

home • artnews • news

The Year in Latinx Art: Icons Receive Their Due as Mid-Career and Emerging Artists Get Spotlights

BY **MAXIMILIANO DURÓN**

December 29, 2023 10:15am



Amalia Mesa-Bains, *Library of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (detail)*, 1994/2021.

MAXIMILIANO DURÓN/ARTNEWS

In 2016, the artist Teresita Fernandez organized a gathering for Latinx artists, writers, scholars, and curators at the Ford Foundation. At the time, few Latinx artists had solo shows at major US museums, and even fewer had work on view in these institutions’

permanent collection galleries. But if this year’s abundant offerings were any proof, a lot has changed since then.

The best place to begin is with Amalia Mesa-Bains, who gave a presentation at that 2016 Ford Foundation gathering about her nearly five decades’ worth of advocating for Latinx and Chicanx art. Mesa-Bains, best known for her altar installations, is a towering figure within the Chicanx and Latinx art communities. Her art, activism, and scholarship spoke to our lived experiences when mainstream institutions ignored them. Finally, this year she got a retrospective to honor her indefatigable achievements.

When I profiled Mesa-Bains for *ARTnews* in 2018, she joked about how she could never “have a retrospective because I would have to replicate [some] 50 objects seven times” in order to recreate some her most significant installations, as certain objects have traveled between them. Thankfully, that did not deter curators María Esther Fernández and Laura E. Pérez, who mounted her career-spanning show at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archives.



Amalia Mesa-Bains, *Circle of Ancestors*, 1995, installation view in “Archaeology of Memory,” 2023, at BAMPFA.
PHOTO WHIT FORRESTER

I was most struck by one of the artist’s lesser-known works, *Circle of Ancestors* (1995), in which seven chairs face each other. Each is dedicated to a different woman, including the Aztec goddess Coyolaxauhiqui, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Mesa-Bains’s grandmothers and

mother, artist Judith F. Baca, and Mesa-Bains herself at the age of her First Holy Communion. The work imagines the conversations and chisme that would transpire if these seven women gathered. I recalled the work at the show's opening, where Mesa-Bains was surrounded by artists and curators. In the presence of multiple generations, she said that an exhibition like this could only have come about because a young generation had continued the fight that artists like Baca and herself had taken up years ago.



Judith F. Baca's in-progress extensions of *The Great Wall of Los Angeles*, at LACMA.
MAXIMILIANO DURÓN/ARTNEWS

Baca's work, too, got a big showcase this year, at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, which she has transformed into an artist atelier. In 2021, the Mellon Foundation gave Baca and her arts nonprofit Social and Public Art Resource Center \$5 million to extend the imagery of her iconic *The Great Wall of Los Angeles* into the present. The mural's new stretches are now being fabricated. Two of the panels were exhibited earlier this year at Jeffrey Deitch's LA gallery, and until next June, at LACMA, Baca's team will continue to paint the others on-site.

It would have been unimaginable to find a show like Baca's at LACMA more than 50 years ago. As the story goes, around that time, a LACMA curator told artist Harry Gamboa Jr. that Chicanos don't make art, they join gangs; hence why the museum would not display art by them. Shortly afterward, Gamboa with two other members of the artist group ASCO, Willie Herón III and Gronk, spray-painted their name on LACMA's wall, which was then captured in a photograph by Gamboa. In that image, the group's fourth member, Patssi Valdez, stands above her cohort's tags, looking off into the distance.

That ASCO piece, *Spray Paint LACMA* (1972), would serve as a calling card for Chicana art, and would eventually move the museum to mount a solo show for another Chicano artist collective, Los Four, in 1974. It moved me to tears to realize that Chicana painting had moved inward at LACMA, from its exterior to its central galleries, where Baca's murals are now being fabricated.



Installation view of “Teddy Sandoval and the Butch Gardens School of Art,” 2023, at Vincent Price Art Museum.

MAXIMILIANO DURÓN/ARTNEWS

Deceased Chicana artists are still coming into focus, however, and one is Teddy Sandoval, whose work is now the subject of an impressive retrospective by curators C. Ondine Chavoya and David Evans Frantz at the Vincent Price Art Museum in Monterey Park, California. Sandoval's most memorable works are his painted images of faceless men, begun in the late 1970s; they took on new resonance at the height of the AIDS crisis in the '80s and early '90s. (Sandoval died in 1995, the year before antiretroviral therapy—“the cocktail,” as it is informally known—proved to be an effective treatment against HIV, effectively ending the virus's all-but-sure death sentence.)

