Handbook of Hispanic Cultures in the United States: Literature and Art

Edited and introduced by Francisco Lomelí

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From Barrio to Mainstream: The Panorama of Latino Art

Eva Sperling Cockcroft

Introduction

It was not until the Civil Rights movement of the mid-1960s that differing cultural heritages could be accepted as part of a new American social vision based on a model of diversity rather than an enforced and mythical homogeneity. There were Latino artists working during earlier periods, but only after 1965 could one begin to talk about Hispanic or Latino artists—that is, artists of Latin American extraction living and working in the United States—as a separate artistic sensibility and movement.

Because self-definition and cultural reclamation, rather than stereotyping by outsiders, played such an important role in the Civil Rights movement, there has been a great sensitivity to labeling in minority communities. The word "Hispanic" is particularly problematic for many. The term Latino is currently considered preferable by many cultural activists like Gómez-Peña, since they consider that, unlike Hispanic, it recognizes the influence of African and Amerindian populations on the group. The Amerindian component of the Latino identity, of great importance for many contemporary artists, also created an ambivalent attitude toward the 1992 celebration of the 500th anniversary of the "accidental invasion" of the Americas by Christopher Columbus (Lippard 128) and led to the initiation of a counter-celebration Five Hundred Years of Resistance, the umbrella term for a nationwide outpouring of educational materials, art installations, videos and performances that reexamined standard histories of the conquest.

The question as to whether ethnicity is a valid criteria of art criticism—whether one can even define a sub-category known as Latino art—is still open to discussion. During the peak years of Modernism in the United States, from the international triumph of Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s through the Minimalist movement of the 1970s, only formal elements—color, line, space, composition—were considered important. Visual art was thought to be based on universal laws to which political, social, ethnic, economic, even psychological factors were considered irrelevant. In the eclectic post-Modernist decade of the 1980s, however, questions of gender and ethnicity have gained a new legitimacy. The exploration of cultural roots and the "deconstruction" of historical myths have become not only valid but even fashionable.

During the 1980s it became popular to mount exhibitions of "Feminist," "Homosexual," "Minority" or "Hispanic" art, categories which are irrelevant to artists in all of these groups whose aesthetic concerns are purely formal and not sociological. For those artists who had developed in the context of the Civil Rights movements, however, this open climate released them from a double prejudice, stylistic and social. It permitted them greater access to mainstream institutions and the opportunity to achieve national reputations.

The question remains, however, whether such labeling is either useful or valid. The category "Latin American" has been criticized for ignoring substantial differences in geography, history, culture and race within the many distinct Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking countries of this hemisphere. The category "Hispanic" or Latino is even more problematic since it ignores the added factors of class, racism and assimilation. The fact that both the Southwestern states and the island of Puerto Rico were acquired by conquest in the nineteenth century accounts for some of the discrimination they have suffered. The added fact that the post-1940 migrations have been largely economic, consisting of peasants and laborers employed in the lowest paying jobs has added to the negative stereotyping. On the other hand, most of the Cubans who fled the Revolution during the 1960s and exiles from the military dictatorships in Chile, Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil came from middle- and upper-class backgrounds giving them easier access to artworld institutions. Grouping all Latinos together also ignores the psychological scarring caused by racism in the United States educational system and media on United States ed-
ucated Latinos, especially those with Amerindian or Black features, as opposed to those educated in their countries of origin.

Yet, in spite of the great differences between them, Latinos share a commonality of linguistic and religious heritage. Catholicism, however altered it may be by the infusion of ancient gods and rites—be they African or Amerindian—is an important unifying factor. As the Mexican writer, Octavio Paz points out, "what seems to me particularly notable is not the diversity of Hispanic groups... but rather their extraordinary cohesion, a cohesion not expressed politically, but in collective acts and attitudes.... Hispanic-Catholic society is communal, and its nucleus is the family... the storehouse of religious beliefs and traditional values" (Paz 160).

Before 1965, the Latino presence in the United States visual art scene was largely that of Latin American nationals residing in the United States for varying periods of time. Internationally acclaimed masters like Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros, Rufino Tamayo, Wifredo Lam, and Roberto Matta were respected and influential figures during their sojourns in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s. During these years, while the United States was still searching for a "national" style of its own, these artists received attention in the most important institutions and were influential in shaping developments in United States art. The Mexican muralists are generally credited with inspiring the Works Progress Administration (WPA—a relief program for artists) mural movement, while the influence of Roberto Matta is acknowledged as important for the development of Abstract Expressionism (Sims 160).

Several important exhibitions of Latin American artists were mounted by American museums between 1930 and 1965 which provided inspiration and support to Latinos living in the United States. Most often, these exhibitions have coincided with United States foreign policy initiatives in Latin America (Cockcroft 1989, 192). Following the post-Revolutionary rapprochement between the United States and Mexico after the return of expropriated oil rights in the 1930s, two important exhibitions of Mexican art were held in New York City. The Metropolitan Museum of Art hosted a major historical exhibition of Mexican Art while the newly founded Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) gave its second one person show to the great Mexican muralist, Diego Rivera.

The next spurt of interest in Latin American art came between 1940 and 1945 as part of an effort to counter Nazi sympathies in Latin America during World War II. This included the export of numerous exhibitions of United States art to the southern hemisphere and seven exhibitions of Latin American art at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. These included Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art, Portinari of Brazil, Brazil Constructs, and Cuban Painting Today. Except for the 1957 one-person show given to Matta, MOMA has not presented a major exhi-
Quincentennial which provided the impetus for a similar series of official and unofficial exhibitions and publications discussing the Hispanic contribution to America.

Two of the new Latin American exhibitions have been devoted to Mexican art, perhaps in recognition of the growing political and economic strength of the Mexican American population. The first was Diego Rivera organized by the Detroit Institute of Art, site of one of Rivera's greatest murals. This exhibition, like others from the 1980s, is accompanied by an excellent book-length catalogue. Mexican art is also honored by Mexico: Splendors of 30 Centuries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1990, the first of a number of exhibitions planned for the Quincentennial. This exhibition marks the first important Latin American art show including modern art at a major Manhattan museum in decades. Most other Latin American shows have been seen in the New York area in the outer boroughs or beyond (the Rivera show traveled no closer to New York than Philadelphia).

For the first time in the 1980s, Chicano and Puerto Rican artists were included in major traveling exhibitions of Latin American art: the Indianapolis Museum's 1987 Art of the Fantastic: Latin America, 1920–1987; and the Bronx Museum's 1988 Latin American Spirit: Art and Artists in the United States, 1920–1970. A number of exhibitions of art from inside Cuba were also seen in New York during the 1980s. United States Latino artists were also invited to some international Latin American exhibitions in the 1980s including the Havana and San Juan Bienals. In 1987, a complete exhibition devoted to the work of artists of Latin American descent resident in the United States, Hispanic Art in the United States: Thirty Contemporary Painters & Sculptors was organized by the Houston Museum of Fine Arts and the Corcoran in Washington, D.C. Hispanic Art was very controversial not only because the exhibition was curated by two Anglos, raising the problem of external definition, but also because the selection was felt to arbitrarily exclude the more political artists while emphasizing the Expressionist and Folkloric directions.

The development of internal cultural institutions, curators and critics within the Chicano, Puerto Rican and Cuban exile communities has led to a number of ambitious mono-cultural exhibitions during the 1980s aimed at self rather than external definition of their art movements. Chicano artists and art historians, disturbed by what they considered a false picture of Chicano art presented in Hispanic Art began organizing a counter exhibition almost simultaneously. The result was Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965–85 (CARA), a massive historical exhibition of Chicano art that explores the relationship between the economic and political movement and its expression in art. CARA, which opened its national tour at UCLA's Wight Art Gallery in 1990, was created with input from members of the Chicano art community nationwide through a unique curatorial process that tried to replicate the grass roots character of the Chicano movement.

Another example of a mono-cultural exhibition is Puerto Rican Painting: Between Past and Present curated by Mari Carmen Ramirez. Exhibited at the Museo del Barrio in New York in 1987, it provided a major retrospective of painting by artists residing on the island whose work has been largely unknown in the United States. Also in 1987, a major exhibition of Cuban exile art curated by members of that community, Outside Cuba/Exilio de Cuba and organized by Rutgers University and the University of Miami Art Museums, provided the first major survey of contemporary Cuban-American art seen in the New York area. The excellent catalogue essay by Cuban-American critic Ricardo Pau Llosa provides a coherent analysis of the continuity of a Cuban sensibility in spite of exile.

The United States intervention in Central America revitalized protest elements within the mainstream art world itself which had been largely dormant since the end of the Vietnam War. A massive protest exhibition, Artists Call Against Intervention in Central America in 1984, involved the participation of more than 1000 artists in exhibitions at more than 20 locations including prestigious galleries as well as alternative spaces. The exhibitions included several of Central and South American art as well as collaborations between North American and Latino artists.

