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Latinx Art Got More Visibility Than Ever in 2021. What Will Change Going Forward?



BY MAXIMILIANO DURÓN December 30, 2021 3:15pm



The end of 2021 also marks the end of the traveling retrospective for acclaimed lesbian Chicana photographer **Laura Aguilar**, who for decades turned her lens on Latinx, queer, and working-class communities of East Los Angeles and the San Gabriel Valley. That exhibition, curated by Sybil Venegas, first opened at the Vincent Price Art Museum in 2017 as part of the Getty Foundation's Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA initiative, which that year focused on Latinx and Latin American art. Since its opening, **Aguilar's exhibition** has traveled to Miami, Chicago, and New York. Although that show never made it to a mainstream venue, between 2019 and 2020, the Getty Museum, VPAM, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art acquired dozens of works by Aguilar, and in 2021 alone, 15 museums—including the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the Guggenheim Museum, and the Art Institute of Chicago—bought at least one print by her.

These acquisitions may be a good barometer to track the success that Latinx art (used here to describe artists based in the United States, primarily but not limited to those born here or having arrived as children, with a heritage to Latin America and the Caribbean) is currently having within the art world. The fight for recognition has been ongoing since it was initiated in the late 1960s by artists, activists, and curators, and right now presents what some might call a moment for Latinx art. Characterizing it as a moment is problematic, however, as that would make it seem like a fleeting trend. It would also dismiss the fact that Latinx people have been an important part of this country and will continue to be as the Latinx population in this country continues to grow. (In 2020, Latinxs accounted for 19 percent of the U.S. population, up from 5 percent in 1970.)



Laura Aguilar, *Clothed/Un clothed #20*, 1992.
THE LAURA AGUILAR TRUST OF 2016

This shift is still not enough—it might never be. But things do seem to be changing, and if museums—and the art world as a whole—want to continue to be relevant, this is an audience that needs to see itself represented across the art world. As curator Pilar Tompkins Rivas writes in essay for a standout issue of *Aperture* this year given over to Latinx photography, “As the canons of art and history must be pushed to meet the world we live in, so too must the systems that support its visual documentation—from academia, to museums, to the market, and beyond.”

What the **Museum of Modern Art** in New York chooses to show tends to be telling, and it was notable that, as part of a rehang in the fall, two significant rooms were given over to Latinx artists: one gallery devoted to Pepón Osorio, the other to **Guadalupe Maravilla**. Not far from the custom-built room for Monet’s *Water Lilies* is Osorio’s groundbreaking 1995 video and mixed-media installation *Badge of Honor*, which looks at how incarceration affects not just those imprisoned but their families as well. In the work, an incarcerated father (whose image is projected onto a bare yellow cell) has a conversation with his teenage son (whose image is shown in a bedroom bedecked in classic ’90s teen accoutrements). The conversation isn’t imagined. Rather, it was a real one mediated by Osorio, who traveled between Northern State Prison in Newark, New Jersey, where the father was imprisoned at the time, and the son’s home over the course of several weeks.



Pepón Osorio, *Badge of Honor*, 1995, installation view at Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2017.
COURTESY LACMA AND MOMA

Unfortunately, this powerful work is neither shown well (the gallery’s acoustics were not suited for this kind of work) nor properly contextualized sufficiently (the wall text was cursory at best). After all, why exhibit it nearby works made decades beforehand? But you couldn’t say the same for MoMA’s elegant gallery for Maravilla, titled “Luz y fuerza” (Hope and strength). Here, Maravilla, who was also the subject of a solo show at the Socrates Sculpture Park in Queens this summer, presents various examples from “Disease Thrower” mixed-media sculptural series, which he describes as “healing machines” that can be activated by sound baths that the artist has been staging at various intervals since the show opened. These works are complex and visually rich, and have gravitas, particularly in their installation here at MoMA.



