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“Cheech Marin: Up in Art”

By: Simmy Swinder



Since the early 1980s, writer, director, and comedian Cheech Marin has been an avid supporter of Chicano art, amassing a sizable private collection. In 2001, Marin and curator René Yañez launched an exhibition that toured 15 cities between then and 2007. Among the institutions that exhibited *Chicano Visions: American Painters on the Verge* were The Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. and The de Young Museum in San Francisco. In 2008, an abridged version was mounted at LACMA West, entitled *Los Angelenos / Chicano Painters of L.A.: Selections from the Cheech Marin Collection*.

I recently sat down with Cheech at his Pacific Palisades home, which was a delightful mix of humble abode and sophisticated display of his successful professional career and passion for art. I asked Cheech about his experience as both organizer and patron of the historic, and at times controversial, traveling six-year exhibition, as well as his past and present motivations behind collecting and promoting Chicano art.

**I'm always curious to know from collectors as engaged as you are whether they only buy from artists whom they know and have a relationship with.**

I collect from artists that move me. Though I now know all the artists, I didn't when I first saw their work. I believe that's a really good way to go about it if you're a collector or have to deal with artists on a consistent basis because then you can divorce the art from the artist very early on and judge the artwork on its own merits. Plus, a lot of artists are a pain in the ass so you want to cut that part out and just focus on the art.

**Has your collection been informed in any way by the exhibitions you initiate?**

To tell you the truth, it hasn't been. I collected way before I started organizing exhibitions or promoting art.

**As a third-generation Angeleno, you identify as a Chicano and your unyielding support for that community has been the driving force behind your writing and collecting. What avenues are you actively pursuing to this end?**

What I'm involved in now is trying to spread the word vis-à-vis art fairs and lecturing, mainly because nobody else is doing it. And so now pushing Chicano art that is not my particular, you know, dyed-in-the-wool, esoteric taste, I have to be aware of what the community would appreciate and possibly relate to as encapsulating the essence of being Chicano. I guess it's a question of do you serve them tacos without chilies? No, because that's not Mexican food or Chicano food. You just don't give them the ones that are going to send them to the hospital.

**You talk at length about identity as a central issue in the Chicano community. Are there other themes that interest you or drive your collecting?**

The thing about Chicano art is that it overlaps in so many categories simultaneously. It is about identity, and that is just as good of a theory or a reason to form a school around as Abstract Expressionism or Ashcan or Hudson River Valley School. Most of the schools give a sense of place. Identity is what the Chicano establishment has been missing because they're still evolving that identity; their official identity has not been accepted.

**How do you mean?**

There's no box you can check on the census as Chicano. You can check Asian, Caucasian, African American, but not Chicano. Yet you can get a PhD from Harvard in Chicano Studies. I don't think identity is really what the Chicano School is formed around, but it comes to you in a myriad of different avenues, whether it's social, religious, political, gender-based, or abstract. And all these points of view of that identity gather together to give you the 360 degree perspective of the experience and/or the feeling of being a Chicano.

**Do you think within that conversation, the Chicano artist's voice resonates within other immigrant communities?**

It absolutely does. Take for example *Born in East LA*, which was about that process. People from the Philippines, China, Korea, or anywhere, who came to America under duress, immediately identified with it. It didn't make any difference where you came from – you could still recognize that experience. I think people will see that what informs the Chicano School is the experience of being Chicano, and it's told from a myriad of different viewpoints and styles that overlap into preexisting styles like Photorealism or Abstract Expressionism or Expressionism. These artists are university and/or art school trained – they are not naïve artists, they're very sophisticated and they tell a very complete story.

**How else are you championing Chicano artists?**

I'm on the board of directors of the Hispanic Scholarship Fund, through which I've created the first postgraduate scholarship in the arts. I use all my Jeopardy winnings to fund that, and that's been quite a bit of money.

**Are you doing much writing as well?**

I write all the time. I've written this series of essays that I'll gather together in a book and title *We Come in Peace and We Have You Surrounded*. One such essay is about the English-only movement – okay, let's have everything in English. To begin with, we would have to rename all the states – Colorado, Texas, California, Arizona, New Mexico, and that's just the Mexican names – Wisconsin, Indiana, they're all Indian names – the only thing that's left is the News, New Jersey and New York. How do we do that? I tried to write about it in a comical way, but it's just the invisible elephant in the room that nobody sees.

**Which really questions the quintessential American.**

My book will examine the spread of Latinos throughout the country, since we're in the midst of the biggest wave of immigration in the history of the country, namely 85% from Mexico, in every state simultaneously. And 85% of them are under 25. The census bureau issued a statement about 2 months ago that 50.6% of all children under the age of one in this country are Latino, all over. You go to Rhode Island, you go to Mississippi, North Carolina, Hawaii, Alaska, it doesn't matter. The majority of babies are Latino.