Post-Modemist theory and pressures from women and minorities for inclusion, have created a new interest in concepts of "diversity," "otherness" and "multiculturalism." One result has been exhibitions like the Pompidou Center's Magiciens de la Terre, an exercise in exoticism which paired "first" world installation artists with "third" world "sorcerers." In a more positive vein, The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity, organized by three important alternative institutions (the New Museum, Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art and the Studio Museum), includes Black, Latino, Asian and Anglo artists working on similar themes. It brings together minority artists working in the new art forms that resulted from the combination of ethnic-historical explorations and contemporary art modes with post-Modemist political artists "deconstructing" their history. This is also the case in activist critic Lucy Lippard's important new book Mixed Blessings. The first book on multicultural arts, it discusses artists who work in shamanistic, political and spiritual approaches toward the definition of identities.

Chicano Art, History and Development

During the late 1960s, Chicano artists and activists embarked on a quest to reappropriate their true history and develop a separate cultural identity that would counteract the derogatory stereotypes imposed on all Mexican Americans by the larger society. This quest and the artistic expressions it engendered were an important aspect of
the larger struggle for economic and civil equality known as the Chicano Movement. Use of the word “Chicano”—defined by martyred journalist Rubén Salazar in 1970 as “a Mexican-American with a non-Anglo image of himself” (Salazar 7)—was in itself an expression of this cultural struggle. Derived from working-class slang, it expressed solidarity with the economic struggle as well as the search for roots. As young Mexican Americans studied Spanish, demanded ethnic history courses, rediscovered their Aztec and Mayan roots, turned for inspiration to traditional folk arts and barrio street culture, they also developed a distinct aesthetic in their art.

To support and exhibit this work, a whole series of new “alternative” spaces—community centers, galleries and museums—were established in the early 1970s. Among the more important organizations formed during this period were Mechicano Art Center, Goetz Gallery, Self Help Graphics and Social and Public Art Center (SPARC) in Los Angeles; Galería de la Raza in San Francisco; Centro Cultural de La Raza and Chicano Park in San Diego; Centro de Artistas Chicanos in Sacramento; Casa Aztlán and Movimiento Artístico Chicano (MARCH) in Chicago. Artists, especially muralists, also joined multiethnic groups like Chicago Mural Group and Public Art Workshop in Chicago and city programs like Citywide Murals in Los Angeles. Some of the most important collective artist groups were Los Four and ASCO in Los Angeles, Toltecas en Aztlán in São Paulo, Artes Guadalupanas de Aztlán in Santa Fe, Mujeres Muralistas in San Francisco, and the Chicano Air Force (RCAF) in Sacramento and Con Safos in San Antonio (Quirarte 166).

These alternative structures were supported by local communities and the new public funding provided by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and State Councils for the Arts. Minority arts organizations received special support from the Expansion Arts division of the Endowment. Special city programs formed in the aftermath of the Chicago riots and other urban uprisings in 1967 poured money into cultural programs for inner city youth—from Jazzmobiles, to murals, to summer festivals of all kinds—intended to “cool out” the long hot summers. In the universities, another base was provided by ethnic studies programs and Chicano student organizations like MECHA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán-Chicano Student Movement of Aztlán). These alternative networks provided an infrastructure in which young minority artists could both develop their skills and a new style that incorporated latino, indigenous, avant garde, barrio, political and personal elements.

The Early Period: 1968-1978

The political phase of the Chicano art movement from 1968-78 found its purest expression in the form of murals and postcards. Almost all of the major figures in Chicano art today, participated, however briefly, in the explosion of muralism in the barrios of the South and Midwest around 1970. While some like Judith Baca, Victor Ochoa, Ray Patlán, Mike Rios and Leo Tanguma have continued to make community murals their primary focus and developed the medium to new levels, others transferred the Chicano aesthetic they developed during these years to more personal work in other media.

For the most part the Chicano artists were trained as professionals at United States colleges and universities. Many were recent graduates or still students in the late 1960s. The production of murals during this period was enormous. An attempt to document Chicano murals in California, the California Chicano Mural Archive at SPARC was able to obtain slides of 741 separate murals painted by 74 groups and 411 individual artists between 1968-1984. Considering those murals which have disappeared and continuing production, Shifra Goldman, a leading writer on Chicano art, estimates that “even 1,500 seems a conservative figure” (Goldman 1990, 24). Los Angeles is now considered to be the mural capital of the world, but Chicano murals continue to be painted throughout the Southwest into the 1990s.

Early Chicano art was part of a more general anti-elitist reaction within the artworld that rejected the gallery system in favor of “happenings,” performance, political and community involvement. The emergent Pop art movement with its implied critique of media stereotypes and the introduction of artifacts from “low” culture into art provided one direction from within the art world for the development of a new aesthetic. However, instead of turning to soup cans and Brillo boxes, Chicano artists went to barrio culture as a source. Low rider cars, graffiti, tattoos, and pachuco/a (zoot suit) style became their subject matter. Barrio street culture also provided a model of defiance and humor that was adopted by artists: the rasquache [sic] sensibility, defined by Tomás Ybarra-Frausto as “a sort of good taste of bad taste” (Ybarra-Frausto 155). In murals this rasquache sensibility tended to be expressed by heroic portrayals of pachuco/as and the use of spraycan and graphical techniques as in the early work of Los Four.

Another important stylistic influence for the development of Chicano art was Mexican muralism and graphics. The tres grandes—Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros—all painted murals in California during the 1930s: Rivera at the Stock Exchange and Art Institute in San Francisco; Orozco at Pomona College in Claremont; and Siqueiros in Los Angeles. The influence of Siqueiros whose dynamic forms and blazing color images were widely disseminated through the film Walls of Fire was the most important for the Chicano movement. Demands for the restoration of his mural, America Tropical, which because of its anti-Imperialist message had been whitewashed two years after completion, also brought attention to his work. Restoration finally began in 1990, almost 60 years after it was whitewashed.
An influence from Siqueiros is clear in the murals of Artes Guadalupanos de Aztlán, Judith Baca, Ray Patiño and Leo Tanguma among others. Rivera’s constructive composition was a model for Chuy Campuzano’s Bank of America mural in San Francisco while Orozco’s dynamic style provided inspiration for the late Carlos Almaraz in his most important mural, No compr e vino Calfo in support of the grape boycott for the former All Nations Center in East Los Angeles. This landmark mural was re-created, as a homage, at a new location, the Latino Theatre Lab, by noted muralist Willie Herrón in 1991.

As the mural movement developed, the Mexican tradition became the dominant stylistic influence. Pop art and the rasquache sensibility, on the other hand, became more important for the development of a Chicano aesthetic in gallery forms like easel painting, prints, performance, installations and constructions.

Subject matter in murals and poster art during this early period concentrated on the United Farm Workers (UFW) organizing drive and the question of Chicano identity. These themes were approached through the use of images from Mexican political history, American civilizations, and pachucos/a culture. The indigenist direction inspired the first Chicano mural painted in Chicago, Mario Castillo’s Metafísica of 1968, which used pre-Colombian decorative motifs for a basically abstract, spiritual assertion of Mexican identity. At Estrada Courts, the East LA housing project where more than 80 two-story murals have been painted since 1973, pre-Colombian civilizations inspired two of the earliest. Project organizer, the late Charles “Gato” Félix, rendered a section of a Mayan stone relief from El Tajín in red and green on one building while Manuel González painted a giant image of Tlāloc, the Aztec rain god, on another. In the 1980s, the indigenist direction became less important.

The political direction in early Chicano art tended to be expressed through portraits of heroes. Also at Estrada Courts, San Diego muralist Mario Torroño painted an image of Che Guevara with the text: “We are not a minority.” Female icons were painted as well. The Virgin of Guadalupe, who fused the attributes of the Aztec fertility goddess Tonantzin with the Christian figure of the Virgin mother, became a nationalist symbol. She was carried on banners by striking farmworkers and appeared in one form or another in hundreds of murals. Another widely used image was that of Frida Kahlo, surrealist painter and wife of Diego Rivera. Because of her suffering (which was so graphically portrayed in her autobiographical paintings), her beauty and her strength, she became a kind of contemporary saint.

From a feminist point of view, however, the image of the Virgin and the religious values she embodied could be used to prevent young women from breaking out of traditional roles. Yolanda López’s art work deals with de-mystifying stereotypes, both external and internal. Her video, When You Think of Mexico (1986) criticizes stereo-

types about Mexicans taken from commercial advertising. But López also deals with internal stereotypes as in her Guadalupe Triptych of 1978 which represents the Virgin in modern dress: sewing, cooking and jogging.

The two most important poster artists of the early Chicano movement were Rupert García and Malaquías Montoya. Their powerful silkscreen images are characterized by a deceptive simplicity. Malaquías Montoya’s are particularly forceful in the economy of means and clarity of message. His black and white poster Abajo con la Miga (Down with the INS) shows the Statue of Liberty wielding a meat cleaver while the pierced body of a Chicano is impaled on her crown.

García’s posters, on the other hand, rely more on extreme simplifications and abstract design for their effect. His Censo deportación (Stop Deportations), for example, is nothing but a few strands of barbed wire against a brilliant background and a verbal legend. Many of García’s best known posters were highly simplified portraits of important political and cultural heroes like Emiliano Zapata, Frida Kahlo or José Clemente Orozco. Although related to Pop art, as art historian Peter Selz points out, in García there is “an emotional feeling for his subject which is communicated … [that] contrasts to Warhols cool indifference” (Selz 3). In the cooperative poster workshops that appeared in all the movement centers, a strong school of silkscreen artists developed including Richard Duarte, the late Ralph Madariaga and José Sances.

