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uniqueness, distinctiveness, characteristics, self
1 Character personality

"Art and Identity"

Smithsonian Lecture at El Paso, Texas

by Denise Lugo

I want to take this opportunity to thank the Smithsonian Center for Latino Initiatives, Dr. Refugio L. Rochin, Director and the National Museum of American Art for its curatorial work and organizational efforts in presenting us with this historical exhibition from its permanent Collection. This trailblazer exhibition further facilitates the eradication of aesthetic bias, usually associated with American Latino Art by many of our national main-stream museums.

This paper explores "Latinismo", a coin phrase I use to refer to American Latino Art from the late half of the 20th century to the present, therefore the distinction between art of Latin America and art created by Latino artists in the United States. This identification is important because it incorporates all of the Pan-Latino cultural identification such as Chicano, Mexican-American, Caribbean, Central and South American artists who live and work in the United States. This identification is a fit over large broad cultural areas but is important to make the idealization between American Art and that of Contemporary Latin American Art.

"Latinismo" is an American homegrown art infused with some of its Latin American legacy. In the Western United States, "Latinians" artistic contribution similarly parallels those of the European artists' aesthetic whose participation in New York helped to formulate the American "New York" School, starting in the Eastern United States in the 20th century.

Ellis Island now stands as an American symbol of the 20th century immigration whose Pearly Gates assured the "New Americans" that like earlier immigrants they would continue to shaped our country's cultural and aesthetic blanket. Moreover, San Diego and El Paso are today's new duo 21st century Ellis Islands in which Mexico and Latin America continue to provide sanctuary for the New Americans. Borrowing from Dr. Americo Paredes' cultural identification of the American Southwest and its relationship to Mexico, historically speaking, as time marches forward, so the American Southwest continues to be bathed by constant waves of fresh Mexican culture which is then identified as "Mexico de afuera". On the other hand, the culture held within Mexico proper is referred to as "Mexico de adentro". I propose that the artistic fusion of existing Southwest culture and Mexican culture provide another serious and important artistic area/movement of contemporary American Art History. And the artists who work in the American Southwest continue to draw on the pluralistic cultural spirit. Moreover, America - us, now views herself in the mirror, and sees that once again her face has changed. American now has a brown cast to her once pearly-white 20th century face. American now speaks Spanish as well as English. Unfortunately, its "Latinismo" aesthetic cannon are still misunderstood.

individualism
eccentricity, rareness, exclusivity
personality, distinctiveness, exclusivity

(differentiate) ~~de-termin~~
Contemporary

I propose that we view "American Art" as our aesthetic school of national identity with a historical and inclusive growing/development, one in which, through time, will incorporate all its artists. Following this spirit of national artistic identity, American Art History needs to move forwards a more inclusive embracing of American artists, in particular, artists who work outside of New York and the East Coast. Moreover, artists outside of this artistic milieu are often referred to as "outsiders" whose expression is "ethnic" or "regional", as Latino/Chicano art is often referred to. Utilizing a contextual look at American Art, we find that it does not just spring up out of nowhere, but that it has historical roots that have been enriched through its multi-cultural artists. We are all aware of the importance of the earlier contribution by the immigrant European artist who provided the formalist foundation of American Art. I pose that we in the United States are now going through another aesthetic Revolution, in which the "*Latinismo*" aesthetic contribution must be taken into account, just as the 1914 "Armory Exhibition" in New York revolutionized and modernized our American School. In a contextualized view of American Art history, "*Latinismo*" is but another aesthetic area, (please note that I do not refer to a "geographical area" within the United States). I want to specifically make note that when I refer to "*aesthetic*" I refer to the quality of art produced in the American Southwest as being of the same caliber as that created in the East Coast and throughout the United States. On a more general level, the art production within the Eastern United States is found to be greatly influenced by the layers of historical veneer of Contemporary American Art. On the other hand, Latino Art created in the American Southwest is more influenced by the constant "fresh flavor of Mexico and Latin American proper".

Due to time constraints, this essay is focused on the formal, contextual, and social mythology that provides some light on the common misunderstanding and that too often exclusion of "*Latinians*" from being interrogated within American Art.

This essay proposes several methods in which we can interpret/read the cultural "*identify*" of art within the following areas:

1. **Individual Identity:** The artist usually determines the cultural identify of his art since he is the maestro, and father/mother of the art. The degree of Latino culture is usually self determined and is also influenced by the city, urban and American geographical area (city, community, and state) where the artist lives. Moreover, does the artist want to be viewed as

Latino/Chicano, since many artists find that this "ethnic" cultural identification marginalizes his/hers artistic career. Many, in particular Chicano Artists, generally make a conscious effort to reinstate their Mexican cultural aesthetic roots, "*Latinismo*". On another level, many Latino artists strive to formally crossover and become mainstream, with only a fleeting alliance to Latin America be it Mexico, Puerto Rico, Peru, etc.

