

INTRODUCTION

CHICANO LIFE AND COMMUNITY, LIKE VIRTUALLY ALL CONTEMPORARY sociohistorical communities and their particular events and movements, have been extensively photographed. Fixed and moving images of whatever realm of contemporary life are so absolutely overwhelming, and casual materials, journalistic reportages, and formal cultural production are so abundant, that it is often difficult to know where to begin in assembling a sample of illustrative material. And as United States Latinos move more and more into the American mainstream, coverage intensifies, often bringing into question the extent to which it makes any sense to hold on to ideological or ethnic boundaries. Concomitantly, the sheer volume of artistic production generated by those who self-identify as United States Latinos, or Hispanics, or Mexican Americans, or Chicano, as well as an impressive range of alternative designations, has now generated a significant infrastructure of critical institutions and scholarship.

Yet it is striking that major sources on Chicano cultural production, to which I will now essentially refer, since it is the focus of this monograph, have emphasized production in the plastic arts and rarely include photography as an important cultural genre, despite how much of Chicano life has been captured in the multiple languages of photography. The last major exhibition of Chicano art, represented by the catalog *Phantom Sightings* (Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2008), contains very little in the way of photographic texts. The exhibition was significantly identified as directed toward the enormous visibility of Mexican Chicano life after the monumental Chicano Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which struggled so much

for visibility and legitimacy. Without question, the plastic arts that *Contemporary Chicana and Chicano Art* features are brilliant in their originality of conception and the competence of their execution, and the institutional representation of Chicano photography is not helped much by the fact that there have been so few comprehensive exhibits, despite shows devoted to individual artists.¹ In 2002, the Heard Museum in Phoenix, Arizona, one of the major anthropological institutions in the United States, mounted an exhibit of eight artists, *¡Picarte! Photography beyond Representation*, but the small exhibition catalog is essentially unaccounted for bibliographically, and only one of the eight artists (Ken Gonzales-Day) can be said to have attained any subsequent importance. Concomitantly, in the sort of outstanding work one would expect Claudi Carreras to identify in his survey of Latino photography, few Mexican Americans are recognized, and only one of notable stature, Stefan Ruiz.²

This study, in fact, originally set out to concern itself with United States Latino photography in general, with no particular restrictions in mind, except to deal with the most innovative work discoverable. However, it quickly devolved into an investigation of Mexican American and Chicano artists as a consequence of the natural preponderance of the material uncovered with the other controlling parameter, which was that the photography must have been published in book form (exclusive of collections such as Horacio Fernández's, which, by the way, includes no United States Latino artists). This criterion, it was felt, would ensure in some measure that focus would be only on the most recognized quality work and that the work would generally be more bibliographically available than would be the case with a reliance on websites and their attendant vagaries. The discovery of ten major artists whose work was available in this fashion quickly established the basic inventory, which then revealed that the predominant interest was on urban social and cultural issues.³ Such an emphasis is understandable when one considers how the history of the Chicano community has been marked by its increased urbanization, especially in the American Southwest, where the rural and farm roots that were so much a part of the Chicano Movement gave way to barrio life in major cities to one degree or another. But the barrio/rural disjunction cannot be an absolute one. After all, many of the traditional ways of life preserved in the barrio have their roots in a rural existence, and aspects of barrio life have much that can be viewed as resistance to or critical response to the larger urban contexts in which the barrio is to be found. Yet there can be no question that the photographic record that comes together in these chapters often privileges the hegemonic urban nature of contemporary American social life beyond the particularities of ethnic divisions.