Without losing his political edge, in the 1980s, García moved toward a more personal form of expression. He began to create large pastel drawings, many of them diptychs and triptychs, in which a dialectical content is provided by the juxtaposition of images. García’s work was exhibited in mainstream venues as early as 1978, when he was given a one-person show at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Two Directions: 1978–1990

In the late 1970s, at the same time as many of the artists who began as activists turned from public to private expressions, from mural to easel painting, mainstream institutions rediscovered the Chicano minority. Artists like García, Carlos Almaraz, Judith Baca, Carmen Lomas Garza, Frank Romero and John Valadez among others, who had developed their styles in the course of the Chicano movement, were discovered by the mainstream and began to achieve national reputations.

The earliest exhibition given to Chicano art by a mainstream institution was the Los Angeles County Museum show of the work of Los Four (Carlos Almaraz, Roberto de la Rocha, Gilbert Luján, and Frank Romero) in 1974. But sensitivity to exhibitions organized by Anglo curators has always been high among more militant Chicano artists and critics. The Los Angeles County Museum show (organized by the same Jane Livingston who later co-curated
the controversial Hispanic Art in the United States exhibition mentioned earlier) was followed in 1975 by Chicanoarte at the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery. This was organized by a group of Chicano artists representing organizations from throughout the state. Fifteen artists, including three women participated with more than 100 works. The first national exposure for Chicano art followed shortly. Ancient Roots/New Visions a national exhibition of Latino artists organized by Fondo Del Sol, a Washington, D.C. alternative gallery, traveled across the United States from 1977-79. Chicano Expressions in 1986 brought Chicano art to New York City through four successive exhibitions at the Latino alternative gallery, INTAR.

In 1981, the Chicano art movement seemed to reach a turning point. Eduardo Carrillo, a painter and professor at the University of California at Santa Cruz, organized a conference, Califas, for "veteran" artists who had been active in the first ten years of the Chicano Movement. Its goal was to assess the past and look to the future of the Chicano art movement. One focus was the controversy between artworld and community oriented artists, between political and personal expressions, which had already been discussed in position papers by Malaquías Montoya and Shifra Goldman earlier that year.

It was in the context of an Artweek review of Murals of Aztlan, a 1981 exhibition at the Los Angeles Craft and Folk Museum in which artists painted murals in the museum setting, that the split became public. In her review, critic Shifra Goldman raised the question of loss of commitment: "should Chicano artists, at the cost of economic security and possible artistic recognition, continue to express themselves artistically around the same matrix of social change and community service that brought their movement into existence? Or should they, now that some of the barriers are cracking enter the mainstream as competitive professionals, perhaps shedding in the process their cultural identity and political militance?" (Goldman 1981, 3-4).

Judith Hernandez, one of the muralists in the Craft Museum exhibition, responded, speaking for those artists who felt stifled by "those who would eternally chain us to 'Chicano art'. . . Why should changes in my work and social-political attitudes be construed as compromising my commitment . . . while in another artist the same would be perceived as personal and professional growth?" (Hernandez 16). As Puerto Rican critic Susana Torruella Leval expressed the dilemma: artists seemed to be faced with a choice "between the invisibility of the margin and limiting, manipulative contexts" (149).

The Postmodern politicization of gender and ethnicity also affected artists of Mexican descent who had begun their careers before the Chicano Movement and always functioned in mainstream contexts. Artists like Robert Graham or Manuel Neri, who had never participated in the Chicano Movement and had always considered themselves part of traditional Western art, were suddenly given ethnic labels. Their work was included in Latino exhibitions even though neither Graham's classical bronzes nor Neri's Italianate painted plaster nudes have anything specifically Chicano about them. Since the mid-1980s, Graham's work has become quite well known and he has completed several important public commissions, including an Olympic sculpture for Los Angeles and Joe Louis' fist for Detroit.

Muralism

Those artists who continued to work primarily in the mural medium moved toward more international and multi-ethnic themes in the 1980's. Their work continued its social realist political direction, but moved toward more ambitious, larger scale projects. Between 1978 and 1983, Judith Baca created the Great Wall of Los Angeles, a half-mile long history of the role of minorities in California from the time of the dinosaurs through 1960. Stylistically, this mural combines elements of Siqueiros' dynamic perspective with brilliant "Chicano" color. A half mile long, it was painted on the concrete wall of a flood control channel as a collective project employing more than 100 youths supervised by some thirty artists, under the direction of Baca.

In 1984, Baca was among 10 artists (other Chicanos were Willie Herron and Frank Romero) commissioned to create murals on the freeways in honor of the Olympic games. Her current project, a portable international peace mural, the World Wall, consists of a number of large canvas panels. It was installed in Finland and Russia in 1990 and at the Smithsonian Institute in 1991.

Baca has also played an important organizational role in the development of murals in Los Angeles. She directed the Citywide Murals program in the early 1970s before founding SPARC in 1976, both of which have sponsored hundreds of murals by artists and youths. Since 1989, SPARC has administered the city funded Neighborhood Pride: Great Walls Unlimited mural program which is commissioning about ten murals per year in minority neighborhoods. One of the finest of these new murals is by printmaker and muralist Yreina Cervantez who has created a homage to Latina women and especially farmworkers union organizer Dolores Huerta in the form of a painted altar with flowers, poetry and portraits. Another outstanding younger woman muralist is Juana Alicia. Her Las lechugueras (1983) in San Francisco dramatically exposes the dangers of pesticide use with a striking image of a pregnant farm worker.

Victor Ochoa, like Baca, is an organizer as well as an artist. He has played an active role in the creation of the mural projects on the Centro Cultural de la Raza and in Chicano Park—the painted pillars under the Coronado Bay Bridge in San Diego that have become one of the major monuments of the Chicano Movement. Los
East Streetscapers in Los Angeles, has been one of the most prolific mural groups in recent years. Composed of Wayne Healy, David Botello and others, The Streetscapers first collaborated on Chicano Time Trip in 1977 and have been working as a team ever since. Their murals are characterized by strong positive messages and energized paint surfaces. Their space fantasy, on the Culver City Motor Vehicles office and an Olympic's inspired sports image on an exterior wall of Victor's Clothing Company are among their most important recent murals.

Leo Tanguma began painting murals in an El Paso barrio during the early 1970s. Disturbed by the impermanence of outdoor wall paintings, in 1978 he created the first of his large mural sculptures as an alternative form. These monumental free-standing shaped murals with strong religiously cast images are some of the most direct political statements of recent years. Beyond the Cross, which condemns United States imperialism in Central America, is painted on a 33′x45′ wood structure in the shape of a burning cross. It is filled with Siqueirosque images of imperial eagles, portraits of Latin American martyrs, peasants and death.

Gallery Art

The witty and irreverent rasquache attitude that subverts rather than confronts authority has become the foundation of one major direction in Chicano art. This rasquache, barrio-based attitude is the common factor in the Pop inspired work of Mel Casas and Luis Jiménez; the defiant pachucos portraits by César Martínez, John Valadez and Daniel Gálvez; the neo-Expressionist paintings of Carlos Almaraz, Frank Romero and Cronk; the funky constructions and painted cars of Gilbert “Magu” Luján; or the bilingual performances of José Montoya and Guillermo Gómez-Peña. It is this style more than any other that has been identified in the popular mind with Chicano art.

Two of the best known Chicano artists working in the Pop rasquache vein are Mel Casas and Luis Jiménez. Both artists were showing work that criticized media images and sexual stereotypes before the Chicano Movement began. After becoming involved, Casas tuned his biting wit to debunking racial rather than sexual stereotypes. Brownies of the Southwest, one of his best known images, puns on the title by putting Indians, Chicanos and chocolate cookies in the same category.

The fiberglass and epoxy sculptures of Luis Jiménez, with their garish high gloss surfaces, add a rasquache element to the Pop aesthetic through their assault on Anglo standards of decorum and good taste. His sculptures were shown in New York as early as 1969. During the Chicano Movement, he returned to New Mexico and began to concentrate on vindicating the role of Mexicans and Indians in the Western myth. In a counter to the Frederick Remington image of the cowboy in Western public sculpture, Jiménez's flamboyant Vaquero in Houston, Texas, reminds the viewer that the original cowboys were Mexican. Jiménez's sculptures were shown in a double exhibition at the Alternative Museum and the Phyllis Kind Gallery in 1984. This resulted in major articles in local media as well as national art magazines. In his drawings, Jiménez turns his wit and mock-heroic Baroque style toward the depiction of barrio types.

Three of the foremost painters of barrio characters are César Martínez, John Valadez and Daniel Gálvez. Martínez isolates his flattened, outlined figures low on the canvas against an abstract colorfield background in a way which highlights both their defiance and their powerless. Photorealist Gálvez and Valadez work primarily in pastel to create beautifully rendered drawings that are outstanding in their ability to distill the essential flavor of barrio life.

