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CHICANO ARTIST FRANK ROMERO'S CONCURRENT SOLO EXHIBITION CRISS-CROSSES THE U.S.

Posted by Dr. Ricardo Romo | Dec 15, 2024 |

Arts, Culture, Photos | 0 🗨️ | ★★★★★



By Dr. Ricardo Romo

A concurrent solo exhibition at Ruiz-Healy Art galleries in New York City and San Antonio, *De aquí y de allá: Frank Romero, A Survey*, presents a rare opportunity for a West Coast artist to exhibit at the same time both on the East Coast [New York City] and the Borderlands [San Antonio, Texas]. Curated by Rafael Barrientos Martínez, a native of San Antonio residing in Los Angeles, the show included works by Romero from the last 54 years.

Frank Romero is one of the most multifaceted and talented Chicano artists of his generation. In his 50 plus years as an artist he has produced exceptional works as a painter, sculptor, ceramicist, muralist, graphic designer, draftsman, and photographer. Romero's works have been exhibited in major U.S., European and Japanese galleries.

Romero grew up in Boyle Heights, one of the best known Mexican American barrios in the United States. When Romero was coming of age in Boyle Heights, it was less of a barrio and more a multicultural community with Jewish, Japanese, and European immigrant families living next to Mexican Americans. My ten year research in the 1970s for my book, *East Los Angeles: History of a Barrio* [UT Press: 1983], gave me great insights into Boyle Heights.

During the 1950-1960 era, the Boyle Heights community had the largest settlement of Jews west of Chicago and the largest Japanese community in the United States. In the late 1950s when Romero attended Roosevelt High School, his classmates from Boyle Heights represented one of the few truly multicultural neighborhoods in the United States. During Romero's early life, Boyle Heights was home to a number of celebrities including Anthony Quinn, Herb Albert, Mickey Cohen, Edward R. Roybal, and Oscar Zeta Acosta.

From his teen years on, Romero always thought about becoming an artist. He attended Roosevelt High School and at age fifteen began taking weekend and evening adult art classes at the Otis Art Institute. Romero finished high school in 1959 and enrolled at California State University Los Angeles [Cal State]. While attending college, Romero worked part-time with the Los Angeles County Student Professional Program where he was assigned work in graphic design, photography, and archival management.

At Cal State, Romero met the talented Carlos Almaraz who became his close friend and a central figure in major collaborative art projects in later years. Almaraz went on to become one of the most well-known Chicano artists in the U.S. Almaraz left Los Angeles for New York City in 1961, and Romero joined him there in 1968. In New York City, Romero worked in design and production for Penguin Books and later as Assistant Art Director for Ballantine Books. Romero returned to Los Angeles in 1970 and found work as a designer for A&M Records. When Almaraz returned to Los Angeles about a year later, he shared a home with Romero. Romero worked for the Community Redevelopment Agency of the City of Los Angeles until age forty when he determined to devote himself full-time to art.

Romero and Carlos Almaraz emerged as pioneers in the Chicano mural movement in Southern California. They collaborated in painting some of the first murals at Estrada Courts in Boyle Heights. Those murals, among the earliest funded by the City of Los Angeles, allowed the artists wide creative parameters to express themselves. The Estrada Courts murals were among the earliest in the United States to focus on Mexican American culture and identity. Several Estrada Courts murals represented early implementation of Mayan and Aztec imagery. Two of the most popular murals, the "Orale Raza" and "Dreams of Flight," featured themes of identity and aspiration.

Romero's early paintings and art prints represented memories of his Boyle Heights community. During the 1970s, Romero contributed artwork to Self Help Graphics, one of the first and most successful Chicano art print centers in the United States. Self Help's brilliant Center Director, Sister Karen Bocalero, recruited Romero and dozens of other Chicano artists in Los Angeles to produce serigraphic prints and mentor young artists. Self Help Graphics recently celebrated its 50th anniversary, and local artists like Romero are often credited for their active participation and artistic contribution to this artists' cooperative.

In 1973, Frank Romero, Carlos Almaraz, Roberto de la Rocha, and Gilbert "Magu" Lujan formed an art collective which they named Los Four. Their 1974 exhibit at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, *Los Four: Almaraz/ de la Rocha/ Lujan/Romero*, was a major breakthrough for Chicano art. Los Four was the first Chicano exhibit in a major U.S. museum and the first to receive mainstream media coverage. The planning and successful opening of the Los Four exhibition complimented the opening of *Exposición Chicanarte* exhibit in 1975 at the Los Angeles Municipal Gallery that included works by Romero.

In 1984, the Olympic Committee in Los Angeles chose Frank Romero among other Chicano artists to paint murals on the concrete walls of the city's freeways in preparation for the Olympic Games scheduled for Los Angeles. Romero painted a 102 foot long mural "Going to the Olympics" on Highway 101, one of California's busiest freeways. The mural features automobiles with hearts above them surrounded by iconic images of the city. Romero used bright pastel colors and combined objects, such as palm trees with a Goodyear blimp in the background, to showcase what Los Angeles was known for.

In 2017, Harriett and I traveled to Long Beach, California to see an extraordinary exhibition, *Dreamland: A Frank Romero Retrospective*, at the Museum of Latin American Art. Thanks to Eddie Hayes, one of the curators of the exhibit, we also visited Romero at his Boyle Heights studio. On another occasion, we met Romero at his teaching studio at Plaza de La Raza in East Los Angeles. At his studio, we saw firsthand Romero's artistic versatility evident in his large wood cutouts and neon imagery. At his teaching studio we witnessed an art maestro teaching young people ceramic art.

Romero's other notable exhibitions include "ChicanoArte" [Los Angeles County Museum of Art]; "Hispanic Art in the United States" [Corcoran Gallery, Washington D.C. and a national tour]; "Le Demon des Anges" [shown in Nantes, France; Barcelona, Spain; Lund, Sweden; and Brussels, Belgium], and "American Kaleidoscope" [National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.]. Romero is renown as a painter and ceramist, and his artwork has been shown and collected by America's best museums.