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The Year in Latinx Art, From Overdue Retrospectives to Promising New Museums

BY **MAXIMILIANO DURÓN**

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Artist Guadalupe Rosales rides rafa esparza as part of his *Corpo RanfLA: Terra Cruiser* (2022), at Art Basel Miami Beach. MAXIMILIANO DURÓN/ARTNEWS

Part of the wild ride of 2022 has been witnessing the continued mainstream exposure—no matter how gradual—for Latinx art. With that has come recognition for, and acknowledgement of, just how consequential Latinx artists of multiple generations have been and continue to be to American art and to contemporary art history in general.

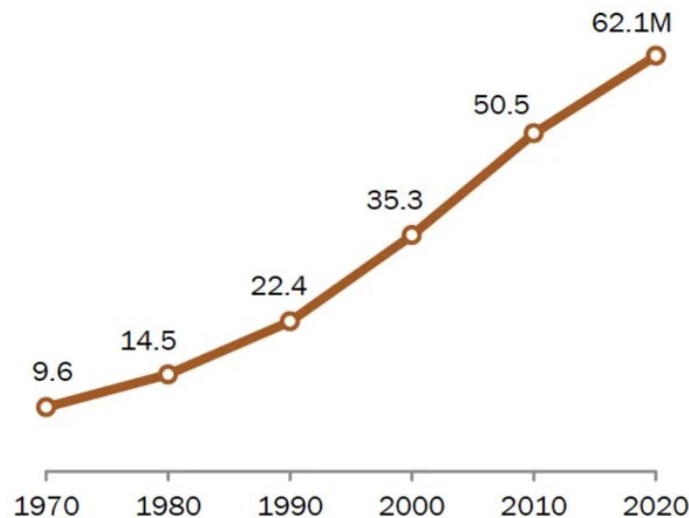
A year ago, I observed that Latinx art had gotten more visibility than ever before. The momentum continued in 2022. Of course, much work still remains to be done, as Latinx art is still woefully under-represented in museums, biennials, and galleries compared to the overall Latinx population in this country.

Below, a look back at the year in Latinx art.

By the Numbers?

U.S. Hispanic population reached more than 62 million in 2020

In millions



Note: Population totals are as of April 1 each year. Hispanics are of any race.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of 1970-1980 estimates based on decennial censuses (see 2008 report "U.S. Population Projections: 2005-2050"), 1990-2020 PL94-171 census data.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Photo : Via Pew Research Center

We continue to live in an extremely white and male art world, as evinced by the recent ***Burns Halperin Report*** (<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/burns-halperin-report>), published earlier this month by *Artnet News*. Its authors, Chrlotte Burns and Julia Halperin, state in their introduction, "The art world likes to think of itself as a bastion of progressive values. But data shows that its perception of progress far outpaces reality." According to the report, despite how museums position themselves as working to create equity in their permanent collections, few seem to have been successful in doing so.

Burns and Halperin looked at the acquisition practices of 31 U.S. art museums, with a focus on women-identifying artists, Black American artists, and Black American women

artists. Notably, in a troubling trend indicative of the art world in general, Latinx and Afro-Latinx artists were not included in the data set, nor were Asian or Indigenous artists, or women of color more generally. Perhaps the data for these acquisitions is still so marginal that they were inconsequential. The report doesn't say, so we don't know.

One interesting tidbit that was included in an article accompanying the report came courtesy of Jessica Morgan, the director of the New York–based Dia Art Foundation. Morgan describes how, since she took the helm at Dia eight years ago, the organization has worked hard to diversity its holdings; when Morgan started at Dia, the foundation owned work by just one artist of color, On Kawara. Black American artists represent 73 percent of acquisitions by Dia in the past two years, up from an abysmal 1.4 percent between 2008 and 2020.

What was shocking was Morgan's acknowledgement of Dia's oversight when it comes to Latinx art: "Dia has a long way to go. Given that New York State's 2020 census shows that almost 20 percent of the population is Latino, Latinx, or Latin American this is an area of immense omission in our collection that we plan to address in coming years." This is likely the first such admission of its kind by the director of a mainstream white art institution based in New York. It leaves me tentatively optimistic about what other museum leaders like Morgan will do going forward to expand the canon and combat decades of erasure of Latinx artists.

