



Latina/Latino American Art

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Latina and Latino art is an important component of a vital cultural tradition in the United States--the contributions of Americans of Hispanic ancestry, including emigrés, exiles, and those born in the United States. But the very diversity that characterizes the people who helped shape this tradition makes it difficult to generalize about them or the art that they have created. The umbrella terms *Latina* and *Latino* comprise a multiplicity of cultures, skin colors, immigration patterns, and even languages.

Not only are Americans of Hispanic descent too diverse to permit easy generalizations, but so is the art that they have produced, utilizing a multiplicity of media and styles. Nevertheless, a number of contexts have been very important to glbtq Latina/Latino American art.

These include urgent social realities such as poverty and discrimination, the power of Church and family, and, above all, the legacy of *machismo*, a very polarized gender differentiation found in most Latin American cultures. These influences have helped shape the art created by American gay men and lesbians of Hispanic ancestry.

But perhaps most significant of all is the hybrid nature of Latina/Latino artists, who are heirs to a number of cultural traditions and conflicts. That is, these artists have often grown up in families in which the Latin American cultural traditions are paramount, but they have also been exposed to European cultural traditions and to the dominant American society and its values, as well as to the inevitable clashes between these traditions. The result is a vital but often conflicted art with a vast range of expression.

For gay and lesbian artists, these clashes may be especially formative, given that Latin American attitudes toward sexuality in general, and homosexuality in particular, tend to be conservative. These attitudes may severely constrain the expression of homoeroticism, though some artists react to this social conservatism with imagery more oblique than explicit, while others more directly challenge negative attitudes toward homosexuality in the Hispanic community, even as they challenge racism and heterosexism in the majority American culture.

The artists discussed below are only a few of the many artists of Hispanic ancestry who have made significant contributions to American art in general and to glbtq art in particular.

Alma López

Contemporary artist Alma López (b. 1966) was born in Mexico and reared in Los Angeles. She grew tired of hearing that, because she is a lesbian, she participates in acts that are perverted and sinful. To the contrary, she believes that love itself is Heaven.

To express this idea, she created a photo-based digital print titled *Heaven* in which a young woman rejects the institutionalized patriarchal system as she gazes at her female lover's image in a golden heart brought to her by an angel.

López created this image in the tradition of a *retablo*, a Mexican painting that functions as a special prayer asking for a miracle or that gives thanks for a miracle that has been received.

López informs her art with personal interpretations of sacred subjects and themes. She focuses on female images in an effort to broaden Latin American visual history and to create a more complex identity for Latinas. She attributes some of her ability to see beauty and strength in women to the fact that she is a lesbian.

Our Lady, a photo collage, challenges the Latin American notion that women are either sexual beings or virgins. The image presents the typically demure Virgin of Guadalupe, a symbol of empowerment for Mexican and Mexican-American Catholics, as a strong, contemporary Latina. (The model for the Virgin is performance artist Raquel Salinas.)

She wears a bikini made of roses since it is this flower that she makes appear as proof of her apparition. *Our Lady's* head tilts up and back as she gazes defiantly at the viewer. A buxom, bare-breasted angel (modeled by cultural activist Raquel Gutiérrez) holds her aloft.

Ester Medina Hernández

San Francisco artist Ester Medina Hernández (b. 1944) also creates images of strong women. Hernández, one of six children of California migrant farm workers, is a graduate of the University of California, Berkeley. She depicts the dignity, strength, experiences, and dreams of Latina women through printmaking and pastels.

The pastel entitled *La Ofrenda II* (1998) shows the bare back of a Latina woman looking over her right shoulder. With her short punk hairstyle, shaved in stripes and dyed pink over the ear, she does not fit the mold of a demure female. A tattoo of the Virgin of Guadalupe covers her entire back.

Mis Madres (1986) is a tribute to Latina women. The work presents an elderly woman as the center of the universe. She stands in the cosmos, facing the viewer, holding the earth in her left hand.

David Zamora Casas

Mexican-American performance and visual artist David Zamora Casas (b. 1960) lives in San Antonio. Casas' work addresses his dual heritage, his gay Latino identity, and his life as an artist. During his stage performances, he uses his dynamic presence and intricately detailed costumes to transform himself from one character into another, for example from a screaming art apostle to a gay activist.

Casas frequently explores androgyny in his painted works, which redefine traditional Mexican art since they combine previously disparate techniques and imagery.