My interest in the analysis of this photographic record can be called

ideological and semiotic. I am interested, as a scholar of photography, in attempting to understand what gets photographed and how it situates itself in terms of overall processes of cultural self-understanding. It is not so much a question of what photographs tell us—because all photography is really an exercise in narrativity—but how they tell what they tell. To be sure, this means attending to technical questions of style and artistry, but processes of meaning are not circumscribed by the strategies and techniques of art, and have to do rather with fundamental questions of who produces meaning in a cultural text, how we go about knowing what that meaning is, and how we situate it within the sociohistorical circumstances from which cultural products arise. A photographer may have a particular story to tell and a particular range of materials with which to tell it. But the processes of meaning are independent from artistic intention in many important ways, and what actually gets told—what actually gets read by the viewer who validates the existence of a photograph at any one specific point in time—goes beyond artistic intention and, therefore, authorial containment. My readings are thus only one viewer's interaction with the texts, although it is hoped that this is a significantly cogent and informed interaction to suggest, at least, to other viewers why they should take this photography as serious artistic achievement. My goal is neither to establish a canon of Mexican American/Chicano photography nor to promote certain uses of photography. It is, instead, I hope, an intelligent account of varieties of photographic enterprise in current Mexican American cultural production that focuses on what has come to be defined as the Chicano experience. A particularly thorny issue is the decision whether to use “Mexican American” or “Chicano” as the defining adjective of this study. The arguments—historical, ideological—in favor of one or the other are both complex and contentious. Neither term is appropriate for the public self-identity of all the artists represented here: Louis Carlos Bernal, for example, belonged to a generation that was more likely to self-identify as Mexican American; Miguel Gandert, whose overall work has focused on Hispanic life in New Mexico, is more aptly characterized by the term “Nuevomexicano.” In the end, however, I chose to go with the term “Chicano,” both because it is now the most generalized academic usage and because it was the 2008 Los Angeles County Museum of Art exhibition *Phantom Sights: Art after the Chicano Movement*, with its virtual absence of photography, that initially prompted this scholarly inquiry. Moreover, since the nature of the photography examined here is its emphasis on the Chicano experience—barrio life; the sense of cultural pride and identity; a nostalgia for historical modes of individual and community life, especially that brought by forebears from Mexico; a critical stance toward the promises of the American dream; the denunciation of the injustices of the American way of life; and an over-

all commitment to dominant icons shared by those who are recognized and who self-recognize as making up the Chicano community. Thus, for example, even when Gandert does not self-identify as a Chicano—and even when so much of his photography deals with Novo-Mexican themes—his photography on mariachi music in Los Angeles, with reference to one of the icons of Chicano life in that city, the so-called Hotel Mariachi, allows us to include this body of work within the rubric of “Chicano.”

As noted, all ten photographers are studied through book-form publication, so-called photobooks and versions of them. By *photobook*, we understand a dossier of photographs, with or without accompanying text, with or without critical, exhibit, and bibliographical apparatus, on a particular issue or event signed by a specific author or collective of authors. The photobook becomes a catalog when it is tied to a particular exhibition by an author or group of authors on specific dates in specific locales; the exhibition catalog may represent a particular group of work that becomes part of a permanent museum or gallery collection. Complementing these two primary sources are the illustrated work and the critical work. In the case of the illustrated work, a work on a particular topic by a separate author is complemented by, illustrated by, the work of a particular photographer or group of photographers. The photographic images may be directly tied to the written text, although not necessarily so. Finally, the critical work is a monograph by a scholar on the work of a particular artist. The critical assessments are accompanied by examples of the artist’s work, and illustration and critical text work in tandem, with the photograph serving to validate the critical comments, while the critical comments serve to identify and contextualize the photograph, the latter being only one example of the range of work of the artist being represented by the publication.

Conventional photobooks represented in this study are those of Delilah Montoya (on women boxers), Laura Aguilar (on her urban body transposed to the Southwestern desert), José Galvez on *vatos* (brothers in the hood), and Bernal on urban barrio life, mostly in Douglas, Arizona, and Lubbock, Texas.

Exhibition catalogs discussed here feature the work of Ken Gonzales-Day (an extremely brief catalog, almost little more than a brochure), Kathy Vargas (a very large exhibition catalog), and, when viewed from a different perspective, Laura Aguilar’s photobook as well.

Several books deal with topics in Chicano barrio life and are accompanied by illustrative photography. Santino J. Rivera’s book on lowriders contains an abundant array of photographs by Art Meza; the photographs are not necessarily tied to any specific points being made in the text. Catherine L. Kurland and Enrique R. Lamadrid published a book on the Boyle Heights, Los Angeles, landmark Hotel Mariachi as part of a project

to save the building; their comments on the history of mariachi music in Los Angeles, so associated with the Hotel Mariachi, are accompanied by photographs by Miguel A. Gandert, a legendary Novo-Mexican photographer whose work deals more with Hispanic folk traditions than with urban themes. It is important to note that while the theme of mariachi music and culture links the verbal text and the photographs, the latter are not placed to illustrate specific points developed in the former, and either could have been published without the other.

Finally, in the context of the burgeoning bibliography on Chicano artists, several major names have received the attention of critical monographs. The innovative East Los Angeles action artist Henry Gamboa Jr. provides an extensive array of photographic examples of his work in the critical monograph on him, with Ramón García's exemplary study on Ricardo Valverde, who spent his life recording East Los Angeles barrio life.⁴ There is still no retrospective catalog of Valverde's extensive work, and García drew on images in the possession of the University of California, Los Angeles, Chicano Studies Research Center.