National Museum of the American Latino



Photo : Photo Tony Powell

Another project I am tentatively optimistic about is the Smithsonian's forthcoming National Museum of the American Latino, which was approved by Congress at the end of 2020. This year the museum hired its founding director, Jorge Zamanillo, opened its first standalone exhibition, and the Smithsonian identified a potential site for the museum on the National Mall. NMAL (as it is now being abbreviated) is becoming a reality after almost 30 years in the making, with its roots in the harrowing 1994 report "Willful Neglect: The Smithsonian Institution and U.S. Latinos," which showed through data just how neglected Latinx artists and Latinx stories had been across the Smithsonian. Change often moves that slowly.

The creation of the Smithsonian Latino Center in 1997 has over the years helped to ramp up Latinx representation across the Smithsonian's museums and archives, in particular under the leadership of Eduardo Díaz. NMAL is now the successor to the Smithsonian Latino Center, which was the driving force behind the museum's inaugural exhibition, "¡Presente! A Latino History of the United States," in the Molina Family Gallery at the National Museum of American History.

This show is modestly size, and only acts as a preview for the museum, which will likely take a decade or longer to open. Even still, "¡Presente!" is exemplary. There is real power in seeing this history told, since it's a lineage that's often passed down from generation to generation and excluded from history books. Seeing it, you may catch yourself crying in a museum, as I did when I heard someone share, in a video on view here, how they'd never had real conversation with their grandmother because they often don't feel comfortable when speaking in Spanish, or when I witnessed the history of Mexican repatriation being told. It's a history that I know personally—my grandmother, Santos, was deported when she was around 3 years old, despite being an American citizen born to Mexican parents—but that many do not.

Of course, there are still gaps to be filled. The Latinx community is a racially diverse one, and NMAL cannot neglect telling the stories of Black Latinxs and the racism and colorism they face within our own community. There are several scholars currently

doing this work, like Lorgia García Peña, Miguel A. Valerio, Takkara K. Brunson, and Carlos Ulises Decena. National gaps exist too: the histories of those whose families come from El Salvador, Guatemala, Brazil, and Haiti must be told. Missing, too, are displays to how Latinx people have agitated against racist education systems, like in the 1947 Supreme Court case *Mendez v. Westminster* or the Chicano Blowouts, in which high school students walked out of their classrooms in protest.

There are many stories to tell; some may be conflicting or uncomfortable. It should be the goal of a museum of this scale to narrate them all.

In Riverside



Photo : Maximiliano Durón/ARTnews

In Christina Fernandez's *María's Great Expedition* (1995–96), one of the first things

