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# Más Rudas Collective, 2009-2016 (An Archival Epilogue to an Epic Pachanga)

Josh T. Franco, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

**Abstract:** Contemporary artists Más Rudas Collective (MRC) were active in San Antonio, Texas, from 2009 to 2016. This essay looks to primary source documents from preceding decades and keystone exhibitions of Chicana/o art to articulate MRC's position in a network of art production and curatorial activity that takes Chicana/o identity as a conceptual framework and/or departure point. Specific examples of MRC members' reappropriations of Mexican, Mexican American, and Chicana/o cultural elements are analyzed and considered as "weaponizations" against cultures of body shaming and misogyny. Their approach is compared to that of other artists and curators in order to highlight the variety of identity-based and post-identity frameworks at play in the broad network of Chicana/o art and exhibition.

**Keywords:** Chicana art, Latina art, feminism, archive, contemporary art, installation, body image, rasquachismo, domesticana, Chicax

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Archives are inheritances. Their fate can range from dusty boxed-up obscurity to spectacular consumption. This is up to the inheritors. The case is similar with the immaterial aspects of traditions. To commit the resources necessary for preserving documents and traditions alike is to wager their appeal and usefulness to younger and future generations. In what follows, I introduce the work of the San Antonio-based Más Rudas Collective (MRC), four inventive heirs of Chicana/o art and art history. The women of MRC take up symbols and traditions of their Mexican American context and fashion weapons against the limits imposed on them by preexisting meanings embedded therein. They also playfully recognize and resist postmodernist strains of Chicana/o art history and curation that respond to the same contexts. I will read MRC's work through the archival documents in which this art lineage materializes in order to elaborate on the adept weaponization of entrenched traditions and culturally coded gender roles undertaken by these artists.

In the context of this special issue, *A Gun For Every Girl*, I can't help but draw a comparison that otherwise borders on silly. But here it makes the point: MRC are the Buffys of Chicana/o art. Why? In the conclusion of the televised portion of the series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*—girl weaponized par excellence—the eponymous Slayer inherits an object from a spiritual ancestor she did not know she had up to that point. But she receives little instruction along with the gift. It is a formidable scythe, more than up to the task of Buffy's ordinary nightly patrolling. But the enemy at the gates in this moment of the Buffy narrative is far beyond ordinary: the incorporeal source of all evil commandeering a primeval army of resurrected supervampires. The scythe, as scythe, would have little effect. Ingeniously, following Buffy's late-night revelation, the essence of the scythe is harnessed by the witch Willow to activate all potential slayers. Then, with an army of Slayers as opposed to the single "chosen one," it is possible to take the day. It is a perfect example of how archives can and often operate: material generated and sourced from the ancestors, used

by the younger generation in a way the elders may never have predicted or considered. The question “So what do I want with this?” applies to both the Slayer’s scythe and the cultural inheritance left to MRC. While the previous generation offers invaluable gifts, how to turn these toward the tasks at hand—whether slaying an innumerable horde of primal protovampires or finally feeling comfortable in one’s own brown woman’s skin in conditions that work constantly against that comfort—is left to the inheritors. MRC began by throwing themselves a party.

The pachanga kicked off in 2009. A bungalow on a residential street between downtown San Antonio and Trinity University. One of those San Anto nights where the air makes everything the right kind of sticky—once the breeze hits. Gente came down from Austin and Los Angeles and everything. I was visiting from New York, and only by chance and chisme did I find myself at *Our Debut*, the inaugural exhibition by the hociconas, who at the time called themselves the Chicana Collective: Cristina Ordonez, Mari Hernandez, Kristin Gamez, Ruth Buentello, and Sarah Castillo.<sup>1</sup> Shortly after, four of the artists rechristened themselves “Más Rudas Collective,” as they would be known for the next six years. Tattoos inside the respective forearms of Hernandez, Gamez, and Buentello affirm the name. Castillo went untattooed, but was no less committed. The four members of MRC proceeded to show in exhibitions in Texas and California, in the spirit of their mission statement, which opens by offering a definition for “más rudas”: “to be tough, to be defiant, and without apology.” What they did not apologize for was claiming a Chicana identity, for not succumbing to the anxiety, vocalized by many artists, of being pigeonholed by making such claims. They debuted in 2009, on the heels of the 2008 *Phantom Sightings: Art After the Chicano Movement* exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, making their decision and their nomenclature all the more pointed. Understanding the history of Chicana/o art through major exhibitions—each framing ethnic identity in a distinct manner responding directly or implicitly to preceding exhibitions—deepens the significance of the MRC’s body of work, an unabashedly mujer-centered (Chicana) and resolutely identity-based group.

*Phantom Sightings* provided an invaluable update through the survey exhibition form, crystalizing an art history in and for the first decade of the current millennium.<sup>2</sup> The exhibition, curated by Howard N. Fox, Rita Gonzalez, and Chon A. Noriega, “establishe[d] this history [of the Chicano movement] as a context, an influence, a point of departure—but not as the basis for a proper name for the art or the artists” (Noriega 2008, 18). *Phantom Sightings* recognized the remaining affect of Chicana/o identity after the movimiento politics of the 1960s and 1970s, the postmodernism and deconstruction of the 1980s, and the culture wars of the 1990s. The exhibition demonstrated Chicanismo’s currency in artmaking despite two factors: one, the end of the Chicano movement in its initial forms and the large-scale mobilization of raza around labor and education; and two, the acknowledgment that “while identity politics is now largely seen as theoretically passé in art school, some artists seem acutely aware of the problematic wholesale dismissal of discussions of difference” (Gonzalez 50).<sup>3</sup> But organizing around labor and education amongst Chicanas/os still occurs, of course, as do studio practices premised on identity, though they must do so in a so-called post-identity era. *Phantom Sightings* recognized these complexities. In its tour in the United States and Mexico, from coast to coast (and to the third coast of Texas) and across the United States’ southern border, the exhibition’s sharp, conscientiously ambivalent curatorial perspective established an internationally scaled interpretive model through which subsequent work claiming a connection to Chicana/o identity could be viewed.