Still, there is a dearth of Latinx art just about everywhere else in the museum. “Masters of Popular Painting,” a gallery focused on the work of self-taught artists working during the early and mid-20th century, excludes Mexican American artist Martín Ramírez, whose work is contemporary to that time. “Divided States of America,” about social unrest and the art that came out of it in the 1960s and ’70s, is devoid of any Latinx art at all. Countless Latinx artists, from Rupert Garcia and Carmen Lomas Garza to Los Four and ASCO, could have been included, though MoMA hasn’t collected their work. The goal isn’t representation—it’s to tell a fuller history of art. To discuss protest movements in the late ’60s and ’70s without discussing the Chicano Movement or the Chicano Blowouts of 1968 (often considered a pivotal year with regard to student activism around the world) is an harmful and ultimately despicable form of erasure. Similarly, a gallery titled “Picturing America” leaves out images of Latinx people as well as paintings or photographs by Latinx artists. The curators would do well to thumb through *Aperture’s* “Latinx” issue or Elizabeth Ferrer’s *Latinx Photography in the United States: A Visual History*, both of which detail early photographic contributions by Latinx artists.



Other museums seem to have done the work institutions like MoMA should be doing. At the end of last year, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston opened its new Kinder building, which came with the institution's first-ever dedicated permanent collection galleries for Latinx art. (Previously, the museum would rotate its Latin American and Latinx art holdings in a poorly lit basement gallery.) Now, work by the likes of Amalia Mesa-Bains, Teresa Margolles, Tania Bruguera, Tanya Aguiñiga, Luis Jimenez, Camilo Ontiveros, Jay Lynn Gomez, and others are afforded the same space as pieces by Warhol, Rauschenberg, Johns, Turrell, and others. The Blanton Museum of Art in Austin, Texas, has long prided itself on its Latin American art collection, and it, too, has now begun to place a greater emphasis on Latinx art. Nowhere was this more apparent than in its small survey of the groundbreaking Chicano sculptor Luis Jiménez, whose work has never been the subject of a posthumous retrospective in the 15 years since his untimely death in 2006.

Within New York, some museums did offer Latinx artists prominent displays. At PS1, artist and activist Djali Brown-Cepeda staged "Nuevayorkinos," a show about how various organizations and activists fought to secure \$2.1 billion for the Excluded Workers Fund, which provided money to people who had lost income during the pandemic but had previously been unable to receive any relief because of their immigration status. And BRIC mounted "Latinx Abstract," a modest but important survey of abstraction by Latinx artists that brought together the work of Candida Alvarez, Glendalys Medina, Freddy Rodríguez, Sarah Zapata, and others. But nowhere was the re-embrace of Latinx art in New York felt more acutely than at El Museo del Barrio in Upper Manhattan.

El Museo's relaunched La Trienal exhibition, curated by Rodrigo Moura, Susanna V. Temkin, and artist Elia Alba, felt like a rebirth for an institution roiled by protests over a lack of Latinx art at the museum during the past couple years. The vast array of works included standout pieces by Francis Almendárez, Fontaine Capel, Collective Magpie, Dominique Duroseau, Justin Favela, María Gaspar, Xime Izquierdo Ugaz, Esteban Jefferson, the Museum of Pocket Art, Sandy Rodriguez, and Edra Soto. This exhibition felt like new life had been breathed into the institution, as it returned to its roots of supporting emerging Latinx talents look before mainstream institutions paid attention. Hopefully, the museum continues to nurture this refreshing energy.

A similar tectonic shift could be seen taking place at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C., where **E. Carmen Ramos** organized "iPrinting the Revolution! The Rise and Impact of Chicano Graphics, 1965 to Now." That show **brought together hundreds** of graphic prints by Chicano artists as a way to show the ongoing influence of the Chicano Movement. In May, Ramos was appointed at the chief curator of the National Gallery of Art, making her the first woman and the first person of color to hold the position. That same month, the Whitney Museum in New York announced a promotion and endowed curatorial post for Marcela Guerrero, who has reshaped how the museum presents and engages with Latinx artists.

On the commercial front, a handful of galleries have been influential in presenting the work of Latinx artists in New York. Ruiz-Healy Art, which also has a space in San Antonio, showed the work of Texas-based Latinx artists, including Carlos Rosales-Silva and César A. Martínez this year. Calderón gallery opened this fall with a mission to showcase the work of Latinx artists in New York. Similarly, young curator Kiara Cristina Ventura's roving Processa arts space now has a permanent home in the Queens's Ridgewood neighborhood. Ortuzar Projects mounted an important exhibition of Chicano artist Joey Terrill; it was one of the first shows Terrill had had in the city in decades.



