

## **A Triumph for Chicana/o Visual Art and Its Historiography**

Sorell, Victor Alejandro

Art Journal

07-01-2004

[Jump to best part of document](#)

A Triumph for Chicana/o Visual Art and Its Historiography Victor Alejandro Sorell Gary D. Keller et al. Contemporary Chicana and Chicane Art: Artists, Works, Culture, and Education. Tempe, Ariz.: Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingue, 2002. Vol. I, 336 pp., 321 color ill., 15 b/w. Vol. II, 342 pp., 344 color ill., 5 b/w. \$ 150; \$ 120 paper; \$ 160 boxed set.

The publication of these two splendid volumes constitutes a triumph for the historiography of Chicana and Chicano visual art. Projected as a four-volume series, the work published to date already supersedes anything that has come before in the quality of its reproductions and breadth of its coverage of individual artists, some of whom have not been previously acknowledged. Also intrinsic to this serial project are the accompanying electronic educational materials, including, for example, a glossary of Spanish words and phrases ([www.latinoartcommunity.org](http://www.latinoartcommunity.org)), which enhance what is already a quantum leap for Chicana/o cultural studies. Predating this landmark project are the seminal book-length treatment of Chicana/o art, *Mexican American Artists* (1973), by Chicano and Mesoamerican art historian Jacinto Quirarte, against which all subsequent studies must be measured, and since 1985, a succession of other excellent works addressing Chicana/o art. In particular, readers are referred to the notable exhibition catalogue edited by Richard Griswold del Castillo, Teresa McKenna, and Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, documenting the CARA project, *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation (1965-1985)*, planned and implemented through UCLA's Wight Art Gallery between 1984 and 1990, with a national traveling itinerary through 1993. A superb complementary volume for the serious student of Chicana/o art is the 1985 publication, *Arte Chicano: A Comprehensive Annotated Bibliography of Chicane Art, 1965-1981*, compiled by Shifra M. Goldman and Tomas Ybarra-Frausto, two other pioneers in the critical appreciation and historiography of Chicana/o art, as well as consulting contributors to the CARA show.

A vicissitudinous branch of American art-itself oftentimes viewed throughout its history as globally marginal and mutable, according to Wanda M. Corn's critically important essay, "Coming of Age: Historical Scholarship in American Art," (*The Art Bulletin* 70, no. 2, 1988)-Chicana/o art is no less equivocal and multifaceted than the bifurcated mestiza/o (miscegenons) identity of Mexican Americans themselves. What more eloquent visual statement and parody to that effect than Ester Hernandez's unparalleled scigraph,

Libertad II (Liberty II, 1987), depicting a Chicana sculptor carving a new identity for Frederic-Auguste Bartholdi's Statue of Liberty, an identity that transforms the gift from the French people to the United States into an Aztec monolith from Aztlan!

A palpable tension exists between Chicana/o art's American patina and its Mexican roots. It is an art thriving on the hyphen or synapse of its dual character. Although it is neither wholly Mexican nor wholly (U.S.) American, America remains Chicana/o art's native land. If this art was once perceived as "foreign" in any respect, it was so by virtue of geopolitical and historical events, coupled with personal artistic ideologies. Like the circumstances that led nineteenth-century Tejano (Mexican Texan) politician and soldier Juan Nepomuceno Seguin to declare himself "a foreigner in [his] native land,"<sup>1</sup> Chicana/o art, its practitioners, staunch critical and scholarly advocates, and collectors have negotiated actual and metaphorical borders and mounted proactive interventions challenging the very canons of art-historical research and scholarship.

