

## Latin-American Photography within Post-Ethnic America

By Analú López

From its beginnings the invention of the camera had dramatically reinvented a new condition for creating an image on a social and cultural level.<sup>1</sup> As we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century and witness the evolution of photography and its many uses within contemporary society we can also trace that evolution of the medium as it was and continues to be used within the Latino-American Communities. From the seventies Documentary/photojournalistic images of Manuel Echavarria, a long time resident and United Farm Workers organizer to the late eighties and nineties conceptual/performance art of Guillermo Gomez-Pena on to the contemporary works of Daniel J. Martinez, we see a shift within the use of the photograph and content of artwork done by Latinos living in the United States which speaks to what Historian David A. Hollinger calls, a Post-ethnic paradigm. Contemporary Latino Artists are creating artwork influenced by multi-culturalism in a time of "preference for choice over prescription."<sup>2</sup>

In the beginning, when we see photographs being produced by Latinos of Latinos-living in the United States-they have a Documentary/photojournalistic style prevalent and their subject matter are of their communities. Artist and art advocate during the sixties Chicano Visual Arts Movement, Gilbert "Magu" Lujan, stated: *"Photography had an impact among our collective visions or information presented to portray us as never before . . . initially with a journalistic approach then later followed by more serious efforts to make aesthetic statements."*<sup>3</sup> At first, photography worked as an empowering agent to the Latino-American community and the importance to portray their communities was crucial to their identities themselves. American photographer Lewis Hine once said: "If I could tell the story in words, I wouldn't need to lug a camera."<sup>4</sup> The purpose of any type of documentary is to record and demonstrate what is important about any sort of event, people or place, enter the images of Manuel Echavarria.

Manuel Echavarria experienced the migrant farm worker's life first hand. Born in Lorraine, Texas, in 1940, and like many other Chicanos of this time, he was a child of the Mexican Revolution. His father, a former military cadet, had left his native Michoacan to escape one of the most destructive episodes in Mexican history. Soon after arriving in Texas in about 1913, he met and married Manuel's mother and took to sharecropping cotton to feed his family. After the death of his mother, and the rise of cotton-picking machines, which triggered the migration of millions of African-Americans, Mexican-Americans and Mexicans throughout the southeastern and southwestern cotton-growing states, at age three the family took up residence in Guadalupe, California. Until about the age of fifteen he worked in the fields with father and sisters, when he dropped out of High school and graduated to

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<sup>1</sup> Firstenberg, Lauri. *"Autonomy and the Archive in America: Reexamining the Intersection of Photography and Stereotype."* *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self*. Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis. Harry N. Abrams: 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Hollinger, David. *Post-Ethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism*.

<sup>3</sup> 2005 e-mail to artist

<sup>4</sup> Lost source

Oceano's celery-packing sheds. After noting the important lessons about the benefits and dignity that came with worker representation, and after earning his G.E.D., he became inspired by the civil rights movement, and later, by the anti-war movement. He bought himself a 35-millimeter Pentax and began to capture on film what was, for him, the history-making drama of his life. Over the course of a decade, he shot hundreds of photographs, showing working conditions that drove many Santa Maria Valley farm workers to support or join the United Farm Workers (UFW). Several photographs include famed UFW labor leaders and organizers César Chávez and Dolores Huerta.

Echavarria's straight-forward, documentary/photojournalist approach is key to his work because prior images-with few exceptions-of Mexican-Americans were usually emotional ones depicting them in a time of struggle, as if all we knew was the experience of struggle. Hardly ever do we see empowering images of Mexican-Americans such as the one of Dolores Huerta speaking on a panel for the United Farm Workers. This image is just one of many examples which exist where Echavarria shows Mexican-Americans outside of the confines of the fields and entering and confronting the very institutions which placed them there. The Documentation of this Mexican-American community touches upon what David A. Hollinger speaks on in regards to "pluralist" model of multiculturalism, which "treats groups as permanent and enduring, and as the subject of group rights." Manuel Echavarria closely identified himself with the Mexican-American community and chose to photograph the community of which he came from. He could have affiliated himself with the working class community which would have included other ethnicities however, because of his background and experience he felt a need to document his community specifically.