A previous exhibition that told the history of art called “Chicano” on a comparable scale to *Phantom Sightings*, and across media as varied, was *CARA, Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965-1985*, which originated at UCLA’s Wight Art Gallery before traveling the United States from 1990 to 1993.<sup>4</sup> Twenty-two authors contributed short poems, excerpts of prose, artist statements, and one bullet-point list to the

catalog's prologue, "La Cultura Chicana: Voices in Dialogue." Ester Hernandez's contribution in particular points to the centrality of the movement's history to *CARA*, which would later become the "departure point" for the curators and artists in *Phantom Sightings* (from which many of the artists travel quite a distance):

Chicano art has its roots in the history of the Chicano community. Dolores Huerta, Vice-President of the United Farm Workers, states that it was Chicano artists who made visible the lives of the Chicano community—from rural life to urban centers. The social and political events of the early Chicano movement in the 1960s and 70s gave artists of Mexican ancestry their first Chicano-related subject matter and audience. Today, the struggle and issues (farmworker rights, immigration, school dropout rates, etc.) continue and intensify. Chicano art is being expressed in many ways (representational to abstract, traditional to experimental) and in many media to an ever-broadening audience. Chicano artists continue to give visual form to the hopes, dreams, fears, and aspirations of our community. (Hernandez 18)

Such a sense of a singular "community" plays less of a role in the narratives offered by the curators and artists in *Phantom Sightings*. This does not mean the more recent exhibition lacked a sense of solidarity. Rather, mutual recognition of social struggle takes place through the articulation of many absences or "phantoms," in lieu of an assertion of presence, which was *CARA*'s method for calling attention to Chicano art.<sup>5</sup> One could see these as merely opposed methods. If that were my framework, MRC would appear naive, misunderstood to nostalgically revive and espouse notions of a unified Chicana/o experience implicit in *CARA*'s curatorial framing. MRC's statement declares:

Calling ourselves Chicana is a form of protest.

Many artists resist the term Chicana in fear of being pigeonholed and excluded from the art world. We feel that our Chicana identity does not hinder or limit us. Our work is influenced by our diverse Chicana experiences. What sets us apart in the scope of Chicana art history is the current time and our geographical location. (Más Rudas Collective 2017)

This experience, or fear and avoidance, of being "pigeonholed" laces the essays in the *Phantom Sightings* catalog, reflecting the anxiety held by many of the included artists themselves.<sup>6</sup> Again, in an oppositional understanding of the positions taken by the *CARA* and *Phantom Sightings* exhibitions in respect to one another, MRC might appear retrograde for taking up a clarity of identity that could give the impression of ignoring art and art-historical developments such as the landmark *Phantom Sightings*. However, MRC has captured the attention of many, including at least one of the curators and many of the artists involved in *Phantom Sightings*. So what do viewers find appealing in a collective brazenly self-identified by ethnicity and gender today?

If *Phantom Sightings* took Chicano history as a departure point, MRC departed yet again, raucously cannibalizing the postmodern spirit of that exhibition as well as the art history encapsulated in the earlier *CARA* show. In lieu of frameworks premised on opposition or progress, I propose an ouroboric understanding of the relationship between these exhibitions' and the collective's conceits, and argue, furthermore, that MRC produces works from a similar understanding. This challenges the polarities that have been constructed in Chicana/o art history—essentialist versus performative, genetic versus constructed—brought into focus as they are by a collective of Chicanas who, from San Anto in the twenty-first century, refused to offer even a shade of apology for who they claim to be. How does such performed cultural affirmation tract in today's art worlds? In 2017, the artists of MRC are moving on, as life moves them in various directions away from the collective. The lights are coming back on after the party. As Chicano/a art history is increasingly well

documented, this present contains within it the papers of veteranas/os available for creative reconsumption, and for weaponization when necessary. Imagine: all along, the confetti in the air, now on the ground, was cut from those archival papers. And to be clear, there are dual weaponizations occurring here in tandem: MRC's turning of symbols and traditions, and my acts as their *compañero*, weaponizing art history by their side.