While other representations of Chicano lives may make eloquent use of photography by non-Chicanos (e.g., the Oakland Museum, *Espejo: Reflections of the Mexican American* and, recently Spencer R. Herrera's moving *Sagrado: A Photopoetics across the Chicano Homeland*, with photography by Robert Kaiser), I have chosen, in this study, to focus on the artistry of these photographers who self-identify as Chicano or Mexican American, not out of an overwhelming commitment to essentialism (which is, intellectually speaking, only of limited critical usefulness), but simply as one way, like choosing to focus on photobooks and other book-length publications, of establishing a corpus.

The grouping of the photographers here is loosely thematic. Again, it is the result of an exercise intended to define parameters rather than to engage in overarching interpretations. Thus, the first group of photographs, those by Valverde, Vargas, and Gamboa, relate to East Los Angeles, something like the ur-barrio of United States Chicano urban life; and Bernal's work focuses on barrio life in Arizona and Texas. Historically, the barrio is where Mexican Americans, who in the urban environment became Chicanos with the political movements beginning in the 1960s, anchored themselves in the major urban concentrations of the Southwest. Whereas cities like Tucson, Albuquerque, and San Antonio have especially deep Hispanic roots, megapolises like Los Angeles, Phoenix, Dallas, and Houston, although not as "Hispanic" as the former, now have significant Chicano populations that may or may not exercise significant political influence. It should not, therefore, be surprising that barrio photography is often nostalgic in nature, implying a unity of shared communal experience that can be truncated by the

social mobility that the so-called ethnic turn in American life has brought for some. And it is often a nostalgia that accompanies the destruction of barrios brought by megalopolitan growth. Three of the four photographers in this section evoke a deeply emotional, if not simply nostalgic, sense of the barrio. Certainly this is the case of the two oldest representatives, now deceased: Louis Carlos Bernal (Tucson and Lubbock) and Ricardo Valverde (Los Angeles). There is also a sense of nostalgic loss in Kathy Vargas's work, especially with its feminist dimensions: images of women are not absent from the work of Bernal and Valverde, but they do not receive the psychological investment in women's lives that Vargas's images contain. Gamboa, by contrast, is very much a photographer of the movement, and his subjects are very much barrio rebels, defiant social subjects who refuse to be contained by social discipline, seeking as they do transgressive stances around the rallying cry of *asco* (revulsion, nausea), a term adopted by Gamboa and his associates in response to alleged spectator reaction to their work (*ASCO* 37). Yet it seems equally to refer to the authoritarian strategies of containment of Chicanos and other minority groups and to the texture of life in the postmodern city that the latter emigrate to and are alleged to invade.

The second grouping deals with individual subjectivities, especially questions regarding gender conformity. Laura Aguilar's photographs of her own body in the desert relate to one woman's attempt to take a body defined by urban parameters (woman, overweight, lesbian) into a presumably hostile space in order to reinscribe it with meaning—in this case, a post-urban one in which there is a gendered disengagement with the hostile masculinism of contemporary urban space. Aguilar's photography is an audacious rejection of any conventional belief in the idea that portrait photography must be flattering, that nature photography be inspiring, or that the conjunction of the individual and nature suggest a benevolent relationship. Rather, Aguilar's photography trenchantly defies such conventional beliefs by exposing, quite literally, a body that many might see as repulsive and that contrasts with the images of traditional Chicano femininity as captured by the masculinist gaze of most of the male photographers represented in this study. Gamboa's work, centered on the proposition of *asco*, might be a singular exception, but female subjectivity is infrequent in this imagery.

In the case of José Galvez's study of *vatos* ("brothers in the hood"), there is a complex geometry of gender conformity. Anchored as it is in Luis Alberto Urrea's memorable poem "Hymn to Vatos Who Will Never Be in a Poem," Galvez's images evoke paradigmatic instantiations of Chicano masculinity. At the same time, it is difficult to view these photographs as a foreground of Chicano masculinity without considering the dynamics of homosociality—male-male bonding as part of the ongoing process of gender conformation/conformity—and a certain melancholy associable with that bonding and

its relationship with female subjectivity. This is not about homoaffectivity, at least no more than homosociality may necessarily include a measure of same-sex affection and, along an axis of affective intensification, homoeroticism. Rather, it is about the process of being a man in the world of Chicano life, a process that Galvez is not reluctant to see with a measure of critical humor and attributable pathos.

