

A Head-Spinning, Hope-Inspiring Showcase of Art

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By Holland Cotter

In Latin American Los Angeles, bridges soar, walls fall. A grand exchange beckons the art traveler to “Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA.”

LOS ANGELES — I guess there’s a God. During one of the meanest passages in American national politics within living memory, we’re getting a huge, historically corrective, morale-raising cultural event, one that lasts four months and hits on many of the major social topics of the day: racism, sexism, aggressive nationalism. True, the hugeness of the thing is a problem, and the contents are uneven. But it’s a gift, worth a trip to puzzle over and savor.

And if the timing is right, that’s semi-accidental. The event, called “[Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA](#),” is the latest of three successive multi-venue extravaganzas in and around this city, spaced several years apart, and bankrolled by the [Getty Foundation](#). The first was an [overview of art](#) in Southern California from 1945 to 1980; the [second](#) was devoted to architecture and design. The current edition is more tightly focused: on the long, mutually formative cultural exchange between Latin America and the Los Angeles region, considered through exhibitions at some 70 institutions, large and small.

The theme is inherently loaded. Latin American art has had shamefully little museum attention in a county that is, statistically, nearly 40 percent Spanish-speaking. So “LA/LA” is definitely a catch-up gesture. And when research began on the project several years ago, few participants could have anticipated the anti-immigrant, and specifically anti-Mexican sentiment of the next administration, summed up by the recent suspension of the [Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals \(DACA\)](#) program by President Trump and in the persistently circulated “Build the Wall” meme of his election campaign.

One “LA/LA” exhibition, “The U.S.-Mexico Border: Place, Imagination, and Possibility,” at the [Craft and Folk Art Museum](#), directly addresses the subject of a fraught boundary. Some of the work in the show is too soft and cute, but a few pieces obviously mean business. In a 1978 print by [Rupert Garcia](#) (reprinted in 2011), three thick strands of barbed wire silhouetted against a red ground frame the words “Cesen Deportación.” A 1988 poster by David Avalos, Louis Hock and Elizabeth Sisco combines a triptych of images of brown-skinned hands cleaning a dinner plate, and others handcuffed, with the words: “Welcome to America’s Finest Tourist Plantation.”

And no work falls more clearly into the art-as-evidence category than a sculpture by Camilo Ontiveros in the exhibition called “[Home — So Different, So Appealing: Art from the Americas Since 1957](#)” at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Placed at the beginning of the show, it’s an assemblage made from the personal effects — bedding, clothing, books and a television set precariously piled on sawhorses — of [Juan Manuel Montes](#), a 23-year-old Mexican man who had lived in the United States since he was 9 and who was deported in February, well in advance of President Trump’s move to end DACA. What’s new in the news is really old history.

“Home,” one of the stronger shows in “LA/LA,” was co-organized by [Chon A. Noriega](#), director of the Chicano Studies Research Center at the University of California, Los Angeles, which has made significant loans to other exhibitions on the roster. One, at the [Autry Museum of the American West](#), is a vivid, tip-of-the-iceberg survey of photographs from the Mexican-American newspaper-turned-magazine La Raza, which, from 1967 to 1977, served as a mouthpiece for the Chicano Civil Rights Movement, documenting the local Latino community’s antiwar protests in the 1960s, its effort to secure work and education, and its persecution at the hands of police.

The Chicano Movement, [el Movimiento](#), was one of the great social justice campaigns of late 20th America. And “LA/LA,” at least begins to give it its due in this exhibition, and in another called “[Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano LA](#).” Installed at two West Hollywood spaces, the [MOCA Pacific Design Center](#) and ONE Gallery, the second show takes its name from a single figure, [Edmundo Meza](#) (1955-1985), known as Mundo, who collaborated with many other artists in an LGBTQ Latino network in the 1970s and 1980s. That whole punk-activist scene is badly in need of documenting. The process starts with this scrappy, bits-and-pieces overview, and it’s a moving experience to see the fragile, reliquary traces of vital young artists, some still active, others long gone, at the beginning of their careers.

You’ll find other, older, and far grander relics at the Getty Center in “[Golden Kingdoms: Luxury and Legacy in the Ancient Americas](#),” a resplendent ensemble of gold-work, jade carvings and textiles dating from 1000 B.C. to the 16th century. This is a display on the classic “masterpiece exhibition” model — it’ll go to the Met in February — and a knockout. You can readily see why the first Europeans arriving in South and Central America started packing up what they found there and shipping it home, while introducing their own art to the so-called New World.

A more recent exchange of influences, running north and south, is in play in the visually confusing but sensationally interesting Los Angeles County Museum of Art show called “[Found in Translation: Design in California and Mexico, 1915-1985](#).” The decades covered, with their wars, revolutions and imperialist maneuvers, were politically hot. But they produced some very cool things: border-straddling marvels like Neo-Zapotec pianos and the Aztec Hotel, a 1920s Mayan-Revival building in the San Gabriel Valley; Richard Neutra and Frida Kahlo.

