

FINANCIAL TIMES

The LA artist leading an 'irresistible resistance' against ICE

From pop-up performances for small businesses to nocturnal protests against immigration raids, creativity has become part of activist' toolkit

By Carolina Miranda | February 17, 2026

In Los Angeles, any performance by the experimental vocalist San Cha is an experience — the sort of event in which the singer might fuse the slow burn of a Mexican ballad with pop sounds and opera. You would typically encounter the artist, who has a penchant for combining ruffly corsets with goth eyeliner and dog collars, performing in one of the city's avant-garde spaces.

But on a warm January night, I find her in a small pub called Distrito Catorce in a historically Mexican neighbourhood east of downtown, putting on a free concert to an audience of three dozen people sipping ale and snacking on taquitos. For "Paloma Negra", a beloved Mexican ballad about a wayward lover, she draws out each searing note of the chorus. The crowd joins in.

Her performance is part of Irresistible Resistance, the first in a year-long series of pop-up cultural events in small businesses in LA's immigrant districts, many of which have been struggling economically as a result of the raids by US Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

According to a December press release issued by the Department of Homeland Security, ICE's parent agency, 10,000 undocumented people were arrested in Los Angeles in the six-month period beginning in June 2025. For San Cha, whose parents hail from Mexico and were once undocumented, doing nothing is not an option. Shortly before stepping up to the microphone, she tells me, "If I can use my voice to help, I will."

Organised by curator Ed Patuto, with funding from the Robert Gore Rifkind Foundation, Irresistible Resistance is one of the many ways in which LA artists and arts institutions have responded to the presence of ICE in the city. These efforts have been seen in everything from improvised mutual aid networks to benefit exhibitions to more formal art world presentations, such as the upcoming Frieze Los Angeles.

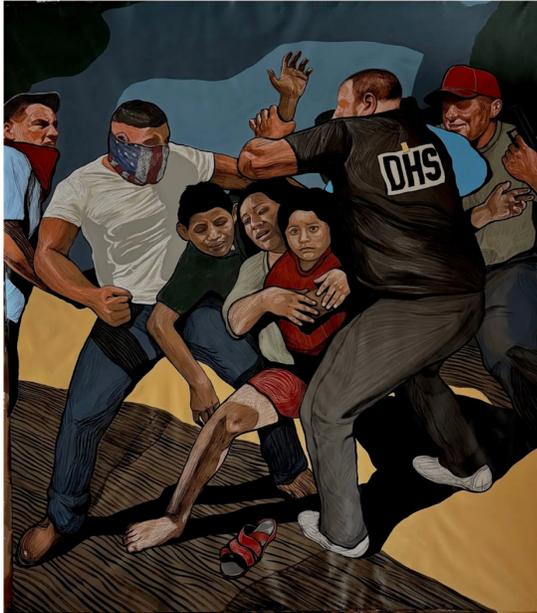
When the art fair opens on February 26, visitors will be greeted by half a dozen neon signs by LA artist Patrick Martinez bearing slogans such as "Nobody is Illegal", which will also go on display on digital billboards across the city, courtesy of billboard operator Orange Barrel Media.

Martinez, who is of Filipino and Indigenous Mexican descent, notes that the issues raised by the raids are hardly new to the Mexican community in the US, which over the past century has weathered racial profiling, displacement and at least one mass deportation. In addition to his display at Frieze, the artist has a solo show at LA's Charlie James Gallery this month that includes vintage silkscreen protest posters made by his Mexican cousin Rayvan Martinez who was an activist in the 1970s, the height of the Chicano civil rights movement. "They were talking about the same shit," says Martinez. "They were talking about Palestine. They were talking about food. They were talking about civil rights. The fight is the same." Amid the myriad gallery displays at Frieze will be a booth presented by AMBOS (Art Made Between Opposite Sides), a cross-border art collective led by LA-based artists Tanya Aguiñiga and Natalie Godinez that organises ceramics workshops at an LGBT+ migrant shelter and community centre in Tijuana, Mexico. In collaboration with the shelter's clients, they are creating an installation inspired by botánicas, the spiritual shops typical of many Latin America countries — it's intended to bring a sense of "healing" in a moment of great turmoil, says Aguiñiga.

Leticia Rhi Buckley, the former CEO of LA Plaza de Cultura y Artes, a cultural hub with displays devoted to Mexican-American history in the city's historic centre, says that art has long been an important activist tool among Latinos, and its use is now evolving. Since November, LA Plaza has teamed up with several other arts organisations in LA, including the Japanese American National Museum and the Museum of Latin American Art, to present nightly projections on their respective buildings challenging the brutality of the raids. In addition to bold graphics by artists such as Lalo Alcaraz and Ernesto Yerena Montejano, there are stark black-and-white pictures of everyday Angelenos (among them, African-American mayor Karen Bass) that bear the caption, "Am I Next?" "If you had any question on where we stood," says Buckley, "you can just literally walk by our building and it's pretty clear."

LUIS DE JESUS LOS ANGELES

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



'Manta No.1' by Hugo Crosthwaite Courtesy of the artist and Luis De Jesus Los Angeles.



'Manta No.3' by Hugo Crosthwaite Courtesy of the artist and Luis De Jesus Los Angeles.

ICE has emerged as a subject in all manner of exhibition spaces. In a group show at the Torrance Art Museum, a small municipal kunsthalle near the coast, paintings by Tijuana-born artist Hugo Crosthwaite depict the brutality of a raid

But the intensity of the moment has been such that many artists have turned to activism more directly. Some have designed custom bandanas as a fundraising tool for organisations such as the National Day Laborer Organizing Network, a non-profit that helps provide detainees with legal services. And groups such as Self-Help Graphics & Art and the Indigenous art collective Meztlí Projects have created downloadable materials such as protest poster designs and leaflets that detail legal rights for activists.

Irresistible Resistance is collaborating with the SELA Arts Foundation to stage their second pop-up in southeast LA on February 27, an event that will sponsor a live reading by poet Xitlalic Guijosa-Osuna at Birriería Barragan, a small family restaurant located in a corner of the city left moribund by repeated raids. Patuto, whose day job is serving as director of audience engagement at the Broad Museum, was inspired to launch the series after conversations with immigrant business owners downtown, where he lives and works. "The thing I heard is that people feel abandoned and they need to know that there is support for them out there," he explains. Rather than staging an elaborate benefit, he secured funding for small, informal events that could be held in locations where they are needed the most. "This is a way for us to show up for them," he adds, "and to do so through the joy of performance, the joy of spoken word." Joy. It's a sentiment that's been in short supply since ICE came to town.