

## "Xicanx" Exhibition Surveys Chicana/o/x Art in San Antonio

by [Ruben C. Cordova](#) | July 20, 2024



Alejandro Díaz, "Make Tacos Not War," 1976, neon on clear plexiglass. Photo: Contemporary at Blue Star



Judith F. Baca, "Judith F. Baca as La Pachuca" (from *Tres Marias Installation & Performance*), 1976, archival digital prints. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova



Robert Jose Gonzalez, "El Paso 8/3/19" and "No Hate No Fear" (diptych with red handprint), 2019, acrylic on canvas. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova

*Xicanx: Dreamers + Changemakers | Soñadores + creadores del cambio*, a sweeping exhibition at the Contemporary at Blue Star in San Antonio, features works by 32 artists. Nearly two-thirds of these artists are from San Antonio, which endows the show with a very heavy local accent. Several artists are from California. The states of New Mexico, Colorado, Illinois, and Arizona are also represented, mostly by one artist each. *Xicanx* is a reduced version of the exhibition presented in a far larger space at the Museum of Anthropology (MOA) at the University of British Columbia in conjunction with The Americas Research Network (ARENET). It is curated by Jill Baird, former Curator of Education at MOA, and Greta de León, Executive Director, ARENET. The [exhibition website](#) has a full listing of artists and a short curatorial statement.

This is an exhibition with big ambitions. Chronologically, *Xicanx* stretches from 1972 (three works are from the 1970s) to a 2024 installation. It includes some of the initiators of the Chicano art movement, as well as mid-career and relatively emerging artists. *Xicanx* also has a certain amount of geographical diversity, as noted above. "Dreamers" and "changemakers" are fairly broad and fluid concepts to begin with, and the exhibition is further broken down into the following categories: neighborhoods, identity, borderlands, home, and activism.

The term *Xicanx* utilized as the exhibition title refers to Chicano, Chicana, and Chicax artists. The final "x" is a gender-neutral, non-binary word-ending (in place of "o" or "a," which are gendered Spanish word-endings). The first "x" is a reference to the indigenous Nahuatl language of central Mexico; it serves to displace the Spanish "ch." *Xicanx* is a fairly new term (most people have never heard of it). It is embraced most by younger artists, LGBTQ+ artists, academics, and museum professionals. Chicanas began using the terms Chicana, Chicana/o, and Chicano/a many years ago, in order to escape the linguistic exclusion enacted by the male-gendered "o" ending. Many artists, scholars, and collectors, on the other hand, prefer the term Chicano (at least in reference to the period covered by the Chicano movement), because that was the name of the movement for which that art was created, and with which it was allied. Post-Chicano is a term sometimes used for art after the Chicano movement.



Installation view of "Xicanx". Photo: Ruben C. Cordova

First, let us note the focus of the *Xicanx* exhibition. In addition to paintings, prints, and photography, it features conceptual works and two installations. *Xicanx* does not include abstract or semi-abstract paintings. Expressionistic currents are largely excluded (with the exception of a painterly work by Ana Laura Hernández). The late San Antonio artist Adan Hernandez is omitted, as are the well-known L.A. expressionists, such as Carlos Almaráz, Frank Romero, Glugio "Gronk" Nicandro, etc. References are made to the Chicano movement, activism, and politics in the website statement. Yet the highly politically charged works made in Northern California (the Royal Chicano Air Force, Rupert Garcia, etc.) are also left out.

Though it's an extremely San Antonio-centric exhibition, some indispensable local painters in the realist, Chicana/o/x figural tradition are absent. Mel Casas created a large body of outstanding large-scale works called *Humanscapes* that feature complex interactions between verbal and visual puns. These paintings would relate well to paintings as well as text-based artworks within the *Chicanx* exhibition. Casas was the central figure among Chicana/o/x artists in San Antonio. He was the teacher of several artists in the exhibition: Roberto Jose Gonzalez, Raul Servin, Rudy Treviño, and Kathy Vargas. He was also the president (1971-73) and the principal spokesperson of the Con Safo art group, whose members included the following *Xicanx* exhibition participants: Rolando Briseño, Jose Esquivel, Roberto Jose Gonzalez, César A. Martínez, Rudy Treviño, and Kathy Vargas (several of whom Casas invited into the group). A painting by Jesse Treviño, the best-known artist within San Antonio and its leading photorealist, would also have been a tremendous addition to the exhibition. (Treviño was also a student of Casas; Casas also brought Treviño into the Con Safo group.)

A number of artists who work best on a small scale are represented by pieces on a life-size scale, which is not their forté. Two artists (Ester Hernandez and

Anna Fernandez) are represented by poor-quality photographic reproductions in the form of giclée prints. A few of the curatorial choices strike me as rather odd. Chuck Ramirez, a photographer who was happier exhibiting outside of a Latinx framework than within one, is represented by a photo of a bag of garbage. Among artists who are younger than those who founded Chicano art, Rubio Rubio would have been a great addition to the show, especially a monumental work such as *January 6th Selfie* (now on view at ArtPace) or *Four Horsemen* (the latter is owned by lenders to the Xicanx exhibition (see pp. 26 and 31 of my catalog, *The Day of the Dead in Art*.)

Despite its heavy San Antonio orientation, *Xicanx* doesn't tell the story of local Chicana/o/x painting very well, even within the stylistic framework the curators have chosen. Consequently, the exhibition has a haphazard quality, as if the curators simply picked what they liked, without much attention paid to making an argument to explain the curatorial vision behind their selections.

Though many of the loans were sourced in San Antonio, few artists are represented by their best and most ambitious work. Had there been a substantial catalog, the curators would have had to conceptualize the exhibition on a deeper level and argue for their choices and their categories. The labels could have offered more information, but they are rather perfunctory (they also don't list the year the artists were born or the places where they live). This is a less-than-ideal situation for an international traveling exhibition, which, one would hope, should present the best possible work (and interpretations of that work) to the rest of the world. The curators referred to the show as "the first major Xicanx group exhibition in Canada." Additionally, there are plans to send *Xicanx* to Mexico, after it closes in San Antonio. My discussion below emphasizes the strengths of the exhibition.