Amongst the bits of paper, one name appears again and again: Tomás Ybarra-Frausto. The *Tomás Ybarra-Frausto research material on Chicano art, 1965-2004* at the Archives of American Art provides primary source documents generated by the now substantial history of Chicana/o art. The collection totals more than thirty linear feet, enough material to keep any researcher busy for months, if not years. Ybarra-Frausto served on the National Executive Committee of the *CARA* exhibition, and is frequently cited in the *Phantom Sightings* catalog. Chon A. Noriega, one of the three *Phantom Sightings* curators, studied with Ybarra-Frausto at Stanford University and continues to consider him one of his most significant mentors. Asked point blank to describe himself in a single term, Ybarra-Frausto's response was "storyteller" (Cardenas). This humble label hides the degrees, the appointments at the Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation, the ceaseless grassroots activism in the Pacific Northwest, in New York, and in Texas, the foundational scholarly publications, the watershed curatorial projects, and the unknowable number of extrainstitutional connections forged by this elder, often through dinners at his and his *compañero*'s, Dudley Brooks's, homes in New York City and, in the past few years, San Antonio. These dinners are a rite of passage for young Latinxs in the arts, one that MRC experienced early in their collective career, as did I, when Ybarra-Frausto and Brooks returned to Texas from New York. Ybarra-Frausto describes those dinners and the move in his oral history, conducted by his longtime friend and peer in Chicana/o studies, sociologist Gilberto Cárdenas:

CARDENAS: You had a lot of people, though, right? Now, I was fortunate to be at several, several dinners, many, many dinners at your house, and you hosted a lot of people and I'm sure a lot of conversations went on, like the dinners I attended. And can you say something about that or just how you used those times?

YBARRA-FRAUSTO: Yeah, well, Dudley is a wonderful cook. So we had a small table for six people, so it was just perfect, because it was a wonderful conversational space. And a lot of times, people we had supported—my work in Latin America, particularly I supported so many of the intellectuals and writers and thinkers and artists and cultural makers that were really creating the new tendencies and the new ideas. And of course, a lot of them traveled to New York City, either because they were bringing their groups or because they were just coming to New York City, they were invited to speak at different universities.

So yes, our table became a wonderful place of *convivios*, of conversations that just went on into the night. We had wonderful dinners, good wine and just brilliant conversation. Because whether it was Néstor García Canclini from Mexico, or Lourdes Arizpe from Mexico, whether it was Guillermo Gómez-Peña from the West Coast, whether it was artists from the Taller Puertorriqueño, or the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre, whether it was the director of the Ballet Hispánico, you know, whether it was the director or the workers from the Spanish-language theater in New York City, Miriam Colon, a lot of the actors from the different ensembles.

And then, of course, we were very interested in the younger artists, the people that were creating new spaces, particularly Asian American, African American and Latinos in New York City. So there were a lot of alternative spaces that we were involved with.

So a lot of these folks came. And so, yes, the dinners and our little apartment—whenever we meet people, they always fondly remember, 80 St. Mark's Place. And a lot of people say, oh, I was in New York City and I passed 80 St. Mark's Place and I said good-bye, you weren't there. And I said, no, I was there.

So I came to San Antonio. The next phase is San Antonio for me. (Cardenas)

As a device for shaping an eternally returning Chicano art history, I envision MRC's major works paired with a relevant finding from Ybarra-Frausto's research materials on Chicano art. I also imagine this as a conversation we are having at dinner in the warmth of the Ybarra-Frausto/Brooks home and salon described in the above passage.<sup>7</sup> Our methodologies come from these convivios. After all, it is our elders who, by inviting us to sit at their tables, teach us to pachanga.

### **Our Debut/Rasquache DIY Space/San Antonio, TX/ Winter 2009**

MRC aptly conflated their coming out Chicana and their coming out a collective by throwing themselves a group quinceañera. For many Mexican and Mexican American girls, no event looms larger on the horizon of girlhood than the quinceañera, the celebration of their fifteenth birthday and their emergence into womanhood. For the mujeres of MRC, the horizon was delayed, and this first show was motivated by the fact that for economic, familial, and other situational reasons, none of the women had a quinceañera at the age of fifteen. In 2009, closer to age 30, they brought fifteen additional years of living, critical thinking, and engagements with multiple feminisms and established individual art practices to their "colorful, jaded reclamation of a tradition their families could not provide for them" (Robinson). Typically, the quinceañera reaffirms conventional social values around gender, power, and spirituality. The young girl's allegiance to the patriarchy of the Catholic Church is affirmed through a series of rites and preparations for the day. Her mature adult heteronormativity and marriage are foreshadowed in the walk down the Church aisle and first dance with her father. A roiling party typically follows.

*Our Debut* offered a quinceañera without patriarchy. No priests or fathers or conforming mothers dictated the forms and expressions of the women involved. The show affirmed a beloved communal ritual, one in which significant memories and familial connections are forged, while dismantling the conventional social structures associated with it, those meant to delimit the young girl's present and future possibilities based on her assigned gender. In one image consisting of four grouped portraits, Buentello, Castillo, Gamez, and Hernandez strike poses ranging from pious to defiant, and pensive to playful (fig. 1).



**Figure 1** Más Rudas Collective, *Colectiva!* (digital photograph, 2009)

All four wear tiaras, and Gamez’s accessories include a string of pearls and an all-white floral bouquet, presumably fastened to her dress, that fills the bottom left quadrant of her frame, reflecting the importance of style and fashion in the ceremony. Opposite this, Hernandez’s gesture of gentle hair pulling brings the tattoos covering her wrists and left arm into view, signifying her squarely as the group’s bad girl in this image. Both Gamez and Hernandez gaze directly at the viewer—one inviting you in while the other dares you to try—while above Buentello and Castillo peer up and away from the camera’s view. With fingertips gently lifted to come into contact with their chins, slightly angled, Buentello and Castillo invoke the virginal and prayerful state expected of a young woman on the eve of her quinceañera.

Hernandez’s work in *Our Debut* was another photographic portrait, larger in scale and featuring only herself and a few presidents (fig. 2).