During the Texas Revolution of 1836, a military conflict that forced Mexico to cede Texas to the United States, Colonel Seguin, organizer of the Second Regiment of Texas Volunteers, found himself like other Tejanos caught in a struggle between two cultures, not certain whether to remain loyal to Mexico or to establish an allegiance to Texas. Seguin chose to side with Texas. Ironically, though, he would eventually be forced to settle in Mexico as a refugee, a consequence of the 1846 exodus of Tejanos from Texas, and a concomitant influx to the area of new Anglo immigrants. The ensuing ratification of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo by Mexico and the United States in the spring of 1848 brought the Mexican War to an end. In addition to Texas, Mexico would ultimately cede much of California, Nevada, Utah, Wyoming, Colorado, Kansas, Oklahoma, the upper Rio Grande Valley of New Mexico, and Arizona above the Gila River. Through the later Gadsden Purchase of 1854, the United States would also acquire southern Arizona and the Mesilla Valley of southwestern New Mexico, in all about half of Mexico's national territory.<sup>2</sup>

A contemporary Mexican American or Chicana/o identity was thus forged out of United States-Mexican hostilities, divided loyalties, shifting borders, immigration, and a U.S. expansionist and imperialist disposition cast against the historical backdrop of Manifest Destiny. To borrow the prominent Chicana artist Judy Baca's revealing and suggestive characterization, it is an identity experience akin to living in a state of "internal exile."<sup>3</sup> It follows that an art born of such volatility must surely be bicultural—at times ambivalent about that duality—introspective, and, above all, spirited.

IMAGE PHOTOGRAPH

Although not conspicuously foregrounded as a thematic focus, the subject of (gendered)

ideality emerges as a meutHEME embedded throughout both volumes. The volumes are principally written by Gary D. Keller (distinguished scholar of Chicana/o literature, film, and linguistics), Mary Erickson (art educator), Kaytie Johnson (museum curator and director), and Joaquin Alvarado (media specialist), with additional contributions by Arluro J. Aldama (scholar of Chicana/o cultural studies), PatVilleneuve (art educator), Henry Quintero (graduate student in English), and Gema Ledesma (student in Chicana/o studies). The core content in both volumes consists of alphabetically ordered feature spreads on 194 individual artists, including photos, personal statements, sample signatures, exhibition records, and, where available, selected reviews and commentaries on the anthologized artists and their works. Each of the two volumes begins with a different series of frontispiece images and an identical statement about the scope of the project. The table of contents for the first volume is followed by a brief essay in which Keller comments further on the four-volume project, notably acknowledging the inspiration he drew from art historian Jacinto Quirarte's "seminal" book. Under the contents, ninety-three artists are named together with eight thematic photographic clusters that appear interspersed within the first volume of the anthology: "coraida y bebida (tambien comercio y bebercio)" [food and beverage (also revelry and drinking)]; "images of the comunidad" (community images); "mujeres por mujeres" (women as interpreted or seen by women); "pre-Hispanic connections"; "Viitos, Cholos, and Pddiuocos" (Dudes, Low-Riders, and Zoot-Suiters); "the Border and indocumentados" (undocumented immigrants); "farmworker iconography"; and "la loleria mexiama" (Mexican bingo). Volume II continues with another 101 alphabetically arranged artists' profiles and addresses eight more themes photographically: "El Dia de los Muertos" (Day of the Dead); "Yolando y Lupe" (the artist **Yolanda M. Lopez** and Our Lady of Guadalupe); "las variadas cncarnaciones de la Virgen" (varied incarnations of the Virgin); "lowriders"; "heroes, antiheroes, and role models"; "Statues of Liberty"; "mothers and daughters, fathers and sons"; and "ila India libre!" (Mexican wrestling). That these sixteen thematic clusters and frontispiece images are only visually presented without benefit of accompanying textual commentary is a shortcoming in the stand-alone, two-volume work to date. It is important, therefore, to reiterate that the completed project will include two more volumes, a third devoted to the documentation of community arts organizations instrumental in the creation of Chicana/o art, and a fourth containing articles and essays concerned with the analysis, criticism, history, and scholarly investigation of Chicana/o art. These forthcoming writings promise to round out the definitive appreciation of what is admittedly a fluid, living subject. One must also hope that some artists who are conspicuously absent from the first two volumes-such as Judy Baca, Santa Barraza, Barbara Carrasco, Jose Gamaliel Gonzalez, Gronk, Joe Bastida Rodriguez, Frank Romero, and Patssi Valdez-will find some acknowledgement in the forthcoming volumes. (It must, however, be understood that their absence is due, in most instances, to their own failure

to provide in a timely manner the critical information that had been requested of them by the books' compilers and editors.)

