Our America: The Latino Presence in American Art

On view 04.02.14–06.22.14 at the Patricia & Phillip Frost Art Museum

http://thefrost.fiu.edu
THE PATRICIA & PHILLIP FROST ART MUSEUM presents *Our America: The Latino Presence in American Art*, a major exhibition drawn entirely from the Smithsonian American Art Museum’s pioneering collection of Latino art. In its first showing outside the Smithsonian, this exhibition presents the rich and varied contributions of Latino artists in the United States since the mid-20th century, when the concept of a collec-


tive Latino identity began to emerge. It explores how Latino artists shaped the artistic movements of their day and recalibrated key themes in American art and culture.

On view from April 2, 2014 through June 22, 2014, *Our America* includes 85 works in all media by 64 leading modern and contemporary artists who participated in all the various artistic styles and movements, including abstract expressionism; activist, conceptual and performance art; and classic American genres, such as landscape, portraiture and scenes of everyday life.

Latino artists across the US were galvanized by the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s. They created new images of their communities and examined bicultural

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experiences. Many critically probed American history and popular culture, revealing the possibilities and tensions of expansionism, migration and settlement. Other Latino artists in the exhibition devoted themselves to experimentation, pushing the limits of their chosen medium.

Our America presents a picture of an evolving national culture that challenges expectations of what is meant by “American” and “Latino.” Artists of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Dominican descent as well as other Latin American groups with deep roots in the US are featured. The show reveals recurring themes among artists of different generations and regions working across the country:
REFRAMING THE PAST AND PRESENT
The artists gathered here tackle themes related to American national identity from Latino perspectives. Many grapple with the repercussions of events that helped establish Latino communities in the US. The Mexican-American War (1846–1848), which resulted in the annexation of Mexico’s northern territories, and the Spanish-American War (1898), in which Spain ceded Puerto Rico to the US, are recurring background themes. To reveal these and other lesser-known chapters in our collective past, Latino artists focus on history and the visual strategies by which it can become known. To engage American history, they transform classic genres and icons, or create works that invoke the past and its relationship to the present.

MIGRATING THROUGH HISTORY
Many Latinos immigrated to this country in search of a better future or to flee tumultuous events in their homelands. Some communities—specifically Puerto Ricans after 1898 and Mexicans living in the Southwest prior to 1848—did not emigrate but were incorporated into the US, and were immediately or eventually granted citizenship. The artists united here use layered or dreamlike imagery to reflect on the conditions that spur migration or to contemplate its aftermath. Their works explore themes of displacement, exile, and hope.

THE GRAPHICS BOOM
Graphic arts played a pivotal role in the civil rights movement. Chicano and Puerto Rican artists, drawing inspiration from Pop art and graphic traditions from Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Cuba, created prints about the antiwar effort, worker and women’s rights, immigration, Puerto Rican independence, and Latino cultural identity. Their works, which were presented on the street and in the fields, at community venues, and in alternative spaces, facilitated mass mobilization and community education. Many Latino cultural organizations owned...
presses that allowed members to experiment with the medium and quickly respond to community needs. The striking range of styles is balanced by the pervasive use of text, a feature that highlights the importance of public address.

TURNING POINT
The civil rights era, in which marginalized groups demanded equal rights, dramatically altered American society. Galvanized by the times in which they lived, Latino artists became masters of socially engaged art, challenging prevailing notions of American identity and affirming the mixed indigenous, African, and European heritage of Latino communities. Many reinvigorated mural and graphic traditions in an effort to reach ordinary people where they lived and worked. Whether energizing genres like history painting, or creating activist posters or works that penetrate bicultural experiences, Latino artists shaped and chronicled a turning point in American history.
STREET LIFE
Urban Latino communities have blossomed across the United States since the 19th century. Reflecting on this history and its enduring visual evidence, many artists turned to the street as a source of inspiration. The artists in this section approach urban environments as insiders who deeply understand its inner workings. Their works expose the way power structures impact the lives of urban dwellers and how Latino communities transform the cities in which they live. For some, urban themes served as a point of departure for considering personal and political concerns.

SIGNS OF THE POPULAR
American artists across time have turned to popular culture as a sign of the changing nature of contemporary life. Latino artists bring a unique perspective to this subject that is attuned to vernacular traditions and the making-do strategies of urban, working-class communities. The artists gathered here examine objects of daily life or redefine imported traditions and iconographies in a new context, often expanding notions of art making in the process. By actively mining the stuff of everyday life, they comment on the meaning of US popular culture.

Above:

Right:
EVERYDAY PEOPLE

Latino artists, drawn to the richness of daily life, often create intimate or monumental images of everyday people. These artists wrestle with how to depict individual likenesses so that they speak to larger historical forces. More than straightforward portraits, these works reflect on the act of portraying people and cultures that are often stereotyped in the media or unincorporated into accounts of American history.

WE INTERRUPT THIS MESSAGE

Many American artists explored the impact of rising mass culture around the mid-20th century. A generation of Latino artists came of age during this time and turned their attention to how television, film, advertising, and print media depicted communities with limited access to the means of representation. Latino artists, like some of their African American and Asian American peers, questioned racial and ethnic stereotypes that permeated American culture. Others, inspired by the rise of Third World liberation movements, critiqued how the news portrayed events in Africa, Asia, and beyond. Together these artists subvert entrenched representations by altering existing images or creatively intervening in established circuits of information.

DEFYING CATEGORIES

The relationship between Latino art and the shifting landscape of American art since the mid-20th century is not simple or clear-cut. Some Latino artists actively participated in the prevailing artistic movements of the US, at times becoming leaders in their respective fields. Others eschewed pure formalist tendencies to tackle pressing issues of the day. An even larger group of artists inhabited multiple worlds, infusing avant-garde modes with politically and culturally engaged themes.

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ROD FAULDS

Art museum administrator, educator, curator, exhibition designer and artist, Rod Faulds talks with On View about designing exhibitions and his upcoming show at Art & Culture Center of Hollywood.

PORTRAIT BY TEODORA DAKOVA