**Figure 2** Mari Hernandez, *Quinceañera* (digital photograph, 2009)

United States dollar bill imagery pervades the portrait. The sitter's right hand blings in the foreground, knuckles rung together in support of three conjoined diamantine dollar signs. Below and to the viewer's left, oversized dollar reproductions peek out from their place amongst layers of pink and green tulle, adding their own weight to the skirt that threatens to disappear Hernandez's deep-cerulean painted fingertips. Her sleeveless torso emerges behind and above this scene. Half of a nearly body-sized twenty-dollar bill constitutes the gown's top. A chest-sized pendant echoes the dollar-sign ring, glittering with reflections of the pink and green of skirt and veil. A backdrop of yet more oversized dollar bills, stacked brick-like, compresses Hernandez's body between the dollars in front of, on, and behind her. This rasquache gown stands in for the one Hernandez missed out on as a fifteen-year-old, the one for which her family, like many families, might have saved a small fortune or gone into debt. The quinceañera rehearses many features of a young Chicana's future wedding, including the dress as often the most expensive single item involved. Hernandez's face reflects ambivalence, likely about the cost and benefits of procuring and stepping out in the glamorous gown.<sup>8</sup>

To the left of Hernandez's self-portrait, strings of silver Mylar beckoned viewers into a dark room. Inside, an empty chair facing a film projected onto the wall. The film features a lone character, a young woman played by Gamez, who throws herself a quinceañera when her family would or could not. The final scene shows her dancing, using the same chair placed in the room with the viewer as her sole prop. This gesture,



echoing the typical choreography of exotic dancers, insinuates her confidence in her own sexuality as a reason for the rejection.

Buentello's contribution was also sexually charged, though not with the erotic bent of Gamez's film. Her work, painted directly onto a wall, is a life-sized portrayal of her younger brother's girlfriend, who became pregnant at age fifteen. She is shown in profile, caressing her pregnant belly with one hand and holding a downward-facing bouquet of flowers in the other. Though her dress is quotidian, she wears a tiara. Together, these elements place her in between the elevated perception of young girls' virginity and purity at the time of their quinceañeras and the obvious reality of her lived circumstance, in which her pregnancy bears witness to an inability to live up to that ideal.

Domesticana tactics like these have a history in Chicana/o cultural production.<sup>9</sup> Las mujeres, compelled by the machismo, and often laziness, of some Chicano men, have repeatedly voiced their positions, unwilling to sacrifice their Chicana identity, despite the misogyny at the heart of some entrenched articulations of Chicano subjectivity. Amongst Ybarra-Frausto's research materials resides an incomplete collection of *Con Safos*, a magazine produced in the 1970s, where a stark example articulates this dynamic.

Oscar "Zeta" Acosta contributed "A Love Letter to the Girls of Aztlan" to a 1970 issue as part of a suite of letters titled "Tres cartas de Zeta."<sup>10</sup> The image sharing a page with the letter, signed by "SERG," pictures the frustration penned below by Zeta: Horizontally across the top quarter of the page is a drawing, apparently in graphite, of a recumbent female body. The body is nude and falls from view just above the breasts on the left margin, and midway down the calves on the right. This headless, footless figure's sexual arousal is suggested by the erect nipples and engorged areolae. In a surrealist manner, a large padlock, its width extending the length of the figure's thigh, replaces the belly button. It pointedly places a lock where her panocha would be, revealing much about the artist's and author's relationships to women and Chicana femininity.<sup>11</sup> The other human figure in the image relates to the body as a landscape, standing, with its back turned toward the viewer, in the "valley" between the breasts. The sloping shoulders and downcast head suggest a despondent male character. The padlock blocks his access.

The letter itself is brief and unyielding in its criticism of raza women, effectively blaming them for a lack of progress toward goals of the Chicano movement.<sup>12</sup> This is done through a scattershot array of tactics, including accusations of assimilation (wanting to be gringas), though primarily it indicts them for being sexually and reproductively unavailable at the men's whim: "For months now if not for years we muy macho guys of the movement have longed for your involvement in the drinking of our booze smoking of our dope and most importantly the making of our brown babies who shall bear our names and not yours" (Acosta 29). The remaining fourteen paragraphs extend this confusing logic, wherein Acosta professes love for all "girls of Aztlan," in one line, berates their unwillingness to adhere to traditional roles as he understands them, in the next, and in yet another reminds them they have no claim on what they produce when they do fall in line: "brown babies who shall bear our names and not yours." In the closing paragraphs, Acosta summarizes his equation of sexual and reproductive availability with loyalty to la raza:

BUT ALSO IT IS ONLY YOU THAT CAN RID YOURSELF OF THE SAD IDEA THAT BROWN GIRLS MUST KEEP THEIR LOVELY LEGS LOCKED AND THEIR RED LIPS SEALED.