That the deconstruction of identity helps to better understand a Chicana/o artistic ethos is affirmed by San Francisco-based multimedia artist Enrique Chagoya, one of the artists featured in the first volume. His personal statement is largely an articulation of that complex cultural matrix out of which his art and that of many other Chicanas/os evolves: "My artwork is a conceptual fusion of opposite cultural realities that I have experienced in my lifetime. I integrate diverse elements from pre-Columbian mythology, Western religious iconography, and American popular culture. The art becomes a product of collisions between historical visions, ancient and modern, marginal and dominant paradigms—a thesis and an anti-thesis that end in a synthesis in the mind of the viewer . . ." (vol. 1, 128).

Profiled in the second volume, Laura Molina of Los Angeles is concerned about her own cultural erasure or invisibility, a consequence of forced disenfranchisement or marginalization by an arrogant, often ignorant, and largely monolingual dominant culture: "I feel the need to assert my identity in the most militant way possible because otherwise, as an American, I am invisible. In a culture where nothing happens until it happens on TV, I don't exist. As an educated, native-born, English-speaking, fifth-generation Mexican American and a feminist, there is almost no reflection of me in the movies or television, which is almost as bad as being stereotyped . . ." (vol. II, 146).

Chicana/o identity carries with it attendant aspects, many of which are virtually inscribed in the sumptuous, largely word-free photo essays. One can readily infer the Chicana cultural theorist Gloria Anzaldúa's resonant characterization of the borderlands or *la frontera* as *una herida abierta*, an open wound "where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds . . . and before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture."<sup>4</sup> Two images, in particular, render Anzaldúa's verbal pathos in uncompromising visual terms. A 1981 serigraph by Malaquias Montoya depicts an anonymous immigrant impaled and limply suspended on an unyielding barbed wire fence. A titular textual snippet reading UNDOCUMENTED appears obliquely in bold, upper-case letters, seemingly printed with the blood shed by the victim of this attempted border crossing. David Avalos's *Donkey Cart Altar*, a mixed-media installation of 1985, represents on its front side a detained immigrant being frisked by a border patrol agent. The rarely seen back side of this "altar" includes a portrait of Francisco Sanchez, a youngster murdered by the Border Patrol on December 8, 1980. Appealing to the viewer's moral introspection, Avalos has substituted upright flashlights,

instruments of surveillance, for votive candles.

The ubiquity of religious altars installed in devoutly Catholic Chicana/o households has, in turn, inspired a tradition of altar-making among that constituency's own artists. It is in this religious context that Our Lady of Guadalupe is herself a ubiquitous icon. It follows logically, then, that she would be invoked in two of the second volume's eight thematic clusters. Highly prominent within this prolific output of Marian images are three canonic oil-pastel-on-paper portraits by **Yolanda Lopez** of herself, her mother, and grandmother, each in the guise of la Guadalupeana. This iconic trinity is a remarkably singular instance of women as seen and interpreted by women. They are reproduced in volume II, side by side, like a triptych. It should come as no surprise that among the faithful, these works were viewed with considerable controversy because the holy and the human realms are not distinguished but, rather, conflated. This leveling of distinctions might be explained in what **Lopez** said in a 2001 talk at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art: "The complexity of the Virgin can be stated by the fact that she represents the Roman Catholic Church, Mexican nationality, Chicano spirituality, a role model for women, and a source of solace for men" (vol. II, 80).