### Discussion of Works in the Exhibition



Alejandro Díaz, "Make Tacos Not War," 1976, neon on clear plexiglass. Photo: Contemporary at Blue Star

The neon version of Alejandro Díaz's *Make Tacos Not War* (1976), his signature work, is at the center of the entrance to the exhibition. I caught up with Díaz for this review. He noted that his neon slogans were "a natural progression

from the cardboard signs that I made and sold on the streets of Manhattan in the early 2000s.”



*Alejandro Díaz, "Make Tacos Not War," 1976, neon on clear plexiglass. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova*

This work also existed as letters in a window at Sala Díaz, the San Antonio art space in the King William district founded by the artist before he decamped to New York. “Like the cardboard signs,” noted Díaz, “the neons often incorporate humorous slogans that address socio-economic inequality, political concerns, and artworld references.” These slogans include: “Wetback by Popular Demand,” “No Shoes, No Shirt... You’re Probably Rich,” and “Homos Welcome!”



*Celia Muñoz, "Enlightenment #4 – Which Came First," 1982, mixed media. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova*

Just around the corner from Díaz’s piece, one encounters another conceptual work by the Arlington-based artist Celia Muñoz, who is a native of El Paso. Her *Enlightenment #4 – Which Came First* is a very complex work, and I reached out



for her analysis of it. According to Muñoz, it “reveals the lies that adults tell and lies of the camera” by illustrating “the parallels of the visual and the verbal from two languages” (Spanish and English). In particular, the piece deals with the verbs “lie” and “lay,” which she notes are difficult for both Spanish and English speakers. On a visual level, says Muñoz, “it’s very much about learning perspectival depiction. Things that are near appear to be large, while things that are far appear to be small. In this case, all the eggs are of different sizes, instead of just appearing to be.”

Linguistic complexity (in two languages) is compounded by “visual deception” and “perceptual deception,” resulting in what the artist calls “a tug of war between the visual and the verbal,” requiring “seeing and thinking in two languages.” Muñoz believes the advantage of living on the borderlands is from possessing two languages and two concomitant “thought processes.” She explains that learning a language expands the mind by causing the speaker to also think in that language.



Judith F. Baca, “Judith F. Baca as *La Pachuca*” (from *Tres Marias Installation & Performance*), 1976, archival digital prints. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova

The installation of photographs from Baca’s magnificent *La Pachuca* performance is one of the highlights of the exhibition. The brightly colored walls greatly enhanced the works in *Xicanx*, and the peony color really sets off the black-and-white photographs.



Judith F. Baca, "Las Tres Marias," 1976, colored pencil on paper mounted on panel with upholstery backing and mirror. Photo: Smithsonian American Art Museum

Unfortunately, the triptych *Las Tres Marias* (1976), a central element of the performance, was not part of *Xicanx*. *Las Tres Marias* (Smithsonian American Art Museum) echoes a tripartite vanity mirror. The mirror panel in the center reflects the viewer (it is blacked out in the above photograph). The two side panels feature life-sized drawings by Baca. The left panel features a 1970s-era *chola*: in this instance a member of the Tiny Locas, a youth gang that Baca employed on her public murals. (Baca is one of the most important and prolific muralists in the nation.) Baca modeled the *pachuca* on the right on herself. According to the Smithsonian page linked above, she is "donning the persona of one of the tough girls she both admired and feared growing up in South Central Los Angeles."



*Judith F. Baca, "Judith F. Baca as La Pachuca" (from Tres Marias Installation & Performance), 1976, archival digital prints. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova*

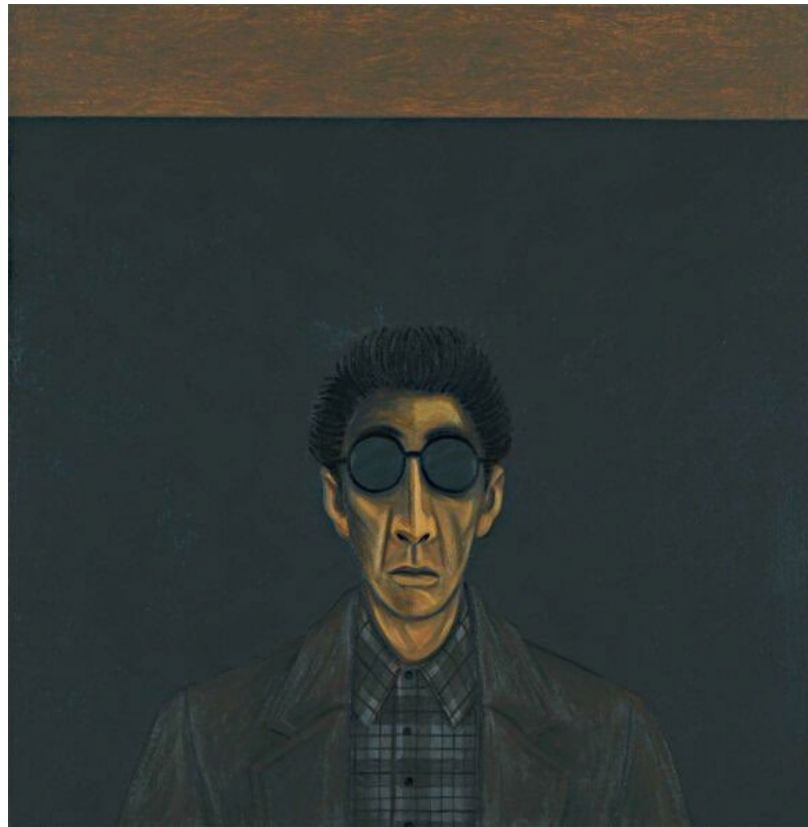
It is this dramatized pachuca persona that is reflected in the photographs in the *Xicanx* exhibition. In one of the photographs pictured above, Baca is applying her makeup. In the other, she is smiling broadly, with dramatically arched eyebrows as she careens to her right.



