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ART REVIEW

WILLIAM WILSON

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ART REVIEW

30 Works From the Grass Roots

BY WILLIAM WILSON
Times Staff Writer

A few times in the history of Western civilization great social revolutions produced an art of equal power. The Catholic counter-reformation fostered the glories of baroque style, the Mexican revolution spawned its monumental murals. In a slightly different context our life-style revolution of the 60s unleashed epidemic creativity;

Characteristically, none of these creative flowerings were planned. They happened with an organic spontaneity that seemed like an act of fate. In contrast, we now find social groups who aim for change unable to articulate their spirit in a coherent style. Groups of artists working loosely together have thus far been

unable to establish distinctive aesthetics for the women's movement, the black movement, or — getting to the case in point — the Chicano movement.

The Junior Arts Center in Barnsdall Park hosts an exhibition of about 30 paintings, sculpture, graphics and ceramics by 15 members of East L.A.'s Mechicano Art Center, a grass-roots community group.

It is difficult to discuss the value of such organizations without getting into a muddle. They tend to overlap aims that are educational, propagandistic, political, social and—sometimes last—aesthetic.

Presumably, some of these needs are fulfilled by the groups or they would not persist. If they make their members feel good about themselves, call attention to good causes or promote the art of some talented individual in the group, one must heartily cheer them on.

If, on the other hand, they become closed coteries promoting the illusion that they have created or discovered a distinctive art style, I have to say in all objectivity that they simply have not.

Mechicano artists do make work that suggests the consciousness of a tradition or heritage.

Charles Almaraz, unquestionably a top talent in the group, shows an abstract painting inspired by bright, chalky pastel col-

ors common to East L.A. buildings and graffiti-like forms common to East L.A. walls.

Jose Cervantes shows a flat-patterned picture containing the emblem of an applique rose that recalls the fetish style of barrio gang insignias.

The primitive and surreal qualities of the Mexican muralists echo dimly in the work by Guillermo Martinez and Ray Attilano.

Painted antiwar sculpture by Manuel Cruz depicts busts of MacArthur and Recken Backer (sic), their mouths smeared with blood (or possibly lipstick which seems unlikely). Cruz's work bears some relationship to Mexican folk carving.

Pointedly satirical pho-

tographs of a lifelike blonde mannikin and a Rolls-Royce grill by O. R. Castillo make sense interpreted as the anger of a barrio kid deprived of society's supposed luxuries.

At the same time we could see any of these works in an exhibition not labeled "Chicano" and fail to make any ethnic connection. Almaraz might remind us of Jasper Johns and lyric abstraction. Cervantes recalls early Billy Al Bengston. Cruz could be connected to Kienholz or early New England figurehead carving.

In a curious way the evident inability of specialized groups to produce a specialized art is a monument to the homogenizing tendencies of American democracy.