

**Rita Gonzalez, Howard N. Fox, and Chon A. Noriega, eds.: *Phantom Sightings: Art after the Chicano Movement*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008. 240 pp.**

*Phantom Sightings: Art after the Chicano Movement* (authored and exhibition curated by Rita Gonzalez, Howard N. Fox, and Chon A. Noriega) purports to present art that is beyond “identity politics” by a new generation of Chicano artists. In fact, the Forward by Michael Govan states that these artists “...have assimilated mainstream culture as much as mainstream American culture has assimilated its diverse and divergent demographic.” Therein lies the underlying ideology of the book and exhibition.

First and foremost, it should be noted that the Chicano Movement is not over; it continues unto today. All of the Sociological literature on social movements maintains that social movements have not dissipated until the movement’s goals have become “institutionalized.” Many of the social problems that the Chicano Movement addressed in the 1960s and 1970s are still with us.

Noriega presents a strong argument in maintaining that the term “Chicano” presents a “usage problem.” There are many people of Mexican origin in the United States who do not use this term to self identify. Moreover, many artists who were born in Mexico do not identify with the term because they have had a “lived” experience different than those of us who were born in the United States. Note that four of the artists in this exhibition were born in Mexico. Whether or not all of the artists in this exhibition call themselves “Chicano” misses the point. The real issue is: What is their work about? Is it still about the Chicano/Mexicano experience in the United States?

Many of today’s artists of Mexican origin retreat from any word, like Chicano, that identifies them as “activists.” They do this because the mainstream art world considers an artist who creates work about social change to be a persona non grata. They learn this in art school, not in the Chicano community. Thus, it is understandable that artists who seek ties with the mainstream art market might be reluctant to use any term that separates them from other artists. It appears that the curators of *Phantom Sightings* have the same objective.

Since seventy percent of these artists in this exhibition are from California, this is a regional exhibition that gives lip service to artists who reside outside California (4 from Texas and 3 from the Northeast).

Though the curators minimize the exhibition’s association with “identity

politics,” only seven of the artists (Acosta, Cabrera, Capistran, Carlee Fernandez, Jauregui, Lopez, and Villegas) present artwork devoid of any references to Chicano culture and identity. Over seventy-five percent of the artists include content related to the Chicano experience.

What is very interesting about this exhibition is that ninety-three percent of the artists have BFA and/or MFA degrees, and almost three fourths of them have received their degrees since 1995. We would expect artists of this generation to know a lot about art and art history, and apparently they do. This is a fact that deserves congratulatory praise.

The members of ASCO deserve credit for leading the conceptual art movement in Chicano Art during the early days of the Chicano Movement. This exhibition follows in this tradition with art that is highly conceptual, e.g., Capistran, De La Loza, Diaz, Esparza, Estrada, Carlee Fernandez, Garay, Gonzales-Day, Jauregui, Morales, Ochoa, Ortiz-Torres, Romo, Sarabia, Saldamando, Villegas, Rios, Los Jaichackers, Mendiola and Ortiz-Torres, Morales, Ochoa and Rios, and Ybarra. The artwork by Acosta, Cabrera, Castano, Christina Fernandez, Lopez, Montoya, and Villegas is more problematic to classify as such. Moreover, the work of Castano, Morales, and Saldamando are figurative (representational) pieces – an art category that the curators derided as being passé in art schools.

The art in this book demonstrates that most of the younger artists in this exhibition are working in the tradition of conceptual art, but they also are artists who are still making references to the Chicano/Mexicano experience. Identity politics and conceptual art are not antithetical. We must guard against creating a fourth phantom of our own making: a phantom that we create ourselves by characterizing artists of Mexican origin living in the United States as having little to nothing to do with “identity.” Assimilation is not what the content of the art in *Phantom Sightings* demonstrates. To think so is “naïve thinking,” as Paulo Freire would classify it.

The U.S. Bureau of the Census projects that by 2050 Latinos will comprise thirty percent of the population of the United States. It is a tribute to the younger generation of Chicano artists in the *Phantom* exhibition that most are still creating Chicano art after all these years.

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