So before we die open up your delicious mouth and give me your soft hand and take mine which since the earliest days of my fathers has wanted none other than those brown eyed ladies of the fields for as I said... I never saw a girl of Aztlan that I did not love. (Acosta 29)

In the Chicano worldview espoused by Acosta, Chicanas are little more than incubators of the next generation. The subsequent issue of *Con Safos* included two letters to the editor responding to Zeta's piece. A writer identified as "Una Chicana de Pittsburg" stated:

Mexican women for the most part have had very little to say about what the standards and mores of the group are. These decisions have traditionally been made by the men. Women then obey, enforce, and teach them to their daughters. So I say to you Zeta, *chulo*, that if you want to change all of the Chicanas so that they will drink booze, smoke dope, lay up with every appealing guy that comes along, etc., with the abandon our machos (and Anglo women) enjoy, you better talk it over with your *carnales* and don't hassle us about it until you decide collectively if this is what you really want. (Una Chicana de Pittsburg 60)

The Chicana subjectivity constructed in this letter maintains the perspective of los hombres as the central point from which the rest of Chicano subjectivities (women and children) are determined. This voice, while admonishing, continues to frame demands as requests for men to finally determine. It chastises the men for a lack of clarity in communicating their desires, but not for their role in perpetuating a diminished role for mujeres. The logic at work does not advocate or put forth the agency of mujeres themselves. The gun remains pointed right at them. "Una Chicana de Pittsburg," as her nom de plume asserts, proudly claims her Chicana identity in her reply to Zeta, but it is a Chicana self still indelibly dependent on Chicano men's whims, even if she finds them irritating.

This is not the case with MRC. Their Chicanisma, as introduced spectacularly through *Our Debut*, is not beholden to raza nationalism, or to an idealized nuclear family and heteronormative self-expectations demonstrated in both sides of the exchange recounted above. Instead, at its lightest, they opened up a convivial space marked by traditions familiar to many who attended, setting off a hell of a joda.<sup>13</sup> The project's seriousness centered on a refusal to relinquish a significant Mexican, Mexican American, and Chicana/o tradition relied on to mark time, to rehearse and maintain collective memory, and to be jovial with one another—despite the fact that it maintains conventional gender roles and Chicano nationalism, patriarchy, and Church loyalty. Instead, as inheritors of Chicana feminisms in development since the same historical moment as the *Con Safos* letters, they embraced and transformed this longstanding tradition through their practice as artists, allowing us to experience the quinceañera, in a rare instance, as a liberatory event for everyone involved.

### **Ruda Phat/Institute of Texan Cultures/San Antonio, TX/Fall 2013**

Appropriately, I attended *Ruda Phat* with my young cousins, two girls in their early adolescence. It was from a perspective something like theirs that MRC took to this project, which began with conversations about when and how each of their physical self-images began to form. Before discussing the show, however, the context should be noted: to reach the installation, visitors had to walk through other exhibitions in the Institute of Texan Cultures. Like the state itself, this place is big, and hosts simultaneous exhibitions on all facets of Texas history and contemporary life. *Ruda Phat*, though ensconced in a distinct gallery, opened on to exhibitions with topics ranging from the geological diversity of the state to remembrances of the Mexican Revolution to a display of inventions originating from Texas. It might have all made for a bewildering experience, but the clarity and distinction of *Ruda Phat* prevented this, thanks to the acumen of curator Sarah Gould. It was an exhibition about Chicana bodies, how images are weaponized against those bodies, and how a group of Chicana artists dismantled that weaponizing process. In film, photography, drawing,

and installation, the four artists interpreted their understandings of their bodies as constructed by their Tejana, Chicana, American upbringings. In these works, they test veterana artist Juana Alicia's assertion that "our cultural traditions, personal histories and relationships are the body within the body, that express themselves outwardly as well" (Alicia 16). Alicia's statement accompanies the catalog reproduction of her pastel drawing *My Brother's Boots*, her contribution to the 1990–92 exhibit *Body/Culture: Chicano Figuration*, which opened at the art gallery of Sonoma State University in Rohnert Park, California. This catalog, contained in Ybarra-Frausto's research materials, documents an earlier survey of Chicana/o bodies in art. *Ruda Phat* shares and diverges from many of the concerns in the earlier exhibition, examined here in relationships between individual works from each show.

On birch panel, Buentello drew herself for the first time in her artistic practice. To picture shame and depression associated with her body image, she illustrates her prostrate body, clad in bra and underwear, in two drawings of her front and back. Her gaze in the frontal drawing is down and away from the viewer, though neither is it directed at her own body. In both, her legs are drawn up, compressing and emphasizing the lonjas concentrated around her hips and legs.<sup>14</sup> These two drawings I took as the touchstone for the room as a whole: a body simply undressed in response to shame, a challenge to the self to not give in and cover up, a challenge which Buentello met admirably in these two frank, realist depictions. The simultaneous revelation of the body and gestural refusal of the viewer's gaze speak to a similar ambiguity in Lorraine Garcia-Nakata's charcoal drawing *Connection*, included in the same exhibition as Alicia's *My Brother's Boots*. The figure, in profile, pushes a hand against the foreground while staring to her left. Is she attempting to keep the viewer out, or inviting a hand to meet hers? Buentello's and Garcia-Nakata's works offer figures who seem ambivalent about being on view. The difference between being seen and being looked at is highlighted, speaking to the negotiations Chicanas, as other women, are forced to make between becoming objects on view in art and subjects of their own art, demonstrating agency through depictions of their own bodies. Consider Buentello's drawings as the baseline for the other projects in *Ruda Phat*, whose conceits respond to that challenge not through bald exposure but through ritual, history, and conceptual figuration.