But those works only scratch the surface of Sandoval's oeuvre, which also includes performance, collage, mail art, zines, and riotous ceramics and mixed-media works. (Among the most memorable works are his colorfully glazed “chili penises” and a pair of leather chaps, adorned with chilis and stereotyped imagery of Mexicans.) Yet rather than viewing Sandoval in isolation, the exhibition also suggests that he had a lot to do with many others who followed, hinted at by the inclusion of “and the Butch Gardens School of Art” in

its title. As a result, the show also includes fascinating works younger artists, like Troy Montes Michie, Ana Segovia, and Moises Salazar Taltenchi.



Joey Terrill, *Chicanos Invade New York Series*, 1981, installation view, at Museum of Modern Art.

MAXIMILIANO DURÓN/ARTNEWS

With the Sandoval exhibition, Chavoya and Frantz, like many other historians of Chicana art, are now seeking to show how Chicana artists have long formed networks. That was also their point of their 2017 show “Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano L.A.,” which opened as part of the Getty Foundation’s PST: LA/LA initiative and included artists such as Sandoval, Baca, Mundo Meza, Tosh Carrillo, Laura Aguilar, and Joey Terrill. The exhibition helped spur on more interest in late-career artists, the most notable being Terrill, known for his paintings that document the intersections of queer and Chicana life in Los Angeles and beyond.

This year, Terrill’s work is included in two major exhibitions, “Copy Machine Manifestos: Artists Who Make Zines” at the Brooklyn Museum and the 2023 Made in L.A. biennial at the Hammer Museum, and he had his second New York solo gallery show with Ortuzar Projects. But the most significant presentation of his work took place at New York’s Museum of Modern Art, which acquired and then put on display his 1981 triptych *Chicanos Invade New York Series*.

Showing three scenes featuring Terrill during his first stay in New York (making tortillas, learning of John Lennon’s death, and visiting the Guggenheim Museum), it’s now on view in a permanent collection gallery dedicated to 1980s New York, alongside the work of

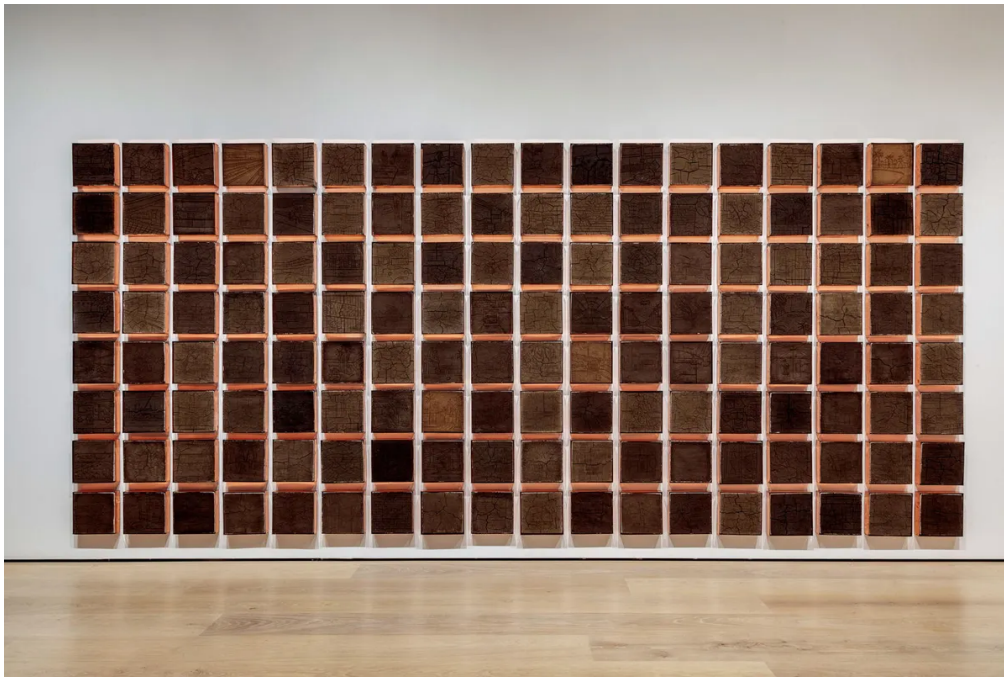
artists like Ashley Bickerton, Jeff Koons, Elizabeth Murray, Jenny Holzer, Martin Wong, and Haim Steinbach. In situating Terrill alongside the stars of the era, MoMA suggested he was just as important as them, a bold statement that did a lot to raise his profile, as did the museum's decision to promote its offerings on social media. So, too, will a forthcoming monograph on Terrill's work from the AIDS crisis, which will likely touch on his day job as director of global advocacy and partnerships for the AIDS Healthcare Foundation.