As Carlos Almaraz's work transformed from the specific political emphasis of his early murals toward more generic expressionist modes, it gained a poetic dimension and richness of color reminiscent of the great Mexican painter Rufino Tamayo. His continuing preoccupation with the automobile inspired some of Almaraz's finest work, such as the freeway crash series of the early 1980s. He was honored with a retrospective at the Los Angeles Municipal art gallery during the Los Angeles Olympics in 1984. His early death in 1990 was a great loss to the Chicano community.

Frank Romero, also an original member of Los Four, is best known for his paintings of cars and freeway scenes. These combine his characteristic brilliant expressionist gestures and color with a playful spirit. One of his most delightful pieces is the mural, Going To The Olympics, which contains comical cars, hearts, flying horses and zeppelins all on a palm studded California freeway.

Defiant gesture and glorification of stylistic elements from the barrio were at the heart of the outrageous mural/performances of ASCO (an existential statement rather than an acronym, ASCO is the Spanish word for “nausea”) formed in 1972 by Willie Herrón, Cronk, Patssi Valdez and Harry Gamboa. In true Dada fashion, ASCO's “happenings” like the Walking Mural or Instant Mural not only served to force reexamination of mainstream prejudices about Chicanos, but also attacked the overly serious attitudes of more politically correct muralists and traditional Mexican American social mores. After the breakup of ASCO, Patssi Valdez and Cronk became successful neo-Expressionist painters, Harry Gamboa, a writer and conceptual artist, and Herrón founded the punk rock group Los Illegals, while continuing to paint murals.

Biting social commentary characterizes the work José Montoya and the Royal Chicano Air Force (RCAF) in Sacramento. Formed in 1969 by José Montoya, Esteban Villa, Armando Cid, and Juanish Orozco, the RCAF is dedicated equally to educational work and art-making. In this sense, it has continued the idealism of the early
1970s into the '90s. José Montoya, in particular, both in his artwork and persona has been singularly important in developing the rasquache sensibility. A poet as well as a painter, Montoya has come to personify the tragic and humorous voice of the pachuco in his bilingual Spanglish poetry.

Just as Montoya has created a bilingual pachuco who speaks with an accent in both languages, Gómez-Peña’s punk Border Brujo has taken this same space between two cultures as his performance territory. Although the surface content of his work deals specifically with the Tijuana-San Diego border, metaphorically he sees the border as: “a multiple metaphor of death, encounter, fortune, insanity and transmutation” (Gómez-Peña n.p.). His work is at the forefront of post-Modernist performance art. But, his work as a theoretician and writer is even more important. Like Octavio Paz for an earlier generation, Gómez-Peña has been able to embody and explain the Latino situation, without compromise, in a way that directly communicates to a mainstream audience.

Gómez-Peña works with San Diego’s Border Art Workshop (BAW/TAF) whose hard-hitting installations and theatre pieces on Border issues have brought Chicano political art into the Postmodern era. It was formed in the early 1980s by a number of veteran Chicano, Anglo and Mexican activists, muralists, filmmakers, and conceptual artists including Víctor Ochoa, David Avalos, Isaac Artenstein and Gómez-Peña. Their work included performances at the border fence and multi-media installations at the Centro Cultural de La Raza. It raised 1980s issues: pesticide use, migrants being hit by cars while crossing the freeway and the reality of a interchangeable border culture on both sides of an arbitrary line. Controversial and innovative, they quickly gained national attention. In 1989, they were invited to exhibit at Artists’ Space in New York, an event that was covered in the art press. Later that year, the groups, most controversial member, David Avalos, presented an exhibition of his sculptures, installations and conceptual pieces at the INTAR gallery in New York. His 1988 bus poster project outraged San Diegans by drawing attention to the role of illegals in the city’s economy. Welcome to America’s Finest Tourist Plantation contained images of hotel workers’ hands scraping a plate, cleaning a room and being deported in handcuffs. It was placed on the back of 100 busses during the 1988 Superbowl.

Ritual and Myth

As far back as the early 1970s, Chicano artists and art centers transmuted the forms of mainstream performance art into participatory spectacles for the community. Traditional celebrations of the Day of the Dead (El Día de los Muertos) became the occasion for costume parades, performances and altar installations that served to build community solidarity. The altars, in particular, based on the traditional domestic altar arrangements of photographs, religious statues and personal mementos have developed into a separate highly evolved art form. Interest in the traditional altars and santos (religious pictures or statues)—so beautifully documented in the photos of Louis Carlos Bernal—initiated a new generation of traditional carvers of religious images, santeros like Félix López and Luis Tapia.

This more spiritual direction is also expressed in sculpture, assemblage, installation, painting and performance. It encompasses the work of conceptual artist Celia Muñoz whose sophisticated, clever texts explore a child’s view of adult life, as well as in the folk narrative style of Santa Barraza and Carmen Lomas Garza. The sophisticated yet ingenuous narrative spirit that informs Frida Kahlo’s work is reincarnated in the paintings by Carmen Lomas Garza of daily life in her Texas barrio. Lomas Garza also shares with Kahlo a subtle political edge to her story telling.

When Patricia Rodríguez became involved in painting murals as a newly politicized art student in San Francisco, she found the machismo and harsh political messages of many male muralists uncongenial. With three other Latina art students, she formed a women’s painting collective, the Mujeres Muralistas. Their murals, like Latinoamérica, used rich harmonious color to celebrate the rituals and customs of women’s culture. Crucial to her inspiration was the memory of her grandmother and the religious customs, communal culture and rituals of everyday life in the Texas barrio where she was raised (Mesa-Bains 1990, 70-76). In recent years, Rodríguez turned from painting murals to assemblage. She makes small boxes based on religious reliquaries, miniature tableaus of handmade and found objects that simultaneously express personal and cultural narratives.

This kind of ceremonial art centered on communal rituals and domestic customs has become a new genre in minority arts that brings together past tradition and contemporary aesthetic concerns. Amalia Mesa-Bains, curator of the traveling exhibition Ceremony of Memory and herself a leading altar installation artist, points out that this art has a political basis as well: “contained in this aesthetic is a cultural resistance expressed through the affirmation of an ancient worldview” (Mesa-Bains 1988, 7).

Puerto Rican Art

The relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States has profoundly affected the reception given to its art and artists in the United States. Like the Southwestern states, Puerto Rico was colonized by Spain and then acquired by the United States through military conquest. But, unlike the Southwest which became an integral part of the United States and from which Mexican Americans could look toward an independent “mother” country to
the South, or Cuba, which in spite of the Platt Amendment retained its national sovereignty, Puerto Rico had gained autonomy from Spain only a few months before it was invaded and became an American colony.

Until 1948, the island was governed through acts of the United States Congress and the governor was appointed by the United States President. After 1948, under pressure from the anti-colonialist atmosphere in the U.N., Puerto Ricans were allowed to elect their own governor. In 1950, through the passage of Federal Law 600, Puerto Rico gained commonwealth status and a constitutional government. However, its status remained ambiguous. As Mari Carmen Ramírez writes in the catalogue of Puerto Rican Painting: Between Past and Present, "the history of Puerto Rican painting can be described as the quest for a vocabulary and language to define a national identity" (16).

The island has tenaciously retained the Spanish language and culture in spite of sustained efforts to impose English. Yet, because of its ambiguous status, Puerto Ricans have been placed in the anomalous position of being excluded from both Latin American and United States exhibitions. Perhaps because of United States embarrassment at its colonialist role in Puerto Rico in the light of its support for liberation struggles around the world, there has been a denial historically in the United States of the existence of an indigenous Puerto Rican culture. This blockade of silence was breached only after the civil rights movement.

Recognition from the Latin American art establishment improved after the establishment of the San Juan Biennial of Latin American Graphics in 1970 which helped to create ties to the Latin American art establishment. In 1987, the traveling exhibition Puerto Rican Painting, a show of work by artists resident on the island, was shown at the OAS Museum of Modern Latin American Art in Washington. Another positive note was the inclusion of a Puerto Rican artist, Arnaldo Roche Rabell in the 1987 Art of the Fantastic exhibition, especially since the catalogue states a preference for artists "working in Latin America" (Holiday 10).

Only two Puerto Rican artists have been able to achieve major visibility in the United States artworld. Rafael Ferrer and Ralph Ortiz achieved this breakthrough during the mid to late 1960s, a period when, due to the war and social movements, the art world was in a state of flux. Both considered themselves part of the international avant-garde and were engaged in the most advanced and outrageous forms of "process" art at a time when these art movements were in still their developmental stages.

Trained in surrealism at the University of Puerto Rico during the 1950s, Ferrer scandalized the University community with his Dada style anti-art actions. After moving to New York, in 1968, he engaged in a number of highly aggressive art actions. For the Whitney Biennial, he created Ice. This consisted of two and one half tons of ice placed at the entrance to the Whitney which proceeded to melt throughout the show creating a kind of improvised moat in front of the museums. As Kim Levin points out in her catalogue essay for a 1982 exhibition of Ferrer's work at the Laguna Gloria Museum in Austin, Texas, his early Installations were "unauthorized raids on territories already claimed by other art" (12). In the later 1970s, Ferrer turned to more conventional surrealist forms of painting and sculpture. He began to create magical objects: cryptic maps, dream kayaks and strange masks. He also began making pseudo primitive sexually charged paintings on Puerto Rican subjects.

