



Ruiz-Healy's 40-year Frank Romero Survey Traces Early & Ancient Roots of Chicano Art

by Nicholas Frank March 5, 2025

Writing in the catalogue produced for the two-part survey *De Aquí Y De Allá: Frank Romero, A Survey* at Ruiz-Healy Art locations in San Antonio and New York, curator Rafael Barrientos Martínez drew a throughline between ancient Indigenous pictographs of the Southwest and Romero's graffiti-based symbology. The exhibition itself draws a line from Romero's standout 1981 mural-sized painting *Por El Pueblo* through the present, with recent examples of the 83-year-old painter's work, including a recent refashioning of works from *The Adobe Series* of 1995 and the *Nopal* table sculptures of 2024.



Frank Romero, "Por El Pueblo," 1981, acrylic on canvas, 143 × 250 inches

Por El Pueblo dominated the San Antonio gallery space, hung wrapping a wall corner, its chalky pastel background holding cartoon renderings of a sedan, cross, jewel heart, cactus, a white stallion, and a plain woman with breastfeeding child that might be a stand-in for the Virgin Mary, the ubiquitous Latin American symbol for virtue and resilience. Guns, calaveras, and sarape blankets populate other works, repeating throughout Romero's visual vocabulary, all bearing witness to the everyday myths and realities of the Chicano culture then flourishing in the undercurrents of Los Angeles and his Boyle Heights neighborhood.

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Los Four, in front of one of their murals

The painting represents Romero's early masterstroke of curating an exhibition, *Murals of Aztlán: The Street Painters of East Los Angeles* at the city's Craft and Folk Art Museum, introducing live graffiti mural-scale painting into an institutional setting — a triumph of translation concurrent with the gallerization of Jean-Michel Basquiat's street-writing energy on the opposite coast. That exhibition followed the 1974 Los Angeles County Museum of Art show of Los Four, the group of artists including Carlos Almaraz, Beto de la Rocha, Gilbert Luján, and Romero, regarded as the nation's first show of Chicano art at a major art institution. A gallery biography quotes Romero on how Latino identity has been named through the decades: "In those days, we were 'Mexican American.' White people often would call me 'Spanish.' If you were more liberal, you were Mexican American. The whole idea of being Chicano was very radical."



Frank Romero, "Pingolandia," 1982, ceramic, earth soil on wood, 49.75 x 62.25 x 62.25 inches

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Long before *Portlandia*, there was Romero's *Pingolandia*, a wry miniature-scale fashioning of Aztlán, the mythic homeland of Indigenous Americans ranging from what is now the Southwestern U.S., a land and nomenclature of present-day Latin Americans calling forth an originary identity long predating "minority" or second-world status. Romero's work, dated 1982 and recreated here, sets toylike figures and objects in a sandbox setting, recalling childhood play while also suggesting that all that can be built can be wiped away in moments, the sandbox reset for the next world-shaping session. Most poignant are little ceramic blocks of the Aztec creator deity Quetzalcoatl built in the shape of a pyramid, representing both the glory of empire and its downfall.



Frank Romero, "Recuerdo (design for reflection pool Warner Center, LA)," 1982, acrylic and cut paper collage, 15 1/8 x 80 inches

Of note and mirroring the desert aesthetic of the *Pingolandia* sculpture was *Recuerdo* (design for reflection pool Warner Center, LA) of 1982, an 83-inch acrylic and cut paper rendering for a large-scale tile mural that recalls the horizontal and time-crossing storytelling of ancient codices. The wall label noted Romero's sense that the landscape form functions "as a sort of womb, as a circle, and a stage where I place various events. A commentary on life." Lending a time-dimensional element to the exhibition's title, which translates as "From Here and There," *Recuerdo* moves from pre-colonial times through missionization to the freeways that characterize modern L.A., functioning as an ancestral self-portrait.



Frank Romero, "Adobe Series – Tierra roja, Set 2," 1995/2024, soil, acrylic, chicken wire on wood, 24 x 24 x 2.5 inches

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Even as the gallery hummed with the vibrant coloration and provocative symbology of Romero's paintings, works on paper, tableau, and sculptures, one quiet corner stood out. A quatrain of plain brownish two-foot squares hung two-by-two, recreated examples of *The Adobe Series* from 1995. Romero found a second New Mexico home alongside other L.A. artists and built his own adobe home with the guidance of Taos Pueblo residents, learning deeply-rooted craft traditions. The relatively diminutive *Adobe Series* works represent a depth of inquiry on artistic, artisanal, and sociopolitical life, resolutely separated in mainstream capitalist culture but for millennia seen as intrinsically interconnected in the Indigenous cultures that undergird Chicano consciousness.

The layered meanings of *Pingolandia* and *The Adobe Series* functioned almost as existential questions framing the Ruiz-Healy Art gallery's celebration of Romero's body of work, suggesting that for all the bravado of Hollywood westerns, L.A. gun and car cultures, love and religious devotion, we all as individuals and societies will one day pass into the strata of memory.