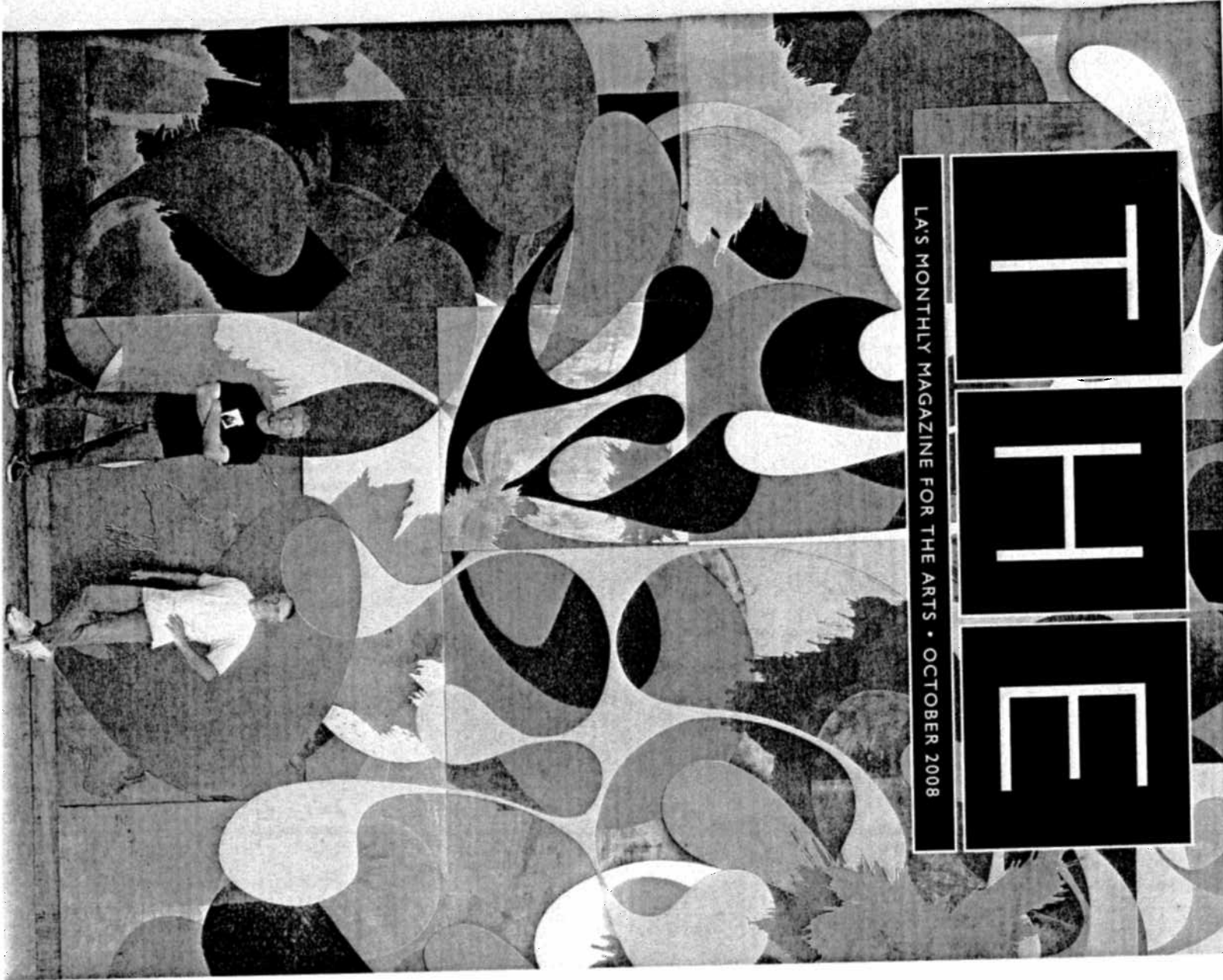


THE

LA'S MONTHLY MAGAZINE FOR THE ARTS • OCTOBER 2008





Shoe fans of the world — unite, or unite, as the case may be. MAKI studios in the Netherlands called upon 140 artists throughout the world to show what creativity can do to a plain pair of sneakers and the occasional high heel or rain boot. The results can be seen in *Custom Kicks* (Lantern Press Publishing, \$19.95), where regular pairs of shoes become one-of-a-kind works of art. Apartment buildings, Chairman Mao, Bob Marley, flowers, animals, Day of the Dead imagery, and even cupcakes make all footwear in the book truly unique works of art. Putting your best foot forward has never been more beautiful.

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(l-r) David Lloyd and Charlem Arnold standing in front of Arnold's Corn, acrylic on canvas, 336 x 252, 1998.
From *Charles Arnold* by Rodas Books.
Courtesy Rodas Books and the artist.



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FROM THE EDITOR

THE OPENING WEEKEND OF THE 2008-09 LOS ANGELES art season was heaven for art lovers. Throughout the city they marched location to location, excited to see the latest offerings, happy to mingle with artists and those who share an appreciation of the arts. If those evenings were any indication, we are indeed in for a spectacular year.