Leslie Martinez, *The Reconstitution of Rejected and Refracted Voids*, 2023, installation view, at MoMA PS1.

MAXIMILIANO DURÓN/ARTNEWS

MoMA has been slow to acknowledge the work of Chicanx and Latinx artists in a substantive way until recently. Terrill's appearance in the permanent collection galleries marks a step in the right direction. But, it has been even slower to acknowledge the scholars who created foundational texts, like Tomás Ybarra-Frausto and Mesa-Bains. An exceptional show by Leslie Martinez at MoMA's sister institution, MoMA PS1, does this well. It includes three commissioned works, including a seven-panel work that takes over the corner of the show's final gallery. The artist's no-waste practice, in which rags and other studio detritus are embedded into these eye-popping abstractions, calls to mind *rasquachismo*, an aesthetic approach by Chicano artists that scholar Ybarra-Frausto coined in 1989. It's the art of the make-do, being resourceful to create works that speak to the lived experiences of Chicanx communities. Works like Martinez's subvert expectations of what some might think Latinx art can or should be, and show how artists like Martinez have long been in conversation with canonical figures found in MoMA's permanent collection galleries.



Jackie Amézquita, *El suelo que nos alimenta*, 2023.
PHOTO JOSHUA WHITE

Meanwhile, a sea change is taking place for mid-career and emerging Latinx artists, who now seem to have more opportunities than they ever did before. Look no further than Made in L.A. Not only was a stalwart of the LA Latinx art community like Terrill included, but so were showcases for other major fixtures of the scene, like Guadalupe Rosales, whose room-size installation that features at its center a sculpture of the Mesoamerican deity Quetzalcoatl made from lowrider bicycle parts tied together with blue bandanas, cast in a purple and green neon light with a pyramid disco ball spinning in a corner. Presentations for younger artists like Ryan Preciado, Esteban Ramón Pérez, Vincent Enrique Hernandez, Marcel Alcalá, and Christopher Suarez were powerful as well.

But the standout of this cohort is Jackie Amézquita, who presented a grid of 144 square slabs each of which is made with the soil of a different neighborhood in Los Angeles. Onto these, she has inscribed scenes inspired by those neighborhoods, creating images that serve as tender documents of daily life in parts of the city that don't exist in the mainstream conception of "Los Angeles."



Installation view of “rafa esparza: Camino,” 2023, at Artists Space, New York.
MAXIMILIANO DURÓN/ARTNEWS

One of today’s most closely watched artists, rafa esparza, had two major showings this year: a three-person show (with Rosales and Mario Ayala) at SFMOMA and a solo show at Artists Space in New York. Showcasing a new evolution in the artist’s well-known practice, esparza has created several life-size portraits of his friends and family on adobe, a generational practice that was passed down to him from his father; these works, however, were installed on metal structures and over an adobe brick road that crumpled during the exhibition’s run. It’s a reminder that those we hold close—our family, our friends, our communities, our neighborhoods—can gradually fade away if we don’t take the care to maintain them and their memories.

Memory is also the subject of a powerful exhibition by another LA-based artist, Eddie Rodolfo Aparicio, at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. Aparicio’s work portrays the aftereffects of the Salvadoran civil war, as seen from the artist’s perspective as a second-generation child born in the US. The exhibition’s centerpiece is large-scale floor installation made of amber poured over objects like ceramic bones, volcanic stones, historical documents from the civil war, and clothes found in MacArthur Park. The work’s shape matches that of El Playon, the site of a volcanic explosion just outside San Salvador that once served as a dumping ground for the bodies of the disappeared during the civil war.



Eddie Rodolfo Aparicio, *601ft² para El Playon / 601 sq. ft. for El Playon* (detail), 2023, installation view.
MAXIMILIANO DURÓN/ARTNEWS

Aparicio's exhibition found its twin in a survey at the International Center of Photography in New York for photographer Muriel Hasbun, who herself left El Salvador at 18, in 1979, the year before the civil war officially broke out. Her experiments in printing multiple images over each other, including on linens that once belonged to her ancestors, shows how memories past can forcefully collide with the present, their presences serving as haunting reminders of those we have lost.