*Judith F. Baca, "Judith F. Baca as La Pachuca" (from Tres Marias Installation & Performance), 1976, archival digital prints. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova*

In the leftmost picture above, Baca's smile has morphed into an aggressive grimace, with a contorted mouth, a wrinkled nose, and arms akimbo. In the last photograph, Baca is deep into the enjoyment of a cigarette, as smoke covers a central portion of her face. For a discussion of pachuco culture (with linked references), see my Glasstire article "[Cheech Collects.](#)"



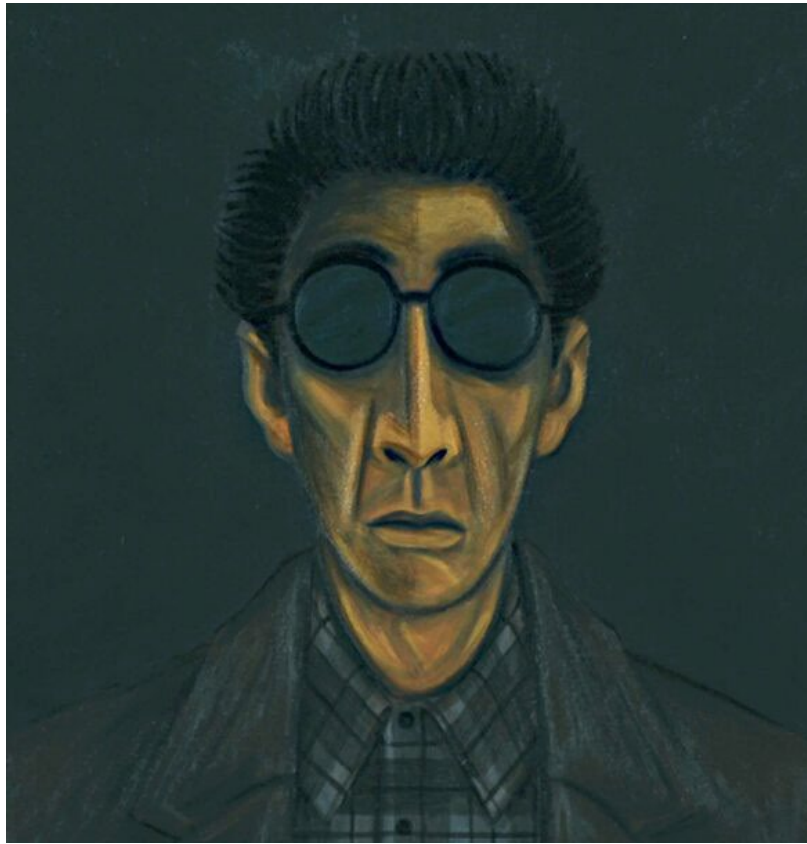


César A. Martínez, "Bato con Sunglasses: El Mosco," 2008, acrylic on muslin. Photo: courtesy of the artist

César A. Martínez's *Bato con Sunglasses: El Mosco* is inspired by a friend of the artist who likewise attended Martin High School in Laredo, Texas, from which the artist graduated in 1962. Martínez remembers: "We called him El Mosco [the fly] because he wore these large roundish sunglasses and somebody said he looked like a horse fly." Martínez and his friends were not content to merely mock the young man with an insect nickname: "Whenever he approached a group of us," says Martínez, "everybody started making a buzzing sound."

Martínez moved to San Antonio in 1971, and he began making images of *batos* and *rucas* in 1978. They are not actual portraits, and the vast majority of the works are not meant to represent or summon a particular individual. Rather, most of them are renderings of social types, composite images, made by mining image banks from the 1940s and 1950s, such as high school yearbooks and obituaries.

For these works, Martínez also draws on a wide range of modern artists and photographers. For more information on these *batos* and *rucas*, see my "[Cheech Collects](#)" review and *¡Arte Caliente! Selections from the Joe A. Diaz Collection* (Corpus Christi, TX: South Texas Institute for the Arts, 2004, pp. 29-33).



César A. Martínez, "Bato con Sunglasses: El Mosco" (detail), 2008, acrylic on muslin. Photo: courtesy of the artist

*Bato con Sunglasses: El Mosco* is a very unusual image because the artist – at least initially – attempted to render a likeness of a specific high school classmate. Martínez recalls: "I tried to make El Mosco as I remembered him." Martínez, however, strayed from the path of resemblance for iconographic reasons: "But then, I decided to make him very slender to better emphasize the sunglasses." Symbolism thus took priority over fidelity to form. His pair of sunglasses – the very object that gave El Mosco his sobriquet, his buzz-inducing identity in high school – was aggrandized at the expense of El Mosco's fleshy face. Martínez has given us a rather gaunt El Mosco. Moreover, the creases in his face and neck make him seem much older than a high school student.

Martínez notes that he has, in a few instances, attempted "to capture the 'look' of a particular person, but not necessarily the actual appearance." He adds that he "always changes things to enhance what attracted me in the first place." In this case, the alterations were in the service of humor. The glasses successfully summon the idea of a fly, even if the face of his subject is substantially transformed in the process. Thus we are given an effective caricature of a fly, but with a face that seems less specific and individual than those of his composite images.

Martínez continues to refine his images of (mostly) young men and women. He has sometimes reworked a particular image several times over the years. It

would be very illuminating to see a row of Martínez's pachuco-like *batos* and *rucas* next to the photographs of Baca as a pachuca.



Sarah Castillo, "Embroidered Tears," 2017, *Chicana Feelings Series*, found dress, red embroidery thread. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova

Sarah Castillo, a San Antonio native, is a mixed media and performance artist concerned with mental as well as physical health. She founded the Lady Base Gallery and co-founded the Mas Rudas Collective. *Embroidered Tears* is part of her *Chicana Feelings* series, whose purpose she explains in this manner: "Strategies for survival are essential. Cultivating forgiveness for the self comes in the form of prayers and the synapses remind your cells to forgive yourself."

Castillo elaborates: "Chicana Feelings represents my Chicana experience in the context of mental health. I am guided by questions framed to understand the ways that art, identity, and healing expand and challenge our capacity to embrace ourselves as we interact with the world around us."

