



## Bicultural and Bilingual: Los Four's Legacy and Impact on Art History

By Eva Recinos

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Members of Los Four (Frank Romero, Carlos Almaraz, Gilbert Luján and Robert de la Rocha) stand in front one of their mural works. | Jim Tartan. Courtesy of Elsa Flores Almaraz

There's a clip from a documentary of artist collective Los Four that has become iconic, in a way: it shows the four artists sitting around a table talking loudly while taking notes. Carlos Almaraz, Gilbert Magu Luján, Frank Romero and Robert "Beto" de La Rocha are talking shop, their voices sometimes rising.

Almaraz and Romero lived together in that space for about 10 years. It became the meeting space for the group, a collective of four artists with different aesthetics but similar missions.

"It was an old Victorian house in Angelino Heights which is a little Victorian neighborhood built in the 1880s between Temple street and Sunset boulevard in Echo Park and that's where we were," said Romero.

The group would become integral to the development of Chicano/a art in Los Angeles. Their significant contributions to contemporary art history felt only appropriate to show at one of the most-awaited SoCal institutions — artworks by some Los Four members are on view at the new Cheech Marin Center for Chicano Art & Culture of the Riverside Art Museum.

### The Beginnings of Los Four

The story goes that Luján first introduced Romero to Almaraz and de La Rocha; Romero doesn't remember an official start date to the group but it all started to come together when they decided on their name. They wanted "something bicultural and bilingual," and Romero suggested Los Four.

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1110 Mateo Street, Los Angeles CA 90021  
213 395 0762 | gallery@luisdejesus.com  
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This moniker captured their multifaceted identities as a group: Almaraz was born in Mexico City, de La Rocha in Wilmar, Romero in Los Angeles and Luján near Stockton. There's a photo of the artists that often makes the rounds: it shows the four standing in front of a mural. Romero holds a spray paint can, while Almaraz and Luján put their fists in the air. The image captures their individual energies, even while showing how they work together as a group.

Los Four became a part of the Chicano movement in the 1970s, often creating murals with political themes and aligning themselves with groups such as the Concilio de Arte Popular, which produced the publication *Chisme Art* focusing on Chicano art, and Plaza de la Raza.

"It was just part of our lives in those days," said Romero. "It was an exciting time, the '70s. The mural movement was just beginning."

But it would be a 1973 UC Irvine exhibition that would eventually lead to institutional praise of their work. Luján served as the connection to UC Irvine, where he got his MFA, and the show was on view from November to December of 1973.

In 1974, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art presented "Los Four: Almaraz/de La Rocha/Lujan/Romero," which was described as "an exhibition of paintings, drawings, watercolors and sculpture by four artists from the Los Angeles Chicano community." On view for two months, the exhibition included "a cooperative mural" and was organized by Hal Glicksman of UC Irvine and Jane Livingston, Curator of Modern Art at LACMA. It was, in some ways, an "extended version" of the UC Irvine show. The brochure listed the works by authorship, showing "collective works" then the individual artist's name with wall labels. The artists' pieces spanned mediums, from spray paint to acrylic to watercolor to drawings, a clear indication that their practice was a multimedia one.

Romero put his graphic design skills to work, creating posters for the exhibition and brainstorming a logo with Luján. FOUR is spelled out vertically with LOS intersecting across it, the two words sharing an O. Four lines sprout from this central O. Romero's mother, a caterer in Boyle Heights, supplied the food for the opening.

A documentary on the group, produced and directed by James Tartan, includes the recognizable scene of the group holding a lively discussion around a table. It also shows the artists walking around their neighborhoods — Romero often with a camera in hand — and working in their studios. Each member talks about his upbringing and relationship to Chicano culture. Tartan also directed the documentary "Murals of Aztlán: the Street Painters of East Los Angeles," which was tied to a 1981 exhibition hosted at Craft Contemporary (formerly known as the Craft and Folk Art Museum) which also featured the work of Gronk, Willie Heron, John Valadez, the East Los Streetscapers, Judithe Hernández. Soon, Hernández would play a large role in the collective.

### The Fifth Member of Los Four

But what the documentary doesn't fully capture is the fifth (and only female) member of Los Four: Judithe Hernández. She does appear briefly in the film, namely cutting the artists' hair during the installation process, but she doesn't get the screen time the other four do.

Hernández recalls that Almaraz suggested the group introduce a female member — primarily because ASCO, another Chicano artist collective in L.A., featured Patssi Valdez as a member. Hernandez met Almaraz at Otis College of Art and Design (previously known as the Otis Art Institute), where they were both students.

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"He was also probably the most fervent Marxist of the group," said Hernández. "And he felt that if a group was going to be true to its mission to be inclusive and not to observe all of the old traditional exclusions of women, he thought that women should be part of the group."

