

home • artnews • artists

Rasquachismo Has Officially Entered the Art Historical Canon

BY **MAXIMILIANO DURÓN**

May 16, 2025 4:30pm



Installation view of "Rasquachismo: 35 Years of a Chicano Sensibility," 2024–25, at McNay Art Museum, San Antonio.

PHOTO JACKLYN VELEZ/COURTESY THE MCNAY ART MUSEUM

Most people probably think of San Antonio as the “home of the Alamo,” and while the city may be the birthplace of a certain Texan imaginary, it’s also given rise to concepts that help visualize American culture in less nationalistic ways. One of those concepts is

rasquachismo, an aesthetic sensibility that acts as a way to understand “an attitude or taste” prevalent within art made by Chicanos, as scholar **Tomás Ybarra-Frausto** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/tomas-ybarra-frausto/>) wrote in his 1989 essay theorizing it.

“To be *rasquache*,” Ybarra-Frausto wrote, “is to posit a bawdy, spunky consciousness seeking to subvert and turn ruling paradigms upside down—a witty, irreverent and impertinent posture that recodes and moves outside established boundaries.” In the decades since, *rasquachismo* has been a cornerstone of Chicana studies. But until very recently, it was less widely recognized within the American art canon.

To mark the 35th anniversary of Ybarra-Frausto’s essay, San Antonio’s **McNay Art Museum** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/mcnay-art-museum/>) recently mounted an exhibition, “*Rasquachismo: 35 Years of a Chicano Sensibility*,” to honor this homegrown idea. In many ways, the exhibition, which opened last December and closed in March, was a “celebration of San Antonio” and a “recognition that the city itself has such a distinct aesthetic character,” according to the exhibition’s curator, **Mia Lopez** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/mia-lopez/>). “There was a seed that was planted in this city, a seed that was planted in this institution, and how that then grew into the framework for something like *rasquachismo*, to me, was really special.”

“It feels like it’s coming back home,” Ybarra-Frausto said earlier this year of the exhibition, noting that visitors had told him that walking through the show, they were able to grasp the concept because of how they had experienced it in daily life in San Antonio. “‘I see *rasquachismo* everywhere—I get it. I know what you’re talking about.’ So that’s confirmation to me that what I intuited is actually not only intuition, but it’s reality. It has added to the vocabulary of American culture.”

Lopez described *rasquachismo* as “the good taste of bad taste.” The exhibition included work in a range of materials by major figures within Chicana artists, including Yolanda M. López, Carmen Lomas Garza, Santa Barraza, Celia Álvarez Muñoz, Carlos Almaraz, Frank Romero, Patssi Valdez, and Luis Jiménez. Younger artists featured included Ruth Buentello, Juan de Dios Mora, and Jimmy James Canales.



Ruth Leonela Buentello, *Under the Mexican Colchas*, 2012.
 PHOTO BETH DEVILLIER/COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

Ybarra-Frausto credits Mi Tierra Cafe y Panaderia, a Mexican restaurant in San Antonio's Historic Market Square that he has visited regularly since he was a kid, as being crucial to his critical eye, describing it as a "hotbed of rasquachismo." The walls and ceiling of the restaurant are covered with photographs, piñatas, string lights, and papel picado, with ofrendas placed in multiple parts of the spacious cafe. "Everything is covered with stuff there," he said. "All the space is filled up. There was sort of a horror vacui, a fear of an empty space."

It wasn't until years later, when he began writing "Rasquachismo: A Chicano Sensibility," that he thought back to the aesthetics of a place like Mi Tierra. "In thinking of the relationship between Mexican art and European art, especially the Baroque, I began thinking that rasquachismo is a barrio Baroque. Mi Tierra is a perfect example of that."

"Tomás is no accident. He comes from a long line of San Antonio intellectuals," said San Antonio-based artist **Cruz Ortiz** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/cruz-ortiz/>), who painted **a portrait of Ybarra-Frausto** (https://npg.si.edu/object/npg_NPG.2020.146) now owned by the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C., and currently on view in its "20th Century Americans: 2000 to Present" galleries. "The most important thing about Tomás is that he helped start the Chicano intellectual lexicon. You can't have a revolution without a lexicon. You can't have a movement without it. He made a map for us."

Ybarra-Frausto said he found it fulfilling that the McNay mounted its recent rasquachismo tribute, since the museum helped foster his love for art from an early age. Yet the exhibition also had resonance for the community, in a city that is more than 60 percent

Latinx, because it signified an important change in the McNay's curatorial direction. In 2023, the museum hired Lopez as its first-ever curator of Latinx art, making it one of the few museums in the US to have such a role.



