

## **Chicano/a Art and Activism in Austin,**

Texas Ricardo Romo, PhD

Mexic-Arte in Austin, Texas is one of the oldest and most prominent Latino museums in the United States. Co-founded by Chicano artists, Sam Coronado and Sylvia Orozco, and Mexican artist, Pio Pulido, Mexic-Arte started at the Arts Warehouse in 1984. During the late seventies and early eighties, downtown Austin's traditional retailers— department stores, jewelry stores, and restaurants— were relocating to the suburban shopping malls. Mexic-Arte, on the other hand, found downtown Austin ideal for showcasing Latino art and strategically made long-term lease commitments on a corner building on Congress Avenue five blocks from the state capitol building.

Mexic-Arte has thrived as a pioneer art institution with premier art exhibits and educational programs over the past three decades. In their recent exhibit opening on April 8th, 2022, Mexic-Arte demonstrated why it is esteemed by art lovers from all ethnic, gender, and racial groups. The exhibition, "Chicano/a Art: Movimiento y Más en Austen Tejas 1960s to 1980s" documents through art the evolution of a Latino community in its struggle for justice, peace, inclusion, and fairness. This essay features three of the artists in the exhibition whose work I have followed for several decades.

In the late 1960s young Latinos in many parts of the U.S. Southwest and in Austin, Texas, came together to be a part of a new political, cultural, and artistic movement of unprecedented scope and aspirations. They called themselves Chicanos. They strongly rejected long-standing assumptions about assimilation and blind compliance to what they considered a stale and

meaningless Mexican American dream. Chicanos framed their aspirations in new terms—demanding rather than asking— for justice, inclusion, fairness in work and wages, and better educational opportunities. Leaders involved with this new movement shouted “Brown Power,” and “Si Se Puede,” celebrating with slogans such as “Viva La Raza.” In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Chicanos found their voice in themes of struggle, community, and unity. They creatively expressed their new identity and their new persona in muralism, art, drama, music, poetry, and literature.

The most active of those responsible for new Chicano activism attended or had recently completed college. Their activism was fostered by the presence of Cesar Chavez’s United Farm Workers boycotts, high school walkouts, the anti-Vietnam War movement, and the rise of new politics fueled by the La Raza Unida Party.

Chicanos in Texas almost universally agreed that the educational pipeline from high school to college was broken. In the 1970s Mexican Americans represented only a small number of the students at UT Austin, a campus with an enrollment of more than 25,000. Former students of that era estimated that less than two percent of the UT students were of Mexican American descent. The number of Mexican American faculty was even smaller. However, the few Latino faculty there made a huge difference as they united to introduce new courses to address the Mexican American experience from the perspective of the humanities and the arts. UT Austin professors, led by educator George I. Sanchez and anthropologist Americo Paredes, were instrumental in the late sixties in introducing Mexican American courses to the UT curriculum and in establishing the UT Center for Mexican American Studies in 1970.

Santa Barraza arrived in Austin in January 1971 with aspirations of earning a bachelor of fine arts from the University of Texas. Over the next fourteen years, Barraza earned that Bachelor of Fine Arts degree and in addition, she earned a Master's Degree in Studio Art. Her commitment to art and Mexican American culture led her to establish several Chicano arts organizations and promote art exhibitions. By the 1980s Barraza emerged as an artistic leader and activist in the Mexican American community at the local, state, and national levels.

Barraza's early art education occurred in Kingsville, Texas, a small agricultural and ranching community in South Texas. Eighteen-year-old Barraza enrolled at Texas A&I in her hometown of Kingsville in 1969. She arrived during a year of unprecedented political protest across America's colleges. The unrest, largely associated with the anti-Vietnam war movement, resulted in mass demonstrations on college campuses and in urban public spaces.

Although Mexican American students at the Texas A&I campus were politicized by anti-war activists in the late 1960s, even greater political influences came from labor organizers involved in Cesar Chavez's farmworkers' movement in South Texas. The rise of "El Movimiento" [the Chicano political movement] associated with the Mexican American Youth Organization [MAYO] and later La Raza Unida Party had a significant impact in the agricultural heart of South Texas.