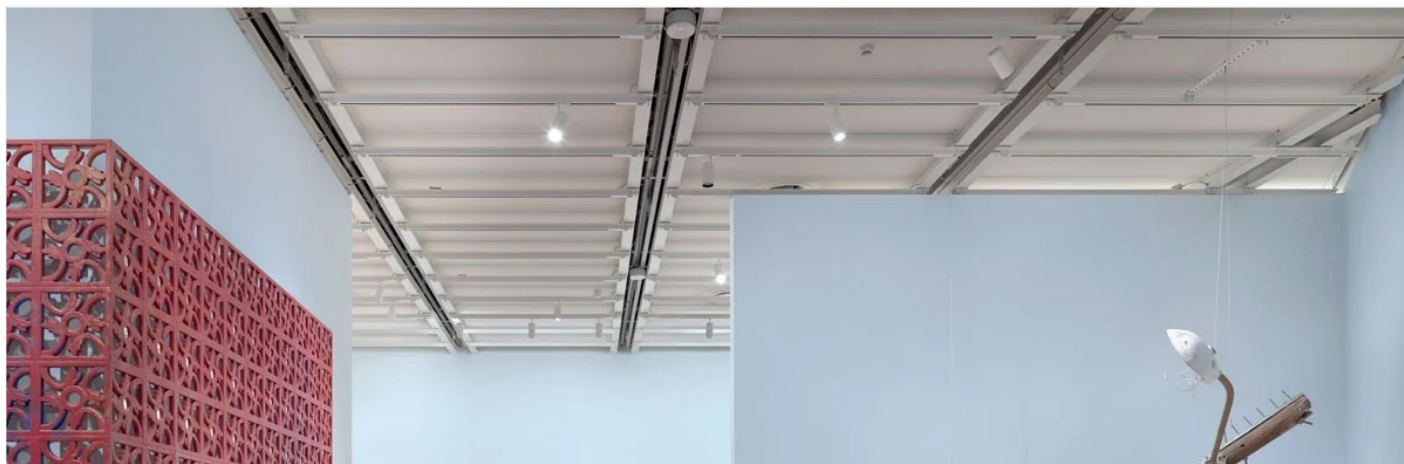
you encounter when entering her current survey at UCR Arts Block's California Museum of Photography in Riverside, the artist reenacts her grandmother's journey from Mexico to the U.S. between 1910 and 1952, the year of her death. In six striking images, Fernandez poses as her grandmother, María, staring straight at the camera. In one she is surrounded by laundry; years later, she is hunched over, cooking at an old-school stove. Each image is accompanied by a text that details the life María lived.

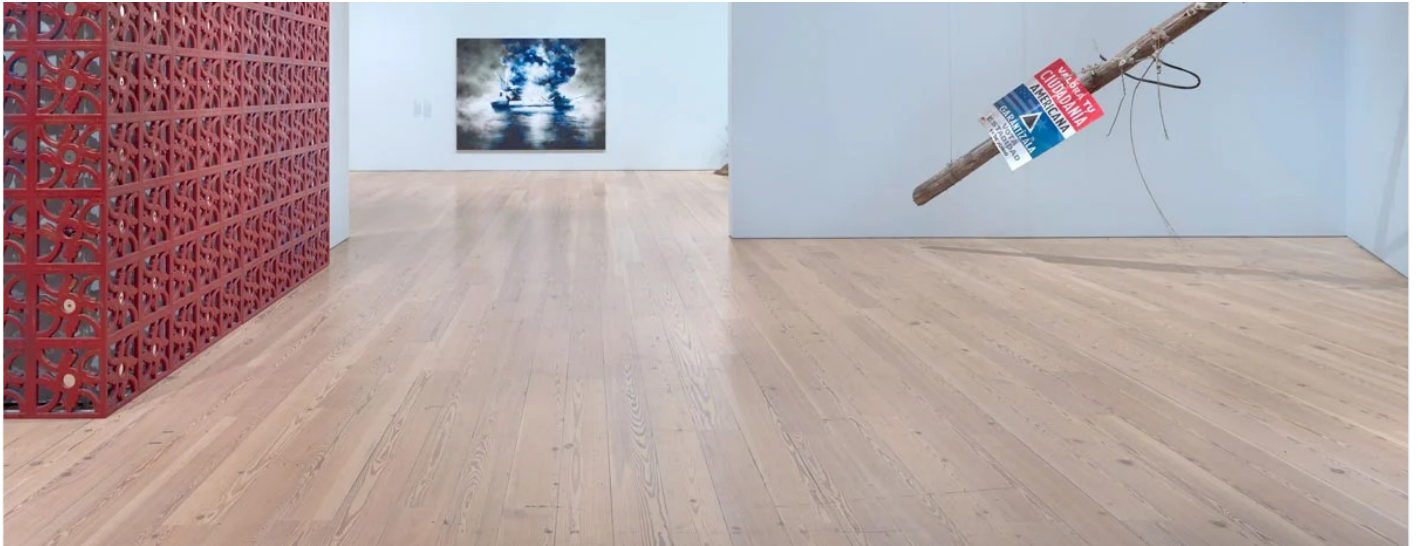
Fernandez's exhibition is down the street from the Cheech, the center dedicated to Chicana art that is part of the Riverside Art Museum. The Cheech opened in June with an exhibition of works from the initial gift of *ARTnews* Top 200 Collector Cheech Marin that established the namesake arts space, as well as curator Selene Preciado's well-researched retrospective of the de la Torre Brothers, whom Marin has long supported.