Multiple screens on the wall to the right of the entrance present Gamez's videos about everyday beauty rituals. Through quick cuts, viewers witness the tightly cropped Gamez manually manipulate her nose, apply makeup, and flash light into her eyes, all gestures highlighting in acute points how her body fails to meet an ideal she internalized over time. Intercuts in the films offer views of Gamez writing in her journal, emphasizing the solitude in which these beauty rituals are performed. Words and phrases in Gamez's handwriting flash on the screen: "I've forgotten what my arms look like with hair"; "lack"; "I cover my face when I smile"; "It's too wide"; and "Maybe... light in my eyes will make them lighter." While Gamez has been explicit in her commentary about this work as a direct critique of the pressure placed on young girls to live up to unrealistic bodily expectations, there is an undergirding message about the technical delivery of these idealized images. The role of the screen in producing ideal subjects plays in Judy Baca's oil-stick drawings of Oliver North, in the same exhibition as Alicia and Garcia-Nakata. Formatted and hung to simulate a grid of nine televisions facing the viewer, each depicts a distinct facial expression of North's, which, according to Baca, "increasingly revealed the simultaneous creation and collapse of his hero façade" (Baca 18). Imagining this work beside Gamez's serves to remind how technological supports are not only supports but also indelible components in the construction, veneration, and denigration of various body types, body languages, and subject formations.

For Hernandez, identification with an exploited historical figure provided the subject of her work, a series of largescale portraits in which she takes on the role of Julia Pastrana. Pastrana has been a recurring press figure since the nineteenth century, when she was heavily traveled and sensationally touted by her manager husband as the “ugliest woman in the world.”<sup>15</sup> In 2013, Pastrana and her much-delayed burial near her birthplace in Sinaloa, Mexico, were the subject of a *New York Times* article (Wilson 2013). Reading the article, Hernandez found herself identifying with Pastrana’s marginalized status premised on her physical appearance, her body’s distance from conventionally lauded types. Hernandez used oral prosthetics and attached hair to her face and body in order to simulate the two conditions that shaped Pastrana’s appearance: generalized hypertrichosis lanuginosa (body hair) and gingival hyperplasia (protruding mouth). The portraits show Pastrana/Hernandez as she might have appeared after or before a show, half-dressed in typical nineteenth-century fashion in a space suggesting a dressing room. Again, and as in Gamez’s piece, solitude features as a necessary stage for the preparation of a subject ultimately meant for spectacular consumption, whether by desiring gazes in the streets of San Anto, or in the circuses and carnivals of nineteenth-century United States and Europe.

The article about Pastrana’s burial also notes the many animal tropes mapped onto her body, including comparisons to bears and gorillas. This simultaneous dehumanization and animalization appear to have struck a chord with artist Eva Garcia as well. Her *Body/Culture* contribution was a tripartite self-portrait. The central figure is the artist wearing a tool belt, holding a nail menacingly upright in her closed fist, with dark eye makeup and teased and feathered hair exceeding the upper edge of the frame. Flanking her are two panels with charcoal images of gorillas. While these are above-the-shoulder close-ups, the feature most prominent is not the faces of the gorillas but their richly textured hair, which uncannily echoes the tones and patterns of Garcia’s coif in the central picture. Reappropriating the reduction of women of color to subhuman status via animal tropes, Hernandez and Garcia produce images elevating the markers of those reductions into the history of portraiture, a branch of painting and photography that not only takes sitters’ humanity for granted but historically has marked them as exceptional figures in the building of civilization. Without ignoring the histories of dehumanization, without assimilating, these works nonetheless restore dignity to those who have been historically degraded.

In her essay contribution to the *Body/Culture* catalog, Amalia Mesa-Bains describes rasquache “bodily stylizations” deployed in figurative work by the Chicana/o artists in the show as “armour against the larger society” (1990, 9).<sup>16</sup> Castillo, for her part, did precisely that in *Ruda Phat*, manifesting the energy of body-shaming micro-aggressions in sculpture and displaying the results in photography. This energy, rendered in stuffing and fabric, accretes into a surreal suit of armor, both protective and inhibitive of the artist’s body. While appearing a burden, the growing suit also provides a place of solitude in its interior, where Castillo can concentrate toward building self-confidence amidst an environment not always amenable to the task (as she observed in an e-mail communication to me on August 4, 2016). Viewers progressively saw sculptural representations of the micro-aggressions overtake Castillo’s chest and face. The series might appear comical, bulbous and awkward as the accretions are, if Castillo’s expression in the series of photographs were not so forcefully conveying seriousness.

### **YLA 19: Y, Qué?/Mexic-Arte Museum/Austin, TX/Summer 2014**

In Texas, the annual *Young Latino Artists* exhibition at Mexic-Arte Museum in Austin provides a significant platform for emerging artists, often functioning as the make-or-break moment that may thrust them to new levels of prominence. As eagerly awaited as the artist roster every year is the appointment of the curator. In 2014, MRC was selected for the role, positioning them anew in the matrix of art production and exhibition in Texas and in Chicana/o art. Bringing their unapologetic approach to this task, they immediately determined that all invited artists would be women (they did not have to be Chicana, however). Texas art press made much of the shift from a show whose title historically read “Latino,” with the masculine “o,” to exclusively “Latina.” In the same performative linguistic vein as their group name, MRC’s title for the exhibition, *Y, Qué?*, dares audiences to question the bluntness of its main criteria.