Installation view of "Joey Terrill, Once Upon A Time: Paintings, 1981–2015," 2021, at Ortuzar Projects, New York.
PHOTO: STEVEN PANECCASIO/COURTESY ORTUZAR PROJECTS

Galleries like these can provide crucial support to artists, and so, too, can awards. This year, the Ford and Mellon Foundations partnered with the U.S. Latinx Art Forum, and launched what looks to be the **most significant monetary support** for Latinx art in a generation—or possibly ever. Spearheaded by two Latinx art curators now working in philanthropy, Rocío Aranda-Alvarado (at Ford) and Deborah Cullen-Morales (at Mellon), the Latinx Art Visibility Initiative is comprised of various components that will unfold over the next five years. It includes a major new artist fellowship through which 75 artists will each win \$50,000 fellowships over the next five years. Among the first 15 winners were Carolina Caycedo, Coco Fusco, Miguel Luciano, Carlos Martiel, and Juan Sánchez.

Tanya Aguiñiga won the Heinz Family Foundation's annual \$250,000 artist awards, and Guadalupe Maravilla won the \$100,000 Lise Wilhelmsen Art Award from the Henie Onstad Kunstsenter in Norway, which will mount an exhibition of his art next year. United States Artists awarded its \$50,000 unrestricted grants to a bevy of Latinx artists like Naima Ramos-Chapman, Carmelita Tropicana, Ofelia Esparza, Maria Gaspar, and Daniel Lind-Ramos, who was also the recipient of a MacArthur "Genius" Fellowship this year, marking the first time a Latinx artist has been honored with one in over a decade.



Yolanda López, from the series "Tableaux Vivant," 1978.
PHOTOGRAPHY: SUSAN MOGUL, COURTESY YOLANDA LÓPEZ

As with Aguilar's passing months after her retrospective opened, **Yolanda M. López died** just one month before her first museum survey in decades was set to open at the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, in the city where she made so much of her consequential work in the 1970s. The loss of López to the Latinx arts community, especially the Chicana community, cannot be understated. As one of the members of the first generation of Chicana artists, López helped our community, in particular women, imagine new possibilities for themselves. She reclaimed the iconography of the Virgen de Guadalupe, and poignantly asked: How do we see ourselves?

I fear that many artists of her generation will pass away before any museums mount major retrospectives, but I'm also hopeful for what 2022 will bring. Already, there are some exciting projects on the horizon. The Mistake Room in Los Angeles will organize a series of exhibitions over the next two years that will look at the complexities and nuances within Latinx art. That series will culminate in a citywide biennial-style show titled "Wetlines," which is itself a reclamation of a slur used by Cesar Chavez against undocumented workers.

Judith F. Baca, who is currently the subject of a retrospective at the Museum of Latin American Art in Long Beach, California, curated by Alessandra Moctezuma and Gabriela Urteaga, is also due for greater visibility next year. In 2022, her *World Wall* mural will be the subject of a major survey at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, and over the next several years, she'll be at work with a team of collaborators and community input to extend the imagery for her iconic *Great Wall of Los Angeles*, **thanks to a \$5 million grant** from the Mellon Foundation. Meanwhile, her contemporary, Amalia Mesa-Bains, will be the subject of a retrospective at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive in 2023, curated by Laura E. Pérez and María Esther Fernández. In July, Duke University Press will publish a new volume of essays, edited by Pérez and Ann Marie Leimer, on the groundbreaking work of Northern California-based Chicana artist Consuelo Jimenez Underwood; it will be the first such book on her pioneering textile and multimedia art. And in May, the long-awaited Cheech Marin Center for Chicano Art & Culture will open in Riverside, California, under the artistic direction of Fernández.

In thinking toward what must happen, I'm reminded of something **Cheech Marin told** me earlier this year: "My mantra during all these years has been: You can't love or hate Chicano art unless you see it. ... I've heard it said all the time: 'I didn't know what Chicano art was—but I liked this.' Well, that was the goal: to get as many people as possible to see Chicano art."