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Art
WILLIAM WILSON
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'Los Four' a Statement of Chicano Spirit

BY WILLIAM WILSON

Los Angeles Times

Some days one wishes to hide under the covers. You would not think that such a cheery occasion as the County Museum of Art's exhibition of "Los Four" could create such a headache.

It is perfectly decent four-man show by Carlos Almaraz, Roberto de la Rocha, Gilbert Lujan, and Frank Romero for exhibit at County Museum of Art. It is also something else, different but not quite separate, an exhibition of Chicano art.

Chicano art is what you would call a subcultural style. No individual invented this style, it grew naturally as an indigenous expression of thousands of Chicano in the Southwest. It is an urban folk style. As far as I know it took shape in the 1940s among adolescent Mexican-Americans. Hallmarks included heavily oiled ducktail haircuts and spit-shined shoes with three sets of soles for basic pompadour hairdo, brand hangers, peasant blouses, short black skirts and white shoes and socks for girls. Graphic expression included small tattoos and large wall graffiti announcing affiliations with gangs like Los Flats or with sweethearts. Automobiles called "low riders" appeared after World War II. The name derives, I think, from the fact that springs were shocked so car rested close to the ground. It also may connect to the fact that style required drivers to slump low in the seat looking imperturbably macho cool, as reflected in a woodcut block by Lujan.

Basic Elements Remain

Chicano style has altered somewhat but basic elements remain traditional. "Los Four" expresses many of its facts and all of its spirit through artists returned to grass-roots after professional college art training. They worked together on two mural-size paintings using spray cans to produce brilliant versions of graffiti walls in romantic, sugary colors. They cooperated on a huge pyramid "altar" laden with Chicano and Mexican popular culture memorabilia, lacquered dolls and masks, painted ceramic figures, books and who knew what all.

Artists were aided by family and friends making what Lujan calls a work of "cultural process art." Lujan seems most involved of "Los Four" in Chicano life-style art. His quarter of the exhibition is entitled "An Aztec either rescuing or sacrificing a lovely unconscious maiden in the jumble of objects."

"Los Four" is agreeable as an ensemble statement of a strong, sentimental love for popular Chicano culture. Individual works are closely hung and unlabeled. It requires a little study to sort out four personalities. In many ways the show discourages criticism, mainly demanding the audience participate in artist's loving feelings.

I did. Having grown up in the midst of all that, it was easy to get lost in waves of nostalgic "American Graffiti"-type affectation. What ever happened to Connie Aragon?

"Los Four" is unclear because the last decade saw alterations in accepted notions of what constitutes art. Aestheticians, including me, recognized that socially generated forms like Chicano art are artistically viable, just like folk music is viable.

Why not then do an exhibition of Chicano art, the real article, unfiltered by the interposition of four college-trained artists who, by the very act of leaving the barrio, ceased to be authentic folk artists? Probably because museum curators are still haunted by the specter of a disastrous exhibition at New York's Metropolitan called "Harlem on My Mind." It was intended as a socially responsive exhibition showing affection for the folk traditions of the black community. Black people detested it as campy and patronizing picturing them as quaint, clannish, urban peasants with amusingly naive, picturesque ways.

Speaking for a...m. nl

Some Mexican-Americans will respond similarly to "Los Four" despite the cachet of the artists. They cannot possibly speak for all Mexican-Americans. Almanza claims to speak for that segment of the community disenchanted with the American melting pot. He is frankly a politician. He presents the exhibition's single largest painting, a scene in Mexican muralist-cum-political-cartoonist-style showing a confrontation between noble members of the United Farm Workers and evil-looking figures labeled "Growers," "Telemarketers," and police.

Is the responsive museum now obliged to offer equal time to equally polemical social art by cops, truckers and farmers?

I hope not. Presumably the material is presented as art to be appreciated for its intrinsic merit. When we listen to a Jerry Lee Lewis record we don't dump on him as a Southern redneck satanic sexist because he is an artist of a high order who raises his subject matter to a realm of art that is sublimated fantasy. Freud allows us to entertain any thought or image in a fantasy even if Marx insists with equal vigor that every matchedcover is a political statement.

Politics is not art critic's business even if the artist himself is political. Art criticism's business is to speculate about how "It's one of the most beautiful things he's ever done" expresses whatever he chose to say. To a degree all..."
Statement of Chicano Spirit

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the "issues" surrounding "Los Four" are decoys distracting from the central issue of aesthetic clarity, expressiveness, justness and pointedness. (Consider context when Almaraz's big painting is hung at a UFW meeting the central issue is politics.)

Aesthetically all four artists strike me as competent, even gifted, men just beginning to find themselves. The core of that identity seems, for each, to be the mystique of Chicano folk art. So far they are only as good as indigenous examples at their very best.

All work with passion, tumbling out ideas seriously in need of further development.

The cooperative murals seem to be trying to graft graffiti to the tensions of Jackson Pollock. They fall between schools.

Frank Romero presents colorful reliquary boxes containing patterns in cut paper surrounding precious pictures of loved ones. They are sweet and vital but not quite together.

Roberto de la Rocha has a delicate, pyrotechnical, drawing style that flashes across about 75 examples combining elements of Picasso, psychotic art, adolescent style and Chicano emblemism. When he slows down he produces such intensely affecting poetry as that inscribed "A Chita Con Todo Amor."

Lujan's individual pictures include fascinating playing card-size drawings of magical people and paintings, vaguely reminiscent of Philip Evergood, that only seem to need to continue deepening without locking into their own stylizations.

Almaraz's work is the most dense and far ranging of the four. He has experimented with abstraction and strange figurative fantasy expressivism that seem to predigest his immersion in politics. Like the others he seems just discovering a direction for his obvious gifts and energies.

The County Museum of Art has, perhaps, discharged a felt social obligation with "Los Four." As a compromise between conflicting contemporary currents the exhibition is perhaps not a bad one considering all artistic compromise feels squishy.

I hope "Los Four" proves a launching place for the maturing of four gifted men, not just a flash in the general obscurity. That, of course, is partly up to them.

Meanwhile the museum ought not be surprised to receive complaints from many artists, equally talented as "Los Four," that they are disadvantaged by having no special circumstances to promote their talents.

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