

Our America The Latino Presence in American Art

By E. Carmen Ramos

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Reviewed by Susan Noyes Platt

E. Carmen Ramos, the brilliant young curator of Latino Art at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, declares that Latino artists are part of the mainstream culture of the United States; she proposes to integrate the history of American art. "Our America: The Latino Presence in American Art" both an exhibition will travel all over the United States. Its timing is perfect. As our reactionary politicians are demonizing immigrants forced to come here by free trade policies which are wiping out their living at home, the exhibition and its magnificent book partner, offer sophisticated works of art by immigrants, and descendants of immigrants, that declare that Latino/as are immeasurably enriching our country. This project primarily emphasizes artists whose roots are in Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, and Mexico. Artists living in the United States from Central America, as well as the rest of Latin America, are all part of the story as well, of course, although those immigrations have come later and therefore the museum holdings are smaller.

"Our America" is the title of an essay by the famous Cuban intellectual José Martí who spent a good deal of time thinking about the solutions to imperialism and the independence of Cuba. "America," for him, refers to the entire hemisphere, not just to the US, a fact people in this country frequently forget.

José Martí wanted a revolution for Cuba to come from people who understood the inner nature of Cuba, who were not conditioned by European perspectives. He believed in the US model of cultural blending. Using this title for the exhibition and the book points to the thesis that the artists in the exhibition are both distinctly themselves as well as part of a larger culture to which they contribute.

The book consists of two major essays. The eminent Latino art historian Tomàs Ybarra-Frausto provides an abbreviated historical overview in "Primeros Pasos: First Steps Toward an Operative Construct of Latino Art" starting with the "Spanish Legacy" and concluding with "The Global Present." While acknowledging great differences, he points to language, colonization, immigration and "racialization" as shared among Latinos. E. Carmen Ramos takes on "What is Latino about American Art?" Latino artists are not isolated and speaking only to each other, but they are "peers dialoguing with other American artists and their national conversation." Therefore these artists engage Civil Rights and Identity as part of a context, as knowledgeable artists working in mainstream styles including minimalism, conceptual art, pop, realism, surrealism, etc.

Intriguingly, the book does away with most of the (how many) subsections of the exhibition. Ramos includes only three "Reframing American History," "Signs of the Popular," and "Defying Categories." The first two categories easily lend themselves to her project as she demonstrated the ways in which Latino artists made 'history' and "Pop their own. The death of Rubén Salazar, the famous Latino journalist

killed by the police in 1970, is enshrined in a painting by Frank Romero, that, in Ramos opinion, is comparable to "Washington Crossing the Delaware. The most famous example of the transformation of Pop Art is Luis Jimenez's giant fiberglass (latino) Cowboy which stands outside the Smithsonian American Art Museum. "Defying Categories" refers to a range of artists who must be placed in the avant-garde, from Raphael Montanez Ortiz who manipulated films of American westerns to Carmen Herrera whose abstract art was first sold when the artist was 89. Ramos declares that they "draw out the latent social meanings of a movement often defined by aesthetic autonomy."

Ramos wants to disperse the ghetto. She rethinks all of these artists' place in established American art history, emphasizing intersections, rather than exceptions. Putting any artwork into the "mainstream" means removing politics to a certain extent, putting politicized art into an institutional framework also tends to aestheticize it. Ramos's effort is to have it both ways: she identifies cultural difference, specific historical references, political issues, and, at the same time, that she embeds those differences into our perceptions of mainstream styles.

Following the two introductory essays, the rest of the book provides dazzling reproductions of the art and detailed discussion of each work. It is an invaluable addition to the library of anyone interested in the history of American art both for the high quality of its illustrations and for its thesis.