This sense of invasion also characterized the early performance art of Ralph Ortiz, perhaps the foremost United States exponent of the Destruction in Art movement. Ortiz was born and educated in New York City receiving his Master of Fine Arts from Pratt Institute in 1964. His first piano and furniture destruction pieces were performed in 1963, while still a student, and brought him instant recognition. Although his 1968 performance The Life and Death of Henry Penny introduced Puerto Rican subject matter into his work through the voodoo style sacrifice of a chicken, Ortiz never considered himself in any sense a "regionalist" artist. His intention was to draw attention to the violence inherent in this society through shocking, confrontational art. In a 1966 manifesto, Ortiz wrote, "Our tragic dilemma is that because of our limited psychological evolution we have, unwittingly, instituted our ultimate destruction of our species" (Stellweg 292).

Ortiz was active with the Art Workers Coalition, a group of New York artists organized to protest the Vietnam war and open the museums to work by women and minority artists. While his art quite consciously remained within the parameters of "universal" artworld concern, he was active in the Puerto Rican movement and helped to found the Museo del Barrio in East Harlem in 1969. The artist's workshop, Taller Boricua, housed in the Museo, was begun shortly thereafter.

The Museo has seen its mission as primarily educational, providing knowledge of their culture to young Puerto Ricans in New York, as well as providing an exhibition space to present Puerto Rican art to a larger audience. In 1973, in collaboration with the Metropolitan Museum of Art, it presented a joint exhibition of The Art Heritage of Puerto Rico: Pre-Columbian to the Present.

Other institutions for the display of Puerto Rican art in New York are The Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art (Mocha, formerly the Cayman Gallery, 1974-1991) which showed avant-garde Latin American and Latino artists, INTAR, which also houses a theater, and Olmsted in Queens. Some multi-ethnic spaces which show substantial numbers of Puerto Rican artists are the Bronx Museum, The Alternative Museum and Exit Art. Several commercial galleries that specialize in Latin American art also show Puerto Rican work. The wealth and variety of Puerto Rican art, however, is known only to a specialized
public and still almost entirely neglected in the art media.

Chicanos and mainland Puerto Ricans share the experience of racism, oppression and loss of cultural identity that leads to an art concerned with self-definition and the reclamation of historical roots. Like the Mexicans, most Puerto Rican immigrants were economic migrants, forced to emigrate because of extreme poverty on the island in the post WWII period. These massive waves of migration beginning since the 1950s have resulted in some 40% of Puerto Rico’s population moving to the mainland, mainly to New York City and Chicago.

There are certain important differences however. In Nuyorican art the search for roots is intertwined with the iconography of the independence struggle. Unlike the Mexican racial mixture of Amerindian with Spanish, in both Cuba and Puerto Rico the native Carib and Taíno populations were killed and replaced by imported African slave labor. Taíno artifacts in Puerto Rico, in particular the stone and wood carvings and incised petroglyphs, have become important symbols of an almost mythical Amerindian past. Another difference is in the Afro-Spanish culture, with its Yoruba influenced religions and rhythms, a culture that is quite distinct from the taciturn Indo-Spanish Chicano culture.

Although often similar in theme and form, Caribbean art has a very different feeling than Southwestern expressions. The Mexican influence and muralism are relatively unimportant for Puerto Rican art while surrealism and New York artworld trends play a much greater role. The existence of santería, a syncretic form of Christian and African religion as a continuing form of worship in both Cuba and Puerto Rico, has inspired a parallel yet distinct artistic movement of spiritual, ritual object making and installations as well as the introduction of santería symbols into painting.

Puerto Rican artists are unique in the degree of mobility between island and mainland. Most have lived in the United States; some maintain residences in both places; others, born on the mainland, have returned to the island to live. The influence of island artists as teachers and examples was also important in the development of Nuyorican art in the 1960s, just as the influx of WPA artists to the island in the 1950s helped to create the infrastructure for the development of modern Puerto Rican art. In many ways, the mainland Puerto Rican experience and art are more similar to that of the Chicanos than to their own countrymen who were raised and educated on the island. Islanders did not suffer the same experience of prejudice as mainland Puerto Ricans. Additionally, most island artists are from middle- to upper-class families while migrants tended to come from the poorest sectors of the society. Because of the class and educational experience, the work of island artists more closely resembles that of other Latin Americans.

The pattern of earlier Puerto Rican art was similar to that of other Latin American countries. Eighteenth-century artists, like the great “free mulatto” portraitist José Campeche, worked in European styles. Nineteenth-century artist Francisco Oller studied with Courbet and became part of the Impressionist group during his stay in Paris from 1858 to 1865. On his return to Puerto Rico, Oller continued to paint Impressionist landscapes, but for his figurative paintings of peasant life he used the Realist style developed by Courbet. Like Courbet, Oller felt that “modern art had a distinctly social, political and religious mission and was obliged to contribute positively to society” (Ramírez 179). His realist genre scenes, in particular his masterpiece El Velorio, which depicts the wake for an infant’s death, contains symbols of both Christian and African mourning customs. Oller is credited with establishing a tradition of socially involved realism on the island, a tradition which may help to explain how a flourishing social realist art movement could develop in Puerto Rico during the 1950s at a time when Abstract Expressionism was gaining dominance around the world (Cockcroft 1988, 67–71).

The growth of a social realist art movement in Puerto Rico was aided by government sponsorship. Shortly after his election as governor in 1948, Luis Muñoz Marín, an admirer of Franklin Delano Roosevelt who campaigned on a “New Deal” style program, set up a Puerto Rican version of Roosevelt’s WPA artist program. A group of former WPA artists from the United States, Irene and Jack Delano, Edwin Rosskam and Robert Gwathmey, were brought to the island to set up a film and graphics workshop that produced educational materials, including silk screen posters in a simple style reminiscent of Ben Shahn to support government campaigns for social reforms for a largely rural audience.

By 1949, a number of Puerto Rican artists including Julio Rosado del Valle, Lorenzo Homar, Rafael Tufiño, Carlos Osorio and Carlos Raquel Rivera returned to the island to participate in the workshop. These artists became the leaders of the new Puerto Rican art movement and brought it the first international recognition. In the cultural posters for art exhibitions and films which began to be produced in the mid-50s, the distinctive Puerto Rican silkscreen style with its emphasis on expressive calligraphy and textures began to develop. Wood and linoleum cut prints in the style of the Mexican Taller de Gráfico Popular (TGP) became another important medium. One of the finest early series of woodcut prints are the illustrations for a songbook of plenas (1954–55), a typically Puerto Rican song form, designed by Tufiño and Homar. Both the silkscreen posters and woodcuts became well known in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s during the civil rights movement. Although the inclusion of political content in painting was still an anathema to the artworld sensibilities during that period, its long tradition in printmaking, from Durer to Goya, made political graphics more acceptable to contemporary taste.

The 1950s were a period of intense activity by the
Puerto Rican independence movement that generated a parallel expression in art. In November 1950, activists attacked President Truman’s residence at Blair House, and in 1954, four nationalist guerrillas including a woman, Lolita Lebrón, fired on the United States Congress. These incidents and the jailing and martyrdom of Independence party leader, Pedro Albizu Campos, provided much of the subject matter for the art that accompanied the political movement. This politically motivated art tended to take two forms in the ’50s generation: protest art which concentrated on attacking injustice and oppression, and nationalist art which celebrated the Puerto Rican heritage and culture.

Tufiño is one of the most influential artists working in the nationalist style. Following the tradition of realist painting established by Oller, Tufiño paints Puerto Rican life and customs in a spontaneous and direct manner using strong color and line. Coyita, an unsentimental portrait of his mother, has become a symbol of the sorrow and strength of the Puerto Rican woman.

The protest orientation was exemplified by the linoleum prints of Carlos Raquel Rivera. Their bold compositions and strong textural qualities carry on the satirical Mexican tradition of Posada and the TGP. In Colonial Elections, his satire of the electoral process in Puerto Rico, a giant American Eagle hovers over the masses of tiny people rushing to their own destruction. Raquel Rivera’s paintings use surrealist juxtapositions and brilliant color to express political content.

Lorenzo Homar is generally considered to be the father of the Puerto Rican poster movement and is its most skilled practitioner. He is important both as an artist and a teacher. His exquisitely designed and executed silkscreens emphasize the expressive use of text, although many also contain a portrait. In his later works, like the portrait of Salvador Allende (Chilean President 1970–73), he may use as many as 20 different color runs to achieve an almost three-dimensional effect. One of Homar’s best known images in the United States is his El maestro (1972), a woodcut portrait of Pedro Albizu Campos with a background of an excerpt from the text of one of his speeches. As director of Puerto Rico’s major poster workshops for 22 years, Homar was responsible for training a whole generation of younger artists, including José Alicea, Antonio Martorell, Myrna Báez, José Rosa, and Rafael Rivera Rosa.

