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Introduction to Chicano Studies

Defining Chicano Social Issues and Establishing Self-identity through Art

My paper will show that the contemporary art movement helped establish an integrating role for Chicano artist to express their beliefs and self-identities within their culture. I will discuss the work of popular artists such as Guillermo Gómez-Peña as one of the many well-known Chicano activists who specialized in protest art; however through my research I was unable to find successful women whom used protest art to fight against the social injustices in the Chicana/o culture.

In order to understand the full concept of the Chicano art movement one must first understand the Chicano movement itself. According to the scholarly article, "The Chicano Movement: Paths to Power," written by Jose Angel Gutierrez, the Chicano movement took place during the late 1960's through the early 1970's, the main purpose of the Chicano Movement was to establish and achieve Mexican-American empowerment. The Chicano culture was silenced and it was inevitable that the voices of the Chicano community were not being heard, and it was then that they decided to transmit their language into illustrative and symbolic nonviolent weapons, such as school boycotts, strikes, walkouts, and demonstrations. According to Gutierrez these revolts ultimately resulted in the Chicano Cultural Renaissance. This Cultural Renaissance was the commitment to social and political change through nonviolent activism not only by the protests that Gutierrez mentioned, but also through art. The Chicano Cultural Renaissance was the official birth of the Chicano Art Movement which allowed many Chicanos to protest social

issues like racism and immigration that they were facing, and to also establish their own cultural identity through their art.

As stated in the introduction to this paper there have been an unfathomable amount of Chicano artists that have chosen to express the political side of being a Chicano through art because they really want to provoke and cross lines that most people do not dare to do, one of those artists being Guillermo Gómez-Peña. Gómez-Peña was born and raised in Mexico City, but then migrated to the United States in 1978 (Aushana 133). The style of his art work is performance art, video, audio, installations, poetry, journalism, critical writings, and cultural theory, however when creating his masterpieces he does his best to capture any type of cross-cultural issues in the North America and South America regions (133). According to Christina Aushana the author of "Transborder Art Activism and the U.S.-Mexico Border: Analyzing Artsapes," Guillermo Gómez-Peña follows the traditional form of some Chicano artists in the 1970's through his art segments. Gómez-Peña invokes the traditions by using symbolic arrangements and symbols of "Mysticism" which can be defined as religion, theology, spirituality or holiness.

Another artist that stood out in my research was Roberto Sifuentes who is originally from Los Angeles, California. Sifuentes lived in New York City and graduated from Trinity College Hartford CT. in 1989. He is currently an Assistant professor of performance at School of the art institute of Chicago. Sifuentes collaborated with Gómez-Peña in 1991 as the designer/stage manager; Gómez-Peña was so impressed with Roberto Sifuentes' work that Guillermo invited him to tour with him around the United States, Europe, and Latin America for projects that included performances, lectures and installation projects.

Both Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Roberto Sifuentes use the symbols of the “North /South relationship of the Aztlan, the “mythical” homeland of the Aztecs viewing it as a heritage and identity they claim as their own.” According to Christina Aushana the two artists embody the indigenous culture to create those critique stereotypes; they hope to challenge the stereotypes that society has already put in place about the Chicano culture (133). The article “Transborder Art Activism and the U.S.-Mexico Border: Analyzing Artsapes,” it mentions that Gómez-Peña and Sifuentes like to entrap themselves in “commercialized trinkets that evoke the stereotypes...” The artists like to be “living mirrors through which the audience’s own fears and perceptions of the “other” are reflected back...” (133).

One of the two installations that I based my research was called “The Cruci-Fiction Project.” The instalment was organized by Rene Yanez and took place at Rodeo Beach, California, April 10, 1994. According to Guillermo Gómez-Peña himself, the sole of The Cruci-Fiction Project was to protest the immigration policy being put in place in California. Gómez-Peña and Sifuentes, both men were tied on a cross and took on the roles of the two main stereotypes they felt society had generalized every Chicano by; the undocumented bandito and the generic gang member (147). The generic gang member who had been crucified by the Los Angeles Police Department and the undocumented bandito was crucified by “America’s fears of cultural otherness.” Over three-hundred people were in attendance and every single one of them received a flyer stating the following:

“Free us from our execution and take us down from the crosses as a gesture of commitment...”

The artists climbed onto the crosses at 6:30 P.M. and approximated that it would’ve taken the public about forty-five minutes to retrieve them from the crosses without a latter but unfortunately the underestimated and by 9:45 P.M. the event coordinator Rene Yanez decided to

take action, they formed a human pyramid to get the artist down. There were various reactions to the instalment, however many of them were negative. Some of the comments made were “Let them die...Stupid Mexicans...Get yourselves down!” The people in the audience were unaware of the situation that was actually occurring. They did not realize that the instalment was dangerous, Gómez-Peña dislocated his right shoulder and Sifuentes nearly fainted, both artists had numbing of the tongues, torsos, arms, and hands and do to the pressure of their ribcages on their lungs it became difficult to breathe (149). According to the article "The Cruci-Fiction Project," written by Gómez-Peña there were photos taken of the installation and they were used as a San Francisco greeting card. However, there was no description of the event, or the purpose behind the photos, the greeting card only had Guillermo Gómez-Peña's name but it was misspelled and Roberto Sifuentes' name was not mentioned at all (151).