Culver City, Downtown, Chinatown — all over our City of Angels art galleries beckoned art lovers with carnal, acrylic, and the occasional glass of wine. Bergamot Station was like a zoo, albeit one where the animals party once the keepers have gone home. There were lots of catkins, but no honking; lots of booze, but no drunken behavior; lots of artists, but no painting in the parking lot; and of course lots of contemporary art to gaze upon.

Mid-month a trend confided to me though they liked one particular exhibit, they didn't necessarily "get it." What does "getting it" mean, anyhow? Art is subjective. Looking at contemporary art is often akin to looking at clouds. I may see a monster while you see Snow White with a broom. And that is what remains endlessly fascinating about art. There are no right answers — there are only different viewpoints.

There is no doubt that Los Angeles is home to a thriving, cutting-edge art scene, admired throughout the world, and we intend to cover every bit of it. Our reviewers' love art, and can offer insights that might elude the casual viewer. Every word in this magazine is offered with the utmost respect for the artists and their devotion to their craft. Look for us, we'll look for you, and together we can explore today's art while keeping an eye on tomorrow. We are but an email away.

— LAURIE ROSENTHAL, Editor-in-Chief
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CHICANO ART

Is This the End or the Beginning?

Susana Smith Bautista

LACMA found itself in a unique and surprising position last summer — simultaneously presenting two major exhibitions of Chicano art in a mainstream public museum. *Phantom Sightings: Art After the Chicano Movement* opened April 6 and ended September 1, and *Selections from the Cheech Marin Collection: Los Angeles/Chicano Painters of L.A.* opened June 15 and runs through November 2. This extraordinary happenstance provides a rare opportunity to engage in critical dialogue about Chicano art, history, and politics. And there probably could not be a more appropriate venue than LACMA, which presented the first major Chicano exhibition with Los Four in 1974, having been tagged just two years earlier by the artists in ASCO who were reacting against being told that Chicano artists do not make “fine art.”



Phantom Sightings is based upon the premise that there is a generational and rhetorical distance between contemporary Chicano artists and the Chicano movement of the 1930s, 1960s, and 1970s. The curators state that their work focuses on “conceptual processes vis-à-vis social, cultural, and political issues related to the Mexican-descent population in the United States.” The only problem is that all these issues still form the very basis of the Chicano movement that remains active today. Whether they are called for refer to themselves as Chicano, Mexican-descendants, Latinos, Americans or anything else, what is important to recognize is that the artists in the exhibition are still influenced by these issues related to Chicano culture. The curators have been very careful to avoid labels. In the catalog introduction they write, “We take the Chicano movement as a historical context and as a curatorial point of departure but not as the basis for a proper name for the art or the artist.” It is premature to call the movement historical, even as a curatorial device that requires a theoretical (and chronological) point of departure.

By stating that the exhibition presents work *after* the Chicano movement the curators imply that the movement has ended or is no longer viable today. UCLA experienced their own resurgence of Chicano activism in the early 1990s by MECHA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán) when they successfully fought against attempts to eliminate the Chicano Studies Program. Other examples of Chicano activism can still be found around the country today, as well as manifestations of Chicano popular culture within communities, and even Chicano professional associations. Most of the artists in *Phantom Sightings* did not personally experience the movement in the 1950s, but they either have knowledge of it or some personal experience of its present manifestation which undoubtedly has changed somewhat. Even the four artists from Mexico (Rubén Ortiz-Torres, Margarita Cabrera, Julio César Morales, and Juan Capistrán) are familiar with the movement and contemporary Chicano culture. Furthermore, many artists in *Phantom Sightings* are still addressing issues of identity, culture, and oppression. Gary Carriz’s *Polka Cart* (2004) and *Febina y Purra* (2006) are based on Mexican traditions of street vendors and *boluditas*, and Cabrera’s *Isahn* (2004) and *Agua* (2006) depict familiar Mexican symbols such as the VW Beetle and cactus plants. So then, what really differentiates them from those “other” Chicano artists from whom they have distanced themselves?

The answer to this and other questions lies only a few hundred feet away, in the Cheech Marin collection that presents signature works of seminal Chicano artists starting from the early 1970s. LACMA Adjunct Curator



Vincent Volpe, *Mother to See Him*, *Keep on Movin'*, oil on canvas, 48" x 72", 2008. Collection of the artist. Photo © 2008 Museum Associates/LACMA.



Gromk, *Perdida* (detail), mixed media on handmade paper mounted on wood, 60" x 116", 2000. Collection of Chazou Marin. © Gromk.