I began by considering Chicana/o art through exhibition history and now return to that line of thought through *Y, Qué?*, while also remaining in the archives. In February of 1993, Ybarra-Frausto was copied on a letter addressed to Elisabeth Sussman from Chon Noriega. At the time, Ybarra-Frausto was in his post at the Rockefeller Foundation, and Noriega—who, recall, was one of the curators of *Phantom Sightings*—was a young assistant professor at UCLA, where he continues today. Sussman was a curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art. The letter came as the watershed 1993 Whitney Biennial opened. Noriega had served as an advisor to the project, making a substantial presentation to Sussman and her curatorial colleagues in April the year before. In five pages and a professed spirit of camaraderie, Noriega expresses overall appreciation for Sussman’s achievement while also voicing concerns around the low number of Latino artists included. The concern is not solely based on numbers but on contextual and theoretical framing of works by artists of color, especially in relation to notions of Americanness. Noriega writes:

The new approach would consist of a changing set of multiple aesthetics able to discern and evaluate the diverse cultural practices within the nation.

What this requires, in a practical sense, is a commitment to seek out and include artists whose work does not necessarily “make sense” within the accepted aesthetic genealogies and cutting edges of “American” art, without also reducing these artists’ work to a barometer of—in the words of the exhibition announcement—“social, cultural and political concerns.” What I am worried about here is that the first significant inclusion of racial minorities in the Biennial Exhibition occurs within a context in which their art becomes recuperable within the categories of the “political” and the “folk,” categories that are easily dismissed as tangential to real art, real aesthetics; in short, the formalist debates over modernism/postmodernism. (Noriega 1993)

The low numbers are an important factor in missing the opportunity to make the shift described above, because without more Latino participants it is impossible, according to Noriega, to convey a “sense of an aesthetics-in-process that has critical mass, intertextual associations, internal complexity, and, above all, considerable range.”

*Y, Qué?* vindicated, at least on a Texas-sized scale if not a full-blown American one, Noriega’s post-op analysis of the 1993 Whitney Biennial. The potential heavy-handedness of MRC’s explicit mujer-centric parameters within an exhibition already premised on exclusively showing work by Latina/o artists dissolves in the face of the works themselves. For instance, there are some startlingly nuanced manipulations of the wall-to-floor relationship that threads through “debates over modernism/postmodernism,” demonstrating Noriega’s claim to intertextuality: Audrya Flores’s text-laden bedsheets emerging from large-format collages; the knit nude suits of las Hermanas Iglesias projecting from the wall, suspended at the end of brackets typically associated with the hardware one finds in a department store, not to mention their piñata,

which incites the thought that it might be fun to go back to a suspended Alexander Calder or Bruce Nauman work and find out if they contain any candy; and Nanibah Chacon's semi-gridlike arrangement of abstract animal and plant images around a brown woman figure painted onto the wall, framed by a dual red-and-black stripe that makes contact with the floor at its terminus. In their selection of works, MRC demonstrates their inheritance and digestion of the concerns raised by Noriega over twenty years prior. Here was an exhibition of work that resisted being "only about" women, identity, politics, or race in the end, though that may have been where it began. This was identity deployed as a starting point and not a conclusion, open and invigorating as it proved to be to many lines of art history. This is what MRC, in their brazen identity-based claims, was asserting all along.

### The "a" and the "x"

Currently, the fields of Latina/o and Chicana/o studies, and the cultures more broadly, are vetting the emerging "x," as in "Chicanx" and "Latinx." This attempt to reform a Spanish language convention, rooted in a binary gender system of masculine-and-feminine languaging, is in large part due to simultaneous international discussions around trans- and non-gender conforming lives. That these conversations coincide with the end of MRC's run as a collective of Chicanas is somehow fitting, though not in the sense that their *mujerisma* is outdated and a Chicanx art will emerge to moves us "forward." For there is little in the work of MRC that would want to close off the possibilities of the "x" for the sake of some essential womanism. Chicana, Chicano, and the coming Chicanx art should not be viewed as a progressive sequence, one more politically sound than the last. This only rehearses the logics of classification, exclusion, and domination fundamental to the oppression of Chicana/o/xs in the first place. Moving into new realms of meaning and digging into the still present material—potential weapons—generated by preceding and living elders are tactics that improve conditions for making art, living life. Not all of MRC's projects have been addressed here. This is only a beginning of the analysis required to unpack and mobilize the contributions it made as a collective to art history and to those invested in Chicana/o/x subjectivities. This fuller analysis will require that their papers enter the archives, to be physically preserved, yes, but as importantly, to be available. To be the confetti for the next generation's epic *pachanga*.

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### Notes

1. To reflect the *caló* of Spanish and English that is typical of many Tejana/o speaking habits, including mine and that of the *mujeres* of MRC, words in Spanish are not italicized because they would not be marked as exceptional in speech in this context. Definitions will be offered however, for unfamiliar audiences. "Gente" means "people"; "chisme" is "gossip"; "pachanga" is a big, raucous party; and "hocicona" is a derogatory term—counter-coopted by Chicana feminists—meant for "loudmouthed women" who exceed their proper roles and assert themselves inappropriately.

2. The gravity of this particular exhibition is aptly encapsulated in comments from the *Los Angeles Times* art critic, Christopher Knight: "In fact, 'Phantom Sightings,' which ends Sept. 1, could easily pass for a Whitney Biennial. Come to think of it, I wish it were the Whitney Biennial" (Knight).

3. “Raza” translates as “race,” and is another term for Chicana/o people as a group and an idea. *Phantom Sightings* curator Howard N. Fox elaborates further in his characterization of a performative, theatrical framework for describing work reflective of the desire to recognize difference without relying on identity politics as previously defined: “The reasons are myriad, but this performative representation of identity surely reflects the remarkable creative vitality and intellectual challenge that animates and supercharges the restless American culture of diversity.... In it all, they deny an essentialist notion of identity, refusing to either codify themselves as members of neatly defined ethnic or cultural groups or to declare a magic immunity to such aspects of individuality” (Fox 76).

