

The feminist movement has made significant strides for women, but it addresses issues that are not relevant to the barrio...I don't really feel a part of it. I find it basically an upper middle class, white woman's movement.

—Judithe Hernández

## CHICANA ART AND SCHOLARSHIP ON THE INTERSTICES OF OUR DISCIPLINES

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The statement above, made by muralist Judithe Hernández,<sup>1</sup> emblemized the ambivalent relationship that Chicana artists held with the feminist movement in the 1970s, a movement that, in its early manifestations, failed to recognize that patriarchy was a system of power predicated not only on gender oppression but also on class and racial hierarchies. Like their male counterparts in the Chicana/o arts movement, many Chicana artists committed themselves to the practice of a politically motivated art that served as the artistic arm to the Chicano movement. Much of their visual work echoed the growing nationalist vocabulary of *el movimiento's* political philosophies. Nevertheless, the specificity of women's experience as well as their capacity for radical political action—a capacity in women often not recognized by Chicano men—became recurring motifs in Chicana art, thus destabilizing the male-centered elements in the prevailing nationalist aesthetic and ideology of the time.

Images such as Ester Hernández's 1976 etching *Libertad* depicting a young Chicana resculpting the Statue of Liberty to resemble a Maya carving, and Yolanda López's pastel drawings (1978) that depicted herself, her mother, and her grandmother in the role of the Virgin of Guadalupe were examples of early Chicana art that placed women at the center of discourses on liberation and decolonization. What seemed clear from works such as these was that the ambivalence toward feminism felt by many Chicana artists was compounded by an ambivalence regarding the gendered exclusions of Chicano nationalist imagery. Thus, Chicana feminist aesthetics emerge from an interstitial and bordered space wedged somewhere between feminist epistemologies and Chicano nationalism, among other discourses, refusing to stake allegiances to any one ideological camp. As Chicana feminist philosopher Gloria Anzaldúa argues, the borderlands are characterized by "ambivalence and unrest,"<sup>2</sup> where "dislocation is the norm."<sup>3</sup> But borderlands, as sites of cultural production, are also spaces of countless possibilities, where creativity breaks through the bonds of convention and prescribed gender roles. It is here that I locate Chicana artistic sensibilities, for this bordered position has catapulted Chicana artists into the forefront of innovation and decolonizing visual discourses. In this focused issue on art, the various scholars who contributed essays to this volume articulate not only the innovative element and decolonizing qualities in Chicana cultural production, but also the overlapping subjectivities, contradicting experiences, and consciousness expressed in their work. Moving away from one-dimensional visual and formal analyses so common to the field of art history, the texts in this issue skillfully address the various levels of complexity and meaning that inform Chicana creativity. Representing new and exciting approaches to cultural production, the work of these scholars is boldly interdisciplinary *and* multidisciplinary, necessary intellectual approaches for the effective analysis of Chicana creative expressions.

Chicana artists have pioneered on many fronts, but none more thought-provoking and even controversial than in issues of sexuality within the Chicana/o community. The politics of the early Chicano movement often placed great emphasis on the vectors of class and race as critical factors determining the Chicana/o community's history of disenfranchisement and marginalization. Concerns over gender and sexuality were either relegated to the margins or completely silenced. Many activists at the time, both male and female, held the perception that these were Anglo-American issues that would divide *el movimiento* and dilute its political effectiveness. Moreover, patriarchal notions about women's prescribed roles within the domestic sphere and their status as sexual objects to male desire were deeply ingrained in the minds of numerous activists. Nevertheless, in other quarters the gender and sexual revolution was well under way, prompting many Chicana activists to realize that, as Alicia Gaspar de Alba points out, "patriarchy functions in insidious ways."<sup>4</sup>

Aside from insisting on the specificity of gender in their imagery, Chicana artists began to break with the taboo on sexuality by producing work that presented women as sexual subjects with agency over their own bodies, a far cry from the objectifying, scantily clad Aztec princesses painted by Mexican illustrator Jesús Helguera and often reproduced in calendars, murals, tattoo art, and mostly male Chicano art throughout the U.S. Southwest. The painting titled *The Pomegranate* (1994), created by Bay Area Chicana artist Maya González, depicts a Chicana dressed in black lingerie holding a pomegranate and *calavera* as she seductively and defiantly returns the gaze of the spectator. Ester Hernández's serigraph *La Ofrenda* (1988) portrays an androgynous-looking Chicana in a punklike haircut who proudly displays a tattoo of the Virgen de Guadalupe on her bare back. Both images graced the covers of two important Chicana feminist anthologies, *The Pomegranate on Living Chicana Theory* (1998, ed. Carla Trujillo) and *La Ofrenda on Chicana Lesbians: The*

*Girls Our Mothers Warned Us About* (1991, ed. Carla Trujillo). These two works also celebrated women-centered desires while acknowledging the sexual and gender diversity within the Chicana/o community. The emphasis on sexuality also included queer interventions into traditional Mexican/Chicana/o imagery as we see in the work of Los Angeles-based Chicana artist Alma Lopez, who together with María Herrera-Sobek and myself contributed an essay to this focused issue. In her digital print *Ixta* (1999), the artist cites the myth of Ixtaccihuatl and Popocatepetl, better known as the “Legend of the Volcanoes,” yet casts two young queer Chicanas in the roles of the doomed lovers.