Castillo poses these questions: "How does a Chicana artist enact agency to understand the conditions of herself? How does oppression operate against the body? And, how does this translate through art?" She provides these answers: "My body carries family stories, histories, and the missing pieces too; but they've become constrained by colonization, imperialism, patriarchy, hegemony, capitalism, and acculturation to reinforce a popular discourse that normalizes and perpetuates a cycle of violence, obscurity, and silence. Through the concept of embodied knowledge, our lived experiences are validated as an essential source of power and authority. We learn that our body knows."



*Sarah Castillo, "Embroidered Tears" (detail with embroidery), 2017, Chicana Feelings Series, found dress, red embroidery thread. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova*

The following is the text she embroidered repeatedly on the dress, like a mantra or a prayer: "In all directions of the universe, I forgive myself for the harm that I've caused others. In all directions of the universe, I forgive myself for the harm that I've caused to my body temple. In all directions of the universe, I forgive those that have harmed me."

The dress's red color was a vital element that caused the artist to choose it for this piece. In Castillo's iconography of color, red represents protection. She placed the text over the abdomen because her research led her to the conclusion that this may be the site "where we carry shame in our bodies." The repetitive, prayer-like text is intended, she says, "through the lens of neuroplasticity... to remind my cells to forgive."



David Zamora-Casas, "Altar for the Spirit of Rasquachismo: Homenaje a Tomás Ybarra-Frausto," 2024, mixed media altar. Photo: Beth Devillier

David Zamora-Casas, a San Antonio native, is a multi-faceted painter, performance artist, and installation artist. He utilizes these multiple talents in *Altar for the Spirit of Rasquachismo: Homenaje a Tomás Ybarra Frausto*. These include multiple personas in the projected video component (he wears a straw hat in the above photograph, and a pachuco zoot suit in the one below). Zamora-Casas refers to the work as "a *Día de los Muertos* inspired – and subverted – altar." Because Ybarra-Frausto, the honoree, is still alive, it is not a traditional *muertos* altar. (See my entry "Ybarra-Frausto, Tomás," in Ilan Stavans, ed., *Encyclopedia Latina: History, Culture, and Society in the United States*, Danbury, Conn.: Grolier Academic Reference, 2005, vol. IV, pp. 294 – 295.)





*David Zamora-Casas, "Altar for the Spirit of Rasquachismo: Homenaje a Tomás Ybarra-Frausto," 2024, mixed media altar. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova*

Ybarra-Frausto's work, particularly his essay on [Rasquachismo](#), deeply influenced Zamora-Casas. "It [the essay] articulated the things I felt in real life, it was a eureka moment," said the artist. "It was an undeniable reflection of my experiences and those of the Mexican-origin community. He made these things tangible and real," he added. Zamora-Casas planned to highlight the content of the Rasquachismo essay in his altar. But before he fashioned the altar, Ybarra-Frausto's partner Dudley D. Brooks died suddenly on March 9, 2022. In honor of their half-century partnership, and of the vital role that Brooks played in Ybarra-Frausto's life, Zamora-Casas decided to treat their loving relationship in his altar. "Love is love," says Zamora-Casas.



David Zamora-Casas, "Altar for the Spirit of Rasquachismo: Homenaje a Tomás Ybarra-Frausto," 2024, mixed media altar. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova

*Altar for the Spirit of Rasquachismo: Homenaje a Tomás Ybarra-Frausto* is what Zamora-Casas refers to as "a declaration to the world rooted in love." The artist elaborates: "When I was growing up, *jotos y manfloras* [Chicano/a queers and lesbians] were not represented with dignity. Tomás and Dudley served as inspiration. They were role models, people we looked up to. They were professionals, respectable citizens in our society, as well as loving, caring individuals."



David Zamora-Casas, "Altar for the Spirit of Rasquachismo: Homenaje a Tomás Ybarra-Frausto," 2024, mixed media altar. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova

In his altar, Zamora-Casas included photographs of the couple in their youth, "their heyday, their days and nights of passion." In the paintings within the altar, Zamora-Casas depicted details from intimate conversations he had with the couple, and he also used quotes from Ybarra-Frausto's essay "[The Geographies of Love](#)." He adds: "I think the LGBTQ+ community would benefit from reading that essay. It shows that life is short and precious. It made me more appreciative of life. We don't normally hear these things, so that essay was like a kick in the chest to me." Brooks' death made Zamora-Casas reflect on the cycle of life, on what he calls "the precious gift of life." That realization "doesn't just come to us," says Zamora-Casas, "we have to seek it out, we have to fight for it."



*Robert Jose Gonzalez performing before "El Paso 8/3/19" and "No Hate No Fear," 2019, acrylic on canvas, June 7, 2024. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova*

Gonzalez had intended to paint a two-panel homage to the Mexican printmaker José Guadalupe Posada as part of a group of works commissioned for my [Day of the Dead exhibition](#) in 2019 (see p. 63). But Gonzalez was so deeply affected by the mass murders in El Paso in 2019 that he changed his subject. He was particularly shaken that the shooter had traveled all the way from Dallas to an El Paso Walmart specifically to find a concentration of Mexican immigrants. "That's crazy," the artist told me recently, "to travel all that distance to murder Mexicans." He added: "How insane, how obsessed, how filled with hate this young man must have been." The artist believes that longstanding murderous urges are being given license in today's violent and divided political climate. "This is the result of all that," said Gonzalez.

The left panel depicts the victims of the shooting, and the right panel represents the survivors and the mourners. Among the latter, the artist includes the citizens of El Paso, and, more broadly, the inhabitants of the cities near the Mexican border. As a child of the border (he was born in Laredo and lives in the San Antonio area), Gonzalez knows they are the ones who "most deeply felt this loss." Border town residents are also the ones who are most imperiled by this particular form of violence.

The space between the two canvases is of paramount importance to the artist. He hangs the paintings in a very precise manner because the gap between them is highly symbolic. It represents the gulf between the living and the dead. In this respect, it is a chasm, an ultimate rupture. Yet, at the same time, it is a symbolic space where the two groups reach out to one another. Memory – and the desire for connection – ultimately bridge this seemingly insuperable gulf.