The ground-floor show, "Cheech Collects," is a watershed, but perhaps not for the reasons you might think. This is, of course, the works amassed by one collector with a specific taste and aesthetic—someone who favors museum-sized painting. That leaves many holes to be filled, particularly when it comes to photography, performance, video, and conceptual works, although you can expect the museum to address these gaps going forward.

Still, it is powerful enough seeing all of these works together in one space, in a permanent home. Here, Chicana artists have been given prime real estate to shine—which is still exceptionally rare at mainstream museums. Works by Carlos Almaraz, Judith Hernández, Patssi Valdez, César A. Martínez, Frank Romero, Vincent Valdez, Yolanda Gonzalez, and Margaret García dazzle in their brilliance.

At the Whitney and Beyond





Installation view of "no existe un mundo poshuracán: Puerto Rican Art In The Wake Of Hurrícane Maria," 2022, at the Whitney Museum, New York, showing work, from left, by Edra Soto, Gamaliel Rodríguez, and Gabriella Torres-Ferrer.

Photo : Photo Ron Amstutz

Several institutional shows deserve praise for their groundbreaking curatorial concepts. One of them was “no existe un mundo poshuracán: Puerto Rican Art in the Wake of Hurricane Maria” at the Whitney Museum. Organized by Marcela Guerrero, the museum’s associate curator focusing on Latinx art, the show looks at various artistic responses to Hurricane Maria, on the fifth anniversary of the devastating weather system that battered Puerto Rico in September 2017.

Maria’s direct impact on the exhibition is front and center, as evinced by a powerful 105-minute video by Sofía Córdova, in which family and friends discuss their experiences during and after Maria, and Gabriella N. Báez’s heartbreaking installation *Ojalá nos encontremos en el mar*, in which the artist processes her father’s death by suicide just before the one-year anniversary of Maria through images of him that she has stitched together with red thread. But the show also tackles several other issues that are happening concurrently in Puerto Rico, like the austerity measures imposed by the Promesa Act, government corruption, and rampant real estate speculation by white U.S. investors.

The latter issue, as well as thinking about tourism as a neo-colonial enterprise in the Caribbean, was recently taken up in another exhibition, “Tropical Is Political: Caribbean Art Under the Visitor Economy Regime,” at the Americas Society in New York. Curated by Marina Reyes Franco, who contributed a related essay to the “no existe un mundo poshuracán” catalogue, the exhibition ponders how one person’s leisure is another’s exploitation, with pieces about the topic by Joiri Minaya, Carolina Caycedo, Ricardo Cabret, and Sofía Gallisá Muriente.

Similarly, there was curator Carla Acevedo-Yates's "Forecast Form: Art in the Caribbean Diaspora, 1990s–Today," at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, which aims to "envision a new approach to contemporary art in the Caribbean diaspora, foregrounding forms that reveal new modes of thinking about identity and place." In April, the National Portrait Gallery will continue exploring that topic with "1898: U.S. Imperial Visions and Revisions," which is already among my most anticipated shows for 2023. Curated by Taína Caragol and Kate Clarke Lemay, it will mark the 125th anniversary of when the U.S. became a colonial empire at the end of the Spanish-American-Cuban-Philippine War. May these four exhibitions spark many more like them.

El Museo del Barrio



Sculptures by Joel Gaitan in "DOMESTICANX," 2022, at El Museo del Barrio, New York.