In the early 1970s, Chicano artists began forming cooperatives and artistic organizations. For a short time, Barraza belong to Los Quemados, a group that included several artists from Austin. Among them were Amado Pena, Luis Guerra, Jose Trevino, Carmen Lomas Garza, and Carolina Flores. After leaving Los Quemados, she co-founded, with Nora Gonzales-Dodson the

group Mujeres Artistas del Suroeste [MAS]. Barraza was also active with local Chicano artists and Juarez-Lincoln students who founded LUCHA at Juarez-Lincoln University in Austin. Juarez-Lincoln, an affiliate of the Antioch Graduate School of Education, opened its Austin campus in 1972.

The MAS artists joined Women and Their Work, Inc. in 1976 in an art festival, Encuentro Femenil, at the Austin campus of Juarez-Lincoln University. The Encuentro had the assistance of the Juarez-Lincoln cultural center and the League of United Chicano Artists [LUCHA].

Barraza joined with Gonzalez-Dodson, Nanci de Los Santos, Sylvia Orozco, Modesta Trevino, and others to incorporate MAS as a nonprofit in 1977. They located studio space in East Austin and worked with LUCHA from Juarez-Lincoln to sponsor exhibits. MAS's most ambitious programming occurred in 1979 with the Conferencia Plastica Chicana held in Austin at three sites, The University of Texas, Saint Edward's University, and LUCHA at Juarez-Lincoln University. Barraza served as the director of the conference and helped to secure funding from the National Endowment for the Arts and Texas Commission on the Arts for the event.

## II

When Raul Valdez arrived in Austin in 1975 only one Chicano mural could be found in the city. Over the next forty-five years, Valdez, one of the premier Chicano muralists of Texas, painted more than 50 murals in Austin. His murals are largely historical, many focused on his Mexican American roots. He paints with the belief that history and identity are important, commenting: "It's impossible to be proud when you don't know who you are."

In 1969, Valdez was drafted into the U.S. Army. After two years, he received an honorable discharge and returned to Texas to attend college. With financial support from the G.I. Bill, Valdez enrolled at Texas A&I University in Kingsville in the fall of 1971. The Kingsville campus had trained several leading Chicano artists in the late 1960s, including Carmen Lomas Garza, Amado Pena, Santa Barraza, and Cesar Martinez. With the exception of Martinez, all of these artists were already living in Austin when Valdez began his studies at Kingsville. Valdez enjoyed the art classes in Kingsville and did well. He graduated in 1975 and enrolled in the Masters' Art program at UT Austin.

When Valdez arrived in Austin, he first went to the community-based organization El Centro Chicano seeking like-minded people associated with the Chicano human rights movement. He then visited Juarez-Lincoln University, a recently established Mexican American institution with its new campus on East First Street [now Cesar Chavez Street]. The Latino university offered graduate classes in education and housed the National Farmworkers Information Clearinghouse which collected data on migrant farmworkers and migrant programs. After meeting several of the students and university administrators, Valdez agreed to paint a mural in the interior of the Juarez-Lincoln University building.

The following year Valdez completed a second mural painted on the northern outside wall of the Juarez-Lincoln campus which he named "Los Elementos." That large mural depicts a woman capturing a ray of sunlight in her hand. The title is a reference to the Mexican/Meso-American philosophy of respect for the elements of all matter: earth, air, fire, and water. The mural also includes two conjunto performers, a tribute to borderland musicians.

Valdez's murals at Juarez-Lincoln impressed the Chicano community of Austin leading to strong bonding with Chicano activists from East Austin and the Rainey Street neighborhood near Austin Town Lake. The bonding and growing appreciation of his murals were partly a result of his approach to involving community members in the decision-making process to identify images to be included in the murals. Working with volunteers, Valdez surveyed the community asking residents about their interests and preferences for the concepts and visual presentations for his proposed murals. He has followed this community survey process with all of his other murals, a process that he considers to be a trademark.

