



## ...the e-newsletter of the Ethnic Arts Council december 2008

### Chicano Art: Shared Culture, Ethnic Divide, and Political Message

By Wolfgang Schlink

The year was 1972. The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) did not show any interest. A curator reportedly declared: “Chicanos, they don’t make art, they’re in gangs.” Hours later, a few Chicano (=Mexican-American) artists tagged the museum entrance with their names in red and black graffiti. If they could not get inside, they at least would sign the museum as their artwork on the outside. Today, Chicano art is accepted as a genuine contemporary art statement. It has been shown in several 2008 exhibitions in Los Angeles museums and is valued by an ever increasing audience of collectors.

The main nerve centers of Chicano art are located in the border states of California and Texas. The art depicts shared Mexican-American culture through the eyes of the Chicanos. The aesthetics vary: The great Mexican muralists, graffiti street art and calligraphy, photorealism with pastels on paper, Frida Kahlo, retablo imagery, folk art, and much more have influenced imagery and style of Chicano artists. Support for print-making - a major form of Chicano art practice - came from Self Help Graphics, a Los Angeles-based communal art center.



The subjects of Chicano art are universal: Life, love, passion, coming-of-age, etc. Add car culture, as evidenced by Carlos Almaraz’ *Sunset Crash* (1982). Yet, more often than not, Chicano art has highlighted the cultural divide of brown vs. white, prevalent in issues of socio-political struggle, civil rights, and immigration. Mexicans have crossed the U.S. southern border in pursuit of a better life in *el Norte*. However, the border - metaphor for divide - has stayed with them. As a consequence, Chicano art frequently enforces political statements.

#### Siqueiros, the forerunner

In Los Angeles, Mexican political art has been a precursor to Chicano art. The seeds were planted in the early 1930s, a time of deep economic depression and racial tensions. More than a million U.S. citizens of Mexican origin were forcibly “repatriated” to Mexico: A one-way train ticket of deportation, courtesy of the U.S. government. David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896-1974), master muralist and one of the great artists of his time, was on temporary teaching assignment at Los Angeles’ Chouinard School of Art. He had been exiled from Mexico because of his communist activities. While in Los Angeles in 1932, Siqueiros painted three murals.



The first, on the walls of Chouinard, was titled *Mitin Obrero* (Workers' Meeting). In black and white it depicted a multi-cultural crowd listening to a militant union organizer. Uproar was the immediate response of Los Angeles' political watchdogs. The fear of "the other", aka communism? The mural was covered by a tarp and destroyed within a year. Siqueiros' second work, *América Tropical*, did not fare much better. Commissioned by an art gallery, it was painted on a second floor wall of an Olvera Street building in downtown. The mural showed a crucified Indian topped by an "imperialist" eagle, peasants waging a war of liberation, and crumbling meso-American pyramids. Not quite the images the gallery had hoped for - the expectation was something like a tropical paradise of lush jungle and happy natives - and categorically unacceptable to the Los Angeles community of cultural conservatives. Whitewash was the almost immediate answer. Long forgotten, the mural is now being restored by the Getty Conservation Institute, a multi-year project.



Happily, the third of Siqueiros' murals lived to tell the artist's tale. *Portrait of Mexico Today - 1932*, painted for Hollywood director Dudley Murphy (best known for his 1924 Dadaist, avant-garde film *Ballet Mécanique*, co-directed by French artist Fernand Léger with cinematography by Man Ray), endured on protected private property in Pacific Palisades. Siqueiros portrayed indigenous poverty, slain workers, a Communist soldier, and a corrupt Mexican politician juxtaposed with an image of U.S. business tycoon J.P. Morgan. The financier's portrait symbolized America's fiscal supremacy. Morgan's senior partner Dwight Morrow (father-in-law to Charles Lindbergh) had been appointed ambassador to Mexico in 1927 to help protect U.S. oil interests south of the border. Siqueiros sent a far-sighted artistic statement that is still so relevant some seventy-six years after its creation.



The mural was moved in 2002. It is now on permanent view at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art. Siqueiros' Los Angeles art episode had lasted all but six months. His visa expired, and he - somewhat unceremoniously - left town for Argentina.