Romero also remembers being a part of the conversation. The group voted on the suggestion and added Hernández, but decided to keep the name as Los Four because it was already so well-known.

Part of her integration into the group meant taking a good, hard look at how the collective viewed gender roles given their "traditional upbringings."

"We really had to work to kind of divest ourselves of some of that stuff, especially the guys, and learn how to be more accepting and treat the other as professional equals, regardless of gender," said Hernández. The public will soon get an expansive view of her work at The Cheech as well, with a retrospective of Hernández's art planned for exhibition in two years.

### A Crazy Collaboration

Being a part of Los Four, Hernández said, was "wonderful and terrible all at the same time." They often "fought like crazy."

Artist Elsa Flores Almaraz, Carlos's widow, recalls that the group often argued about the way things should be organized.

"I think one of the big arguments they would have— and this is in the Los Four film —was about control," said Flores Almaraz. "Carlos wanted everyone, the entire group, to have control over their destiny — financial control, artistic control."

But the LACMA exhibition was a moment that the entire group celebrated. In their interviews, Flores Almaraz, Hernández and Romero all pointed out the size of the crowd at the opening night — the "record-breaking" attendance, as Romero puts it, that was a result of a "homespun effort on all our parts." In the documentary, it's easy to see there's hardly room to walk through the galleries.

"I'm sure every white person on the West Side was freaked out to see all these Brown people visiting," said Hernández.

And while Los Four thrived in a spirit of collaboration, the supplement to the exhibition and Tartan's documentary also explore each artist's identity as an individual. Almaraz's bio explains that he spent some time in New York and returned to L.A. in 1970 as "a failure." De la Rocha recounted his obsession with the L.A. river and declared, in all caps, QUE VIVA MI RAZA QUERIDA.

Hernández remembers the years of 1974-84 as especially formative ones, both from political and artistic standpoints.

"It was pretty important, I think, to our growing up, that whole experience — that camaraderie and kind of communal experience as creative artists," said Hernández.

### In Search of Additions

For a while, the group often included more artists in their exhibition. But the original collective started to dissolve.

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A 1995 Los Angeles Times article profiles de La Rocha, explaining an incident in which he decided to destroy all of his artwork. Disillusioned by the way things progressed after the LACMA exhibition, de La Rocha stopped painting and moved into his father's home. He started reading the bible fervently, and "took to heart the commandment not to make graven images and destroyed his artwork," as Los Angeles Times staff writer Michael Quintanilla writes. Despite this decision, de La Rocha eventually wanted to start creating again. Some of his work appeared in the Robert Berman Gallery show "Los Four 20 Years After: Then and Now" in 1994.

But Flores Almaraz says that Carlos felt that the group "kept going just for the sake of keeping it going" after de la Rocha left.

Despite the eventual fallout, the impact was already made. "I don't know what my career would have been like without them," said Hernández.

The influence of the collective lives on in both its impact on the artistic community and the curation of more institutional exhibitions dedicated to Chicanx and Latina art. In 2017, LACMA presented the first major retrospective of Almaraz's work. It focused mainly on his work from the 1960s to 1980s. The same year, Glicksman and Rhea Anastas curated the first survey of Luján's work, "Aztlán to Magulandia: The Journey of Chicano Artist Gilbert "Magu" Luján" at UC Irvine's University Art Galleries and the Museum of Latin American Art (MOLAA) in Long Beach presented a retrospective exhibition on Romero's work called "Dreamland: A Frank Romero Retrospective." Hernández also exhibited at MOLAA, with the show "Judith Hernández: A Dream is the Shadow of Something Real" opening there in 2018; it was the first solo exhibition of a Chicana artist at the institution.

Today, Hernández and Romero still keep in touch; so do Romero and Flores Almaraz. Hernandez's studio sits around the corner from Romero's and when I spoke to him he shared the "regular stuff" they argue about, like some pastels she lent him that she now wants back. Almaraz died of AIDS in 1989 and Luján passed away in 2011 after a battle with cancer.

"People are writing about us now because we're all dying," said Romero.

Yet the themes the collective tackled — cultural symbolism, social activism, East L.A. identity — feel extraordinarily relevant today. Los Four's members have collectively created impactful art, educated and mentored younger students, shared their insights through lectures and more. In 2019, Netflix released the documentary "Carlos Almaraz: Playing with Fire," directed by Elsa Flores Almaraz and Richard Montoya, which included appearances from a roster of familiar names including Edward James Olmos, Shepard Fairey, Zack de la Rocha, Dolores Huerta and, of course, Cheech Marin.

The legacy continues.

"We had no idea what we were doing would have any impact except on our immediate audience which was the Chicano community," said Hernández.

But Almaraz might've known that the group was on to something.

"He was such a visionary," said Flores Almaraz. "He knew that this was going to be a very important historic period for art history."