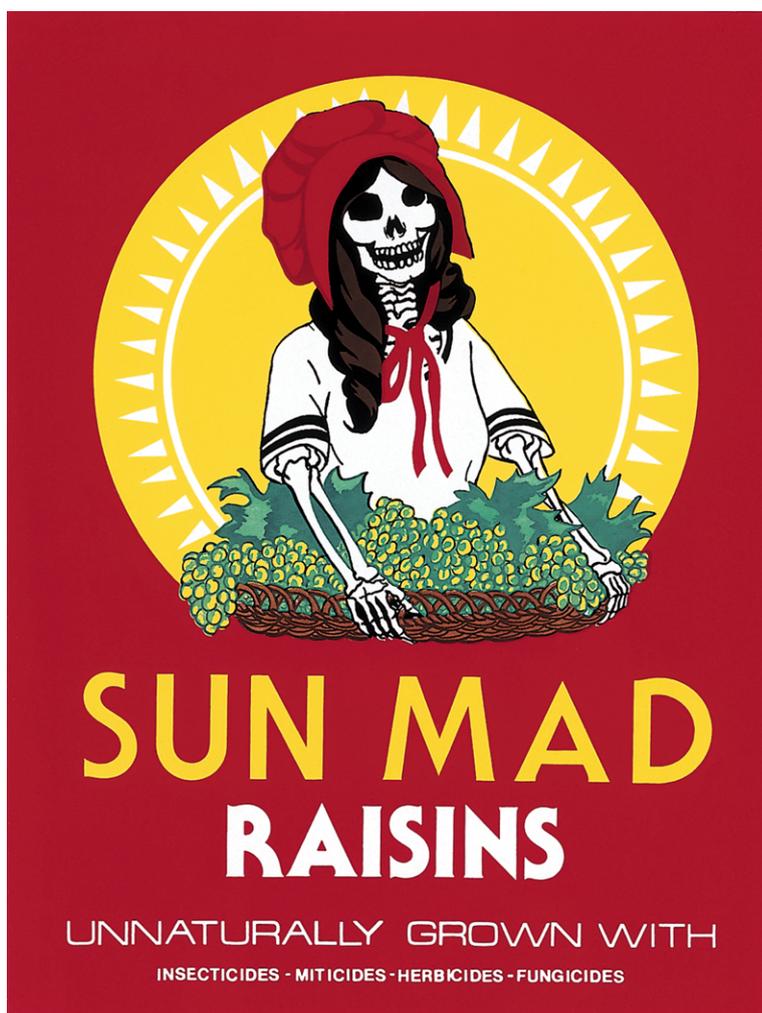
There were scores of community meetings with foundational questioning. What is the role of art in a social movement? How can we create art for an audience that is not used to going to art museums? How can we use the spaces that we control—public spaces—to make art? There were publications, there were sit-ins, and there were vigils and strikes. Quantities of art were produced in relation and response to these social movements. Posters became an important tool for organizing. Murals were central examples of emancipatory art, and theater, rituals, and other performative acts were abundant.

The Chicano artists in the Bay Area had a bifocal vision. Most of them were in

universities, getting their MFAs. So all of the Americanisms of the moment, like pop art and conceptual art, were part of their vocabulary. At the same time they wanted to extend their vision by sampling the vocabularies and sedimented artistic traditions of their own communities. It was a new story of amalgamation and fusion, of uniting multiple optics and traditions from the United States, Mexico, Central America, and, in some cases, the rest of Latin America. It was a moment of regeneration and renewal, of looking back at historical roots to deal with contemporary realities. I was conscious that this was happening nationwide, not just among Latinos in San Francisco.

The panel *Artistic Expressions in the Barrio* at the “Califas: Chicano Art in California” conference, held at the University of California at Santa Cruz, April 16–18, 1982. From left, Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, José Montoya, Carmen Lomas Garza, Pedro Castillo, Sue Martínez, and Harry Gamboa Jr. Tomás Ybarra-Frausto Research Material on Chicano Art, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.





Ester Hernandez, *Sun Mad*, 1982.  
Serigraph on paper, 22 x 17 in.  
Smithsonian American Art  
Museum, Washington, D.C.,  
Gift of Tomás Ybarra-Frausto

The Chicano movement was one of cultural reclamation and social redemption, and artists were right in the middle of reclaiming and making social options for people. I was conscious that the social movements in the Bay Area were part of an important historical moment, like Paris in the 1920s, or the New Deal in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s, or the apogee of abstract expressionism in New York. Latino visual artists were establishing new legacies of contemporary art. And so I just started saving ephemera related to the visual arts. I was very conscious that we were activators, not merely receptors, of American art. Somebody had to preserve what was going on, because these people I was having coffee with were writing the new stories about American culture.