4. There are *many* more exhibitions, publications, and events that populate the history of Chicana/o art. For my purposes here—laying out the broadest stakes in Chicana/o art to give the reader a historical sense of the meaning of MRC’s claims—I reference the two I find myself returning to again and again, the two that have proven themselves as anchors mooring research into the many other significant moments in this art history. Conveniently, both catalogues conclude with timelines leading up to their moments, where those events, publications, and significant figures are cited. Not included in these timelines are other field-shifting exhibitions in recent years, such as Cheech Marin’s well-traveled exhibition of paintings, *Chicano Visions*, and Ondine Chavoya and Rita Gonzalez’s focused *ASCO: Elite of the Obscure, A Retrospective, 1972–1987*.

5. Noriega lays out three phantoms in the bulk of his contribution to the catalog: “The first phantom calls itself Chicano art. This category produces something that can be *seen*, that has even generated its own canon and corresponding debates, but that otherwise does not *exist* in the art world, from the museum to the academy” (2008, 20; original emphases). “The second phantom is art by self-identified Chicanos who refuse the category, even if they also engage many of the same critical issues. This work speaks in an international idiom, but it also participates in the local environment. It is the phantom of the first phantom” (23). “There is a final phantom, and that is the one lurking in the title of this exhibition. It is the phantom of the first two phantoms, and it is heard in the homonyms for *sighting*:

Siting: To situate or locate something in a particular place or position.

Citing: To mention something or somebody as an example to support an argument.

These are the actions that turn the apparitional into something real (or social), that locate it within a context and reference it within discourse. Without such siting and citing, we fail to see how the artists themselves engage—intellectually, aesthetically—the very artistic genealogy from which they have been excluded” (30; original emphasis).

6. A footnote included in Gonzalez’s contribution to the essay points to the anxieties encountered by the curators in this regard: “Even though *Phantom Sightings* purports to deconstruct past curatorial models for framing identity, a number of artists rejected the possibility that such an exhibition could escape limited readings, and thus refused the curators’ invitation to participate” (Gonzalez 2008, 72n15).

7. There are other collections with which this could be performed, notably the Shifra Goldman papers at University of California, Santa Barbara; the Sandra Cisneros literary archives at Texas State’s Wittliff Collection; the Gloria E. Anzaldúa papers at University of Texas at Austin’s Benson Library; and many of the collections cared for by the Chicano Studies Resource Center at the University of California, Los Angeles. There are more in the pipeline. Perhaps this will inspire others to undertake similarly honed readings of contemporary art through archival materials.

8. Though worn by Hernandez, the skirt was created by another MRC member, Sarah Castillo.

9. “Domesticana” is a term and concept formulated by Amalia Mesa-Bains, reflecting on her affirmative and critical engagement with the popular tradition of Mexican and Mexican American altar-making that characterizes her practice. She writes: “A ceremonial aesthetic has grown from this process of critical invention that characterizes my work. Through the use of bricole miniaturization, the use of domestic objects, Catholic imagery, natural and organic ephemera, mirrors and dispersal, I have pursued a personal and collective narrative of Chicano/Mexicano history. The adoption of this form and process for more than twenty years has produced a politicizing spirituality that has served my community and given meaning to my life. In my own work a feminine Rasquachismo or Domesticana, as I call it, is a driving force in creating a critical space that is simultaneously contestatory and passionately affirming of our histories as women and our situation of struggle” (Mesa-Bains 1995).

10. Acosta is popularly known for his friendship with Hunter S. Thompson. He is the inspiration for the Dr. Gonzo character in Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, which itself was inspired by a trip Thomson and Acosta took to Las Vegas together (Doss).

11. “Panocha” means “pussy.”

12. Though deployments of the term “la raza” fall at widely varying points along the political spectrum, sociologist Maxine Baca Zinn’s 1970 explanation remains a succinct working definition: “A guiding principle of the Chicano movement that cuts across specific organizational goals and tactics is the preservation and maintenance of family loyalty. Ideologically, this principle is expressed by two concepts: *la familia de la Raza* and *carnalismo*. La familia de la Raza unites Chicanos to struggle as a family tied together by carnalismo, the spirit of brotherhood. Organizationally, these concepts take the form of total family participation in ongoing struggles for racial justice” (Zinn 415).

13. “Joda” means “party.”

14. “Lonjas” means “rolls of flesh.”

15. Pastrana’s “own husband called her a ‘bear woman.’ An 1854 advertisement in *The New York Times* said she was the ‘link between mankind and the ourang-outang.’ She became known in the popular imagination during the mid-19th century as ‘the ugliest woman in the world.’ After she died from complications of childbirth, her body and the body of her baby appeared for decades in ‘freak’ exhibitions throughout Europe” (Wilson 2013). The article also describes Pastrana being toured while alive and references contemporary press descriptions of her and the show.

16. Mesa-Bains is a fundamental figure in the field of Chicana/o art for both her artistic contributions and her critical scholarship and curation. Since the 1970s, her immersive and altar-based installations have productively troubled established boundaries between sacred ritual and art. Her curatorial and critical work has expanded the field significantly, generating concepts such as “domesticana,” rasquachismo revised through a feminist rereading. Among many other honors, she has received a Distinguished Fellowship from the MacArthur Foundation.

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