A HOME FOR CHICANO ART

What is Chicano art anyway? The short answer: it is the creative expression of a uniquely American experience.

As artwork created by Americans of Mexican descent, Chicano art exploded onto popular culture in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Born out of the counterculture of the Chicano Movement, it became known as the art of struggle, protest, and identity.

Whether it was printmaking, painting, performance art, murals, or mixed media, or some combination thereof, the artwork was then—and continues to be today—a key tool for Chicanos to share their own unique passion and life experiences. It is a forum where creativity and activism converge into something combustible, inspiring, and breathtakingly bold.

It screams from the canvas: “We are here. And we matter!”

Today, visitors to The Cheech Marin Center for Chicano Art & Culture of the Riverside Art Museum (affectionately known as “The Cheech”) have a rare opportunity to view paintings, drawings, sculptures, and other works by some of the most respected Chicana/o artists in the world—all pioneers, trailblazers, and rule-breakers—visionaries like Carlos Almaraz, Margaret Garcia, Wayne Alaniz Healy, Judithe Hernández, Frank Romero, John Valadez, and Patssi Valdez.

Like Cheech Marin himself, many of the artists whose work is showcased in the Center have strong roots in the Los Angeles area, while others come from places like Santa Fe and San Antonio. Regardless of their hometowns, many are considered game-changers in the world of Chicano art.

Art born from perseverance

Many of the artists creating Chicano art were heavily influenced by *El Movimiento* or the Chicano Movement. The crusade for social justice prompted many Mexican Americans, and those who identified as Chicanos, to create art that spoke of self-determination and perseverance for a population that was—and to some degree, continues to be—disenfranchised. The artwork focused on a spectrum of themes ranging from political representation, farmworker rights, and education reforms.

Chicano art was greatly influenced by post-revolutionary Mexican painters like Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros, as well as by Mesoamerican art and European art movements. The work incorporated imagery from colonial folk art, religious iconography, indigenous traditions, and the blending of cultures along the US/Mexico border.

Crucial to the development of Chicano art was the growing muralist movement spreading through America, a renaissance of street art in the 1960s. Alongside public murals, the art emerged in silkscreen poster production. Suddenly, printed images depicting political and social

issues could be seen everywhere. Young artists formed collectives during the 1970s, such as *Asco*, Mujeres Muralistas, Los Four, the Royal Chicano Air Force, among others.

Chicano art and culture are constantly evolving

Today, Chicana/o/x art still has echoes of those original tenets, but it also transcends the constraints of identity. Some of the most powerful pieces illustrate current struggles and social issues while also highlighting the importance of family, culture, and history. The work itself has evolved into other facets of art, including fashion, typography trends, street art, low-rider cars, photography, and film.

Central to the idea of Chicano art is the concept of *rasquachismo* developed by art historian Tomás Ybarra-Frausto to describe Chicano aesthetics. This refers to a knack for resourcefulness, a do-it-yourself attitude, and an inventiveness that leads the artist to use the most ordinary materials to fuel the creative process. *Rasquachismo* is the celebration of "making do," and can be seen in brightly colored houses, a shrine of plastic flowers, paintings on velvet, or a wall or fence adored with found objects, pieces of plastic, or odds and ends.

"Chicano art was always political art," Marin said. "And year by year, it evolved into what it is today. It can be political. It can be non-political. It can be highly personal. But what I've learned over the years is that Chicano art reveals the *sabor* (flavor) of the community."

Artists that will be featured in The Cheech include the late Carlos Almaraz who was a leading member of the Chicano Art Movement in Los Angeles in the 1970s and '80s, producing banners for rallies in support of Cesar Chavez's United Farm Workers labor union. Look also for works by Judithe Hernández who was among the first Chicana artists to break through the mainstream museum barrier; Patssi Valdez who grew up in East Los Angeles as a multimedia artist and cofounder of the seminal Chicano artist collective called *Asco*; Gilbert "Magú" Luján, a painter, muralist, and sculptor who was among the first U.S. artists of Mexican descent to establish an international career; Glugio "Gronk" Nicandro, a painter, printmaker, and performance artist who was also a founding member of the LA-based arts collective *Asco*; and Sandy Rodriguez, whose work explores the methods and materials of painting across cultures and histories.

The exhibition will also feature the work of Frank Romero, one of L.A.'s most iconic artists. He is a founding member of the Los Four art collective whose work in the 1974 exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art was acclaimed as one of the first ever Chicano art shows at a mainstream museum. Also joining the show is Wayne Alaniz Healy, a founding member of the East Los Streetscapers, one of the first groups of artists to begin the muralist movement in the 1970s.

María Esther Fernández, the Artistic Director of The Cheech, said the Center takes its stewardship of Chicano art very seriously. This is because the pieces in the collection have such historical significance, and—as Fernández put it—the Center itself "represents a massive step forward in our pursuit of shaping the art world's perceptions and understanding of Chicanx art."

Indeed, The Cheech has always had at the forefront of its mission a desire to increase the public's understanding of Chicano art. Through its use of thought-provoking exhibitions, enriching art classes, fun (and free) family activities, scholarly lectures, and groundbreaking film screenings, the Center will pull visitors into a deeper exploration of Chicano art history so they

can experience firsthand, and appreciate, the enormity of its contribution to American culture and society.

# # #