One could go on about all the artists who have received their due this year. Conceptual artist Celia Álvarez Muñoz had first career retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego. Pepón Osorio's installations were brought together at New York's New Museum. A Brooklyn Museum survey explored how María Magdalena Campos-Pons's practice examines the aftereffects of slavery on Cuba, the US, and the world writ large. Yolanda González's survey at the Museum of Latin American Art in Long Beach, California, provided new insights into the work of a beloved artist, and there were three exhibitions for Gala Porras-Kim, at MUAC in Mexico City, Fowler Museum at UCLA, and the Leeum Museum of Art in Seoul.

Carolina Caycedo's sublime *atarraya* sculptures currently fill MoMA's second-floor atrium. Yvette Mayorga's maximalist paintings and installations were the subject of two solo institutional showings on view this year, at Crystal Bridges's The Momentary and the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Connecticut. Accompanying a tightly curated survey of his recent work of lush studio portraits, Ken Gonzales-Day organized an exhibition at

Scripps College's Ruth Chandler Williamson Gallery that paired selections from his collection of tintypes with works by contemporary queer artists.



Ruben Ochoa at Frieze Los Angeles 2023.
MAXIMILIANO DURÓN/ARTNEWS

Ester Hernandez, Diana Solís, Diógenes Ballester, and Mario Ybarra Jr. were among the artists who received this year's Latinx Artist Fellowship, which comes with \$50,000. Rosemary Meza-DesPlas, a 2022 winner of the Latinx Artist Fellowship, had a solo show at Bushwick's Amos Eno Gallery, showcasing documentation of her riotous performance-cum-beauty pageant, Miss Nalgas USA. **At the Armory Show, Ruiz-Healy Art had on view a powerful installation by Consuelo Jimenez Underwood, who is woefully in need of a retrospective.** Ruben Ochoa's mobile art gallery, *CLASS: C*, made its return, after nearly two decades of retirement, as part of an outdoor project at Frieze Los Angeles. Nao Bustamante opened an artist-run gallery at her grave plot at the Hollywood Forever cemetery. Ortuzar Projects mounted an exhibition dedicated to Carlos Almaraz and Elsa Flores, looking at how the artist-couple influenced each other's works.

Galleries like Ortuzar Projects, **Ruiz-Healy**, Embajada (in San Juan), Commonwealth and Council, and Charlies James (both in Los Angeles), as well as the now five-year-old Latinx Project at NYU, have nurtured these artists' careers. They remain exceptions in a market that has largely ignored Latinx artists. But a couple signs of a shift taking place in the upper echelons of the market: Firelei Báez got representation with Hauser & Wirth, one of the world's biggest galleries, and Christie's mounted a selling exhibition dedicated to contemporary Latinx artists, with works by Aliza Nisenbaum, Freddy Rodríguez, Juan Sánchez, Gisela Colón, Yvette Mayorga, and more offered.

The support of these artists through solo shows can only go so far; they need major thematic exhibitions that draw out the connections of their works and place them in historical contexts that speak to our contemporary moment.

Three group shows come to mind in this regard. The first is a Lisson Gallery's summer group show in one of its New York spaces. Organized by César García-Alvarez, "Distribuidx" featured artists like rafa esparza, ektor garcia, Felipe Baeza, Sarah Zapata, Carlos Reyes, and Marcel Pardo Ariza, and looked at how these artists employ conceptual strategies to dismantle structures that seek to confine their art. "Ordinary People" at the Long Beach Museum of Art, focuses on how activism by artists can result in significant change. Among those spotlighted are Tlaloc Studios, AMBOS Project, and Slanguage Studio, each of which prove that artists can help us fight for a better, more just world.



Justin Favela, *Gypsy Rose Piñata (II)*, 2022, installation view.
MAXIMILIANO DURÓN/ARTNEWS

The year's biggest thematic show came in the form of "Xican-a.o.x. Body," at the Cheech Marin Center for Chicano Art & Culture of the Riverside Art Museum. Bringing together around 125 works, the exhibition looks at how some 70 artists, from multiple generations, have foregrounded their Brown bodies as sites of political agency. Highlights include documentation of Cyclona's groundbreaking 1971 performance *Chicano Wedding*, an experimental video by Patssi Valdez, Justin Favela's large-scale *Gypsy Rose Piñata* sculpture, and photographs by Fabian Guerrero, William Camargo, James Luna, and Laura Aguilar.

It is wide-ranging surveys like this that create a lineage for Latinx artists. We are witnessing the building of a new canon for these artists on their terms, one that demonstrates just how important Latinx artists are, and have been, to our own understanding of art history.



ARTnews is a part of Penske Media Corporation. © 2024 Art Media, LLC. All Rights Reserved.
Powered by WordPress.com VIP