The quality which most clearly distinguishes the work of Antonio Martorell is his sense of satire and wit. In the late 1960s he set up his own poster workshop called Taller Alacrán, which published the Barajas Alacrán (Scorpion playing cards), a giant deck of cards printed with political symbols. One card shows Lyndon Johnson as a Puerto Rican jibaro (peasant) and is meant to satirize the presidential election of 1968. His 1976 woodcut series, Paper Dolls, presents the leaders of the church, army and society as dolls in the nude, stripped of their symbols of power. In the 1980s, this many-faceted artist turned to creating performances and spectacles in the vein of the political theatre of Bread & Puppet. In 1986, the Biennial of San Juan awarded him an exhibition of honor. For this event, Martorell created a magical environment of color woodcuts that evoke a Puerto Rican Garden of Eden inhabited by life size mythic, yet real figures seen as if glimpsed standing behind the bars of a colonial style wrought iron fence.

In the generation of the 1960s, Myrna Báez is the most important artist to emerge in the field of socially concerned figurative painting. Based on photographs, her paintings criticize the pretensions and manners of modern Puerto Rican society. As a printmaker, Báez has developed the technique of collograph printing to achieve very rich textural and color effects.

Activist artist Carlos Trizarry introduced the use of photo silkscreen for political graphics to the island. A powerful painter as well, in Transculturation (1975) he symbolizes the lost culture of the past by quoting in black and white the classic jibaro image from a 1906 painting by Ramón Frade. The present is represented by a flayed figure hung on a fence.

The interrelationship between island and mainland artists was exemplified through the Taller Boricua workshop which brought the nationalist poster tradition of the island to New York. At the Taller Boricua, New York-based Puerto Rican art school graduates, self-taught former gang members and Fifties generation artists Rafael Tufiño and Carlos Osorio, joined together to create an environment in which young artists could develop a sense of identity along with professional skills. Founded in 1969, the original Taller Boricua was located in East Harlem across the street from the young political militants of the Young Lords Party. During these early years, the Taller participated in the political movement, making political posters and setting up exhibitions in the community. The emphasis was on rediscovering their Taíno heritage and integrating this knowledge into their artistic endeavors. Many of the artists who participated in the formative period—Rafael Colón Morales, Marcos Dimas, Jorge Soto Sánchez and Nitza Tufiño—went on to become leaders of the Nuyorican art movement.

Marcos Dimas and Rafael Colón Morales are two representatives of the abstract tradition among Nuyorican artists. Dimas uses Taíno Indian forms and pre-Colombian symbols in mythic evocations of a lost culture and religion, while Colón Morales explores this mythic dimension in lyrical abstract painting. Former Young Lord Jorge Soto Sánchez was the most powerful artist to emerge from the workshop experience. His extraordinary surrealist drawings, often based on classical compositions by Campeche and Oller, Soto represented the transformation of the Puerto Rican experience from a rural island society to life in a drug-infested ghetto.

Ceramicist Nitza Tufiño, daughter of Rafael Tufiño, has
continued the activist tradition through her work in participatory ceramic murals. An early project on the Third Street Music School in the East Village was among the pioneering works in that medium in the community mural movement. Tutíño, like Judith Baca in California, has developed the technique of engaging minority youth in the production of highly professional public art works. Tutíño’s most recent project is a permanent large scale ceramic mural for the 86th Street subway station in New York.

Although images of palm trees, flags and revolutionary heroes (like Dr. Ramón Betances, Pedro Albizu Campos and Lolita Lebrón) painted by self-taught artists appeared throughout Puerto Rican barrios, only a few large scale murals were painted by Puerto Rican artists in New York and Chicago. In the mid-1970s, Mario Galán in Chicago, and Alfredo Hernández and Heriberto Alicea in New York worked with local youth to produce some impressive projects. In the 1980s, artist and housing activist María Domínguez painted a number of notable murals in the Loisaida section of New York’s Lower East Side.

Two of the most interesting Nuyorican artists exploring the political dimension of identity questions in the 1980s are Juan Sánchez and Marina Gutiérrez. Sánchez, an Afro-Puerto Rican from Brooklyn, was politicized while still in high school and has been an activist ever since, fighting for Puerto Rican independence and minority rights. In addition to his own artwork, he has played an important role as an educator and curator, bringing exhibitions of Puerto Rican and multicultural art to the attention of the New York art community. He has also participated in political art events organized by Artists Call, Political Art Documentation/Distribution (PAD), Group Material and Art Against Apartheid.

His multi-layered paintings combine photography, words, Taino symbols and Christian artifacts with painterly surfaces built up by many coats of pigment. Mixed Statement (1984) commemorates the “Maravilla Incident” in which three nationalist youths were killed by United States Marines. This mixed media triptych includes photos of the flag draped youths, a fragment of the Last Supper, a bloody palm print, flag fragments, leaves, a dollar bill covered with a cross and an explanatory narrative all placed on richly textured surfaces of red, yellow and black. Sánchez’s work is filled with love of family (his mother appears as a persistent theme) and spiritual values, as well as political content. In that sense, his work is not only revolutionary but also inspirational. It is also remarkable for its aesthetic qualities. New York critic and painter Rudolf Baranik writes, “Juan Sánchez’s symbolism and painted words are not incompatible with the formal language of New York art ... (he) creates an iconography of Puerto Rican liberation through forms which preserve all the tension and excitement of Abstract Expressionism” (Baranik 23). Sánchez has received numerous awards including a Guggenheim fellowship in 1988. His work is included in national political art shows including the Museum of Modern Art’s 1988 traveling exhibition, Committed to Print.

Like the paintings of Chicana artist Carmen Lomas Garza, the art of Marina Gutiérrez bridges the gap between personal and political, using the vocabulary of folk art to make contemporary statements. In her construction for the exhibition Autobiography: In her own image at the Intar Gallery (1988), she suspends a variety of brightly colored small objects—a pair of lips, a rooster, an atomic cloud, a blue eye—in front of three versions of her self-image that unveil the various layers of social and personal presence. Her 1986 Homage to Ana Mendieta, a seven panel history of that artist’s life and work, won an award at the 2nd Biennial of Havana in 1987.

Imprisoned Puerto Rican nationalist Elizam Escobar is a visionary artist in the tradition of William Blake. His atmospheric paintings, filled with dream-like images from Puerto Rican folklore, explore the realms of prophecy and the imagination. Arrested in 1980 in Chicago as an alleged FALN (Armed Forces for National Liberation) member, Escobar was sentenced to 68 years in federal prison. His work has become known through an exhibition of his prison paintings organized by his supporters, Art as an Act of Liberation, which opened in Chicago in 1986. The exhibition toured alternative spaces throughout Puerto Rican communities in the U. S., and was shown at the Institute for Puerto Rican Culture in San Juan in 1989. Escobar keeps his artmaking quite separate from his political activity, stating that he refuses “to sacrifice his imaginative freedom to political demands” (Murphy 9).

The foremost Abstract painter on the island is Julio Rosado del Valle. In his early Abstract Expressionist works such as Carnival Devil (1955), Rosado del Valle uses teluric forms in an abstract cubic space in the tradition established by the great Cuban Surrealist Wifredo Lam, whose forms specific to the cultural history of the Afro-Caribbean region are incorporated into abstract works. After returning to figuration in the 1970s, Rosado del Valle has achieved powerful psychological effects with semi-realistic figurations in an abstract space.

The abstract tradition was represented in New York during the 1950s and 1960s by Olga Albizu, a student of Abstract Expressionist pioneer Hans Hofmann, in color abstractions notable for their rich colors. Albizu showed her work in New York achieving a modest success through gallery exhibitions by the late 1950s. In the following decade, however, when her paintings began to appear on record jacket covers for bossa nova music, she became quite well known.

Luis Hernández Cruz, a leading painter and teacher from the generation of the sixties, has been the greatest advocate for the Abstract movement on the island. Hernández Cruz was a founder of several artists associations to promote non-objective painting, including Grupo Frente (1974) and the Congress of Abstract Artists
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(1984). During the peak of the Abstract movement in the 1970s and early 1980s, most of the abstract painters on the island worked within either the lyrical, minimalistic or geometric schools popular on the mainland. Among the more interesting are Noemí Ruiz, Lope Max Díaz, Domingo García, Carlos Collazo and Paul Camacho.

A number of younger artists are doing interesting work in Postmodern styles. Nick Quijano uses a playful, pseudo-primitive style in paintings and constructions that provide witty comments on social mores. Following a childhood in New York, Quijano’s self-conscious cliché approach reflects the same nostalgic visions of the island that characterize the homemade murals of palm trees on grocery stores in the Puerto Rican neighborhoods of New York.

The strongest of the young neo-Expressionist painters are Mari Mater O’Neill and Arnoldo Roche Rabell. Both are from the island, received their art training in the United States, and introduce Taino or African motifs into figurative autobiographical pieces. Roche, in particular, has received considerable attention from mainstream institutions and has been included in all the important Latin American and Latino exhibitions of the ’80s. His richly textured Expressionist paintings are created by rolling real objects and bodies on the canvas. Powerful and poignant, his tortured surfaces recall violent visions of a lost African past.

Exile and Cuban Art

The direct socio-political emphasis typical of much Chicano and Puerto Rican art is not as important a direction for Cuban and other expatriate or exile artists from Latin America. For exiles, the exploration of aesthetic options becomes more important as does the preoccupation with the interior world, dream images, cultural memories and the mythic past. As the English critic John Berger wrote in the introduction to the Boston exhibition of exiled Latin American artists, Artists in Exile (1977), “To live and work in exile is to live and work on memory” (n.p.).