## **LACMA: Have Chicano artists moved on?**

Fast forward to the 1970s: Two groups of Chicano artists had formed in Los Angeles. "ASCO" (Spanish for "disgust") included the LACMA taggers Harry Gamboa Jr., Willie Herron III, Gronk, and Patssi Valdez. "Los Four" consisted of Carlos Almaraz, Gilbert (Magú) Lujan, Roberto de la Rocha, and Frank Romero. The former ensemble, mostly self-taught, embodied the raw power of the barrio. The latter, schooled at art colleges, took a more intellectual approach to painting the essence of Chicano culture. "Los Four", in 1974, received LACMA's stamp of artistic approval with a small exhibition in the museum's back room. The show broke attendance records.



Works of both groups were included in a 2008 exhibition at LACMA. The selection was mainly from actor/comedian Cheech Marin's collection that had toured major U.S. museums since 2001 under the title "Chicano Visions". The exhibition presented a multi-faceted cross-section of Chicano art from the late 1960s to the 1990s reaching into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Patssi Valdez' *Little Girl with Yellow Dress* (1995) was in the show. And so were two of the more recent paintings by young gun Vincent Valdez (born 1976) who is evolving into a formidable chronicler among the Chicano painters. His disturbing *Kill the Pachuco Bastard!* (2001) depicts the 1943 racially-infused Zoot Suit Riots, i.e. the police-condoned bloody beatings of Mexican-American youths by white sailors in downtown L.A. And his *Nothin' to See Here, Keep on Movin'* (2008) is a powerful portrait of in-your-face LAPD officers in riot gear, courtesy of the mishandled 2007 May Day demonstrations at Mc Arthur Park.



Cheech Marin's selection shows an unabashed, refreshing embrace for art and artists combined with a deep sense of local art history and socio-political context, not diverted by encyclopedic ambition or scholarly distraction. The exhibition was testimony that Chicano art and voice are enduring. The initial rejection of the show by LACMA for potentially serving the interests of a private collector has been widely documented. Fortunately, the new top brass at LACMA had a change of heart.

LACMA hosted a second show in 2008: "Phantom Sightings: *Art after the Chicano Movement*". The title of the exhibition, the first show on Chicano art curated by LACMA for some thirty years,



seemingly implies that Mexican-American art has moved on, has amalgamated with the Anglo art world, and along the way has lost its authentic message? For sure, the artists of the "Phantom" exhibition were of a more recent generation and not born when significant events took place that left their mark on local Mexican-American art and history: The Chávez Ravine land-grab tragedy of 1949-1959, with a Chicano working-class settlement - described as a "poor man's Shangri-la" - as the opening act, eviction and unfulfilled promise of affordable, Richard Neutra-designed housing as part two, and the entry of bulldozers and the building of Dodger Stadium as its swan song;

union organizer César Chávez and the fight for farm workers' rights; the killing of popular KMEX-TV reporter Ruben Salazar by a LAPD tear gas grenade in 1970 in the aftermath of a Vietnam war protest, or - same year, same street - the police-enforced end of cruising on Whittier Boulevard, the premier catwalk of East L.A.'s lowriders.

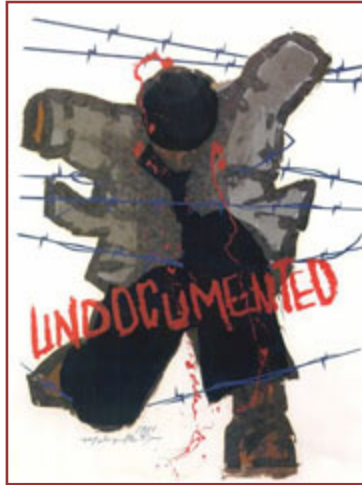
But, have Chicano artists in fact entered a "post-ethnic" era as the LACMA exhibition title implied? It would be suggesting that this country has moved into a "post-racial" age with the election of an African-American candidate as its President. A good step in the direction of ethnic and racial integration, for sure. However, Barack Obama's inauguration is unlikely to turn the political message of African-American artists into yesterday's news; at least not yet.

Meanwhile, the Mexican-American divide is very much alive and entrenched in its most permanent and smoldering subject, the unresolved issue of undocumented immigration of millions of people. Virtually every Chicano's life is touched by the "border issue", and Chicano artists have responded.