Interestingly, *valos*, *cliolos*, and *Pachucos*-men whose *vidas locas* (crazy lives lived on the edge) are the subjects of Chicana/o folklore and who are subsumed under a thematic cluster-number among the men who find comfort in la virgen (the Virgin), "strutting to early mass on Sunday morning" (vol. I, 204), as does El Louie, the protagonist of the emblematic poem and paean to Pachucos everywhere, written by musician, poet, and visual artist Jose Montoya. The poem is reproduced alongside wonderfully evocative paintings by Caspar Enriquez, Cesar Martinez, and Miguel Angel Reyes and a monoprint by Wayne Alaniz Healy of Los Sreetscapers fame, a legendary muralist group. One of these works, entitled *Tirando tiempo* (Doing/Wasting Time, 1993), an acrylic painting on board in shade and tint is a hypnotic portrait rendering of a *vato* whose tattoos betray time spent in prison. A tattoo of Christ on his chest attests to his *failli* and, through its permanence, suggests further that he sought a protracted refuge in his religious beliefs.

Essentially a spiritual observance dating from pre-Columbian/Hispanic times, *El Dia de los Muertos*-another thematic segment in the second volume and one associated with All Souls' Day-revolves around the annual ritual practice of making *ofrendas* (offerings) on elaborate or makeshift altars in remembrance of those loved ones who have passed away. It is a time for both reflection and celebration. *Calaveras* (skeletons) popularized by Mexican printmaker Jose Guadalupe Posada are no less ubiquitous in this context than la *Guadalupeana*. *Dando vida* (Giving Life, 1999), a mesmerizingly evocative lithograph by

Cesar Martinez, portrays a calavera-embodiment of the indigenous belief that life and death are extensions of one another-nourishing the roots of a commanding nopal (cactus) plant. The skeleton and roots are revealed inside what appears to be a cross-section view of an Amerindian pyramid. The entire composition carries with it the solemnity of a commemorative altar. Emulating Posada's raucous calaveras that celebrate their communion with the dead, the dandified skeletons in two mixed-media pieces, Trisza Jaurique's *En memoria de Josefa* (In Josephine's Memory, 1995) and Carlos Cortez's *La Catrina* (1996), are apparent tributes to Posada's own skeletal lady by that name. Customarily, Day of the Dead altars must also offer the spirits their favorite foods and libations.

Given his great impact on el movimiento Chicana/o (Chicana/o Movement), the late Cesar Chavez, leader of the United Farmworkers (UFW), is arguably the paradigmatic commemorative subject for a Dia de los Muertos observance. Fittingly, volume I features back-to-back frontispiece memorial images by Alfredo Arreguin and Ester Hernandez. While *Farm Workers' Altar* (1967), an acrylic-on-wood construction by Emanuel Martinez, might additionally function today as a tribute to this fallen hero, its original purpose was to recognize a living rhetor whose words moved farm workers and artists alike to affirm their Mexican American identity and demand that their civil rights be respected. In the second volume, under the profile spread for Martinez, this reviewer is quoted describing the altar as a virtual pulpit for the Chicana/o Movement. The stylized huelga (strike) eagle/thunderbird logo of the UFW, codesigned by Chavez himself and his cousin, is part of the extensive farm-worker iconography adorning all four sides and top of the pulpit. Arguably, rhetoric is what galvanized the Chicana/o community politically.

The social fabric of the Chicana/o community lies with family ties binding mothers and daughters, and fathers and sons. *Cumpleanos de Lala y Tudi* (Lala and Tudi's Birthday, 1989), a festive family gathering as painted by Carmen Lomas Garza, illustrates the ever-present and symbolic pinata party. Martin Charlot's oil painting *Father Paints the Son* (1999) celebrates artistry in the family, passed from generation to generation.

Popular pastimes, Mexican bingo and wrestling in particular, are an aspect of community life that Chicana/o artists also choose to address. Victor Orozco Ochoa has injected a Chicano rasquache/i (make-do) aesthetic sensibility in parodying Mexican bingo as *Border Bingo*, a serigraph of 1995. Rejecting traditional subjects of Mexican bingo-la corona (the crown), la mano (the hand), and el corazon (the heart), to name three major ones-he replaces them with el vato (the dude) and el nopal (the cactus), among others. Moreover, this artist assumes a performative role, also rendering the cards three dimensionally as

foam-rubber costumes. Rasquachismo is one of those subjects that awaits further elucidation in the fourth volume of the series.<sup>5</sup> The heroic, highly popular personalities/stars of the Mexican art of la lucha libre (wrestling)-like Dos Caras and Santo Jr.-are eulogized Warhol-fashion in the prints of Victor Gastelum.