*Robert Jose Gonzalez, performance in front of "El Paso 8/3/19" and "No Hate No Fear,"  
June 7, 2024. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova*

Given the ongoing epidemic of mass shootings in this country, Gonzalez fears that today the El Paso shooting is largely forgotten. Nonetheless, it is emblematic of a clear and present danger. One in which an individual drove 645 miles specifically to hunt Mexicans.

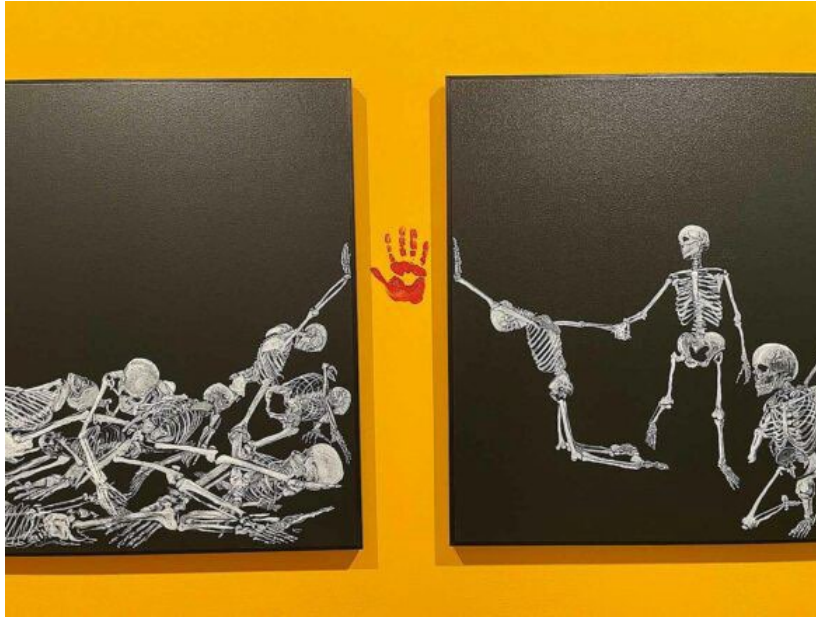
Gonzalez memorialized the victims of the shooting by reciting their names and some of the details of their lives in a performance at the *Xicanx* opening on June 7. As a healing gesture, he placed his hand in the space between the living and the dead.





Robert Jose Gonzalez, detail of the artist pressing his hand in the gap between "El Paso 8/3/19" and "No Hate No Fear." Photo: Ruben C. Cordova

After the performance, Gonzalez left his handprint in red paint in the breach between the two paintings, following the suggestion of the curators.



Robert Jose Gonzalez, "El Paso 8/3/19" and "No Hate No Fear," 2019, acrylic on canvas with red handprint between the two paintings, June 7, 2024. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova

The goldenrod color (Benjamin Moore's "Sparkling Sun") dramatically accentuates Gonzalez's stark canvases and it also evokes one of the main colors used during Day of the Dead.



Celeste DeLuna, "Our Lady of the Checkpoint," 2019, woodcut and vinyl on paper. Photo: courtesy of the artist

As a native of Harlingen, Texas, the San Antonio-based artist Celeste DeLuna crossed the U.S.-Mexico border, as well as checkpoints within the state of Texas, many times with her family. Though they were all native-born U.S. citizens, these crossings always provoked deep anxieties. These experiences led DeLuna to create *Our Lady of the Checkpoint*, as a deeply satiric, virtual

border saint or deity. In a written statement she shared with me, DeLuna wrote of “an unspoken anxiety” as one approached borders and checkpoints. She often reflected on the sources of these powerful anxieties, even though they struck her as irrational at the time. DeLuna concluded that there were multiple factors behind them, including “inherited ideas about citizenship, worthiness, and not appearing ‘suspicious.’” When she and her family crossed these checkpoints and international bridges, they concentrated on “behaving ‘correctly.’” They took pains to “appear American enough” to avoid attracting undue attention. They were traumatized by the mere experience of moving freely within the country of their birth.

These surveillance pressures gave rise to what DeLuna refers to as an “unspoken shame and fear” on the part of her parents that they would not seem sufficiently “American.” They were the radical other, with skin colors and facial features that were deemed markers of aliens and criminality. As a response to these experiences, DeLuna painted *North: Las Garritas* in 2012. *Garritas*, the Spanish word used for checkpoints in Mexico, is utilized by Spanish speakers in South Texas to refer to interior checkpoints (there are 18 permanent ones in Texas, which are situated 25-75 miles north of the U.S.-Mexico border).

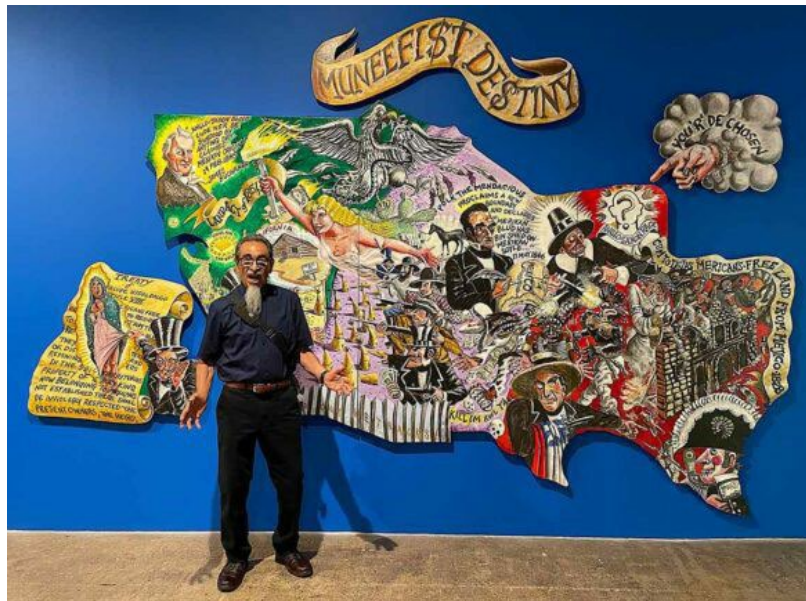
*Our Lady of the Checkpoint* is an elaboration of *North: Las Garritas*. DeLuna narrates her experience within the print: “What am I doing? I am praying all goes well. Who do I pray to? Which Virgin, the commercial Guadalupeana? The ineffective Virgen de Los Lagos?”