Salvador Jiménez-Flores, *La resistencia de los nopales híbridos / The Resistance of Hybrid Cacti*, 2016.
COURTESY THE ARTIST

Lopez, who first came across Ybarra-Frausto's essay in the early 2000s, knew she wanted to highlight the influence of the essay, and to show "how the concept of rasquachismo continued to permeate within, not just institutions, but artists' studios." By way of example, she pointed to Salvador Jiménez-Flores, who identifies as a "rasquache futurist" and who was represented by five sculptures in the exhibition. The largest of these was *La resistencia de los nopales híbridos / The Resistance of Hybrid Cacti* (2016), in which faces, a tongue, and an eye emerge from a towering green nopal, a metaphor for how Chicanos have needed to become hybrids to persist and resist in the US.

While the exhibition was meant to speak to those already familiar with rasquachismo, Lopez also wanted to introduce the concept to a wider audience, highlighting how it "resonates with so many other cultural forms, whether it's Arte Povera, punk and DIY culture, assemblage, a little bit of visionary art," she said, adding "Chicanos call it rasquachismo, but they may call it something else in other cultures."

Running through the exhibition were the three pillars of where someone might encounter rasquachismo that Ybarra-Frausto defined as "la casa, la calle, y la comunidad" (the home, the street, and the community). In these encounters, "you learn about the culture sometimes in unexpected ways, whether it's through a calendar or an advertisement. You begin to ask, 'Where did that symbol come from? Where did that icon originate?' You start to realize that these symbols have long histories."

For the display, Lopez opted for a salon-style hang, seeing it as "an intimate way of displaying work." She also collaborated on a "hybrid of an ofrenda and a Wunderkammer" with Ybarra-Frausto, drawing various objects from each of their personal collections, like photographs, posters, candles, tchotchkes.



Installation view of “Rasquachismo: 35 Years of a Chicano Sensibility,” 2024–25, at McNay Art Museum, San Antonio.

PHOTO JACKLYN VELEZ/COURTESY THE MCNAY ART MUSEUM

In his essay, Ybarra-Frausto looked at a wide range of works to define *rasquachismo*, including Daniel Villegas’s 1928 novel *Las aventuras de Don Chipote, or cuando los pericos mamen*, about “the trials and tribulations of a Mexican laborer as he maladapts to life in the United States,” or the early works of Luis Valdez’s *Teatro Campesino*, which he described as “[a]rticulating and validating the *rasquache* sensibility in dramatic form.” Other examples include the sculptures of Ruben Trejo, the performance pieces of Guillermo Gomez Peña, and the prints and murals by the Royal Chicano Air Force.

Ybarra-Frausto’s text went heavy on male artists—and went on to inspire another essay, this one by artist **Amalia Mesa-Bains**

(<https://www.artnews.com/artnews/news/icons-amalia-mesa-bains-9988/>), who in 1995 wrote “Domesticana: The Sensibility of Chicana Rasquache,” which offered a feminist perspective on *rasquachismo*. She wrote that Chicanas have been key to the development of this aesthetic, particularly through the construction of home altars for domestic spaces, as a form of emancipation within a patriarchal society. “Critical to the strategy of *domesticana* is the quality of paradox,” she wrote. “Purity and debasement, beauty and resistance, devotion and emancipation are aspects of the paradoxical that activate Chicana *domesticana* as feminist intervention.” Ybarra-Frausto described Mesa-Bains’s essay as the “twin” to his.

Both essays have inspired generations of artists and curators. This year, the Latinx Project at NYU **established** (<https://www.latinxproject.nyu.edu/news/announcing-the-tomas-ybarra-frausto-curatorial-fund>) the Tomás Ybarra-Frausto Curatorial Fund

with a \$150,000 grant from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund to support “the professionalization of curators in the field of Latinx art.” A 2024 exhibition organized by Josh T. Franco at the ICA Philadelphia took up the **concept of yard art** (<https://www.artnews.com/art-news/reviews/yard-art-where-i-learned-to-look-ica-philadelphia-review-1234718236/>), grounding it within a rasquachismo framework. In 2022, El Museo del Barrio **mounted** (<https://www.artnews.com/list/art-news/artists/latinx-art-2022-year-in-review-1234652368/el-museo-del-barrio/>) “DOMESTICANX,” which expanded these concepts to include Latinx artists who do not identify as Chicana and added a queer lens for understanding Ybarra-Frausto’s concept. Lopez similarly wanted to “disrupt a little bit of that gender siloing” that has inherent in domesticana. Included in the show is Rolando Briseño’s *At the Round Table at the Bellagio* (1991), a fiber piece that shows a table with hands reaching toward it.