Latin American artists have been coming to New York instead of or in addition to Europe since it became the center of the international art market in the 1950s. These voluntary exiles, as well as those who fled military dictatorships in Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Uruguay or the communist revolution in Cuba, form a substantial Latin American art community in New York. Fairly substantial Latin American art enclaves also exist in Washington and Miami.

Unlike the Chicanos or Nuyoricanos, most of these artists come from middle- to upper-class backgrounds. Their artistic orientation is avant-garde and internationalist and they tend to work in all the directions current in the mainstream art world. Their art is generally highly sophisticated and deals with “universal” artistic concerns.

Argentina, for example, has a very strong school of artists working in the styles of constructivism, geometric abstraction and kinetic art. The typical United States stereotypes about Latin American art as either social realist, surrealist, quiant, or garishly colored expressionist work are hardly appropriate for these artists.

Yet, in spite of the sophistication of their work, Latin American artists have faced discrimination in getting their work shown in important mainstream institutions. In some cases, the current emphasis on ethnicity has made their situation more difficult, especially when their art has no relation to regionalism, surrealism or politics. As Félix Angel, director of the OAS Museum in Washington, points out, the Latin American artists in the United States did not desire “to compete with United States art on the international stage; rather the idea was to exhibit alongside United States artists and have the work judged accordingly” (229).

Most art by Latin Americans in the United States is still presented in specialized institutions and galleries, although a few Latin Americans have been shown in the “projects” space at the Museum of Modern Art. The OAS Museum, Fondo Del Sol, the CIR Gallery and MOCHA provided the major exhibition venues for abstract and experimental Latin American art. In the late 1980s, several new commercial galleries that specialize in Latin American art opened in New York. Also, a number of exhibitions of Latin American artists living and working in New York have been organized in the past ten years.

Cuban American Art

Cuban American art bears more resemblance to that of other Latin Americans than to that of Nuyoricanos or Chicanos. However, since most Latin American exiles are leftists, the situation of the Miami Cubans—because of their strong right-wing profile and the United States government’s involvement in the movement to overthrow Castro—was somewhat unique. Only in the late 1980s have there been major exhibitions of their work outside the Miami area, although individual artists have been included in Latin American and Latino group shows. On the other hand, art from inside Cuba, especially Cuban films and poster art was seen in the United States in spite of the blockade.

During the 1960s and 1970s, there was a great deal of interest in the Cuban Revolution among young people and within the artist community. Fidel Castro and Che Guevara became popular heroes whose images hung next to rock stars on dormitory walls. The publication of the Susan Sontag and Dugald Stermer book, The Art of Revolution in 1970, helped to popularize the poster movement in United States art circles. Several exhibitions of painting, poster art, graphics and photography and trips by art professionals to visit Cuba, organized by the Center for Cuban Studies in New York, helped to bring

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due since. Of the other artists from that generation, Portocarrero, Mariano Rodríguez and Luis Martínez Pedro remained in Cuba; Surrealist painter Cundo Bermúdez moved to Puerto Rico; and Daniel Serra-Badue to New York. International in orientation, most of these artists had studied and lived abroad for long periods. Their styles were well established long before the Revolution and not affected by exile. As Cundo Bermúdez states, "exile has changed the individual, not the artist" (Fuentes-Pérez 92).

The first major exhibition of Cuban exile artists was Outside Cuba/Fuera de Cuba (1988), a traveling exhibition organized by the Art Museum at Rutgers University in New Jersey. Many Cuban American artists have shown regularly as individuals in locations specializing in Latin American art, mainly in the Miami area, and a few have broken through into mainstream venues. But this exhibition was the first opportunity to see the work of five generations of Cuban artists in one place. An exhibition of younger Cuban American artists, Cuba-USA: The First Generation, organized by Fondo Del Sol, opened its tour in Chicago at the Museum of Contemporary Art in January 1991.

A substantial support system for Cuban American artists has developed in Florida. The Cintas Foundation gives fellowships to support Cuban American art and artists. Local museums and galleries show their work, and critic Ricardo Pau Llosa has written extensively about them. If there is a common bond to be found in the work of Cuban artists, Pau Llosa sees it in a concern with "the structure of the unconscious, an imagination that seeks to redefine (rather than bracket or reduce) the ways of representation so that art might better deal with dream, temporality, historical juxtaposition, violence, resemblance, transformation and non-causal thinking" (Fuentes Pérez 59).

Wifredo Lam's successful integration of Afro-Cuban symbols into his Cubist paintings, has provided an important precedent for contemporary Latin American art. His approach is especially important for those artists interested in the integration of magical and ritualistic elements into abstract painting. The tradition established by Lam is reincarnated in the work of one of the more interesting younger painters, the late Carlos Alfonso. Educated in Cuba, Alfonso came to the United States in the 1980 Mariel Boatlift at the age of 30. His canvasses are covered with complex patterns of line that partially disguise objects like tongues, eyes, knives, crosses and tears, elements from a private symbology "to do with my exile, with my personal drama as I see it" (Fuentes Pérez 246).

Two of the best known Cuban American artists, Luis Cruz Azaceta and the late Ana Mendieta both came to the United States without their parents in the early 1960s, after spending their childhoods in Cuba. They received their artistic training in the United States, Azaceta at the School of Visual Arts in New York where he studied with Minimalist Robert Mangold and neo-Expressionist Leon...
Golub; Mendieta at the prestigious University of Iowa’s Center for the New Performing Arts under Hans Breder where she moved from painting canvases to using her own body to create ephemeral art. A thread of magic and violence runs through both their work. Both were haunted by the trauma of separation from their country and have found in their work a kind of curative magic. But here the similarity ends.

Having escaped the brutality and violence of the war against Batista and the beginnings of the Castro government, Azaceta discovered in the United States, rather than “the American dream” a fragmented society, torn by political upheaval, crime, poverty and racism. Azaceta’s work represents a Kafkaesque reality. He appears as a helpless victim or witness, small, emaciated, dark-skinned, helpless before the tides of fate or surrounded by urban atrocities. Azaceta describes his work as follows: “My own artistic creation is only a mirror of man’s social and cultural creations. … Death, La Muerte, is the one absolute truth that we possess. … I paint to kill La Muerte, and also to kill Cruelty, Injustice, Violence, Ignorance and Hypocrisy” (Martin 19). Stylistically, his work is part of the neo-Expressionist school with heavy strokes and very intense color. Since 1975, his work has been represented by a mainstream gallery in New York, he has won several fellowships and his work has been shown internationally.

Mendieta’s first body piece, inspired by the murder and rape of a fellow student, was a rape tableau performed with herself as victim. Until she began her nature pieces in the late 1970s, much of her work dealt with blood and involved allusions to santería rituals. Her earth body sculptures, created with vegetation, mud, sticks, fire, water and leaves were made using the silhouette of her own body. In the early 1980’s she wrote: “I am overwhelmed by the feeling of having been cast from the womb (nature). My art is the way I reestablish the bonds that unite me to the universe” (Barreras del Río 32).

Unlike most Cuban exiles, Mendieta was sympathetic to Castro’s Cuba. Her first trip to the island since she left at 13, was in 1979. She returned again in 1981 to do a series of silveta carvings combined with pre-Colombian symbols incised on the rock walls of the caves in the forest at Jarurco. Her work was widely recognized by mainstream institutions before her tragic death in 1985. During her brief 10 year career she received numerous grants, including two NEA visual artist grants and a Guggenheim Fellowship. In 1987, she was given a retrospective exhibition at the New Museum of Contemporary art in New York.

The thread of magic, of art as a way of curing and warding off evil, also appears in the work of several other Cuban artists in the United States. The autobiographical sculpture environments of Maria Brito-Avellana evoke the experience of fragmentation inherent in exile. Often, Brito-Avellana appears as a disembodied face in her surrealist coolly crafted pieces. The altar installations of Juan Boza, who was a practicing santero, fuse the line between religion and art. He wrote, “my artwork is anthropological, full of devotion, evocative of spiritual and magical forces and visions … through color, cloth, shells, feathers, heads, fruit and fetishistic objects and ornamented artificial foliage I depict the spiritual universe as essential to well being” (Mesa-Bains 1988, 20).

Félix González Torres and Andrés Serrano are two young Postmodern political artists. González Torres, a member of the activist exhibition collective, Group Material, creates word pieces on the issue of AIDS, while Serrano’s pseudo-religious Cibachromes accompanied by bodily fluids achieved instant notoriety after drawing the wrath of conservative Senator Jesse Helms in his 1991 campaign against the arts endowment.

Other Exiles and Expatriates

Luis Camnitzer has been an important presence in the New York art community as a writer and teacher as well as a conceptual artist. His early works, made shortly after his arrival from Uruguay (via Mexico) in 1962, used words to replace objects. In 1970, in response to the massacre of leftists by military regimes in Latin America, Camnitzer created the anti-war piece, Leftovers, for the Paula Cooper Gallery. This consisted of an inventory of armaments and a wall of boxes, wrapped in bloodstained gauze, marked with a Roman numeral and stamped with the word “leftover.” Together with José Guillermino Castillo and Liliana Porter, Camnitzer was a founder of the New York Graphic Workshop which served as a place to re-think the graphic medium on artistic and social levels (Stellweg 301).