DeLuna concluded that her salvation depended upon a new intercessor: “No, I think I need a special one, a Virgin of the Checkpoint.” This new Virgin is represented as DeLuna imagined her: “I see her shimmering in the heat, blinding me with her reflective blanket, emanating barbed wire rays, with a razor wire halo around her head.” This Virgin bears more than a passing resemblance to DeLuna herself because she was modeled on Maya, the artist’s daughter. DeLuna adds that the Virgin of the Checkpoint is “standing in front of the checkpoint shelter.” The latter becomes her “*capilla*” [chapel]. The cameras are technological, all-seeing eyes, “not of God, but of the government.”

Fittingly, the image seen on the camera is a human skull. Death is the fate of too many immigrants, who undertake desperate measures in order to enter the increasingly militarized U.S. border. It should be emphasized that important components of the U.S. economy have long depended upon undocumented labor. By its very nature, it is cheap and vulnerable, even as undocumented workers provide a high percentage of essential services. (See my discussion of undocumented workers and essential services in “*Diez y ocho ilegales Pressure-Cook in a Boxcar: Border Politics and Two Migration Hellscape*s by Adan Hernandez.”)



Map of Mexico and the U.S. prior to the Mexican-American War; Alfred Quiróz, "MUNEEFI\$T DE\$TINY," 1996; Luis Jiménez, "El Buen Pastor" (The Good Shepherd), 1999. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova



Alfred Quiróz with "MUNEEFI\$T DE\$TINY," 1996, mixed media on mahogany panel, collection of the artist. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova

*MUNEEFI\$T DE\$TINY*, one of the highlights of the *Xicanx* exhibition, is a complex historical work, one that warrants a substantial treatment. Let us begin with Quiróz's title. The artist utilizes a unique phonetics, born of two experiences: learning English in grade school in his native city of Tucson, Arizona (where he was hit with a ruler for speaking Spanish), and phonetics training in the U.S. Navy. As an Assistant Navigator during the Vietnam War, Quiróz was obligated to take a course to learn the extremely exaggerated military phonetics utilized in telephone and short-wave radio communications. As the artist informed me: "I use a lot of language in my work, and I destroy it as much as I can."

Quiróz studied with two of the U.S.'s greatest satirical artists. He was "unleashed" by Peter Saul when he was an undergraduate at the San Francisco Art Institute. Saul asked him what he was thinking about. Quiróz replied that



his thoughts “were not nice.” “Paint them anyway,” replied Saul. As an MFA student at the University of Arizona, Quiróz was mentored by Robert Colescott, whose satiric paintings focused on race and utilized slang titles and captions.

Quiróz reconfigures “Manifest Destiny” as “MONEY-FI\$T DE\$TINY,” with the two “S” letters transformed into dollar signs. The first “T” is fashioned out of a sword and an arrow that are “pointing down to hell.” The dollar signs signify motivation, and the fist and sword symbolize the violent means utilized for the conquest of Mexico. The shape of the painting is based on the top half of Mexico, which the U.S. took as booty at the conclusion of the Mexican-American War (1846-48).

As Leah Ollman remarked about this painting in the *Los Angeles Times*, Quiróz “strips the gloss from our country’s self-justifying history to tell of the greed and violence that put the white man in power. The settling of the West is a far more unsettling story than most history lessons attest, and Quiróz’s wildly clever work educates as it entertains, and does both lavishly” (“Reexamining a History of Injustice,” January 22, 1998).



Alfred Quiróz, “MUNEEFI\$T DE\$TINY” (detail of upper right section), 1996, mixed media on mahogany panel, collection of the artist, 2024. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova

Quiróz’s history begins in the upper right, with a white hand in a cloud wearing a bracelet inscribed “GOD.” The cloud bears the caption “YOU ‘R’ DE CHOSEN.” The hand of god points to the “ANGLO-SAXON RACE,” which is an empty silhouette, an invented category, a cipher for European colonists.



Alfred Quiróz, "MUNEEFIST DESTINY" (detail of upper right section), 1996, mixed media on mahogany panel, collection of the artist. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova

The Anglo-Saxon race is fleshed out in the figure of an adjacent pilgrim, who fires his pistol and musket, which blast an enslaved Black man and a Mexican, while a Native American stands in between them. These three figures are portrayed as exaggerated stereotypes. This vignette represents the pattern of racial oppression, genocide, and territorial depredation that guided the formation and expansion of the United States.

The facade of the Alamo church is meant to conjure the primary anti-Mexican slogan: "Remember the Alamo!" Quiróz recalls that, when he was in the navy, sailors from Texas often repeated the slogan to him, in an effort to intimidate him. "It was like a power trip," he says. Quiróz would give one of two responses: "It was a terrible movie," or "I remember, wasn't it a great Mexican victory?" (The Texans were invariably demoralized by his ripostes.) To emphasize what Quiróz called the "phoniness of the mythical history," he rendered the Alamo as a film prop, literally held up with wooden braces. For the after-effects of the Alamo slogan, see my Glasstire article, "[Is it Time for San Antonio's Fiesta to Secede from San Jacinto? Part II.](#)"