The importance of Manuel Echavarria's documentary photographs was to show a people, in this case Mexican-Americans, standing up for their basic human rights. In a recent tape-recorded interview, Echavarria offered one of his reasons for taking his camera into the fields more than three decades ago: "You don't want history to say the Mexicano, the Chicano was... passive, [that] everything must have been okay with them. But we know that's not true. So, ultimately that's one of the reasons why I've been involved with this for so many years. It is to make sure that history doesn't say that, *que estamos todos contentos*, that we are happy, that we didn't exist."<sup>5</sup>

By the late eighties to nineties, although photography was still being used within some communities in a documentary style, the medium began to be explored on a conceptual level by other individuals who once identified themselves as Chicanos but now within this work we see the model of "Cosmopolitanism" entering much artwork from this period. In his theoretical essay, *Post-ethnicity: Beyond multiculturalism*, Historian David A. Hollinger posits a "post-ethnic" perspective emphasizing civic nationalism and which builds upon the strain of multiculturalism. Simply put the post-ethnic agenda states: "preference for choice over prescription . . ." His Post ethnic perspective distinguishes two kinds of multiculturalism: a "pluralist" model-mentioned earlier-, which treats groups as permanent and enduring, and as the subject of group rights; and a "cosmopolitan" model, which accepts

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<sup>5</sup> 1999 interview per California Polytechnic State University's Kennedy Library database

shifting group boundaries, multiple affiliations, and hybrid identities, and which is based on individual rights. In David Hollinger's definition of "Cosmopolitanism" he states that it is more "wary of traditional enclosures and favors voluntary affiliations whereas, it promotes multiple identities, emphasizing the dynamic and changing character of many groups, and is responsive to the potential for creating new cultural combinations."<sup>6</sup>

Cultural combinations come in many forms, as seen within the content of Manuel Echavarría images, they can be of only one community or as seen within the work of Guillermo Gomez-Pena they can be influenced not just by their racial identity but also their geographical locations and how that relates to their multiple identities. Guillermo Gomez-Pena was born in Mexico City in 1955 and came to the US in 1978. The recipient of 1991 MacArthur Fellowship and a 1989 Bessie Award; his work has been featured internationally. Since then he has been exploring cross-cultural issues with the use of performance, multilingual poetry, journalism, video, radio, and installation art. His performance work and critical writings have helped develop debates on cultural diversity, identity, and US-Mexico relations.<sup>7</sup>

His work from the late eighties/nineties although it could still fall under the realm of Documentary it now begins to enter the world of conceptualism and aesthetics, a genre shift from the photojournalistic approach of the sixties images explored by his fellow Latin-American artists and an approach would be the precursor to some art done by Latin-American artists today. As seen within the black and white image from his 1996 performance, *"The New World Border,"* where Gomez-Peña and other artists were the main performers we see his influence and take on the experience of multiple identities as it plays out cross-culturally. We see within this image the artist-Guillermo Gomez-Pena dressed up in a hybrid identity. The mid-torso portrait shows us the artist as he stares boldly out to the audience while wearing a headdress, spotted leopard mask, spiked hand-bracelet, along with other traditional indigenous attire as he holds up a sign reading: FREE TRADE ART/ARTE DE LIBRE COMERCIO, in his left hand while raising his right hand in a welcoming manner as if to say, "we welcome all art."

Contemporary Art created by Latin-American artists today derives much of their influences from the previous genres and artists mentioned above. However, we also begin to see them deriving their influences which branch out of their racial identities and begin to explore topics of Art History, Psychological experiences/disorders where the realities of the post-ethnicity structure begins to play out, something which surfaced in the eighties/nineties but not entirely explored. Daniel J. Martinez is one such cross media conceptual artist who combines photography, video, sculpture and language projects in site specific installations, performances and public art projects which speak to the post-ethnic paradigm. Like Guillermo Gomez-Pena, Martinez' interest lay in the deeper, psychological meaning of

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<sup>6</sup> Hollinger

<sup>7</sup> Shapins, Jesse. From Tortilla Curtain to the former East Berlin: The performances of Guillermo Gomez-Pena and the city in between identity and times.

subcultures and their place in society--calling into question their marginalization as "other" and pointing to a more universal and humane perspective. Also, his works place equal weight on political commentary and the critique of art historical conventions.<sup>8</sup> Installations of his work have occurred at New Langton Arts (San Francisco), the 1993 Whitney Biennial, and the Aperto at the Venice Biennale.