**¡Ay, caramba! I better brush up on my Spanish. With regard to languages, you characterize words like menudo and chicano as being inherently flexible, possessing an ability to transform thorough generations. How do you think these redefinitions help or hinder the Chicano movement?**

They define it, really. Chicano is a word that means amalgamation. Every generation that comes along has as much right to define what is Chicano as any of the generations that came before it. I think that Chicano will be the stand-in for the acculturation process, regardless of where you come from, whether you're from Indonesia, Mexico, or Korea, because it's that blending of your traditional background with American pop. And where those two things come together produces something else that is both – it's a gestalt bigger than the constituent parts.

**Can you tell us about your Art of the New America initiative?**

It's about discovering new artists and promoting them. Because I travel a lot, I get to go places and scout artists that heretofore never make it to LA, New York, Chicago or wherever the bright lights and the big city is. I go to El Paso or Corpus Christi, Texas or Mississippi and unearth art, and now, they find me. This gives me more time to hone in on a particular something that I'm looking for in a Chicano artist, mainly that their creative process or the object that they produce has an identity. It may not be obvious at first – it's not like standing in front of a taco stand. But the influences that they take from their heritage and combine with the places that they find themselves in is unique and I recognize it when I see it.

**How is the Art of the New America going to be incorporated into ArtHamptons this summer and how have you worked with Thomas Paul Fine Art, who will be exhibiting there, to raise awareness for emerging Chicano talent?**

I'm delivering a lecture and the headline is *From the Comptons to the Hamptons*. For the most part, people in New York have no idea what Chicano art is, not even the most established and well-informed of them. So this is where Thomas and I are reinventing the wheel. It's a sophisticated audience that buys art and my mantra has always been to equate it to something else that they know—“this is the Modigliani of the group, this is the Picasso of the group, this is the Monet of the group, here's Chagall, etc.”



This came into play when we opened up Chicano Visions at the Smithsonian; we put up a painting entitled Kill the Pachuco Bastard! by Vincent Valdez. It was about the zoot suit riots in 1943 in Los Angeles and captured the violent moment when the Mayor and Chief of Police unleashed the Navy on rioters, beating these young, punk Chicanos. During the installation, the museum's director was hesitant about including the painting claiming, "We're going to get a lot of school kids in here and this is really graphic." I responded by noting that every major museum I've ever been has had some version of The Rape of the Sabine Women. So it really comes down to whose ox is getting gored here.



**I think the success of the Chicano artists that you work with and promote will be that their voice and their vision is as universal as Picasso's *Guernica* or a Jackson Pollack drip painting.**

I'm trying to get Chicano art to the point where, if I say Chicano art, an image pops up in your mind, just like when I say Warhol, you picture a soup can or if I say Picasso, you imagine one of his cubist faces. I want a similar reaction to hearing "a Almaraz" or "a Gronk". It will happen through repetition of images so that people get used to certain themes and pictures.

**So by raising the profile of Chicano artists, you carve a place for them in art history.**

The Abstract Expressionists didn't sell 10 paintings between them in their lifetime. I went to a show at the MoMA entitled Abstract Expressionists that Created All Their Work within a 12-Block Radius of the Museum. Those guys had Clement Greenberg or any number of critics and dealers to write about them and promote them to a well-healed group of collectors. And what I'm trying to do is to identify and develop the well-healed.

**So this is why you're bringing these artists to the Hamptons.**

You can't love or hate Chicano art unless you see it – and that's what we're in the process of – getting them to see Chicano art. It's same thing I did when I first discovered the Chicano artists that I know; I was trying to learn about contemporary art, which was the gap in my art knowledge. So I started going to galleries on the west side, and boom, they popped out at me, and I understood them right away.

**What do you think the future of Chicano art will entail?**

I'm excited to see what's going to happen because I don't know what's going to happen. But as long as the artists remember the essence of being Chicano, it will go towards redefining what America is, and has been. You know, it's not like I'm putting Mexicans in the populace – they've already been there. I'm just trying to



Cheech Marin is the 2012 recipient of the ArtHamptonsArtsPatronoftheYear Award. Marin's current touring exhibition is entitled *Chicanitas: Small Paintings from the Cheech Marin Collection*.

Simmy Swinder is director and curator at Carmichael Gallery, located in Los Angeles and New York. She is also the marketing director of *tasj* magazine, an independent art periodical founded in 2009 and distributed to homes, museums, galleries, auction houses, art fairs, and festivals around the world. She is a frequent contributor to *American Contemporary Art* and *l.a. centric* magazines.