Art in America

Defiantly at Home: Latinx Artists in the Borderlands

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Louis Carlos Bernal: Dos Cholas, Tucson, Arizona, 1982, gelatin silver print, 8 by 12 inches.

Photojournalism from the US-Mexico border currently emphasizes stark, divisive images: walls, fences, surveillance devices, border patrols, “coyotes,” and crossing migrants. Yet some of the most compelling artwork dealing with this region attests to several generations’ worth of cross-border familial relationships, personal identities that carry markers of both countries, and hybrid cultures that meld influences from the United States, Mexico, and farther south in Latin America. This more complex work demonstrates how border residents have resisted being defined by the border and its conflicts, concentrating instead on a de-territorialized notion of home, along with a sense of self that often transcends both nationalism and gender politics.

In Louis Carlos Bernal’s 1982 photograph Dos Cholas, Tucson, Arizona, two women at a car rally on the outskirts of town are dressed in short-sleeved shirts and tight jeans, hair and makeup elaborately done. Behind them we see a lively congregation of young men and women with their cars and pickups, and beyond that lies the outline of mountains on the desert horizon. Like many images that Bernal took of “cholos/as” (bicultural, working-class, Spanish-speaking individuals) throughout the Southwest in this period, the photograph reinforces the marginal status of many Mexican Americans, and the idea that their social gatherings occur in peripheral urban areas.

A Chicano artist and Arizona native with deep ties to the communities he recorded, Bernal (1941–1993) often said that his works were "made for the people I have photographed," and that he hoped his images could make "some small contribution to my people—La Raza." He knowingly opposed racist attitudes and the isolation from mainstream society that the Chicano barrio population experienced. His practice was structured, he said, around a politics of Mexican American self-representation, an approach fostered by his participation in the Chicano movement of the 1960s. In a 1983 exhibition brochure, Bernal wrote: "Chicanismo represents a new sense of pride, a new attitude and a new awareness. The Chicano artist cannot isolate himself from his community."

During much of his 52-year life, which was tragically cut short by a bicycle-car accident, followed by nearly four years in a coma, Bernal networked with photographers across Mexico and the Southwestern United States, while he steadily gained critical notice. Despite his international status, he retained a consistent focus on the Latino/Chicano communities in which he grew up. (He was raised in Phoenix, earned his MFA at Arizona State University, and taught for his entire career at Pima Community College in Tucson.) Bernal had a penchant for documenting families in their own homes, or at informal public gatherings. He often used saturated hues to highlight the culturally distinct identities and intimate personal spaces of his sitters.

The 1980s cholos/as style captured in Bernal's photographs was heir to a longer tradition, particularly that of working-class Mexican American youths in El Paso and Los Angeles who, around the time of World War II, became known as pachucos, or zoot-suiters. In Woman in the Zoot Suit (2009), cultural historian Catherine S. Ramírez argues that women zoot-suiters, or pachucas, resisted prevailing female identities, setting the stage for the transgressive fashions of later generations. Pachucas achieved this freedom through their adoption of the stylishly baggy male fashion—dress-up attire that was relatively expensive and impractical, unlike working-class clothes—as well as their brazen attitudes, their "bravado and swagger," expressed in part through the use of group slang. The later pachucas that Bernal portrayed, their wardrobes more form-fitting, were also vital agents of resistance to heteronormative ideologies and established gender roles. Chicana muralist Judy Baca's seminal work Las Tres Marías (1976) is a life-size triptych in which she paints herself as a chola in the left panel and a tight-skirted pachuca in the right, the images flanking a mirror that enables viewers to envision themselves in this spectrum of female empowerment.

Bernal's pictures of cholos/as in the central Southwest were, in turn, a direct inspiration for Mexican photographer Graciela Iturbide's images taken in Los Angeles and Tijuana a few years later. Both artists, at roughly the same time, covered an area and a subject matter frequently worked by noted photographer John Valadez, who grew up and continued to live in the Boyle Heights neighborhood of Los Angeles.

More recently, artist Ronny Quevedo has captured the transgressive implications of cholo and pachuco wearing a series of works that outlines sewing patterns for clothing of this type in gold leaf on muslin. One piece from the series, titled pachuco, pacha, p'alante (2019), draws inspiration from the artist's mother, a seamstress in the Bronx after the family migrated there from Ecuador. The delicately patterned cloth traces the templates used to create a suit.

The loaded cultural significance of the garment is suggested by the shining gold leaf, which endows the building blocks of the ensemble with baroque brilliance. The patterns themselves, with the inscribed measurements and dotted lines tracing each piece, evoke medieval illuminated manuscripts. Yet the markings may also be read as a revolutionary roadmap: the p'alante of the title is a common activist slogan, translating as "onward."

This association echoes Ramírez's emphasis on the cholos/as' and pachuco/as' working-class origins—as though Quevedo imagined their idiosyncratic uniforms crafted from sheets of solid gold, rendering the wearers catalysts for political change. Mexican sociologist José Manuel Valenzuela Arce has argued that these youths mark the rise of a new kind of collective group identity, with a utopian sense of the future.