In this article Gómez-Peña includes two moving stories about a man Ricardo Chaires Coria and an unknown woman. The man Coria was inspired by The Cruci-Fiction Project and decided to do some protesting of his own. In October 4, 1995 Coria decided to crucify himself in his police uniform, in front of the monument El Angel de la Independencia in Mexico, he was protesting poor wages and police corruption. An installation very similar to Gómez-Peña and Sifuentes' however Coria was on the cross for more than seven hours before he was brought down, and by then he was near death (151). Gómez-Peña also mentions another person that was inspired by The Cruci-Fiction Project. After a lecture that took place in Las Cruces, New Mexico, a local artist handed an envelope to him and Sifuentes, the envelope contained a photo of a woman in her mid-thirties. She had also crucified herself on a wooden cross in an act of cultural penance (151).

A couple months after The Cruci-Fiction Project took place the two artists were bombarded with alternate stories as to what really happened at the installation of The Cruci-Fiction Project. Some of the stories involved the two artists being called the “two crazy Mexicans who crucified themselves for several days with real nails and got arrested and were deported back to Mexico...” Gómez-Peña and Sifuentes believed that the performance was a way to tell social truths, they did not correct any of the versions, in doing so it showed how society views and portrays the stereotypes of the Chicano culture (Gómez-Peña 149-151).

The second installation that was introduced my research was called “The Temple of Confessions,” and it took place in the EX-Teresa Arte Alternativo in Mexico City. The best article to support my research was written by the artist himself Guillermo Gómez-Peña, the title of the article is “Mexican Beasts and Living Santos, from The Drama Review, written in 1997. According to Gómez-Peña this art piece was based on a religion metafiction, and transformed them into “living Santos,” there were three main spaces for the instalment: The Chapel of Desires, The Chapel of Fears, and a mortuary chamber in the center of the two.

The purpose of this installation was to invite people to experience and confess at the temple their inner most desires and intercultural fears. It was stated in the article that on the opening day they were overwhelmed with the attendance of participants, Gómez-Peña believes it was due to the “profound spiritual and cultural crisis affecting society...the audience confessed to the Santos their innermost feelings, fantasies, and memories of Mexico, Mexicans, Chicanos, and other people of color...”(137).

Sifuentes was the El Pre-Columbian Vato, “a holy gang member” (136-137). The alter that Sifuentes was located in was called the Chapel of Desires, and he was involved in slow motion ritualized actions, with his arms painted with tattoos, his shirt was covered in blood with

bullet holes. He also had several props inside of the glass box with him such as: fifty cockroaches, an iguana, spray can, a whip, “real” weapons and drugs. Directly in front of the glass box is a church kneeler and a microphone, this is where the participants are encouraged to confess, however Sifuentes never acknowledges that a person is there unless they are being “verbally abusive to him then he stares right at them” (138).

Gómez-Peña took on the role of “San Pocho Aztlaneca, the “artificial savage,” located in the Chapel of fears. Inside the Plexiglas box Gómez-Peña sat on a toilet with live crickets, taxidermy animals, tribal instruments, and artifacts that resembled witchcraft, and just like Sifuentes’ glass box he also had a church kneeler and a microphone. Gómez-Peña was dressed as a shaman with many tourist souvenirs around his neck along with a tribal talisman to create the “Tex-Mex-Aztec” outfit (139).

In this article Gómez-Peña included some of the confessions taking place during this installation but only a couple stood out to me because of what the content was: “My older sister felt like she didn’t want to get involved with a man whose last name was Gonzalez. She felt that if her last name was too ethnic that it would cause problems for her, being a female in the field of medicine. She doesn’t want to become more of a minority than she already is...” The second confession that was also astonishing is, “I want to confess my sins, all of my terrible sins...of wanting to be like the conquistadores. For so long I tried to blend in, I wanted to forget my raises, I wanted to forget that I was Indian, I wanted to be just like Las Gringas. And now I feel like I have to be me again, I have to be myself again, La Latina, La Latinoamérica, de nuevo.”

I would like to conclude my research paper with a quote from Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s article, “Mexican Beasts and Living Santos,” “If I had decided to engage in a personalized relation with them (confessors) emotions begin to pour from both sides: sadness, vulnerability,

guilt, anger, and tenderness. Some people cry and in doing so, they make me cry. Some express their hatred, their contempt and their fear—and I willingly take it...” (140-141). This statement shows what the artists went through, being told bluntly what society truly thinks of the Chicano culture, this happens every day and with the help of this instalment Gómez-Peña and Sifuentes are able to show society of stereotypes can truly affect a person. The two instalments that were created from Gómez-Peña and Sifuentes were purposely made to challenge the perceptions that society has against the Chicano culture, to challenge them to not be passive participants, to stand up for what is write and most importantly to educate them on what Chicano Social Issues are taking place in front of their eyes.

Work Cited

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