In my years in the Northwest I had begun preserving little bits of paper that I knew would be important, and this practice now grew in importance. They were not just announcements of exhibitions but also photos and ephemera from artists' events. I lived only a couple of blocks away from the Galería de la Raza. I went to every opening and saved the announcement and the programs. If there was a twelve-page exhibition catalogue or brochure, I would save that. When artists sold their first painting, they would make a copy of the check and give it to me. I would keep these documents, thinking that if one day an artist made it big in the art market, we could look back at this check for, say, fifty dollars and better understand their struggle, their origins. I

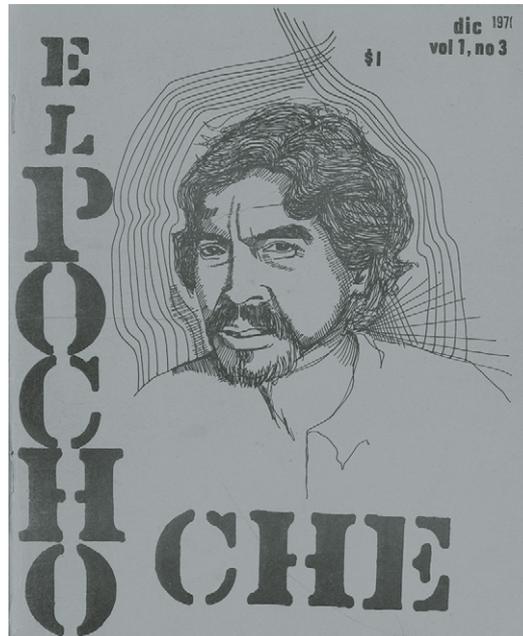
kept things that I thought someday would help fill in the picture with dates, lists of exhibiting artists, the effluvia that art historians pore over for research and analysis.

My collection is so rich because it is very personal. It is what I have found or what people have given me or what I have collected. It is not comprehensive. It has idiosyncratic pockets of material not found in other places. For example, I collected material on *pinto* art—the art of incarcerated people. Within the Chicano community there are particular genres of this art, for example, *paños*, which are handkerchiefs that inmates intricately decorate with ballpoint pens. I was interested in this, so whenever people wrote about *pañero* art, I would clip the article. All the vernacular forms of expression—altars and altar making, graffiti, bodily adornment, things related to youth culture—these have interested me as well. My collection includes articles from sources that were not considered mainstream, clippings not only from the *New York Times* but from alternative community newspapers throughout the country.

One of the core questions when creating an archive is where it ultimately should be housed. Whether you are a collector or an archivist, you desire three basic components: a place where it will be kept safe; a place that will be accessible; and a place where the material will be kept together. My personal predilection was that my materials should not be in a Chicano or a Latin American studies collection. To my way of thinking, my

Gloria Osuña, cover of *El Pocho Che*, 1970. Tomás Ybarra-Frausto Research Material on Chicano Art, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

*The First 20 Years*, 1990 exhibition announcement, Galería de la Raza, San Francisco. Tomás Ybarra-Frausto Research Material on Chicano Art, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.



collection forms a part of a narrative of contemporary *American* art, and it should rightfully be at the core repository for materials on the nation's art, which is the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian Institution. So I donated my personal papers to the archives in 1997, where they are now available for research by scholars of Chicano art and cultural history.<sup>6</sup>

When I started my collection, many individuals were saving similar cultural documents. Indeed the beginning point of the archiving initiatives was analogous to the Chicano Movement itself. People began archiving their own production locally, mainly at universities. Chicano studies departments, like the one at the University of California, Berkeley, sponsored many cultural events and began archiving these events as well as collecting, for example, posters that were created for particular occasions in the Bay Area. Community arts organizations like the Galería de la Raza, Self-Help Graphics, and the Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC) in the Los Angeles area, the Guadalupe Community Arts Center in San Antonio, Texas, and centers in Colorado and elsewhere were all repositories of local visual culture.