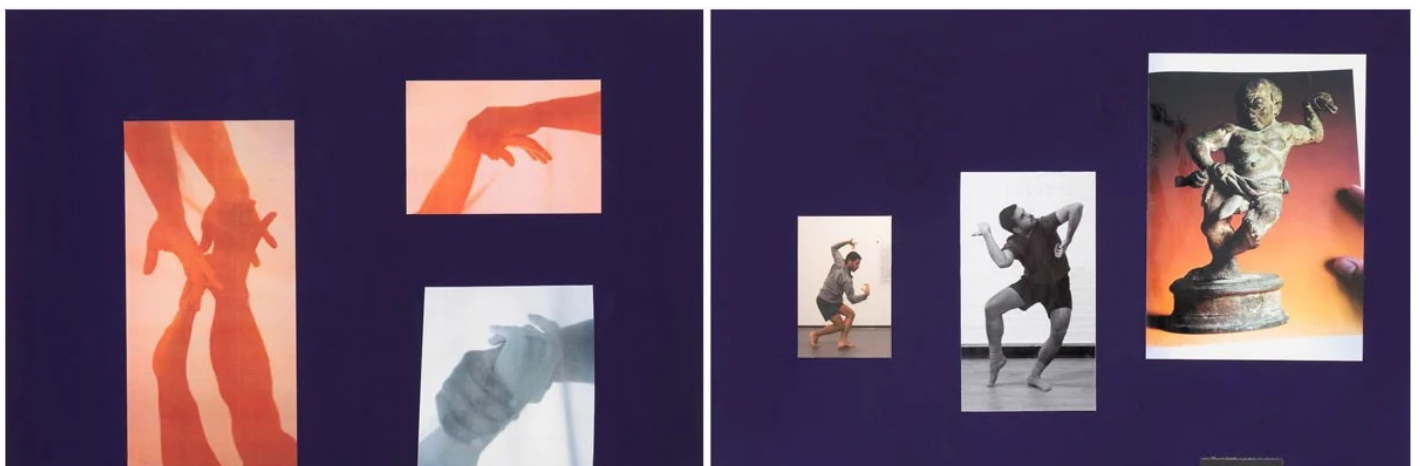
Photo : Maximiliano Durón/ARTnews

In 2019, El Museo del Barrio faced months of protests over its future, with activists concerned that the museum was turning its back on U.S.-based Latinx artists in favor of Latin American artists. The museum began addressing their demands in 2020, and continued doing so this year with an informative retrospective dedicated to the museum's founder, artist Raphael Montañez Ortiz. The exhibition was his first large-scale one since the '80s.

El Museo also presented a stellar group exhibition this fall, "DOMESTICANX," which uses as a starting point the concept of *domesticana*, theorized by Chicana artist and scholar Amalia Mesa-Bains as a feminist response to Tomás Ybarra-Frausto's *rasquachismo*, the make-do sensibility he had observed in Chicano art. Curator Susanna V. Temkin exploded *domesticana*, giving it new life within the contemporary context. Taking into account how queer and gender nonconforming Latinx artists, of any national background, should also be considered, the exhibition is an intergenerational dialogue that creates a new lineage between shared affinities.

Mesa-Bains, who will be the subject of a retrospective opening in February at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive in California, is represented in the exhibition with her *Museum of Fatima* altar that debuted at El Museo nearly 30 years ago. Other strong showings come via two young artists, Mislá (b. 1989) and Joel Gaitan (b. 1995), as well as Mesa-Bains's contemporary Nitza Tufiño (b. 1949). This is exactly the kind of exhibition that El Museo should be doing: one that looks at historical Latinx art and how it continues to impact art-making today.

In the Galleries





Two photo-collages by Camilo Godoy, from his "Choreographic Studies" series.

Photo : Courtesy the artist and Proxyco Gallery, New York

On the market front, several galleries gave important shows to Latinx artists, in the process establishing a market for their work and advocating for museums to acquire it. A perfect example of this came via L.A.-based Charlie James Gallery, which facilitated the Whitney's acquisition of Patrick Martinez's 10-part *Neon Suite for the Whitney Museum* (2021), which was just installed above the institution's ticketing desk. James also gave **emerging artist Danie Cansino** (<https://www.artnews.com/art-news/artists/danie-cansino-profile-1234644302/>) her first gallery solo show during the prime Frieze L.A. slot; the mega-collecting Rubells bought out the exhibition. It was one of the strongest presentations by a young artist I've seen in a while.