## Fowler Museum: Art of immigration

Case in point is the current show “Caras Vemos, Corazones No Sabemos/Faces Seen, Hearts Unknown: *The Landscape of Mexican Migration*” at the Fowler Museum (through December 28).



The exhibited works span several generations of artists. The show’s mood swings from horror and shock to opportunity and optimism. One of the signature exhibits is by senior artist, Oakland-based Malaquías Montoya, a self-declared “artist of protest”: His brutal, gut-wrenching serigraph *Undocumented* (1981) portrays a lifeless, bloodied human shape caught in the barbed wire of the border fence. At the other end of the artistic spectrum, new generation local artist Maria Elena Castro prefers not to be categorized by the “restricting” label of “Chicana artist”, nor does she necessarily position her work as a political statement. Yet her family story is one of growing up in a dual culture, and that is reflected in her art which is largely autobiographical. Her work *Green, Go!* (2008) is a commissioned, central installation of the show: A wordplay on “gringo”; or a traffic light switching to green; or the color of “hope”, and of the dollar bill; green-colored papier-mâché creatures

reminiscent of little green men, i.e. (illegal) “aliens”? All of the above, maybe. It is an enigmatic work of numerous piñata-style figures watched over by the merged images of the Virgen de Guadalupe and the Statue of Liberty.

## Vincent Valdez’ *El Chávez Ravine*: Landmark of Los Angeles (art) history

In 1966, an Edward Kienholz car-themed artwork made history when - in a retrospective at LACMA - his *Back Seat Dodge ’38* (1964) got close to being banned from the show. The installation depicts, in the artist’s grimy way of storytelling, a couple “making out” in the back of the truncated vehicle. The *Dodge* - quite literally - opened the door to a heated debate about art, obscenity, and its showing in public spaces. As a compromise and to keep the artwork in the exhibition, the car door would stay shut and only be opened for adults and a quick peek with no minors present in the gallery. Since 1980, the *Dodge* - a landmark of L.A. art and art history - is in LACMA’s permanent collection.

In early 2008, another compelling car-themed artwork was exhibited in one of Los Angeles’ less likely art venues, the Petersen Automotive Museum, as part of the exhibition “La Vida Lowrider”. The work had been commissioned by music legend Ry Cooder of *Buena Vista Social Club* fame.

Cooder, in 2004, was in the final stages of producing a collection of songs about the battle of Chávez Ravine. His vision was the creation of a thematic mural to coincide with the release of his album. Of course, not any mural would do. The painting surface had to be a 1953 Chevy Good Humor ice cream truck, one of the very few points of direct contact between the Chicano population at Chávez Ravine and the white world. Yet no such vintage vehicle was available.





Cooder did the next best thing and had Fernando Ruelas, L.A.'s premier lowrider builder, recreate the truck for him; a year's work. Then, artist Vincent Valdez arrived from San Antonio, Texas and began to live and work with the three-dimensional canvas, the grey-primed truck, in a Boyle Heights studio. The "paintjob" was supposed to take just several months; but Valdez' arduous journey to the final brushstroke came to an end only nineteen months later (*see photo by Genaro Molina, bottom of page 4*).

Valdez was passionate to get the assignment right. He immersed himself into the 1950s chronicles of Los Angeles, the "red scare", the times of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and J. Edgar Hoover, and the characters that shaped the Chávez Ravine battle, among them Mayor Norris Poulson, Police Chief William H. Parker, and Dodgers owner Walter O'Malley. He studied documents, reviewed vintage footage and photos, spoke to people who had been there, and watched béisbol at Dodger Stadium from the Chicano seats, right above what once was Chávez Ravine.

In the end, *El Chávez Ravine* - the truck - turned out to be a multi-layered, story-telling masterpiece of oil on steel with the images of the historic timeline upfront and the ghosts of Chicano inhabitants and political power players in the background. The artwork embodies American sports history (the move of the Brooklyn Dodgers to Los Angeles made Major League Baseball a true national sport), yet stresses the aspects of social injustice, corruption, police brutality, and shady political deal-making. Vincent Valdez' *El Chávez Ravine* portrays a significant piece of Los Angeles and Chicano history on the canvas of lowrider culture. It will keep the tragic memory of the battle of Chávez Ravine alive. Beyond that, it asks the broader question: "At what price progress?"