Installation view of “Rasquachismo: 35 Years of a Chicano Sensibility,” 2024–25, at McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, showing, at center Rolando Briseño’s *At the Round Table at the Bellagio* (1991).

PHOTO JACKLYN VELEZ/COURTESY THE MCNAY ART MUSEUM

The McNay exhibition featured both historical artists who predate the conception of rasquachismo and emerging artists who had never even heard of the term previously. In doing a dive into the McNay’s collection, Lopez found two ballpoint pen drawings by Consuelo “Chelo” Gonzalez that had been donated in the ’90s but never exhibited at the museum. Gonzalez is also significant within the museum’s history, as the first Chicana to ever receive a solo exhibition there in 1968. Ybarra-Frausto, who saw that show, said, “She herself was considered an outsider artist because she was a woman. She was very important to me as a progenitor of Chicano art.”

On the other end of the spectrum is an artist like Laredo-based Mickey Rodriguez, whom Lopez said was less familiar with the concept but after reading the essay was “overjoyed,” feeling as though there was finally language to describe something she had “seen [her] whole life.” Rodriguez contributed two wall-hung sculptures to the exhibition that gather a variety of materials, assembled here to form maximalist, bric-a-brac constructions. Lopez added, “That was exciting to me, too, to spread the gospel of rasquachismo.”



Installation view of “Rasquachismo: 35 Years of a Chicano Sensibility,” 2024–25, at McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, showing an installation by Victoria Martinez.
PHOTO JACKLYN VELEZ/COURTESY THE MCNAY ART MUSEUM

Lopez also wanted to signal that something different was happening in the museum. In the McNay’s octagonal entryway, she installed a hanging fiber work by Victoria Martinez, a Chicago-based artist who has lived in the city’s historic Latinx neighborhoods of Pilsen and Little Village. In an alcove nearby were painted bricks. Both of Martinez’s installations use found objects from these neighborhoods as a way to think about how rapidly they are gentrifying.

“Her ability to find beauty in the fragments of the city that she experiences becomes this mini-monument to the things that are lost or overlooked in neighborhoods as they transform,” Lopez said.



Victoria Martinez, *Puzzle Pieces: Introduce Yourself to San Antonio, Texas*, 2024.
COURTESY THE ARTIST

That emphasis on seemingly mundane and everyday materials is also present in the work of Dallas-based artist Antonio Lechuga, whose uses *cobijas*, vibrant fleece blankets that are abundant in Chicanx and Mexican households and are often sold at border crossings or in flea markets, as his material. *Fence Section #3* (2021), for example, uses scraps from different cobijas to create an abstract lattice shape; its title, however, clarifies that it is in fact a representation of the US-Mexico border.

“Many of the materials and the conversations that are happening here are at the intersection not only of culture but also of class,” Lopez said, noting that *rasquachismo*’s development within working-class communities was core to the concept.



Antonio Lechuga, *Fence Section #3* (detail), 2021.
COURTESY THE ARTIST

Works like Lechuga's and Martinez's embody this ingenious approach to materials that is a foundation of the rasquache aesthetic. "Resilience and resourcefulness spring from making do with what's at hand (*hacer rendir las cosas*)," Ybarra-Frausto wrote in 1989. During our recent conversation, Ybarra-Frausto pointed to a photograph by late artist Chuck Ramirez, a lifelong San Antonio resident who died in 2010. *Brooms: Pale Yellow* (2007/11) shows the top of a very worn-out broom. To Ybarra-Frausto, Ramirez's focus on "how a broom could be used until it was worn down to the nubs and then you would find a purpose from the broomstick" is emblematic of rasquachismo.



Installation view of “Rasquachismo: 35 Years of a Chicano Sensibility,” 2024–25, at McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, showing, at right, Chuck Ramirez’s *Brooms: Pale Yellow* (2007/11).

PHOTO JACKLYN VELEZ/COURTESY THE MCNAY ART MUSEUM

Cruz Ortiz, the artist who painted Ybarra-Frausto’s portrait, warned against seeing rasquachismo as just a “clever use of material. No, this is a huge intellectual and foundational type of understanding of how the Texas Mexican mind works. What can I do with this shitty thing that was supposed to be thrown away? That’s when the intellectual part happens.”

In our current political moment, Ortiz sees in rasquachismo a way forward, or “a model for looking at society and politics. How can I use the intellectual discourse about rasquache and apply that to how we fix a problem? How can we fix the problem of women not having access to abortion here in Texas in a rasquache way? I don’t have the answer because it’s not just my answer. That has to come from the community—it has to be *colectiva* [collective]. That’s what I’m interested in, using rasquache theory in practice to make change.”

