Frank Romero

Urban Iconography / Iconografía Urbana

Susana Bautista, Curator

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The Harriet & Charles Luckman Fine Arts Complex
California State University, Los Angeles

The Rocky Road Forward

Twenty-four years ago, Frank Romero and Los Four received recognition from the established art world with their group exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. At that time there existed little perceptual difference between the Chicano political movement of the 1960s and the art produced by Chicano artists, referred to as "Chicano art." Because local Chicano artists started working from the streets of East Los Angeles, using its walls for canvas and its iconography as inspiration for subject matter, they were irrevocably placed into the Chicano movement of that time and place. After the landmark 1974 exhibition, Los Four were criticized by both Chicanos and Anglos for having "sold out" to the establishment and thus betrayed El Movimiento. "The trouble with 'Los Four' as artists is that they've been corrupted: they've taught in art schools/colleges, worked as designers, etc., and the road back is rocky indeed," writes Peter Plagens in *Artforum* (September 1974). Political rhetoric was commonly used externally across all societal levels to discuss Chicano artists more than it was used internally by the artists themselves.

Frank Romero first met Carlos Almaraz while attending California State University at Los Angeles in 1959, yet it was ten years later when he would be formally introduced to Chicanismo by Gilbert Luján, Beto de la Rocha and Judithe Hernández. After living in New York with Almaraz from 1968 to 1969, Romero began to feel isolated from his Hispanic roots. He had always considered himself Hispanic, based on the commonality of the Spanish language and because his family came from New Mexico and Texas, where Mexican-Americans called themselves Hispanos, or Manos. But basically he was Mexican, or so he thought until his first visit to Mexico in 1969. He had a mustache, ate tortillas, he even liked menudo, but he didn't speak much Spanish and was as white as a gringo. "You're a pocho," they taunted him. So he left New York, returned to Los Angeles and became a Chicano, kicking and screaming.

The Chicano movement still possessed a strong political agenda during the 1970s. Carlos Almaraz worked for Cesar Chávez a few years, designing for his paper *El Malcriado* and frequently driving up to San Juan Bautista, and Gilbert Luján published the magazine *Con Safos*. Los Four disseminated its visual culture by publishing material through El Centro de Arte Popular, the magazine *ChismeArte* and a Los Four comic book. They even considered their graffiti art a political statement by relating to kids in the barrio rather than to galleries on the west side. But contrary to public opinion, exhibiting in the

conservative Los Angeles County Museum of Art was simply one more political statement. "Just the fact that I called myself Chicano and did paintings and put them in museums was a political act, because that had never happened before, " recalls Romero of that controversial exhibition. Yet Frank Romero's explicitly political paintings didn't start until the mid-1980s with *The Closing of Whittier Boulevard* (1984), *The Death of Ruben Salazar* (1986) and into the 1990s with *The Arrest of the Paleteros* (1996), ironically the period that saw an abatement of the Chicano movement. Political rhetoric was instead used implicitly in his work continuously throughout the years with images which were not always interpreted as Chicano.

Chicanismo in the 1990s is not devoid of explicit political content, rather it has been diffused through the introduction of new political agendas by other Latin American cultures. The 1960s was characterized by a lack of choice. Mexican-Americans considered themselves Chicanos because that was the only option for them —they were neither Mexican or American but Chicano, the socio-political translation of Mexican American. Today, however, the large number of Central and South American immigrants are unable to understand the Chicano experience, which has also become far removed from the younger generation of Chicanos. This current phenomenon appears in the form of a terminological debate—Latinos, Hispanics, Latin-Americans, Ibero-Americans—which has threatened Chicanos with dissipation into a large cultural umbrella rather than providing them with demographic empowerment against a decreasing white majority. Mexican-Americans today are struggling with another aspect of this identity crisis; if they embrace these new immigrants as fellow Latinos/Hispanics will they be accused of betraying the Chicano movement?

Chicano artists today are not concerned about the rocky road back, but about the road forward. "I'm not really angry at the white society because I don't find that productive. I am displeased with many aspects of the dominant culture, but I think that we're part of it," says Romero. Devoid of feelings of hatred, with the absence of powerful civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King and Cesar Chávez, and diffused by other Latino groups also fighting for their rights now with Latino political representation, the weight of the Chicano conscience has finally been lifted. According to Professor David Hayes-Bautista of the Center for the Study of Latino Health at UCLA, only about 12% of the nearly four million Latinos in Los Angeles County today would be considered demographically Chicano. The ideological Chicano is actually a much smaller, although more vociferous percentage. Chicanismo is a unique experience. It is a generation, the Chicano Generation, which has been pushed into the annals of history because of current demographics.

What is the difference between the 1960s and the 1990s? "Now everyone in Los Angeles

eats tortillas, that's the difference," laughs Romero. "We've all become more alike." No, we're not talking about a completely homogenous society, for that would mean death to an artist, but a more tolerant society responsive to demographics rather than ideology. Today it is acceptable for Chicano artists to exhibit in museums and galleries, to paint on canvas and to sell their work because of the concessions allowed by this increased multiculturalism.

