1110 Mateo Street, Los Angeles CA 90021
213 395 0762 | gallery@luisdejesus.com
luisdejesus.com

HYPERALLERGIC

Reimagined Landscapes: Frank Romero's Los Angeles

Born and raised in a middle-class family in Boyle Heights, Romero captured the pulse of Los Angeles through his pictorial and more abstract painting of decorated cars and the vast freeways (portrayed as our cultural shrines) connecting the different parts of the city.

By Douglas Messerli

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The new retrospective of Chicano artist Frank Romero at the Museum of Latin American Art in Long Beach (MOLAA), *Dreamland*, comes at an auspicious time. One of the original Los Four, along with Carlos Almaraz (1941–1989), Roberto de la Rocha (b. 1937) and Gilbert Luján (1940–2011) (later transforming into Los Five when they included Judithe Hernández [b. 1948]), Romero (b. 1941) helped to solidify the reputations of Chicano American artists in Los Angeles and across the country. Along with another Angelino group, ASCO (Willie Herron, Harry Gamboa, Jr., Gronk, and Patssi Valdez), Romero and the Los Four put Chicano art permanently on the map.

As the group's founder, Luján wrote:

The significance of Los Four mirrored the socio-political introspection and concerns of Raza at that time besides providing some iconographic vocabulary to initiate definitions of our ethno-art forms. Our Los Four Xicano contingency ran against some Euro-aesthetic standards of the period. We, as pictorial artists, gave a visual voice to those interests of parity for our young artist constituency-culture. It was a form of cooperation binding us by our sociological circumstance, indigenous paradigms and our adopted response to unify ourselves along political cultural oriented purposes, in lieu of solely aesthetical ones.

Although the MOLAA exhibition begins with a room devoted to Los Four and includes film footage of some of the events surrounding their legendary show devoted to them at LACMA in 1974 — which features cutouts of the original four members and a wonderful clenched protesting fist by Almaraz, with the frame painted by Romero — it becomes clear that these four artists' works quickly took different turns in their work, with Romero alone becoming perhaps the most important documentarian of Chicano events.

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Even more importantly, through large murals and evocative paintings, Romero traced the history of Chicano life throughout the city. Particularly in works such as "The Death of Rubén Salazar" (1986), "The Closing of Whittier Boulevard" (1984), and the more comical, certainly ironic, "The Arrest of the Paleteros" (1996), the artist writ large the tragedies and absurdities of being an American of Mexican heritage in the vast LA metropolis.

Salazar, a journalist covering a Vietnam War protest, died in a local bar from a police tear-gas canister, while Whittier Avenue, the hot spot for low-riding cars, became a regular target for police trying to end the parade of autos. Romero's version highlights the absurdity of the police, one officer riding in on a horse like a cowboy saving the day, while the Chicano drivers blithely ignore him.

Using an almost naïve vocabulary to express the constant challenges of street living, Romero's is, in fact, an art, through its brightly colored narrative paintings, that nearly always embraces rather than excludes. Throughout his artmaking, he has used easily-translatable motifs to bring meaning to viewers who might otherwise be confused by his often jumbled spaces. Many of his vast landscapes, such as "Le Monde" (2006), represent iconic sites throughout the city as well as in his adopted Paris, connected by the somewhat fantastical loops for the Los Angeles freeways

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Images from Romero's early paintings are often incorporated into later ones. Early in the MOLAA show is a lovely, simple painting of a teddy bear, presumably a beloved object of Romero's own childhood, encased in a golden frame. In his wonderful 1998 painting "A History of the Chicano Movimiento," the bear reappears in the upper left, locating the artist's own roots in the events that the rest the large work invokes. The same bear appears in his 2000 painting "Holiday Gifts: Guitar with Teddy."

Hearts are combined with more personal and private motifs — an iron, a fighting couple, the Goodyear blimp, and a Picasso-like Guenica horse — in his famous mural (one of dozens Romero painted throughout the city) "Going to the Olympics" (2011). And often, his art turns almost into a kind of fetishism with beautifully created objects focused on the automobile, a chair, a gun, a cactus plant, or through events such as a trip with a dog in a car.

While these images are often represented within the context of the *faux* naïf, Romero presents a sophisticated vision of art history in works such as "Homage to Kienholz, Backseat Dodge" (1991) and the "Guernica"-like horses in "Going to the Olympics." Indeed, even at their most simple, we recognize in Romero's images a high level of sophistication that is accessible to audiences familiar and unfamiliar with traditional and Chicano art.

Frank Romero, "Corazon Quebrado" (1974),
spray-paint on canvas, 36 x 31 inches (courtesy the artist)

If there is one thing that unites nearly all of Romero's work, it is his sense of humor and his love of the communities which he depicts.
Romero's *Dreamland* is not just an empty-minded satire of "La-La Land," but a strangely hallucinatory world of both love and violence, a landscape wherein you never can quite be sure where you are actually going — or even if you might ever arrive at your destination. The joy, in Romero's paintings is the journey itself.

Frank Romero Dreamland: A Frank Romero Retrospective *continues at the Museum of Latin American Art (628 Alamitos Avenue, Long Beach, California) through May 21.*