

De aquí y de allá
A View of Los Angeles in San Antonio

by Christopher Karr | Jan 20, 2025

You never know what to expect from a Frank Romero exhibit. As a frequent visitor to San Antonio's different galleries and museums, I was intrigued by what his solo show would bring to the city. The Los Angeles-based artist is one of the pioneers of the Chicano Art Movement. He is most known for his paintings and mural work that draws upon the intricacies of Chicano cultural narratives in Los Angeles and beyond. *De aquí y de allá: Frank Romero, A Survey* is a solo exhibition of works by Romero, curated by Rafael Barrientos Martínez, a doctoral candidate in art history at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). I look at the show through the lens of Romero's vivid symbolism and the elements within *De aquí y de allá* that refer to a transnational Chicano experience.

This show comes to San Antonio 50 years after the founding of *Los Four*, a Chicano art collective based in Los Angeles, which Romero co-founded. The other three members of *Los Four*, which started in 1973 and dissolved in 1983, were Beto de la Rocha, Carlos Almaraz, and Gilbert "Magu" Luján.



Frank Romero, "Recuerdo," 1982, Oil on canvas, approx. 8 x 9 f (1.76 x 2.7 m). Courtesy of Ruiz-Healy Art, San Antonio | New York City

Romero's artwork *Recuerdo* is among his early mural paintings that showcase personal iconography. The artist paints numerous symbols, including a chair, lowrider, a minigun, genitalia, a heart and a singing cowboy. Romero is brave in his experimentation with color. In an interview with the Smithsonian American Art Museum, he declared, "In my training, I was told that purple is the opposite of yellow, but you know, I don't use that as a theory; I just react instinctively to how I feel. It's emotional." His application of color in this painting reminds me of graffiti, with outlined forms and shapes filled in with color. Rooted in his upbringing in Boyle Heights, a Chicano-majority neighborhood in Los Angeles, *Recuerdo* is a mural of memory, place and cultural identity.

LUIS DE JESUS LOS ANGELES

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



Frank Romero, "Nature Morte with Pingo y Calavera," 2020, Signed and dated top left, Acrylic on canvas, 36 x 48 in (91.4 x 121.9 cm). Courtesy of Ruiz-Healy Art, San Antonio | New York City

Nature Morte with Pingo y Calavera is a smaller, more recent artwork. The painting's multiple vantage points create visual interest within the colorful arrangement of objects that the artist juxtaposes, such as a skull, an elephant statue, an abstract cactus and a sculpture that recalls Mesoamerican feathered serpents.

The act of painting objects placed together on a table is a still life tradition that gained special popularity in the 17th-century Netherlands. These paintings, which sometimes feature skulls, invite viewers to reflect on themes of mortality and the fleeting passage of time. Romero's artwork takes up this tradition, but with a Chicano twist. The skull is a motif deeply rooted in both European vanitas paintings and Mesoamerican spiritual traditions of death. Meanwhile, the feathered serpent sculpture nods to Quetzalcoatl, the Aztec deity who encapsulates wisdom, renewal, and cyclical time. Romero's artwork is an ode to the still life genre of the past that is firmly situated in the present. It reflects on themes of heritage and cultural syncretism in contemporary Chicano culture, which evolves with time.



Frank Romero, "Nopal," 2024, Acrylic on wood, 28.5 x 15 x 4.5 in (72.4 x 38.1 x 11.4 cm). Courtesy of Ruiz-Healy Art, San Antonio | New York City.

The last artwork that I will discuss in this review is painted on a flat, wooden surface. Romero's carves a cactus (which means *nopal* in Spanish) that he paints on in a crosshatching manner. The inclusion of the cactus in Romero's *Recuerdo* reflects multiple layers of cultural and personal significance. The cactus denotes resilience, enduring even in the harshest conditions, much like the Chicano community's ongoing resistance to social and cultural marginalization.

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Romero's work embodies a spirit that is raw yet tender, personal yet collective. For such an iconic figure in Chicano art to receive enduring recognition for his practice is something the artist himself saw even in the 1990s. In a 1991 interview, he observed, Chicano artists "may have to deal with mainstream politics in order to produce art, but we're no longer doing it for \$350 and a can of paint." Romero's representation by RuizHealy Art reflects a broader shift in the recognition of Chicano artists within the mainstream art world. Don't miss the chance to see this show and experience the enduring spirit of Los Angeles Chicano art in Texas.

De aquí y de allá: Frank Romero, A Survey is on view at *Ruiz-Healy Art's San Antonio gallery until January 25, 2025. A concurrent show is at Ruiz-Healy Art in New York, 74 East 79th Street, until January 31.*