The cultural mash-up is, of course, far from being a thing of the past. It’s basically what “LA/LA” is about, and you’ll find a wonderful example of it in the Los Angeles Public Library’s main branch downtown, at 630 West 5th Street. High up on the wall of its central rotunda is a 1930s mural painted by the illustrator [Dean Cornwell](#) and titled “Four Great Eras of California History.” But this is Hollywood “Anglo” history, a costume drama of noble gents, dolled-up dames, and groveling natives. For “LA/LA” the library commissioned an alternative history, and it’s now in place, at least for the next four months: a set of oil-on-canvas murals by a [Mexican collective](#) called Tlacolulokos (Dario Canul and Cosijoesa Cernas). The paintings bring richly colored images of the city’s contemporary Oaxacan immigrant population into the rotunda and blow Cornwell’s pale tale right out of the space.

And in the very best sense, one “LA/LA” exhibition, “[Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985](#)” at the Hammer Museum, blew me away too. A [decade ago](#) the Museum of Contemporary Art here presented “Wack: Art and the Feminist Revolution.” That was an audacious epochal event. “Radical Women,” though on a smaller scale and not explicitly identifying itself as feminist, is its logical successor.

Smaller still adds up to more than 100 artists. Of those, 11 were also in “Wack.” Many of the rest may well be unfamiliar to visitors who confine their information-gathering to the New York-Europe circuit. Viewers who crave painting won’t find enough. Those who think “the body” an overworked theme, will find it here in excess. At this point, I’ll just say that, in terms of sheer audacity, collective and individual, “Radical Women” is the single most exciting and hope-inspiring historical group show of contemporary art I’ve seen in 10 years. Luckily, it will travel to the Brooklyn Museum in April. What won’t travel, unfortunately, is a raft of worthy and related shows that surround it, among them an exquisite retrospective of the Brazilian artist [Anna Maria Maiolino](#) at the Museum of Contemporary Art; a solo by the photographer [Laura Aguilar](#) at the Vincent Price Art Museum; a pairing of Chicana painters [Judithe Hernández and Patssi Valdez at the Millard Sheets Art Center in Pomona](#); and, coming in November at California State University Northridge, a career survey of the titanic [Judith F. Baca](#), whose “[Great Wall of Los Angeles](#)” mural, begun in the 1970s, is not only still intact but ongoing.

And “LA/LA” has more. An impeccably mounted survey of the self-taught Mexican-American artist Martín Ramírez (1889-1963) both expands on his 2007 New York retrospective, and inaugurates a new museum, the [Institute of Contemporary Art Los Angeles \(ICA LA\)](#). At the alternative space called [REDCAT](#), inside the Walt Disney Concert Hall downtown, a smallish archival show devoted to the Argentine artist León Ferrari appeals more to mind than to eye. But it has already served as a pretext for a live performance — by some 30 readers over eight hours — of Ferrari’s “The Words of Others,” a scathing 1967 anti-authoritarian polemic made up of phrases pulled from newspapers, history books and the Bible. (The piece is subtitled, in part: “Conversations between God and a few men.”)

The once-only REDCAT performance happened last week but, judging from a preview I caught, it rates an instant replay in New York City, where venues should also be found for the spiritual sparkler of a show called “[Axe Bahia: The Power of Art in an Afro-Brazilian Metropolis](#)” at U.C.L.A.’s Fowler Museum; and for the map-defying “Trans-Pacific Borderlands: The Art of Japanese Diaspora in Lima, Los Angeles, Mexico City, and São Paulo” at the [Japanese American National Museum](#).

Obviously, “LA/LA” is a lot. Too much, possibly detrimentally so. Blockbusterism supersized. It’s easy to get pumped on the idea that the huge amounts of time, energy and money put into “LA/LA,” and the buzz generated, guarantees that Latin American and Latino art will never again be left out of the big institutional picture. But I don’t trust institutions. I don’t trust the art world, period. Over and over, it gives certain kinds of art and artists a Hollywood moment only to drop them back into semi-oblivion with an O.K.-we’ve-done-that shrug. (As for New York, institutionally so territorial, I find it impossible to imagine anything on the cooperative order of “Pacific Standard Time” ever happening there, though I’d love to be proved wrong.)

“LA/LA” has done something indisputably and lastingly positive. It has produced a wealth of new scholarship, a mountain of catalogs. But the only thing that will change the canon, write the right history, is to make art that has been excluded consistently present, present in many shows, in many institutions, with those shows appearing one after the other, over long stretches of time, so that the art is never out of sight; so that it is perceived, not as an exotic luxury, but as a necessity.

Photo

Whether the art and artists in the explosion of images and ideas that is “LA/LA” will be given the chance to gain that traction, we’ll have to wait and see. Meanwhile, I’ll mull over what I’ve

encountered: the head-spinning showcase of art by Latin American women; the textured surveys of work by generations of Chicano/Chicana/Chicanx artists-activists; exhibitions demonstrating known and unsuspected intersections of Latin America and the greater globe. They all contribute to the same fundamental goal — to build bridges over borders and pull those damn walls down.