For the Fall/Winter 2002 issue of *Camerawork: a Journal of Photographic Arts*, board member Sharon Bliss curated the first major Bay Area show of Daniel Martinez' works in over a decade. It coincides with a rare San Francisco, *Camerawork* solo show showcasing his most recent works alongside older works. *Without Anesthesia OR This Isn't a Nice Neighborhood: Recent Work by Daniel J. Martinez*, Martinez continues to carry out his creative and intellectual strategies through the production of visual art. Though it seems his recent work leans more in the direction of photography, if you ask him, he'd likely say that the *Camerawork* show features no photographs. Instead, he gives us photo-realistic animatronics sculptures and images he calls "resemblances of photographs," documents of performances imitating paintings.<sup>9</sup>

As seen within his 2002, color, digital inkjet prints *Self-Portrait #3, Eighteenth attempt to clone mental disorder or how one philosophizes with a hammer, after J.G. Ballard, Crash/notes toward a mental breakdown.*, *Self-portrait #9b: Fifth attempt to clone mental disorder or how one philosophizes with a hammer, after Gustave Moreau, Prometheus, 1868; David Cromberg, Videodrone, 1981, 2001.*, and *Self-Portrait #15, Seventeenth attempt to clone mental disorder or how one philosophizes with a hammer, After Michelangelo Merisi-Caravaggio, Salome, 1609-1610*, we see him deriving his influence to create art from a psychological and art historical perspective, not necessarily a Latino perspective, which begins to epitomize David A. Hollinger's post-ethnic perspective.

As stated previously, *Self-Portrait #3* is a color, digital inkjet print, close up, overhead portrait of one of Martinez' animatronics created for the April 2002 Lima Bienale. In this photograph we question our preconceived notions of reality and fiction through noting the stitches on what seems to be a real person's scalp. These are not small stitches rather huge ones which seem to be the only thing preventing this man's entire cranial skeleton from breaking open. The title of the image further influences our imagination to assume that this image can be real. However, the text works as an extra to the image. Because these images are visually stimulating with rich colors and texture we almost assume that what we are looking at could be either real or digitally enhanced. But our notions border reality and fiction. We are overwhelmed by our visual analysis and to those with an Arts educational grounded in the media of photography, these image place a lot of questions into our mind. Is it digitally composed? Is that really the artist? Is that a real head in the picture? The questions go on and on. *Camerawork* cited Daniel J. Martinez in stating:

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<sup>8</sup> ArtPop: Reviews of the Southwest, San Antonio, 29, No. 5 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Exhibition Catalog, "Without Anesthesia OR This Isn't A Nice Neighborhood: Recent Works by Daniel J. Martinez." Oct. 29.-Nov. 30, 2002.

*Many of us suffer tremendous pain, and we have numbed ourselves to such a degree that we don't feel anymore. We've lost touch with our own selves, our own bodies, our own souls. There are many different ways to uncover those things that have been numb for so long. Sometimes the nerve endings need to be laid bare. They need to be raw again. In order to heal a wound, sometimes you have to open it up to let the disease out. And sometimes you need to do that without anesthesia."<sup>10</sup>*

Aside from his installation specific animatronics, the images he uses as form of documentations of these, is it more clearly apparent within this statement his interests mainly lay within the body as the locus for a dialogue on the psycho-social dynamics of identity within public and private space, while examining the role of photography in its representations of reality. In each image for the 2002 San Francisco show through Camera Work we are engaged in an active process of seduction and revulsion.

Some other projects of his which explore the concept of the marginalization of a sub-culture other than a person of color include his series entitled *"The Killer in Me is the Killer in You,"* which is a series of classical portraits of Shevawn's-a fourteen-year-old which was murdered in an abandoned building in Santa Monica on February 26, 1998- friends. This project was part of a group collaboration curated by friends and family which displayed work by artists responding to this atrocity. Presented as large-format light box images, formal, elegant, and straightforward, the portraits capture the essence of each individual and challenge the viewer to see more deeply the human beings beneath the surface, the labels, the fear, and the prejudices attached to their outward signs of rebellion.

Just as the experience of being Latino is multi-faceted so is the use of the photographic image within the artworks of these past and contemporary artists, therefore, there has been a shift in how and what is photographed within these Latino Communities. No longer are they limiting themselves to their identities and only photographing something "Latino or Mexican" but rather in a post-ethnic America, they are embracing all of their societal experiences.

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<sup>10</sup> Martinez, Daniel Joseph. Quoted from "Camera Work: a Journal of Photographic Arts." Fall/Winter 2002, Volume 29. No.2, *Daniel Joseph Martinez: Without Anesthesia OR This Isn't a Nice Neighborhood.*