Employing themes related to gender and sexuality, Chicana artists effectively broke with the monolithic Chicano nationalist discourse. Images relating to indigenous consciousness and identity were explored by Chicana and Chicano artists. Nevertheless, many of the Chicano artists were celebrating Chicanas/os’ indigenous roots through monumental figures of Aztec warriors and idyllic representations of pre-Columbian pyramids. Chicanas, however, were more intently focused on the complex relationship between indigeneity and the histories of colonialism and postcolonialism, as well as on the critical social role that women held in many indigenous societies on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. For instance, the work of Consuelo Jiménez Underwood and Celia Herrera Rodriguez—rigorously deconstructed and analyzed in this focused issue by Constance Cortez—addresses the often painful history of conquest, colonization, and devastation suffered by native populations in the United States and Mexico, both past and present. Herrera Rodriguez’s mesmerizing multimedia installations and Jiménez Underwood’s painstakingly beautiful fiber arts both eloquently reflect the artistic legacies of indigenous communities through form and content. The innovative way in which these artists articulate native people’s history and contemporary postcolonial struggles is heightened by their pioneering use of new and cutting-edge media.

Jiménez Underwood effectively politicizes the indigenous practice of weaving by using the medium to denounce ill-treatment of undocumented immigrants and the devastation of the environment in the name of colonization and progress. Herrera Rodríguez, for her part, utilizes a combination of preexisting materials and found objects to assemble installations that recount the effects of colonialism on native peoples. While indigenous communities and nations were clearly devastated by their contact with Europeans, Herrera Rodríguez and Jiménez Underwood—who are of Tepehuano and Huichol backgrounds, respectively—represent the resilient indigenous creativity that has survived and thrived amid the ravages of colonialism, racism, and marginalization.

Indigeneity in the work by Chicana artists, however, has not functioned as an aesthetic that necessarily erases the cross-culturalism and heterogeneity that does exist within the Chicana/o community, nor does it ignore the counterhegemonic alliances that occur among disenfranchised groups, in particular women. In this issue's essay by Laura E. Pérez, the writer eloquently praises the decolonizing and liberatory qualities expressed in the collaborative mural *Maestrapeace* (1994) located in San Francisco's Mission District. Created with the participation of Chicana artists Juana Alicia and Irene Pérez, *Maestrapeace* celebrates women's monumental contributions to global culture and includes the additional collaboration of women artists across cultural and social spheres. While Juana Alicia and Irene Pérez focused their energies on the representation of indigenous figures in the mural, namely Guatemalan peace activist Rigoberta Menchú and Aztec moon goddess Coyolxauhqui, their contributions are nevertheless contextualized within the overall multicultural theme of the mural's iconography. Resisting the homogenizing discourse of multiculturalism and the melting pot theory, *Maestrapeace* critically speaks to the real-life connections between women without erasing the specificity of their experiences.

The trail-blazing contributions made by Chicana artists to Chicana/o and U.S. contemporary art in the realms of sexuality, coloniality, and heterogeneity exhibit but a few of the innovations that characterize their work. The history of Chicana artistic production is marked by a series of interventions into established discourses as well as unique, creative contributions to the field of cultural production. The scholarship on Chicana art has, therefore, necessarily required an interdisciplinary and multifaceted methodological approach to visual culture. This focused issue evolved from my desire to bring together scholarship that had existed in a fragmented state as isolated articles in various journals and anthologies over the past thirty years. In spite of the seemingly disconnected relationship between these texts, I realized there were common threads running through them, thus comprising what I felt was a cohesive and autonomous body of work. Scholarship on Chicana art, which was unapologetically feminist in its approach, engaged the fields of art history, Chicana/o cultural studies, critical gender theory, and cultural analysis, among other schools of thought, yet remained critical and ambivalent about all of them. The writers shifted their focus according to the dynamic and changing foci of Chicana artists' aesthetic sensibilities, conditioning these scholars to become well versed in the various disciplines and intellectual traditions. This focused issue of *Chicana/Latina Studies* represents the first attempt to bring this scholarship together in one volume, thus highlighting the critical dexterity and intellectual genius of its proponents.