Born in Argentina, Porter came to New York in 1964 after a brief stay in Mexico where she had her first exhibition at the avant-garde Galeria Proteo at age seventeen. A Minimalist in the 1960s, during the 1970s Porter began working with prints and paintings that reveal the ambiguous nature of reality by juxtaposing real and painted objects. Although subtle and mysterious, these exquisitely crafted works imply a human drama. In her text for The Decade Show catalogue, Julia Herzberg, points out the relationship between the sense of mystery and ambiguity in Porter’s work and the aesthetic ideas of her great compatriot, the late Argentine writer, Jorge Luis Borges, who regarded “the nature of an aesthetic event as ‘the imminence of a revelation that does not happen’” (Herzberg 41). In the early 1970s, in addition to participation in the multi-ethnic Art Workers Coalition, Latin American artists in New York united in several short-lived organizations which drew attention to cultural repression in Latin America, discrimination against Latin American artists and misrepresentation of Latin American art by major institutions. Both Camnitzer and Porter were active in protests against the CIR for its collaboration with dicta-
The intellectualized political direction represented in the work of artists like Camnitzer and Porter also characterizes the work of Chilean Postmodernist Alfredo Jaar. Jaar’s site specific light-box photo installations attack the problems of imperialism, militarism and dictatorship. In 1986, he converted the entire Spring Street Subway Station in Soho into a political statement by placing placards containing world gold prices and photos of Indian gold miners in Brazil in all the advertising spaces. When the Hispanic Art exhibition came to the Brooklyn Museum during its national tour, Jaar was invited to create a photo installation in the lobby to compensate for what many New York artists felt was the omission of political expressions from that exhibition.

The tradition of highly stylized political wall paintings developed by the Ramona Parra Brigades during the Allende period in Chile was continued during the Pinochet dictatorship by exile brigades in Europe and the United States. The Orlando Letelier Brigade, founded by sons of the former diplomat who was murdered by Pinochet’s agents in Washington, D.C., was active in California and Nicaragua during the 1980’s. Francisco Letelier, in particular, has developed as a leading political poster artist and muralist of the younger generation.

In a more poetic vein, the work of three women artists, Brazilian Josely Carvalho and Chileans Catalina Parra and Cecilia Vicuña, confronts the issues of gender, politics and roots. In her installations of sheer fabric hangings, photo-silkscreened with intertwined images of women, body parts, birds and turtles (which to Carvalho represent the exile who carries her house/culture in her travels), Carvalho explores the meaning of femaleness and its relation to origins. In 1987–89, Carvalho initiated the Connections Project/Conexus in which women artists from Brazil and the United States created works on the themes crucial to women in both hemispheres: birth, food, body, shelter, environment, race, spirit, war and death.

When Parra began to create her collages of stitched newspaper clippings, photographs and common household items, she was still living in Chile under the repressive Pinochet dictatorship. Allusive rather than explicit, her work invokes the atrocities of military repression and torture, and the endurance of women in a coded visual language. Vicuña’s environment-inspired precarios are altar-like offerings consisting of fragile natural objects which are displayed on shelves or placed around the city and suggest the organic relationship of Andean Indian cultures with their environment. Her installations are often accompanied by shamanistic performances of her poetry.

Also relating pre-Colombian to modern civilization, but in a far more intellectualized vein, are the archaeological reconstructions of Argentine artist Leandro Katz. In The Catherwood Project, Katz rephotographed the Mayan sites originally drawn by the British archaeologist Catherwood, juxtaposing the European version with photographs of the actual place.

Chilean Neo-Expressionist painter Jorge Tacla also explores pre-Colombian history, postulating an earlier age in which Africans coexisted with Latin American Indians. In the nightmare world of Tacla’s paintings, as in Cruz Azaceta’s, the artist appears as an anguished and deformed figure, the eternal outsider. As a mark of his identification with other cultures, Tacla portrays himself as an African. Both Tacla and Cruz Azaceta present modern versions of the neo-Humanist tradition that was important in post-War European and Latin American art in which the distortions of the human form were used to portray existential anxiety. Fellow Chilean Ismael Frigerio focuses his paintings and installations on the post-Conquest period, the confrontation between Aztec and Christian cultures.

The magic realist tradition is represented by Honduran artist, Francisco Alvaredo-Juárez, whose work reflects his sense of the instability of life. In his paintings, he has invented an imaginary world populated by beautiful yet dangerous birds and dragons that dwarf the humans. This fantastic approach to contemporary urban reality also informs the witty ceramic sculptures of Argentine artist, Dina Bursztyn. For buildings threatened with destruction by developers, Bursztyn has created contemporary gargoyles to be placed above the doorways to frighten them away. A telepathic mailbox placed in front of Hostos Community College in the South Bronx during 1990 took the form of a horned monster with a single, turtle eye, inscribed with flying creatures and other legends, mouth open, ready to eat and thus transmit all messages.

The ‘80s emphasis on “diversity” and the return to figuration represented by the Postmodernist aesthetic combined with the politicization of ethnicity and gender has led to a departure from strict non-objectivity even among long-time geometric painters like César Paternosto. A leader of the Argentinian geometric and minimalist schools in the ’60s and ’70s, Paternosto’s new work draws on Andean architectural patterns. This type of ethnic abstraction follows in the tradition of those artists like the Peruvian Fernando De Szsylzo, or the Mexican, Rufino Tamayo, who have “Latinized” eurocentric styles with pre-Colombian allusions.

Conclusion

The new recognition given to Latino art and artists in the 1980s has provided the opportunity for this rich and diverse body of work to be reintegrated into mainstream United States culture and made available to a wider audience. It is important to remember, however, that these artists were nurtured by a network of alternative institutions developed in the 1970s, which provided them with opportunities to exhibit and develop as artists—an opportunity which still does not exist to any significant extent within mainstream institutions. These alternative
structures and the base established through ethnic studies programs in the universities also provided the training for a new group of Latino curators and critics to provide an interpretive voice for Latino artists. Voices like Guillermo Gómez Peña, Amalia Mesa-Bains, Ricardo Paullosa, Mari Carmen Ramírez, Susana Torruela Leval and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto are tremendously important and mark an important beginning in that direction.

In spite of significant progress, prejudice and racism still exist in the art world. As Howardena Pindell points out, in all of the discussion surrounding censorship in the art world following the attacks on the NEA in 1990, there was no “examination of the ongoing practice of censoring out artists of color except for the occasional, reluctantly included tokens” (Pindell 18).

With significant amounts of money now being spent for “diversity” in the arts, mainstream institutions have begun to compete with alternative museums for the same funds. Since exhibitions of Latin American and Latino art have historically been tied to specific foreign and domestic policy objectives, it is not wise to assume that mainstream institutions will continue to mount such shows in the 1990s. It is important, therefore, to continue to support an alternative network, while at the same time working for greater access to mainstream institutions.

While the visibility given by mainstream exhibitions is important, it remains problematic. As Juan Sánchez stated in a panel on de facto racism at the College Art Association Meetings in 1990: “Cultural imperialism is another level of colonialism. Maybe this is the new colonialism where the colonizer aims to reinterpret the culture of the colonized. ... The cultural imperialist appropriates, reinterprets edits, and exploits the very elements that belong to the colonized” (Pindell 20). The controversial Smithsonian Hispanic Art exhibition and the Chicano organized CARA exhibition are an example of this problematic and of the necessity for maintaining an infrastructure of Latino exhibition spaces, curators, critics and teachers.
La Butterfly (Mariposa) by John Valadez, 1983 (Pastel on paper, 30\" x 44\").

La antorcha de Quetzalcóatl by Leo Tanguma (Detail, two forms: 11'9\" x 72' and 8'5\" x 23').
Crash in Thalo Green by Carlos Almaraz (42" x 72").

Detail of Lechugueras by Juana Alicia, c. 1983.
*The Sun* (a) and *The Moon* (b) by Francisco Letelier, 1991. Courtesy of L. A. County Metropolitan Transit Authority Art for Rail Program.

*Biography* by Marina Gutiérrez, 1988 (Acrylic on masonite with suspended metal relief, 4' x 5' x 6").
Conquista de la Soledad by Rafael Ferrer, 1990–91 (Oil on canvas, 60" x 72").

Noviembre 1976 by Myrna Baez, 1976 (Acrylic, 126 x 151.5 cm).
Mixed Statement by Juan Sánchez, 1984 (Oil, mixed media on canvas, 54" x 96").

Still Life with Crying Girl by Liliana Porter, 1985 (Acrylic, screenprint and collage on paper, 40" x 60").
Adam and Eve of the *Tras las viejas* series by Antonio Martorell, 1986
(Woodcut screen of four 8' x 4' panels painted on both sides).

*El milagro* by Carmen Lomas Garza, 1987 (36" x 48").

*Vaquero* by Luis Jiménez, 1980 (Fiberglass, 16.5' h.).

*Beware of Who's Sleeping Next to You* by Arnaldo Roche Rabell, 1991 (Oil on canvas, 78" x 78").
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