

The many – but not all – sides of Chicanismo

WHITE BOY GETS TOASTED



Step aside from the "lowrider simulator," Mom!

BY JOHN EWING
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Before I had even seen "Chicano Now," I was prepared to hate it. The early word from art hipsters and political progressives wasn't good. "Crass, simplistic, degrading, cheesy!" they carped. The criticisms gathered like a bad mood I couldn't shake. I gave in and stayed away. That is, until I discovered the others.

The closeted ones. The "Chicano Now" fans. When pressed, they reveal their enthusiasm for this multi-media circus, housed in the Kress Building on Houston Street downtown. "Empowering, moving, fun!" they cheer, somewhat sheepishly, because they are Chicanos and the spectacle is still too fresh for a final verdict.

Though the goal of every exhibition is to find an audience and generate feedback, precious few inspire such a vast range of responses. "Chicano Now" is complicated and contradictory, much like the audiences it will engage over the next few months. Presented by the Alameda Museo Americano as a cultural primer to SAMAs "Chicano Visions," "Chicano Now" overflows with stimuli. At one point or another, it's everything that everyone has said about it.

The first time through, I rode "Chicano Now" like a ride at Disneyland. Murals, music, and rotating guideposts lead a winding path through colorful rooms with

themes such as family, work, and style. An interactive kitchen gives a lesson in tortillas and mole at the touch of a button. There's also a lighted altar behind glass, a jukebox cantina, a dance floor (with video instruction), a bookshop window, a mechanical lowrider for the kiddies, and a spaceship. If you breeze over the surface of "Chicano Now," you get a bright, slickly-packaged visual experience with loud music.

The second time through, I watched the videos — all 15! The productions really start the show, slowing it down, giving it texture, and shading it with multiple perspectives on the subject of Chicanos. Actor/art collector Cheech Marin guides the vision behind the project, and there is no mistaking that we see everything through his eyes. Narrating a collection of home movie clips, Marin (with tongue in cheek) questions what it is that makes his family different from others. "Is it the way we eat, pray, treat our elders, love our children?" The poignant clips make the case that any cultural differences are superficial when compared to the universal bonds of family.

The comedy team Culture Clash takes the opposite tack. Their videos may be absurdly wacky, but if you linger you notice the jokes have a serious bite that ferrets out hidden pockets of prejudice, much of it

CHICANO NOW: AMERICAN

EXPRESSIONS

Tuesday-Friday:

noon-7pm;

Saturday:

10am-5pm;

Sunday: noon-5pm

\$4

Through April 7

Kress Building,

311 E. Houston

299-1696

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unconscious. As "The Brown Men," the official guides to "Chicano Now," Culture Clash pose as space aliens who are visiting the U.S./Mexico border for the first time. But the joke is on gringos, lampooned for their Spanish mispronunciations, segregation laws, and dominance of mainstream American culture. Also slyly comic are the "Video Graffiti" by performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña. These short clips feature a barking chihuahua, an INS romance, and a linguistic hypnotist, all played out in the schizoid overlap of Mexican and American culture.

Other videos are more direct, but no less provocative. Comedians Paul Rodriguez and George Lopez discuss *rasquachismo*, or "the art of making do with whatcha got." Lourdes Portillo offers a haunting meditation on Chicano progress. In a dark room, projected close-ups of brown hands sewing and shelling pecans are mixed with hands that write, play guitar, and put on rubber gloves. A lilting musical soundtrack binds this evolution from exploited labor to self-actualization. Gustavo Vazquez's video installation forces viewers to spin in circles as projected faces reflect on the imperfect fit of cultural labels. "The general rule," says one man, "is in the United States I'm a Mexican, but in Mexico I'm an American." These stories are framed against a backdrop of Aztec

imagery; in a small ring in the center of the room, Lucha Libre wrestlers duke it out against images of colonial maps.

During my final trip through "Chicano Now," I read all of the didactics, which give the nuts and bolts to this cultural portrait. They wallpaper the exhibit in Spanish and English. Instead of overwhelming the viewer, these serve as historical and imaginative teasers interspersed with clever quotations by writers, historians, and cultural critics. Illustrated with photographs and graphic designs, the wall texts are an introduction to U.S./Mexico border history; the Zoot Suit riots of 1940s Los Angeles; Chicano Rock & Roll; Cesar Chavez and the UFW strike; renowned Chicanos in politics, science, and the arts; and what distinguishes a "Mexicano" from an "Americano." The wall texts encourage further study rather than claim the final word.

Given all of its attractions, "Chicano Now" will certainly "play in Peoria." Who, then, is the target audience (pun intended; the Target Corporation is a sponsor) for this traveling exhibition? Cheech Marin anticipates the dilemma of constructing such a broad cultural overview. Are we different, he asks himself amid the faces of his family? The answer: "No, of course not," and "Yes, of course."

These are rhetorical questions for those in the know, for Chicanos who live inside the subject. Such public scrutiny of self would make anyone uncomfortable, regard-

Arts maven

Leighton Chapman

Position: Director, San Antonio Film Commission

Time in current position: 6 months

Time in San Antonio: 12 years

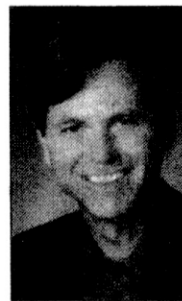
Age: 39

Recent jobs: Freelance location manager (7+ years), and previously assistant film commissioner (4+ years).

Responsibilities: Competing with other film commissions in the U.S. and other countries to attract filmmakers – of commercials, features, documentaries, et al. – to do their do in San Antonio.

How he came to the gig: After film schools in L.A. and Miami, he was at Fiesta and checked whether the film commission had any openings. Then-director Kathy Rhoads "hired" Chapman, who worked his first six months without a wage.

Easy part of job: "Awareness has always been high because of the advertising we have done in the past." Also: "Architectural preservation is a major selling point. I appreciate what the conservation society has done."



Most Hollywood line: "A lot of producers say [San Antonio] looks like a backlot, and it's nice to be able to say it's real."

Biggest challenge: The same as for all U.S. cities: "Competing with Canada. Seventy-five percent of U.S. production goes into Canada." (One report has the

U.S. film industry shedding 3,700 jobs in 2001, many of which were subsequently filled by Canadian workers. An organization with celebrity spokespersons including Dianne Ladd and a Baldwin, is one of the groups lobbying Congress for incentives that would combat Canada's own deal-making.) **Most unusual request received:** "A location that would represent the interior of the arm of the Statue of Liberty. They ended up in the Tower of the Americas. They lit it with green lights."

– JONATHAN MARCUS

less of its accuracy, insightfulness, or interest to viewers outside the culture. As a gay man, I try to imagine what "Gay Now" would look like: the Stonewall Inn diorama, a Barney Frank mannequin, a Gap store window with k.d. lang soundtrack. I squirm at the thought, its superficiality, incompleteness, and bold presumption. But all of

that would say something, and something said in the right spirit may be better than self-imposed silence. "'Chicano Now' is a rip-roaring party, and everyone's invited," writes Marin in his welcome to the exhibition. Celebration may not be the whole story, but it's a pretty great chapter. ●