The issue also seeks to correct the overall paucity of scholarship on Chicana/o and Latina/o art. In 2003 Rita González published an eye-opening report titled *An Undocumented History* that recorded the inclusion in the available art historical scholarship and databases of "ninety-three mid-career and established [Latina/o] artists whose work has been widely exhibited in group and solo shows."<sup>5</sup> The majority of these artists were either completely overlooked

or mentioned very briefly and superficially in popular surveys of modern/contemporary art, such as Lisa Phillips's *The American Century: Art and Culture, 1950–2000* (1999), and in widely used research databases such as the Art Index Retrospective. Using primarily quantitative methods, González concluded that “Latino artists and institutions have yet to be adequately integrated into art historical scholarship.”<sup>6</sup> While González did not include gender as a parameter in her analysis, it was clear from her numbers that these scholarly oversights were even more egregious when it came to Chicana/Latina artists.

The contributors to this *Chicana/Latina Studies* issue on Chicana art are all too conscious of the various institutionalized exclusions and erasures that have deeply impeded the dissemination and serious examination of Chicana art as a legitimized contemporary art movement. For this reason, a sense of urgency and determination runs through the work of the contributors to this volume. The scholarship included in this focused issue not only challenges the voids and erasures that exist in the art historical canon, but also questions the very structures and intellectual approaches to modern and contemporary art traditionally taken up by art historians and critics. The professional detachment and personal disengagement with the subject of study in much of the art history literature has created a clearly delineated distinction between scholar and artist as well as between intellectual and artistic sensibilities. Excellence in scholarship is measured more by institutionally accepted research methodologies, meticulous bibliographic referencing, and rigorous footnoting than by creative thinking and innovative approaches to the analysis of art. Subjectivity, personal inflections, and creativity are all signs of weak and illegitimate intellectual work according to the art history standard. Rather than replicate the structures of traditional art history, this issue includes new forms of intellectual work that resist the artificial distinctions between the artistic and the intellectual, the personal and the scholarly, thus disrupting the subject/object differentiation that

is so dear to the discipline of art history. Laura E. Pérez's text in this issue, for instance, is a "Response" essay, a text that seeks to challenge traditional modes of academic writing by questioning the often contrived distinction between objective and subjective queries. "Responses" are reaction pieces that comment on current artistic practices, and that meld creative and personal accounts with intellectual analyses, thus allowing for a freer discussion of creative expression. My own collaborative piece with María Herrera-Sobek and Alma Lopez is a dialogic essay, a text that establishes a conversation not only with the work of the artist but with the artist herself and her ideas. Instead of privileging the voice of the scholar, as much art history scholarship does, we sought to highlight both the images and the words of Alma Lopez, foregrounding them as focal points of analysis and intellectual reflection.

The writers featured in this issue have made critical inroads in the fields of feminism, Chicana/o studies, literature, art history, and more; they can skillfully move within and between these fields with great intellectual agility. Individually and collectively, they have shaped the emerging face of Chicana art scholarship, making it a dynamic and fluid academic and activist movement that has put various disciplines in dialogue with one another. María Herrera-Sobek—a renowned senior scholar who has written extensively on literature, folklore, and Chicana feminist thought—has published the sole monograph on a Chicana artist to date, namely her edited volume titled *Santa Barraza, Artist of the Borderlands* (2001). Moreover, Herrera-Sobek has curated annual Chicana art exhibitions on the campus of the University of California, Santa Barbara, for ten years now, thus promoting and disseminating the work of Chicana artists at the local and national levels. Constance Cortez, a trained art historian, is well versed in Mesoamerican and contemporary Chicana/o art and keenly understands the transhistorical and discursive connection between the two, a connection that was interrupted and dislocated by colonialism's disruptive



influence. Her work on Chicana art is grounded on a profound understanding of these artists' investment in preconquest indigenous cultures. Likewise, Laura E. Pérez understands indigeneity as a driving force behind Chicana creative expressions while emphasizing the artists' expressions of indigenous spiritualities as forms of decolonizing creativity. Pérez's book *Chicana Art: The Politics of Spiritual and Aesthetic Altarities* (Duke University Press, 2007), released at the same time as this focused issue, is the most exhaustive monograph published to date dedicated solely to the work of Chicana artists; it promises to shape the nature of the emerging field of Chicana art and feminism. These three scholars represent some of the most preeminent and innovative proponents of this field and their contributions to this issue are the most current examples of their still-evolving decolonizing consciousness. *Ha sido un placer y honor trabajar con estas colegas, compañeras y comadres.*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Howard Kim, "Judithe Hernández and a Glimpse at the Chicana Artist," *Somos* 2, no. 7 (October-November 1979): 10.

<sup>2</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, "Chicana Artists: Exploring *Nepantla, el Lugar de la Frontera*," in *The Latino Studies Reader: Culture, Economy, and Society*, edited by Antonia Darder and Rodolfo D. Torres (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1998), 165.

<sup>4</sup> Alicia Gaspar de Alba, *Chicano Art Inside/Outside the Master's House: Cultural Politics and the CARA Exhibition* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 127.

<sup>5</sup> Rita González, *An Undocumented History: A Survey of Index Citations for Latino and Latina Artists* (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, 2003), 2. Report available on-line at <http://www.chicano.ucla.edu/> (accessed 5 March 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

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