A project of the Hispanic Research Center at Arizona State University, this encyclopedic documentation of Chicana/o visual culture affords the reader a breathtaking cornucopia of 665 color images-many of them full-page fold-outs-and an additional twenty black-and-white illustrations through which Chagoya's notion of participatory synthesis assumes the aspect of a magisterial artistic tour, thanks to the virtuoso photography of Craig Smith and Marilyn Szabo. Notwithstanding the ambivalence that can sometimes subtend Chicana/o artistry, it is highly unlikely that any viewer will emerge from this experience ambivalent or untouched. The art itself has an eloquent voice that delivers in symphonic tones. Physically, these two volumes are the visual embodiment to which the art of the book itself can aspire.

In spite of the great strides in Chicana/o art's historiography represented in the volumes just reviewed, it is highly telling that another nearly coeval publication, one with an international readership and scope, *An at the Turn of the Millennium* (Taschen, 1999), chooses to anthologize some 167 international artists, including three Latinos-one Mexican, one Cuban, and one Afro-Cuban/Honduran-but apparently not one Chicana/o artist among the lot! Evidently, from a global visual-arts perspective, marginalization of the Chicana/o branch of American art lamentably persists.

#### FOOTNOTE

1. See *Foreigners in Their Native Land: Historical Roots of the Mexican Americans*, ed. David J. Weber (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 4th paper ed., 1976), 91 and 177-82.
2. Richard Griswold del Castillo, *The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo: A Legacy of Conflict* (Norman: Oklahoma University Press, 1990), provides a scholarly account of the treaty that ended the Mexican War of 1846-48 and that remains the oldest standing treaty between Mexico and the United States.
3. Refer to Diane Neumaier's interview with Baca in June 1981 in "Our People Are the Internal Exiles," in *Cultures in Contention*, ed. Douglas Kahn and Diane Neumaier (Seattle: Real Comet Press, 1985), 62-70.
4. See Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt

Lute Books, 1987), 3.

5. See Richard Griswold del Castillo et al., eds. "Rasquachismo: A Chicano Sensibility," in *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965-1985* (Los Angeles: Wight Art Gallery, UCLA, 1991), 155-62.

#### AUTHOR\_AFFILIATION

Victor Alejandro Sorell is professor of art history, associate dean of the College of Arts & Sciences, and institutional director at Chicago State University (CSU) of the CSU-University of Minnesota MacArthur Foundation Undergraduate Honors Program in International Studies. A founding member of MARCH (el Movimiento Artístico Chicano/Chicano Art Movement), a Chicago-based community-arts organization, he was one of several scholars who pioneered the field of Chicana/o art history. Chairing the National Executive Committee of CARA led to a visiting professorship in Chicano art history at UCLA in 1990. He is currently at work on a book about Chicano prison art, notably panos (illustrated handkerchiefs) and tattooing, subjects of the emergent field of cultural criminology.

A Triumph for Chicana/o Visual Art and Its Historiography

Byline: Sorell, Victor Alejandro

Volume: 63

Number: 2

ISSN: 00043249

Publication Date: 07-01-2004

Page: 100

Type: Periodical

Language: English

Copyright College Art Association of America Summer 2004

[Back to top ^](#)

#### **Citation for your reference:**

---

Ensure the accuracy and completeness of your bibliography by reviewing this automatically generated citation information against the guidelines provided by the standard reference works published by the Modern Language Association (MLA) or the American Psychological Association (APA).



[Edit](#) this citation

Sorell, Alejandro, Victor.. "A Triumph for Chicana/o Visual Art and Its Historiography." *Art Journal*. 01 Jul. 2004: 100. *eLibrary*. Web. 06 Jan. 2013.

Sorell, Alejandro, V. (2004, July 01). A Triumph for Chicana/o Visual Art and Its Historiography. *Art Journal*, (2), 100, Retrieved from <http://elibrary.bigchalk.com>