Vincent Valdez, *El Chávez Ravine*, 2007 (detail)

Vincent Valdez' *El Chávez Ravine* is - like Edward Kienholz' *Back Seat Dodge '38* - a landmark of Los Angeles art and history. It ultimately should be on permanent display in a major Los Angeles public museum.

---

#### Endnotes:

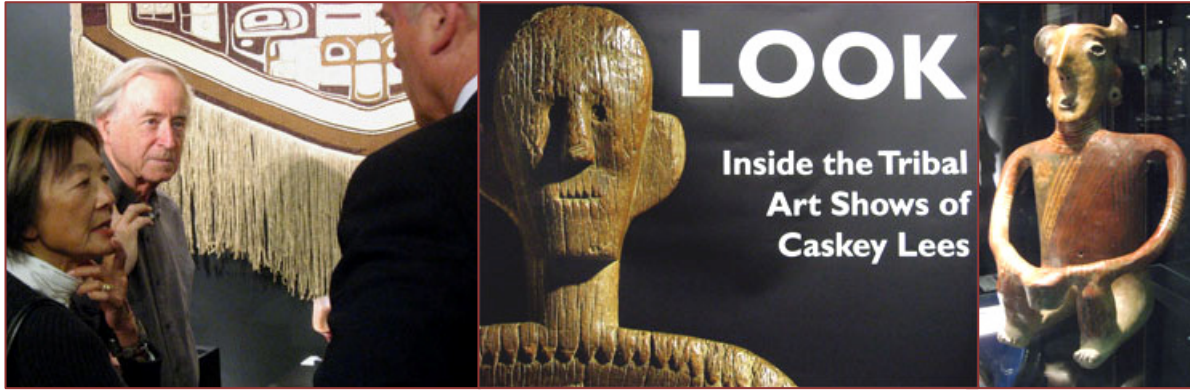
- In October 2008, the L.A. City Council decided to name the area around Dodger Stadium "Dodgertown" further eradicating the memory of Chávez Ravine. The assignment of a special ZIP Code is pending.
- "El Chávez Ravine" - the truck - will be exhibited at the San Antonio Art Museum from March 14 to August 2, 2009.

#### More information:

- For a slideshow about the making of "El Chávez Ravine" with commentary by Vincent Valdez, see <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/news/arts/la-0916-chavezgallery-f-0,6249274.flash>
- Book: Cheech Marin, *Chicano Visions: American Painters on the Verge*, 2002
- Book: *Chávez Ravine, 1949 – A Los Angeles Story. Photographs and text by Don Normark*, 1999



The Los Angeles Asian & Tribal Arts Show



Chilkat dancing blanket at Anthropos

Sculpture (top of a ladder): Mark A. Johnson

Anthropos

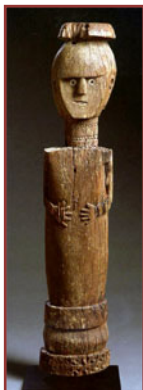
The vibes among the dealers on opening night (Friday, Nov. 14) were cautiously optimistic. The same day, Sotheby's New York - amidst more bad news about the economy - had staged a successful African and Oceanic Art auction. Yet by Sunday evening the mood was more subdued. Many dealers found the attendance adequate; but sales were disappointing. Apparently, it is not easy to mobilize the base of local collectors to buy in L.A. The San Francisco shows have a larger East Cost and European dealer presence, and they offer - on average - higher quality material. Also, the L.A. event may be scheduled too close to the San Francisco show dates of February 2009.



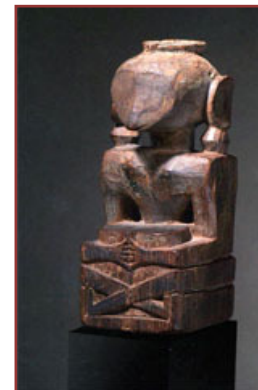
Mark A. Johnson & nextgen

Zena Kruzick, S.F.

New: Aboriginal Art, Peter Molloy



Exhibitor and EAC member **Thomas Murray** has published a new 100 plus pages catalog **ANIMISTIC ART of Island Asia**. It embodies in Murray's own words "the philosophy of my mature aesthetics" developed over thirty years as a tribal art dealer. His selection is driven as much by the power of form as by its ritual-cultural importance. It certainly has significant appeal to the cross-over art collector. Two examples... Murray may be contacted at [tmasiatica@hotmail.com](mailto:tmasiatica@hotmail.com).