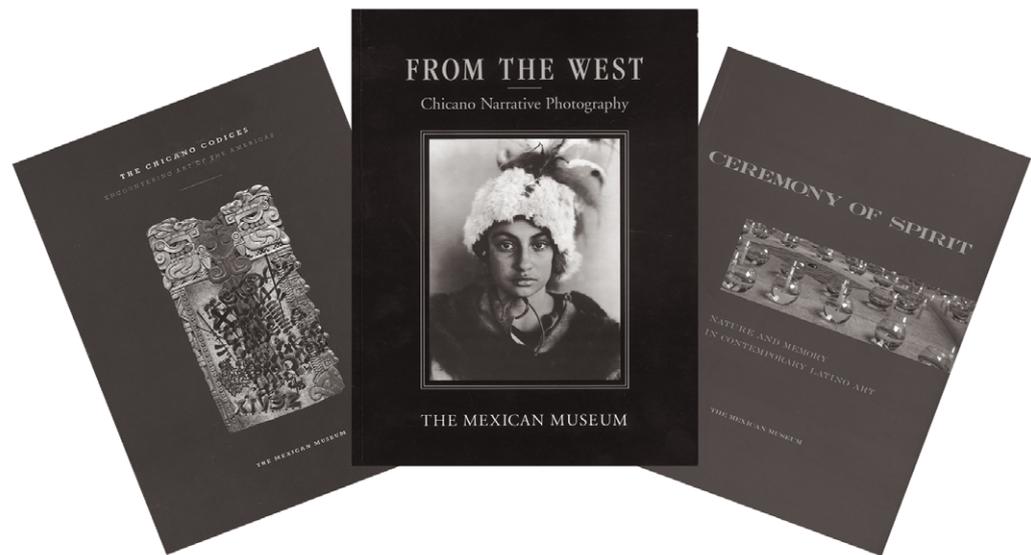
Part of the archival impetus was to have materials that would be useful for teaching. There were no books you could assign that analyzed Chicano cultural production, so cultural activists made their own. When artists were teaching courses in Chicano art and wanted to have class readings, they would cull articles from local newspapers, exhibition catalogues, and writings from community publications. Teachers would photocopy articles and pass them out to their students. At the end of the semester, these readings became cultural notebooks.

Some people still have rich local collections of these self-produced materials that would be significant for understanding the national Chicano movement, but they remain in private archives. Take as an example an important ten-page exhibition catalogue that was produced in an edition of four hundred. Materials like that have a way of disappearing. Perhaps six people still have that catalogue, and it is not in any university library. These are little things, but they begin outlining a historical timeline of the larger cultural picture. Some people might decide that this material is not important and that

Patricia Droher, ed., *The Chicano Codices: Encountering Art of the Americas*. Exhibition catalogue. Mexican Museum, San Francisco, 1992

Chon Noriega and Jennifer Gonzalez, *From the West: Chicano Narrative Photography*. Exhibition catalogue. Mexican Museum, San Francisco, 1995

*Ceremony of Spirit: Nature and Memory in Contemporary Latino Art*. Catalogue of exhibition curated by Amalia Mesa-Bains. Mexican Museum, San Francisco, 1993



the crucial thing, instead, is to begin building on the next iteration. They might want to throw away a piece of the past, but then it would be lost forever. That is why this is a significant moment for the preservation of the history of Latino art. The task is open, awaiting our interventions.

## Notes

The epigraph is from Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, "Autobiographical Note," in *A Finding Aid to the Tomás Ybarra-Frausto Research Material, 1965–1997*, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, [www.aaa.si.edu/findaids/ybartoma/ybartoma.htm](http://www.aaa.si.edu/findaids/ybartoma/ybartoma.htm). This essay is adapted from a March 2005 interview with Amelia A. Goerlitz.

- 1 The term "Latino" is used in this essay to describe people of Latin American descent living in the United States, while "Latin American" refers to those still residing in their countries of origin. "Chicano" refers to people of Mexican descent living in the United States.
- 2 See, for example, Karen Mary Davalos, *Exhibiting Mestizaje: Mexican (American) Museums in the Diaspora* (Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Press, 2001); Alicia Gaspar de Alba, *Chicano Art Inside/Outside the Master's House: Cultural Politics and the CARA Exhibition* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1998); Edward Gonzalez and David L. Witt, *Spirit Ascendant: The Art and Life of Patrociño Barela* (Santa Fe, N.Mex.: Red Crane Books, 1996); Lauro Flores, *Alfredo Arreguin: Patterns of Dreams and Nature* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 2002); Gary D. Keller et al., *Contemporary Chicana and Chicano Art: Artists, Works, Culture, and Education*, 2 vols. (Tempe, Ariz.: Bilingual Press, 2002); and Chon Noriega, ed., *Just Another Poster? Chicano Graphic Arts in California* (Santa Barbara: University Art Museum, Univ. of California, 2001).
- 3 An exhibition called *Ultra-Baroque: Aspects of Post-Latin American Art*, organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, in 2001, established the baroque as a key sensibility within time and space, from Europe to the Americas to the barrio.
- 4 See, for example, Tey Marianna Nunn, *Sin Nombre: Hispana and Hispano Artists of the New Deal Era* (Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Press, 2001).
- 5 The company traveled the West Coast and finally became institutionalized at the University of Washington. For sociohistorical material on Chicano cultural activity in the Pacific Northwest, see Sid White and Pat Matheny-White's Chicano/Latino archive at: [www.evergreen.edu/library/chicanolatino/guidetoarchive\\_en.php](http://www.evergreen.edu/library/chicanolatino/guidetoarchive_en.php).
- 6 The Archives of American Art recently received an \$18,000 award from the Smithsonian's Latino Initiatives Pool to create a more comprehensive online finding aid to the Tomás Ybarra-Frausto Research Material and to digitize selected items from the collection.

## Photo Credit

12, Photo by Jim Hess