A third section deals with Chicano cultural perspectives. One could create an inventory of major *culturemes* (cultural topics that can be invested with ideological meaning) and correlate them with the artistic production of individual artists. Here, four are particularly dealt with because they are the central point of reference of a specific photographic project. For example, Miguel A. Gandert focuses on mariachi music, a phenomenon of vast dimensions. In this case, his images accompany a book on the efforts to promote the historic preservation of the Hotel Mariachi in downtown Los Angeles, a hotel in which many itinerant mariachi musicians have resided. While Gandert's images do not directly correlate with the document on historical preservation, they illustrate the urban presence in Los Angeles of mariachi music, which has its roots in traditional Mexican music, often rural or *ranchero* (from *ranchos*, the *hacienda* or farmhouse). Thus, Gandert photographs the musicians and their audiences in public spaces around the Hotel Mariachi, enhancing the visual ambience, so to speak, of the prose discussions of the hotel. Such public displays of mariachi contrast with the appearance in commercial (e.g., Mexican restaurants and bars) or domestic (e.g., birthdays, anniversaries, coming-out parties) spaces that are their typical venues, in addition to staged concerts and competitions for the more successful or accomplished groups. Much the same sort of collocation between text and image occurs with Art Meza's work on lowriders, a unique and distinctive feature of the role of the vehicle in Chicano urban life.

Delilah Montoya's images of female boxers might well have fitted in the section of individual subjectivities for the depth of her perceptions regarding the participation of women in a sport that is insistently male-dominated and therefore masculinist in its parameters. However, boxing is a *cultureme* of Chicano life for the opportunities it has provided young people to aspire to acclaim and, perhaps, a measure of fortune. There can be little doubt that Montoya, through her regendered consideration of boxing, reaffirms the capital importance of this sport in Chicano social life.

The final project to be discussed in this section deals with a grim historical fact of Chicano life: ritualized murder at the hands of the agents of Anglo racism. Focusing firmly on the interaction between the individual and the photographic subject, Gonzales-Day complements a historian's project on the lynching of Mexican Americans with a complex mediation of visibility and invisibility in the dreadful chapter of lynching (in general of

African Americans but specifically for Gonzales-Day, Mexican Americans) in American history and on the limits of the portrayal of the horrible deaths of others. These photographs are virtually minimalist in nature, despite the degree of immense human cruelty they represent. This is because Gonzales-Day eschews the emphasis on documentary photographs of lynched human subjects that necessarily accompany his research publications as a historian in favor of the material traces of lynching as a historical event: the hanging trees that survive on the landscape beyond the event itself and the disappearances of the martyred bodies. Or, in one case, the photographer dwells on the body of a young Chicano male who has survived the history of lynching or who has not yet been lynched by any of the processes of murderous racism that are post-lynching correlates of that practice (e.g., police killings in alleged self-defense).

One could argue that there is a distinct sense of hybridity in this study, because of the lack of uniformity across the published book sources used and because these essays do not constitute a comprehensive history of Chicano photography of the sort that might provide a unified chronology and yield a unified “vision” of the Chicano experience through the medium of photography. Such a comprehensive, historical overview certainly needs to be undertaken, and in part my goal here is to spark the initiative for such an undertaking.

Yet since all cultural production is hybrid (witness the enormous range of photographic languages represented in the analyses below), I have always had a commitment to a hybrid model of criticism, which means bringing forth important forms of cultural production, subjecting them to intense analytical scrutiny, and giving them an engaging sociohistorical context. My hope is that readers will become, in turn, sufficiently engaged with the material to appreciate its importance and that some among them will begin the process of comprehensive study that the material demands. The validity of the undertaking represented here, with what it may constitute in terms of the hybridity of sources that have in common a published photobook, can only arise from what I hope will be the judiciousness of the interpretive readings of select works I provide. Thus, I repeat, I have not set out to produce a documentary history of Chicano photography, as much as such a history would be in order. This could hardly be reasonably undertaken solely by considering ten artists whose work is brought together on the basis of its availability in book form: the corpus would necessarily be far more extensive. Indeed, it might be more appropriate in historical terms to look at Hispanic or Latino artists as a whole and not just those who are Chicano-identified. Nor has my goal been to assess the reception, impact, or reputation of these ten artists, insofar as that would involve biographical and historical dimensions that do not enter into the intent of this study.

Rather, as a scholar on Latin American cultural production and how it goes about constructing artistic interpretations of issues of metropolitan life, my interest lies in attempting to grasp the ideological and semiotic processes at work in select photographs. Although matters such as influence and reception are important in understanding the role of photography in a sociopolitical context, they are necessarily crucial parameters in the artistic analysis of texts. Thus, it remains for other scholars to organize an interpretation of the sociopolitical role of photography in the Chicano historical experience and in the goals and fortunes of various Chicano movements. My specific interest here is for this study to stand on the merits of understanding photographs as powerful cultural artifacts. These artifacts are not, of course, independent of their sociopolitical contexts, but their importance and eloquence is not, ultimately, primarily determined by treating them foremost as ancillary signs of those contexts.

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