In 1977 Valdez asked to paint the performance stage of the Pan American Recreation Center in East Austin. Valdez recruited Chicano activists and members of the Brown Berets to survey the community about what they would like included in the mural. Many residents chose historical topics dealing with Mexican and Mexican American history and culture. The community survey demonstrated a community starving for representation. There was and still is a lack of positive imagery of Chicanos. Most previous mainstream depictions were stereotypical and often negative portrayals.

Over the past five decades, Valdez has dedicated his life to promoting human rights and protesting police brutality, wars of profits, and gentrification. He remains committed to the promotion and empowerment of what he terms Latin@/Chicano culture in Austin, in the state of Texas, and beyond.

Sam Coronado arrived in Austin in 1973 as a new graduate student in the art department at the University of Texas. His experience at UT Austin prepared him for his journey into the world of Chicano art. Living in Austin and studying at the university also enabled him to expand his commitment to civil rights issues leading to his co-founding of the UT Austin Chicano Art Students Association. Over the years 1980 to 2013, Coronado emerged as one of the leading printers of Chicano art in the nation.

Unhappy with the prospects of dead-end jobs with low pay and no future, Coronado dropped out of high school to join the Army. When he enlisted at age 18 in 1964, few recruits had ever heard of Vietnam. The Army assigned him to cook and manage mess halls in various U.S. bases where he fed hundreds of soldiers. While in the Army, Coronado understood that he would never gain entrance to military units where soldiers with art skills and art degrees worked because he lacked formal art training. After completing his military service, he left the Army with an honorable discharge and G.I. Bill college benefits. His desire to become an artist led him to enroll in art classes at the Dallas Community College and after finishing his degree there, he transferred to UT Austin to pursue a bachelor's degree in art.

Upon graduation from UT Austin in 1975, Coronado moved to Houston to teach art to Latino students at the private school, Association for the Advancement of Mexican Americans. The school lacked adequate resources so Coronado left and soon found a job as an illustrator in Houston. By the early 1980s, Coronado had engaged with the Austin art community, including meeting Latino artists connected with UT Austin's Latino Studies programs. Mexican American Studies had just celebrated its 10th year anniversary, and Latin American Studies and the Benson Latin American Collection had attained International recognition. Coronado shared a

studio in East Austin with several Latino artists and frequently met with Cynthia Perez of La Pena. In 1984 Coronado co-founded with Sylvia Orozco the Mexic-Arte Museum in downtown Austin.

In the early 1980s Austin had an active Chicano art scene. Amado Pena owned a prominent art gallery and studio on Sixth Street. Gil Cardenas started his Galeria Sin Fronteras on Seventh Street, and Raul Valdez was painting murals at various locations on the Eastside. Coronado's early artist network included Cesar Martinez from San Antonio, Liliana Wilson and Jose Trevino from Austin, and Luis Jimenez from Hondo, New Mexico.

During this time, the art department of the University of Texas at Austin began publishing the works of several established Chicano artists, including Luis Jimenez, Patsi Valdez, Carmen Lomas Garza, Amado Pena, and Cesar Martinez. Professor Ken Hale, a master printer, fondly recalled working with these artists as well as with the outstanding Nicaraguan artist, Armando Morales. Hale assisted Lomas Garza in the printing of one of her well-known images depicting a birthday party with children trying to break a colorful pinata in a South Texas backyard.

Coronado initiated the Serie Project with modest resources and high expectations. Most artists had limited opportunities to produce serigraph prints of their works. Works on paper enabled the artists to expand their sales market. With grants from the city of Austin, Coronado also created an Artist in Residence program housing artists when they came to engage in printmaking. Notable visitors included Malaquias Montoya from the San Francisco Bay area,



Vincent Valdez and Alex Rubio from San Antonio, and Marta Sanchez from Philadelphia.

Coronado also contributed to Chicano art with his own paintings and prints.

Coronado reached out to Latino artists from across the country, inviting them to spend residencies at his studio: many came from as far away as New York City and Sacramento, California. Each year for nearly 25 years, Coronado Studios printed the work of an average of a dozen different artists. Collectors bought out most of the Serie prints, but more importantly, museums and universities in the Southwest acquired many of the prints that Coronado Studios produced.