Several galleries who have been working to build markets for Latinx artists were also included in the Armory Show's two curated sections, which this year highlighted the work of Latinx artists. These include Calderón, which mounted a stunning group exhibition this spring of six Latina artists working in abstraction; Proxyco, which hosted a fascinating solo show by Camilo Godoy consisting of photographic collages and ethereal photographs of bodies in motion; Hutchinson Modern, which held an important exhibition for the ever-great Juan Sánchez this fall; and Ruiz-Healy Art, which is currently hosting a fabulous exhibition for the still underrecognized textile artist Consuelo Jimenez Underwood, who was the subject of a major monograph published by Duke University Press this year. It's worth noting that all four of these New York galleries are woman-led.

In November, Mexico City's revered Kurimanzutto gallery expanded its New York operations with a gorgeous new space in Chelsea, opening with a stellar group show that looked at the gallery's history of helping Mexican artists realize ambitious projects, often outside the gallery's wall, across the world. I'm sure they'll bring that spirit to this expanded New York space; my hope, however, is that they'll make to connect with the city's Latinx artists on such projects to create something anew, as they have done over

their almost 25 years of existence.

Judy Baca's Year



An enlarged preparatory drawing for the "Farewell to Rosie Riveter" scene in Baca's *The Great Wall of Los Angeles*.

Photo : Maximiliano Durón/ARTnews

Since *ARTnews* (<https://www.artnews.com/artnews/news/concrete-history-chicana-muralist-judith-f-baca-goes-from-the-great-wall-to-the-museum-wall-8143/>) profiled (<https://www.artnews.com/artnews/news/concrete-history-chicana-muralist-judith-f-baca-goes-from-the-great-wall-to-the-museum-wall-8143/>) Judith F. Baca in 2017, the Chicana muralist has had a stellar run of exhibitions. In 2022, her impressive career

retrospective, curated by Alessandra Moctezuma and Gabriela Urtiaga, finished its run at the Museum of Latin American Art in Long Beach. The show brought together numerous bodies of work by the artist, from her famed *Las Tres Marias* (1976) installation and her photographic suite documenting her 1976 performance *Vanity Table* at the Woman's Building to various preparatory drawings for the dozens of murals completed over her six-decade career. The tour de force of the exhibition, however, was the to-scale projection of *The Great Wall of Los Angeles*, Baca's monumental collaborative mural project in the San Fernando Valley that provides an alternative history from queer, feminist, and BIPOC perspectives. It was positively overwhelming to see the *Great Wall* in such an intimate way. She is currently at work extending the *Great Wall's* narrative into the '60s to today, courtesy of a \$5 million grant from the Mellon Foundation.

In May, Baca opened a small show at the Getty Museum focused on *Hitting the Wall* (1984), one of 10 freeway murals for that year's Summer Olympics in L.A. The piece commemorated the first time the women's marathon was held as an Olympic event; it was whitewashed in 2019 by Caltrans because it had been graffitied. Baca was not contacted beforehand, and after a controversy lasting almost a year, Baca was able to restore the mural, with Caltrans coughing up the funds to do so. The Getty exhibition was curated by Julian Brooks, the museum's senior curator of drawings and a Renaissance expert; he had paired Baca's show with one about murals from Renaissance Rome, many of which are now gone—a poignant reminder of the fragility of public art, a condition that dates back centuries.

Baca capped the year this fall with the monumental presentation of her ambitious *World Wall* project at the Museum of Contemporary Art's Geffen Contemporary space. Baca wanted to take what she had learned while working on *The Great Wall* and share it with the world. For the project she would create four portable murals, and then invited artists in different parts of the world to contribute their own portable mural. The *World Wall* currently includes nine panels, with contributions from Canadian, Mexican, Finnish, and Russian artists, as well as a collaboration between a Palestinian artist, an Israeli Jewish artist, and an Israeli Arab artist. The aim of this work was to visualize peace.