2. **Utilizing American Aesthetic Cannons on "*Latinismo*".** Unfortunately, many mainstream cultural institutions within the United States utilize American Art History formal criteria, (using American Art History artists' style) to evaluate "*Latinismo*". This is mixing apples and oranges. Generally speaking, "*Latinismo*" art fuses the various aesthetic language levels, as does much of the international. This aesthetic segregating of "*Latinismo*" art is often perceived as "*esoteric*" and "*impenetrable*" often viewed as "*low-brow*" folk art.

It must be noted that most of the American, Southwestern, Chicano/Mexican art created, is consciously tied to the mother country of Pre-Columbian Codex tradition. Because its formative formal birth was created during the turbulent 60s and 70s, Chicano art speaks within the figurative tradition. Even now, many murals being created within East Los Angeles still borrow the compositional and palette associated with the Mexican murals created at the turn of the last century.

I was once told by one of the most important Art Historians, later my Art History teacher that "art is art", that the aesthetic quality within the artwork would determine it as Fine Arts. Well, quite a few years later, after graduate school and teaching for about 15 years at the University level, I can tell you for sure that each art work is entrenched within its own level of aesthetic cannons. For example, through application of this aesthetic hypothesis we should be able to utilize the same aesthetic "quality of fine arts" within Zen Buddhism art work and draw on these art cannons to analyze the quality within late 1960s Chicano murals in East Los Angeles. Using logic, one could say that the inference was incorrect, therefore the answer is wrong.

Following on this "quality" hypothesis, we cannot utilize American Art History Cannons to judge much of the "*Latinismo*" art created within the American Southwest.

Moreover, most mainstream museums are continually reading "*Latinismo*", utilizing strict American Aesthetic cannons. Obviously, this reading does not provide understanding for the breath of this art. Coupled with lack of understanding that most of "*Latinismo*" in the American Southwest is still entrenched within the figurative tradition, this application of abstraction, minimal language provide a wrong inference. This is mixing apples and oranges.

3. **“Latinismo” art calls for a pluralist aesthetic assessment and consideration.** Museums professional must make use of a bilingual aesthetic reading beyond the seeming superficial formal elements such as palette, composition and beauty and provide the audience with an audible contextual and cultural voice within the art. Moreover mainstream bias, entrenched in Western European and Anglo American formal aesthetic analysis have provided an negative element that adversely keeps “Latinismo” art from climbing the commercial/economic ladder and crossing over into mainstream commercial galleries, museums permanent and private and institutional collections.

 4. **Latin American art within mainstream American collections** –More mainstream museums are investing and collecting contemporary and vintage Latin American for their Permanent Collections. Unfortunate most lack the professional curatorial interpretation needed for creation in-house exhibitions. Another problem is the lack of intellectual background and hence these institutions mix and match American Latin American Art with Latin American Art. Importantly the general public and most of the mainstream museum views Latin American maestros and especially Mexican masters, as crossed overs (examples-Diego Rivera, Frieda Kahlo) in many major American museums Collections.

 5. **“Latinismo” art is usually collected more by small to medium “cultural specific” museums** i.e.: Latino/Mexican museums within the United States. Many mainstream museums, galleries and collectors have problem culturally differentiation between “Latinismo” and Latin American art proper. For example even though generally speaking Chicano Art is seemly viewed as cultural and aesthetic tied to Mexico; many Mexicans in Mexico City view Contemporary Chicano Art as more Mexican than Contemporary Mexican Art. The Mexican rational behind their thinking is that generally Chicano Art seems to be tied to Nationalistic, traditional Mexican iconography and past figurativism expression usually associated with Mexican **Muralism** at the turn of the century and borrowed Colonial and **Pre-Columbian** symbolism. It must be kept in mind, that generally speaking even though “Latinismo” takes and borrows freely from its mother country it is American Art.
- On a National level, the historical Eastern Coast Art superiority bias, promotes the Puerto Rican and Cuban in New York and Florida “Latinismo” art. Furthermore the Western “Latinismo” artists in California, Texas, Arizona and New Mexico are by passed as “*regionalist expression*”.

6. Poles apart Mixing “apples and Oranges”, not knowing the difference between “*Latinismo*” and Contemporary Latin American Art. To a great extent much of the museum public as well as art professional does not know the difference between American “Latinismo” art and Latin American art. Even though “*Latinismo*” shares/takes are aesthetic connected its Latin American, Caribbean and South of the border cousins work and are influenced within it’s individual nationalistic spear and keenness. Historically the international recognition of Latin American Art started at the turn of the 20th Century. At this time the Mexican Muralist School burst forward with it’s social and expressionistic figurativism. Paralleling the Mexican Marxist Muralist movement, the Latin American Modernist movement was born in Brazil and Argentina in which South America was highly influenced by the European avant-guard and provided the “abstraction” and the formalist exercise of “*art for art sake*”. One general level and rule of thumb is that, the American East Coast “*Lainismo*” artists are influenced still taking and inclined to be moved more by the late South American Modernist tradition, where as the American Southwest is more motivated by the Mexican muralist tradition.