Frank Romero and Los Four participated in the Chicano Generation primarily as artists. As such they observed, interpreted and created art, but not necessarily "Chicano art." This distinction requires more attention than is possible in this essay, but I merely want to emphasize the point that art was determined to be Chicano solely on the basis of external references, both Chicano and non-Chicano. There existed definite criteria and expectations for art created by Chicano artists in the 1960s which did not necessarily reflect artistic intentions. Thirty years later the external references are circumstantially diametric, and it is within this milieu that we are able to reassess the art of Chicano artist Frank Romero and his "Urban Iconography/ Iconografía Urbana."

Susana Bautista
Curator

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'Romero' Pays Tribute to Chicano View

ART REVIEW

By WILLIAM WILSON
TIMES ART CRITIC

Douglas M. Parker Studio

"Feliz Union," a tableau of painted wood cut-out wedding figures in front of their honeymoon car, is one of about 70 works in the exhibit.

During the early years of the Chicano movement, in the '70s, Frank Romero established a reputation as one of its art heroes.

He belonged to the first group of local contemporary Latino artists to crack the hallowed halls of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in the 1974 exhibition "Los Four." Their breakthrough was greeted with accusations that they had sold out to the establishment. Sometimes nothing fails like success.

Now Cal State L.A. honors the artist with the exhibition "Frank Romero: Urban Iconography/Iconografia Urbana." Nicely installed in the Luckman Fine Arts Gallery, it looks at L.A. from a Chicano perspective. The motifs are unmistakable: lowriders, cactus, skulls and flaming hearts all rendered in a cartoon graffiti style typical of the barrio.

Yet it's a perspective tinged with detectably mixed feelings. These images are insufficiently recognized as also being American, informed by pop culture and international Modernism. Guest curator Susana Bautista's catalog essay notes perceptively that the American-born Romero thought of himself as Mexican until he made his first visit there in 1969. Despite his mustache and a zest for the cuisine, he was taunted by indigenous Mexicans for his limited Spanish. On his return to L.A., Bautista writes, he "became a Chicano, kicking and screaming."

Her point, I think, is that no one—especially an artist—likes being turned into a cliché. It follows that when stereotyping is self-inflicted, it takes a certain irony to preserve the nuances of real self-hood. Inevitably, this will affect the feel of an artist's product.

The exhibition, which includes about 70 works, is billed as a 30-year survey. I saw only one painting—a still life of 1963—earlier than 1981. It's no big deal, but such fudging suggests a wish that things seem a bit grander than they actually are.

Romero's art comes on strong. Master of many media from drawing and painting to ceramics and sculpture, he projects the air of a self-confident virtuoso.

A significant fraction of his reputation is based on big murals. He often works large, as in "Feliz Union," a life-size tableau of painted wood cut-out wedding figures near their honeymoon getaway car. He comes on flashy in neon works like "Floral Drive In," a relief of funky autos watching a larger-than-life Hollywood kiss. He takes on man-size subject matter in paintings about the Chicano moratorium of 1970, when Times columnist Ruben Salazar was killed by a police projectile.

The work is always technically deft and produces the appropriate response. Curiously, though, one is frequently left wondering how the artist actually feels. Despite an Expressionist style, there's an odd sense of aloofness signaled by the fact that Romero often quite literally views his images from a kind of distant middle-ground.

There are notable exceptions. "The Ghost of Evergreen Cemetery" is authentically spooky. The mini-mural "Pleasantville" (its label identifies a collaborator in Alfredo de Batuc) is a nostalgic look back at '50s L.A. Romero signals the lurking repression of the era with burning books flying to heaven, but the details of kids making out in convertibles drip with more convincing affection. A catalog essay by historian Margarita Nieto illuminates the work.

It almost seems that the smaller Romero works, the more openly he expresses sensitivity. His photograph of a pubescent girl named Ninny aches with forbidden longing. His grandfather is represented as a handsome patriarch, beloved despite overweening pride.

A table of wheeled toys recalls pre-Columbian prototypes but Romero—evidently a true multiculturalist—bases them on his collection of German playthings. "Anne Leaving Texas" shows a woman in a rag-top embarking with a house trailer. It has to be a portrait of someone the artist cares about.

In Spanish, "*ánimo*" means spirit. Romero makes a bilingual pun using the word to describe images of animals. Clearly a homage to Picasso, these Minotaur and equine figures capture some of the ferocity of "Guernica."

One seemingly anomalous series simply presents various slabs of adobe—the common clay ordinary Mexicans transform into the warmth of home. These pieces speak volumes about the essential earthiness of Romero's art.

■ *Cal State L.A., Luckman Fine Arts Gallery; through June 22, closed Fridays and Sundays, (213) 343-6604.*