Portrait of a Burnout (1993), for example, is a *retablo* that shows Casas wearing a blue skirt, a vibrantly striped shirt, pink wings, and a huge red Mexican sombrero. His skirt depicts the cosmos, including a shooting star, and he wears a necklace with an ankh, a symbol of eternal life, around his neck. *Portrait of a Burnout* may be interpreted as an icon of a modern day, androgynous saint.

Love has no Gender (1993) is comprised of a cross, an androgynous face, and a nude female torso painted on a horizontal strip of tin. Casas incised hearts, gender symbols, and the work's title into the tin surrounding the painted area. Tin cacti decorate each end, along with real, rotting and drying cacti. The decaying plants may allude to the cycle of renewal and therefore to the transformation innate to androgyny.

Luis Alfaro

Luis Alfaro, a Mexican-American performance artist, also uses art to explore androgyny. He sometimes wears outrageous women's outfits, including cheap, short black lace slips, while shouting hilarious poems that he has written. The street is Alfaro's theater, and he frequently accosts passersby, shouting at them to grab their attention.

Laura Aguilar

California-based lesbian artist Laura Aguilar (b. 1959) has made great visual use of her large body in a series of self-portraits that challenge both norms of physical beauty and concepts of national identity.

As the child of a mother who was part Mexican and part Irish, Aguilar is particularly sensitive to questions of multiple heritages. Some of these questions are apparent in *Three Eagles Flying* (1990), a triptych depicting herself naked bound by ropes, with the Mexican flag covering her face and the United States flag covering her lower torso.

Cuban Artists

Many artists, and especially homosexuals, made use of the Mariel boat lift, which shipped Castro's "unwanted" peoples from Havana in the 1980s.

Artist Cabrero Moreno (1923-1981), for example, as an active homosexual was declared an enemy of Castro's revolution. Art critic Rudi Bleys remarks of Moreno that "his interest in the male body went beyond the reticence of official discourse."

In the past few decades, many Cuban exiles and Cuban Americans have made their mark as artists. Of these, Juan González (1942-1992) was notable for his quest of a spiritualized androgyny, as in *La Cuna* (1976), which depicts a cradle but without a baby. He painted in an elegiac style with a subdued homoeroticism.

Jaime Bellechasse (1956-1993) created idealized drawings of nudes. These figures suggested his belief that the positive side of living in the United States outweighed the negative effects of racism.

Installation artist Félix González-Torres (1957-1995) confronted the tragedy of AIDS in his work and made many sly gay references. He moved to New York in 1979 and developed a unique style, characterized by a provocative conceptual wit. For example, his photograph *Untitled (perfect lovers)* (1991) depicted identical white-faced clocks that represented gay lovers.

Readily accepted by New York's avant-garde artistic community, González-Torres de-emphasized the figurative as he unsentimentally but movingly confronted his own debilitation as a result of AIDS.

Another Cuban installation artist, María Elena González (b. 1957), produced the thought-provoking *Self Service* (1996), in which a phallus called "Gloria" is attached to a wall and becomes normalized as a bathroom appliance. The work invites speculations about gender and sexuality. In her installations, González frequently returns to themes of ecology, cultural identity, and sexual politics.

Raúl Martínez (1927-1995) experimented with Pop Art, and in the process contributed to the development of the poster.

Other Latina/Latino American Artists

Other significant Latina/Latino American artists include Nuyoricans (Puerto Ricans living in New York City)

José Luis Cortés (b. 1962), Abnel Rodríguez (b. 1964), Alberto Valderrama (1957-1995), and Reyes Meléndez (b. 1962).

Painters such as Tony de Carlo (b. 1956) and Gil de Montes (b. 1966) also make use of gay imagery, while Miguel Angel Reyes (b. 1964) depicts men with a rough, sexually appealing, macho appearance. Jerome Caja (1958-1995) performed a post-apocalyptic drag act, and also exhibited mixed-media works.

Finally, Latino photographers such as Axel Damian Reyes, Gerardo Suter (b. 1957), Franc Franca (b. 1961), and Roberto Rincón have made a name for themselves by utilizing strong imagery celebrating gay male sexuality.

Conclusion

Perhaps the only generalization that can be made about the diverse artists who contribute to the tradition of Latina/Latino glbtq art is that they often confront, with a peculiarly personal urgency, the crucial issues of gender, sexuality, and acceptance that have obsessed American culture generally in the past several decades.

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