During a walkthrough, Baca admitted that initially she and her team struggled with how to depict peace. In order to achieve peace, they realized, we need balance. That led to the creation of the visually striking center panel *Balance*, in which two hands cusp a child's head over a world restored to natural state of vegetation and clean water. It's a hopeful image that is about peace not just in the geopolitical sense but that directly addresses our current climate crisis. The *World Wall* feels at home in this long gallery at MOCA, which should act now to ensure that this impressive work has a permanent home where people from all over the world contemplate how to create a new, more just world in which we can live in harmony with nature.

rafa and Raquel



The author (center) with Raquel Gutiérrez (left) and Lou Cornum (right) at a talk the latter two did for *Brown Neon*.

Photo : Courtesy the author

I keep returning to an experience I had outside Art Basel Miami Beach earlier this December, when L.A.-based artist rafa esparza installed himself into a kid's mechanical pony machine he bought in 2022 and decked out to resemble a low-rider. A collaboration with esparza's gallery Commonwealth and Council and the *Los Angeles Times's Image* magazine, *CorpoRanFLA: TerraCruiser* (2022) debuted as part of the fair's Meridians section, for large-scale and ambitious projects, though it was the only public-facing work on view there.

For around three hours, a group of invited friends and colleagues would climb a step ladder to sit atop the machine, where esparza had installed himself. They would listen to a short recording by esparza, in which he posits himself a future cyborg and tasks the listeners to take a seed of maíz as a way to create a new future for our community and for our planet. After the rider dismounted, Dr. Dre's "Let Me Ride" would blast on a speaker, and artist Gabriela Ruiz would insert a coin to operate the pony machine, metaphorically sending esparza on his way.

esparza has long intervened in mainstream institutions by presenting his own brand of subversive work that is distinctly queer, Brown, and working class, and by including those in his circle. *CorpoRanfLA* was a collaborative project that esparza realized with his community of artists—many of whom, including Ruiz, Guadalupe Rosales, Karla Ekatherine Canseco, Fabian Guerrero, and Victor Barragán, were on hand at the fair to support him in yet another taxing durational performance. In a fair peopled with moneyed and mostly white people, here was a work made by esparza's community, for his community.

esparza is a recurring presence in one of this year's best books, *Brown Neon* by Raquel Gutiérrez, who has frequently collaborated and written about esparza and his cohort. The book—a combination of memoir, ekphrasis, queer history, and heady theory—opens with two essays on the late writer Jeanne Cordóva, a mentor to Gutiérrez, who here documents Cordóva's final days and the ensuing grieving process.

These are moving reflections that set the book up for its tour de force essay, "Behind the Barrier: Resisting the Border Wall Prototypes as Land Art," in which Gutiérrez documents her journey, on the day of a friend's wedding, to visit the Border Wall prototypes. In 2018, shortly after they were unveiled by the provocateur who calls himself an artist, Christoph Büchel, with the support of his mega-gallery Hauser & Wirth, declared "that the prototypes be considered seriously as land art"—a racist, xenophobic, and shameful gesture. Gutiérrez tackles it with insightful depth, ultimately declaring: "Art is a hostile place. ... You stop asking yourself how art could be involved in a fascist project. *Arthasneverleftitsside.*"

Upon the book's publication, artist Nayland Blake **tweeted (<https://twitter.com/naylandblake/status/1547650424437481473>)** that *Brown Neon* "is a better book about #art and #america than Dave Hickey's 'Air Guitar' and deserves to be as celebrated by art students and art curriculums as his was." I couldn't agree more. *Brown Neon* is a major contribution to art theory and criticism—it is expansive and imagines new futures, grounded in a fresh understanding of the recent past. I think I'll find myself

returning to this collection of essay numerous times over the course of my life, as I have with Gloria E. Anzaldúa's *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. *Neon Brown* is both a very specific history of Brown queerness as experienced by Gutiérrez and something so timeless in its views on the world and art—art and the world—that it will still resonate in the years to come.