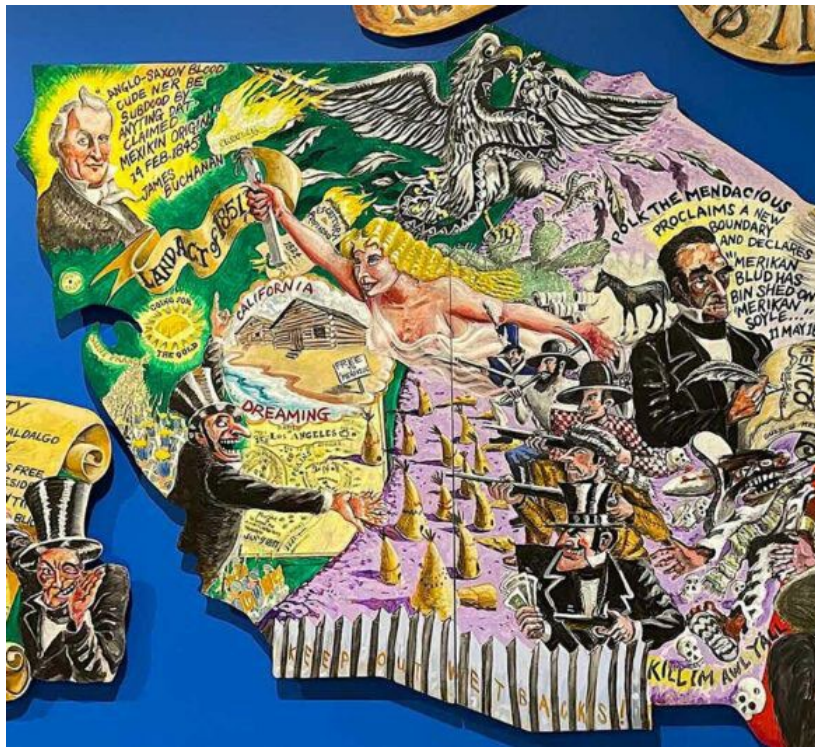
Atop the church facade, James Bowie, a notorious drunk, takes a swig from a jug of moonshine as he fires his pistol. Curiously, two men in coonskin caps fight each other, rather than the Mexican army. They represent Fess Parker (right) and John Wayne (left), actors who played Davy Crockett. At the lower corners of the red state of Texas, generals Sam Houston and Santa Anna face off against one another.

To the left of the Pilgrim, President James K. Polk writes the words that ignited the Mexican-American War: "'MERIKAN BLUD HAS BIN SHED ON 'MERIKAN SOYLE.'" Polk's mendacious incitement to war was based on a false Texas-Mexico border. It was fabricated as a provocation to Mexico and fortified and



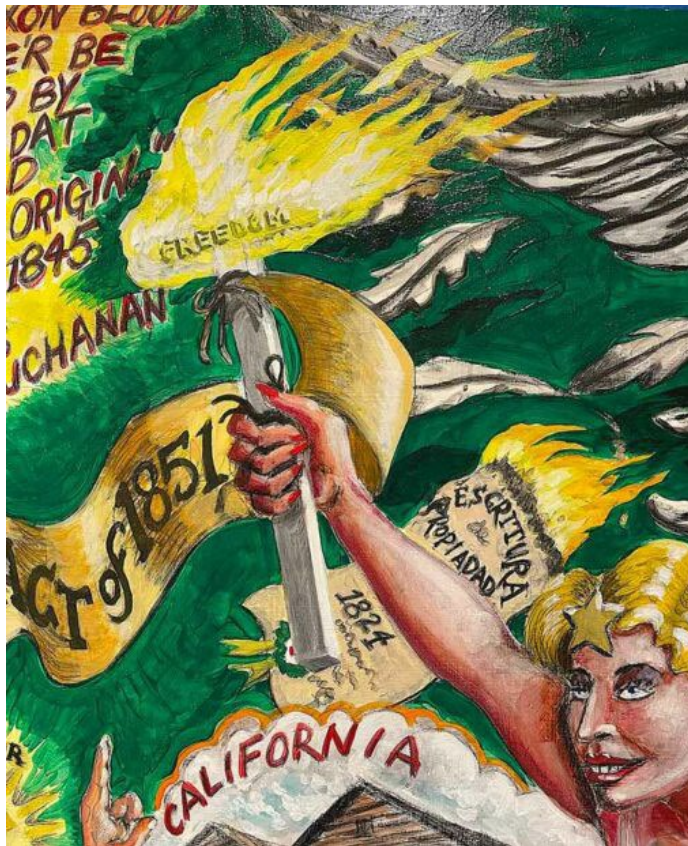
secured by invading troops. In January of 1847, the U.S. House of Representatives censured Polk for “unnecessarily and unconstitutionally” starting the war.

President Andrew Jackson hatched a plan to take the present-day American Southwest from Mexico in 1836. It involved border intrigues that would result in conflict with the U.S. army, and the ensuing assertion that American blood had been spilled on American soil (the Texian victory at San Jacinto prevented the plan from being put into effect). This plot was first reported in 1848 by none other than Anson Jones, the fourth president of the Republic of Texas. Polk, who was hand-chosen by Jackson, executed the latter’s plan to perfection. See my catalog: *The Other Side of the Alamo: Art Against the Myth* (2018, pp. 38-40).



Alfred Quiróz, “MUNEEFIST DESTINY” (detail of left side), 1996, mixed media on mahogany panel, collection of the artist. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova

The blonde woman with a pink dress is the symbol of Manifest Destiny, based on the famous painting and lithograph by John Gast called *American Progress* (1872). A motley line of armed aggressors (a land speculator, a frontiersman, a farmer, a miner, and a soldier) represent the vocations practiced by the “land-grabbing settlers.” They take aim from the right flank of the figure of Progress. The firepower of these invaders drives Westward expansion. A line of skulls (with bullet holes in their heads) behind these men represents those who were vanquished in an earlier stage of expansion.



Alfred Quiróz, "MUNEEFIST DESTINY" (detail of left side), 1996, mixed media on mahogany panel, collection of the artist. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova

Unlike the Statue of Liberty, the allegorical woman does not hold a torch of enlightenment or liberty. Instead, she bears a burning cross – just like a Klansman. Ironically, it bears the inscription "FREEDOM." This freedom, however, is only for white people. Thus, she is effectively a symbol of racial purity.

Additionally, beneath her dress, one can see the new geographical border created by the conquest of half of Mexico. This c. 1990s border wall resembles a white picket fence. It bears the inscription "KEEP OUT WETBACKS!"

The main body of the painting is a Mexican flag, with red, lavender-white, and green colors. The Mexican national emblem is an eagle on a cactus with a snake in its mouth. In Quiróz's painting, the snake "has bitten the eagle in the ass" causing it to jump off of the cactus. This action symbolizes "the internal political turmoil of that time within Mexico."