Left: Aitos Ancestor Figure, West Timor, 19<sup>th</sup> C. or earlier, 47 inches  
Right: Ancestor Figure, Tanimbar, Moluccas, 19<sup>th</sup> C. or earlier, 4.5 inches  
Catalog photography: Don Tuttle; show photography: Wolfgang Schlink



**Recent EAC Programs**

On October 26, EAC members joined gracious hosts **Michael and Darcel Hamson** at their beautiful home in Palos Verdes. After feasting on a sumptuous oriental spread, Michael, a passionate believer in the art of field collecting, gave a stimulating slide lecture about his trials and travails in Papua New Guinea (PNG). He is often treading where no or very few non-natives have gone. Impassable rivers and touchy aircraft pick-ups on the remotest landing strips are just a few “treats” on Michael’s adventures. Of interest is that most art objects in PNG have lost their ritual meaning, yet the owners hold them in high esteem as prestige objects.



**P.S. Annual Dinner - A Sliver of Gold amidst the Economic Gloom**

The September Annual Dinner saw two major “firsts” for EAC. The first “first” was to sell a full table to Sotheby's over the more laborious efforts to garner individual and couple tickets. Our heartfelt thanks go to EAC board member **Fred Backlar**, Vice President at Sotheby's.

The second “first” was receiving a corporate donation of \$5,000 for EAC’s good work. The gift was facilitated by **Will Hughes**, a long-time EAC member and former Chair of the Board. As Vice President of King Food Service, Hawaii, he requested that their California affiliate, Bicara Ltd., make this generous donation. Many thanks, Will, for your continued commitment and loyalty to EAC!

**! Give the Gift of EAC Membership this Holiday Season !**



**HAPPY HOLIDAYS** to all members of EAC and all recipients of EAC e-news!

**Please consider the gift of membership in the Ethnic Arts Council of Los Angeles.**

The following two pages contain information about EAC’s mission and a membership form.



*Comments, suggestions? Please email Wolfgang Schlink, editor EAC e-news, at [wolf@tribearthgallery.com](mailto:wolf@tribearthgallery.com)*





## The Ethnic Arts Council of Los Angeles (EAC)

**F**ounded in 1966, the Ethnic Arts Council of Los Angeles (EAC) is a non-profit education and support organization dedicated to advancing the knowledge, interest, and appreciation of ethnic art that includes, among others, the arts of Asia, Africa, the Pacific, and the Americas. The EAC focuses on educating its members and the public on the art of indigenous people world-wide through educational and grant-making activities. The EAC membership is comprised largely of recognized collectors, active dealers, and enthusiastic admirers of ethnic art.

### Highlights of EAC Contributions

- Helped establish the pre-Columbian collection at the Natural History Museum through donated or loaned materials.
- Initiated the African and pre-Columbian art collections at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) through donations and sales.
- Recent EAC grants (selection)
  - **Fowler Museum:** *Intersections: World Arts, Local Lives*, Long-term gallery, 2004
  - **LACMA:** *Lords of Creation – Origins of Maya Kingship*, Exhibit, 2004
  - **Bowers Museum:** *Gallery Guide to Queen of Sheba*, Exhibit, 2004
  - **Pacific Asia Museum:** *Tibetan Furniture in Religious and Secular Life*, Exhibit, 2004
  - **Southwest Museum:** *Katsina Imagery in Hopi Life*, Carvings in Diorama, 2006
  - **CAFAM:** *Healing: A Cultural Exploration*, Exhibit, 2006
  - **Fowler Museum:** *Early Aboriginal Paintings from Papunya*, Exhibit, 2008

### Why YOU Should Join

- Meet like-minded people interested in educating one another on tribal and indigenous art
- Visit private collections and take special field trips
- Participate in exclusive curatorial tours of major museum exhibits
- Attend lectures and demonstrations on the myriad aspects of ethnic art
- Join members and museum directors at the Annual Dinner and Silent Auction
- Receive the EAC newsletter that highlights aspects of the global ethnic art scene as well as EAC activities
- Support local museums and organizations through the EAC grants program