The Chicano Expression most recognized is Large Scale Murals and public art. Even today the most associated mode of Chicano expression lies within the Muralist tradition borrowed from Mexico. We have come along way since 1959’s famous U.C.L.A. murals was erected by Robert Chavez and Ramshes Noriega. By the late 1960’s the Chicano Movement moved forward and produced the largest concentration of murals in the world. At the height of the Vietnam War and Civil rights Movement, the Chicano School initiated Muralist throughout “East Los” and Los Angeles. It must be noted that most of the American South Western Chicano, Mexican art created in consciously tied to the mother country of Pre-Columbian Codex tradition. Because of it’s formative formal birth was created during the turbulent 60 and 70’s, Chicano art speaks within the figurative tradition and many murals still created within East Los Angeles still borrow the compositional and palette associated with the Mexican murals created at the turn of the last century. These brightly-figured social-political muralists took and recycled Mexican Pre-columbian iconography. These impersonation of the Mexican “Los Cuatro” mural compositions interrogated American Presidents John Kennedy, Lincoln and the Virgin of Guadalupe as well as ancient Mayan and Tenochitlan gods looking down at the Mexican immigrants and Chicano activist and public through out East Los. Interestingly, the Los Four’s “East Los School of painting” that soon became lyricism exercise brushwork; evolved form evolved from the graffiti “Placas” (gang signs)

Now the question arises if this is the case then, why is it that art created by Latino Artists who live in the United States is not American Art. My answer is purely based on my experience with artists who create this new branch of American Art usually created in the American Southwest. It must be noted that most of the American South Western Chicano, Mexican art created in consciously tied to the mother country of Pre-Columbian Codex tradition. Because of it's formative formal birth was created during the turbulent 60 and 70's, Chicano art speaks within the figurative tradition and many murals still created within East Los Angeles still borrow the compositional and palette associated with the Mexican murals created at the turn of the last century.

As example in Californian Art History, there continues to be a lack of inclusiveness of "Latinismo" but especially "Chicano" aesthetic expression. Therefore Californian Art history only touch on the Plain Air, Hard Edge, Beat, L A Funk School, even in Cegee Gallery Robert Chavez –yet the Ferus is viewed as Mainstream Now Mainstream Museum verse "Cultural Specific" museums and presentation of "Latinismo" and within Collections.

Can we utilize the "Quality within the work as the determine factor as fitting with the Fine Arts cannons"

Prep.

- Get copy of *Aqui*, catalogue Fisher Gallery, USC
- Get copy of 1985 Washington DC's Latino exhibition

- Go over CARA, catalogue
- Make apt with Alma at MOCA, interview of museum aesthetic policy with Latin America
- Add the current trend to further diversification of “*cultural specific*” museum’s mission
- Saturday research 20 years of “Latinismo” exhibition and define from Latin American
- Attempt to contact Dr. Susan Larsen Martin at Archives of American Art in relationship to the following:
 1. Various American Artists who’s early in the past century had their identity floundered between the mother country and USA. – Gorshy Arshield? example
 2. European Artist who between the wars worked in New York, yet European.
 3. What is American Art?
- 4, Is there a uniqueness formalistic or individual within American Art as differently from the rest of the Global community? Site examples!

Collections USA Questions?

- 1. Call Mexican Museum in San Francisco**
- 2. MOCA, Collection and exhibition policies**
- 3. Museo del Barrio, Collection and exhibition policies**
- 4. Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum, – Identity- Collection and exhibition policies**
- 5.**

My thesaurus

Identify

Recognize, name, discover, distinguish, associate, spot, differentiate, tell apart, tell between, discriminate, make a distinction, decide, imply, suggest, give the impression, insinuate, understand, survive, get along manage, cope scrape by, equate

Use

Make **use** of, exploit, make the most of, spend , employ, operate, develop, consume, use, drawn, take advantage of, avail yourself of exploit, take, make use of, occupy,

Odds and ends

Summon up, remember, smack of, be redolent of, think of, think back to, bear in mind, think, belief, deem, judge, regards as, commit to memory, consider, take into account, be concerned about, respect, take into account, bring to mind, imply, advocate, suggest, intent, offer, recommend, proposition, advise, put forward, call to mind, evoke, hint at, conjure up.

Propose

Plan, have in mind, aim, mean, insinuate, purport, claim, assert, allege, profess, contend, maintain, declare, meaning, implication, import, consequence, worth commendation, significance meaning, weigh, connotation, significance, meaning weight, magnitude, value worth, indention with, empathize, sympathize, have compassion, bring in, introduce, trade in, undertake, commerce, pioneer, launch, initiative, counsel, suggest, propose, urge, advice, put forward, submit, offer, tender offer, proffer, bid, hand out, extend

Hypnotize

Hypnotize, hypothesize, hypothesize, hypnotized, potentials suppose, academic, conjectural, speculative, abstract, conceptual, intangible theorize, conceive, posit assume, intangible