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ended the war. California gold was one of the major inducements to ignore the treaty, one which Quiróz highlights in a detail of a gold bar.





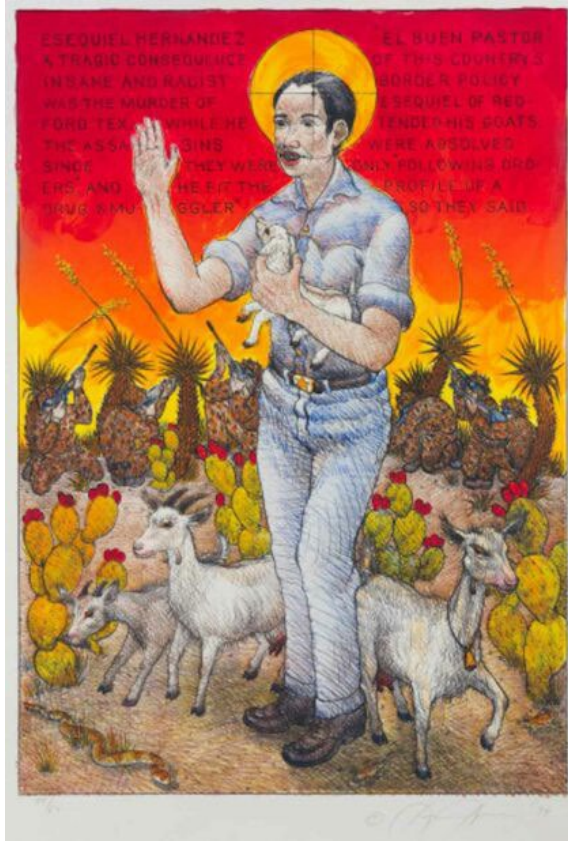
Alfred Quiróz, "MUNEEFI\$T DESTINY" (detail of Treaty of Guadalupe), 1996, mixed media on mahogany panel, collection of the artist. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova

In order to emphasize the multiple violations of the treaty, Quiróz painted a separate panel with a top-hatted huckster – someone who probably sells snake oil, as well as land he doesn't own. The huckster solicits Euro-American settlers while he simultaneously lifts up the skirt of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Beneath this physically violated image, one can make out some of the terms of the treaty, which specifies that "property of every kind now belonging to Mexicans ... shall be inviolably respected."

This work has an unusually sketchy quality because Quiróz initially conceived of it as a drawing. After he had executed the drawing, he decided to "colorize it with paint." Consequently, a considerable amount of underdrawing is visible in several areas, and it is less finished than Quiróz's other paintings.

However untypical it may be within the artist's oeuvre (as a work halfway between drawing and painting), MUNEEFI\$T DESTINY is an undeniably ambitious, major piece – precisely the kind of work I wish there had been more of in this exhibition. Given its subject matter (the Alamo, Manifest Destiny, genocide, slavery, violations of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, etc.), it has extremely high local political relevance. I was surprised to learn that the curatorial team had first attempted to borrow a small, locally owned painting by the artist, and only reached out to him for an alternative suggestion when that request was unsuccessful. Thus its appearance in the exhibition is more by accident than design. In keeping with the stated themes of the exhibition, I

had also hoped for more politically hard-hitting works like this one by Quiroz, which could have been easily obtained for *Xicanx*.



Luis Jiménez, "El Buen Pastor" (The Good Shepherd), 1999, color lithograph. Photo: Saint Louis Art Museum (another example of the lithograph is in the exhibition)

*El Buen Pastor* commemorates Esequiel Hernández, who was tending his family's goats when a U.S. Marine hidden in a ghillie suit shot and killed him on May 20, 1997. He was one of three Marines on a secret drug-surveillance mission that was unknown to local residents. In a direct reference to tin retablos known as *ex votos* (popular Catholic paintings that depict miraculous interventions), Jiménez included a text at the top of this print.

But this text details a death rather than a miraculous act of salvation: "A tragic consequence of this country's insane and racist border policy was the murder of Esequiel of Redford, Tex. while he tended his goats. The assassins were absolved since they were only following orders and he fit the profile of a drug smuggler, so they said."





Luis Jiménez, "El Buen Pastor" (*The Good Shepherd*), 1999, color lithograph. Photo: Saint Louis Art Museum (another example of the lithograph is in the exhibition)

In Jiménez's lithograph, Hernández appears to have an orange halo. But this "halo" is created by the telescopic sight of the rifle that killed him at a distance of about 230 yards. Chillingly, Jiménez has situated the viewer in the position of Hernández's killer. Thus the instrument of his martyrdom is what confers the halo of sainthood.

The Marines lied about the circumstances of Hernández's death, and they let him bleed out. Hernández was the subject of an award-winning documentary film by Kieran Fitzgerald, narrated by Tommy Lee Jones, called *The Ballad of Esequiel Hernández* (2007). His death caused protocols for troop deployments in civilian areas to be changed, and it also was utilized to oppose plans to further militarize the border with Mexico. For a lengthier treatment of this lithograph, see my 2018 catalog, *The Day of the Dead in Art*, pp. 55-56.

*El Buen Pastor* is an excellent and topical work. Perhaps because he is referencing *ex voto* paintings, or perhaps in the interest of clarity, his drawing is tighter and less dazzling than in many of his other prints, pastels, drawings, and watercolors. Jiménez's draftsmanship and the overall quality of his work is unsurpassed. It would have been wonderful to have a larger work in the show, one in which his formidable talents as a draftsman were more completely unfurled.

John Valadez, one of the foremost Chicano draftsmen and painters, was included in the Vancouver version of *Xicanx*, and he is listed on the Blue Star website and in promotional materials. But he is absent from the exhibition.

While *Xicanx* is certainly worth seeing, it could easily have been a much better show, one that could have displayed the artists featured in the exhibition at their best, and one that should have included more of the most important Chicana/o/x artists.

Ruben C. Cordova is an art historian who has curated more than thirty exhibitions. He has published more than 70 articles and reviews, and he has written or contributed to nineteen catalogs and books. His book *Con Safo: The Chicano Art Group and the Politics of South Texas*