In addition to photographing cholos/as, Bernal extensively documented domestic and familial spaces in the US-Mexico borderlands, treating the modest home interiors as sites of transnational collectivity and resistance. While the Chicano movement idealized the male-headed household, where a hyper-masculine figure presides over home, wife, and children, Bernal often portrayed a maternal domestic governance, reflecting the social realities of many blue-collar families. In this way, the artist helped generate new familial tropes, communities, and collective memories.

A recurring theme in Bernal's photographs is a female subject posing before a home altar. For decades, these small religious constructions, and the know-how to make them, have come to the US along with migrant laborers from Latin America. The syncretic practice—which first flourished in the state of Jalisco, Mexico, in the 16th century, initiated there by Franciscan missionaries from Spain—combines Catholic religious iconography, folk art, popular craft, and regional customs to create a place for private worship, where owners pray for miracles and give offerings. Traditionally, the women of a household construct the altars.

In the 1980s, Amalia Mesa-Bains appropriated the form to make statements about resistant and hybrid identities within the Chicano community. Her over-the-top installation pieces, such as the iconic An Ofrenda for Dolores del Rio (1984), blend elements from the sacred tradition and from Latino popular culture: a Day of the Dead skull with framed picture of the eponymous actress, etc. Aesthetically, Mesa-Bains's altars—and home altars in general—make use of embellishments that have often been dubbed "kitsch," meaning vernacular, vulgar, inferior, or in poor taste. But Chicano author Tomás Ybarra-Frausto has designated such work rasquachismo, expressive of a vibrant "view from below," a working-class aesthetic that defies elitist taste. In 2015 Mesa-Bains engaged directly with immigration in her piece Emblems of the Decade: Borders. In this extensive installation, she uses furniture, photographs, and objects to reproduce a home interior, thereby addressing familial separation and displacement, and the need to maintain a domestic experience even in temporary circumstances.

In Bernal's photographs and Mesa-Bains's sculptural installations, female protagonists regain control of their environment. Highlighting the use of ordinary, mass-produced materials and improvised domestic decor, both artists endow the familial spaces of the barrios with a sense of resilience and dignity, displaying what Mesa-Bains in her 2003 essay "Domesticana" called the ability "to hold life together with bits of string, old coffee cans, and broken mirrors in a dazzling gesture of aesthetic bravado." The pride with which they display their handiwork identifies the inhabitants of the borderlands as cultural producers in their own right, and humanizes their experiences.

One woman Bernal photographed in the Barrio Anita in Tucson posed, hands clasped, in front of a small home altar in a room filled with religious imagery. Between the likenesses of Christ and the Virgin Mary are family photographs from multiple generations. Elsewhere, the modest furnishings intermingle with carefully placed pictures, an indication of how every inch of space is given over to decoration. On the wall is a framed image of the Last Supper, a popular decoration found in stores and markets all over the Southwest and Latin America. Such kitsch embellishments, inexpensive and extraordinarily common, identify the setting as a typical working-class borderland home.

Meanwhile, Bernal's artistry is subtly evident. The red walls impart an artificial atmosphere to the image; the Mickey Mouse balloon, hung from a bare bulb in the center of the room like a makeshift light fixture, adds to the image's chromatic saturation. The concentration of objects in one corner of the room emphasizes the space's cramped nature, as well as the woman's resourcefulness in creating a meaningful display with limited resources. By posing the homemaker in front of the arrangement she created, Bernal highlights her role as an artist and cultural producer, challenging dominant ideals of American identity.

Family altars give everyday women the opportunity to present their life stories in artful and monumental ways. These matriarchs cross racial, national, class, and generational lines, and are united as the keepers and guardians of familial and cultural archives. Through Bernal and Mesa-Bains's work, we become witness to the creative force of ordinary women, the results of which are hidden from the world inside their homes, reinforcing the notion that these borderland subjects belong there and the space is unquestionably theirs.

Eschewing the decorative abundance of the home altar, Laura Aguilar (1959–2018) was an LA-based Latina photographer who asserted control over her domestic space through incisive self-portraiture. In Sandy's Room (1990) shows Aguilar reclining nude in a stark, white room, windows thrown open to reveal a living wall of plant growth outside. Although the black-and-white scene includes only minimal objects—an electric fan, two stools, a chair—the work is consonant with the interior scenes discussed above.

In casual repose, nude, a cold drink in hand, Aguilar is in confident control of her surroundings and her self-image. Elsewhere in her practice, concurrent with artists such as Ricardo Valverde, Harry Gamboa Jr., and Isabel Castro, she created portraits of chosen families—those networks of social kinship that lie beyond biological relationships. Such images reconfigure what a family or community could be, and what alternative domestic spaces might look like.

For these artists, the concept of the home and family is a way to challenge convention and put forth new values and practices. Taking a cue from contemporary feminist and queer critiques, they subvert the trope of the home as a site of patriarchal oppression. Furthermore, they highlight how traditional family structures take on different meanings when families are dispersed—an experience common to borderland immigrants—and creatively reimagine transnational social spaces. In doing so, they refute narrowly defined societal, gender, and nationalist constructs.