Chon Noriega describes the difference between the two exhibitions as generational, and the introductory wall text for *Los Angeles* refers to the artists as "first generation Chicano." Marin himself describes his collection as reflecting the Chicano experience. So comparing both exhibitions (which is unavoidable), one could understand *Phantom Sightings* as the contemporary Chicano experience that now focuses more on concept over content, or over the art object itself, a different way of challenging and questioning, positioned against the earlier, traditional Chicano experience that favored content. Chicano artists from the 1960s and 1970s were living in the middle of often violent struggles against inequality, injustice, and rampant racism characterized by the Chicano moratoriums, student demonstrations, and the Brown Berets. Social realism defined much of their artwork because they sympathized with Mexican revolutionaries and Soviet workers from the early twentieth century. Much of this early, injustice has been relearned today, with doors opening more easily for Chicanos across fields. But we all know that injustice persists, with issues like immigration that have yet to be resolved. Furthermore, for as many contemporary artists that don't want to be labeled Chicano, Latino, or Mexican-American there are twice as many contemporary artists today who are still proud to call themselves Chicano, emulating the Chicano masters from Marin's collection and still finding relevance in social realist themes and styles.

An example of such a Chicano artist is thirty-one-year-old Vincent Valdez, the youngest artist included in *Los Angeles*. Marin refers to Valdez as a "bright new hope" in the exhibition video. His 2008 work *Volcan to Sea Haze, Keep an Eye on Marin* was completed just for the exhibition and highlights the contentious 2007 May Day demonstration in MacArthur Park. This intense piece is strikingly similar to Frank Romero's *The Arch of the Paladino* (1996) — both stylistically and thematically — commenting on the police crackdown on street vendors in the early 1990s. Marin's collection heavily emphasizes the social, photo-realist styles of early Chicano artists who freely talk about being inspired by the Mexican murals and by East Los Angeles, using recognizable symbols and colors from both. *Los Angeles* offers excellent examples of such pieces from the 1980s and 1990s: Wayne Heath's *Beautiful Dreamer Bayle Heights* (1993), John Valdez's *Calling Them Out of the Car* (1984), George Yepez's *La Parolita y el Camión* (2000) reprinting of the 1989 original, and *California Manos* (1998) by the late Carlos Almaraz. Almaraz and Romero were part of the collective Los Four along with Beto de la Rocha and Gilbert Lujan, whose two painted towercars are centrally placed at the museum's BB Grand Entrance and inside the exhibition. It is hard to miss Chaz Bogorquez's work framing the exhibition entrance and on the title wall. Bogorquez represents an artist whose style is undeniably Chicano in its graffiti roots, yet in the late 1980s the artist turned from tagging walls to painting canvases that are more abstract stylistically while still remaining loyal to the lyric minimalism and intense energy of graffiti writing.

Two artists unexpectedly appear in both exhibitions: Gromk and Patsi Valdez. However, in *Phantom Sightings* they appear as part of the collective ASCO (1971–1987). Motivated by many of the same socio-political issues as the "other" Chicano artists, the artists in ASCO chose the avant-garde path with their *Holding Hand* (1972), *Instant Man!* (1974), *Isidoro Muna* (1975), and other street performances, conceptual art, and films. Yet in *Los Angeles*, Gromk and Valdez are represented by their later work starting in the 1990s, more traditional in medium and style. Both create figurative work on paper and canvas, but Gromk has recently turned his favorite symbols into abstract compositions such as *Perdida* (2000). In Marin's *Chicano Vision* catalog that first presented his collection in 2004, Gromk's new style is described as "the natural evolution into Chicano abstraction."

It is important to clarify that this article does not intend to posit one exhibition over another, or even one type of artist or artistic style over another. Most of the artists in *Phantom Sightings* have had the highest level of training at mainstream art schools such as Otis, UC Irvine, CalArts, and the San Francisco Art Institute, but earlier Chicano artists also had formal arts training, including at Cal State Los Angeles and Northridge, and even some of the more prestigious institutions such as Otis (Patsi Valdez, Frank Romero) and Chouinard (Chaz Bogorquez). The point is to simply raise the possibility that the difference between these two exhibitions is not necessarily generational, but *psychic*: the personal choices that determine how artists express themselves and their particular reaction to Chicano culture. As LACMA director Michael Govan states in his foreword to the *Phantom Sightings* catalog, "If they are grouped together here as Chicano artists after the Chicano movement, it is not by their own volition or consent; it is a curatorial artifact, a device to reflect and speculate on the interests and issues facing Chicano artists today."

Certainly, Chicano artists today have greater educational opportunities than before, and more global exposure and interaction facilitated by the Internet, which all offer them a wider artistic vocabulary with which to express themselves, but perhaps this multitude of choices is one of the more difficult issues facing Chicano artists today. The contemporary artists who choose to follow their more traditional Chicano predecessors are no less significant, which is what *Phantom Sightings* suggests by indicating a stylistic evolution and a generational difference. Curatorial devices can be powerful and dangerous, and in this instance, misreading in its assumption that the Chicano movement has ended as an influence and inspiration for Chicano artists today. The continued presence of those "others" Chicano artists activates the critical dialogue that must take place for the art world to carry on and flourish, inspiring new reactions and directions. This was precisely the visual dialogue that happened in the early 1970s between Los Four and ASCO with their diverse responses to the same situation, and it is the same dialogue that continues today. If you missed seeing *Phantom Sightings*, buy the catalog or go to LACMA's website, and continue the dialogue. 🗨️