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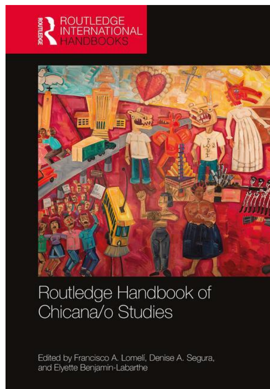

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The art of disruption

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27

The art of disruption

Chicana/o art's politicized strategies for aesthetic innovation

Guisela Latorre

The Chicano movement and the political activism of the 1960s and 1970s provided a fertile ground and a powerful impetus for the emergence of a truly radical art. Though Chicanas/os had been active in creative endeavors prior to these watershed moments in American history, the numerous street protests, the demands for greater inclusion among people of color and the decolonial struggles against assimilation and domination generated new motivations for artists. Speaking about the specific location of Los Angeles (an important hub for Chicana/o artistic productions), Reina Alejandra Prado Saldívar argued that these artists had become highly sensitive to the events around them: "Art sprang up to address the needs of particular communities in Los Angeles, responding to the violence that erupted with the Watts rebellion and the Chicano Moratorium against the Vietnam War, among other events" (Saldívar 2011, p. 41). Moreover, they took stock of the conflictive and at times even violent relationship the United States has with Mexico, with whom they share the longest international border in the world. The generation of artists who came of age during this time understood that art has a consciousness-raising function that allows for the expression of collective sentiments and for the enactment of community building. Thus, the social, political and cultural context that gave rise to the greater visibility of Chicana/o art also prompted artistic innovations and a critical re-thinking of contemporary forms of creativity.

Because of the politicized context that propelled much Chicana/o art, the aesthetic statements deployed by their producers often flew in the face of convention. These artists often disregarded many of the precepts of modern and contemporary art, opting instead for a socially engaged art that could be more direct and accessible to communities of color. Their resistance to the institutionally approved avant-garde aesthetic had a lot do with the exclusions that this aesthetic endorsed, as explained by Chicano artist Rupert García: "European and Anglo-American theoreticians of post-modernism rarely and insufficiently addressed issues of race and ethnicity. They infrequently recognized that many U.S. 'artists of color' were by definition opposed to modernism" (Noriega 2008, p. 21). Thus, these artists' unorthodox approach to art-making coupled with their status as racialized subjects in the United States resulted in a virulent exclusion from museums, galleries and the canons of art history. As time progressed, however, the relationship between Chicana/o artists and the institutions of art was transformed, albeit only slightly. By the turn on the millennium, a relatively small handful of exhibition spaces had opened their

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doors to Chicana/o art. "Indeed, *four* decades after the social movement that first named and debated the term," Chon Noriega observed, "*Chicano art* remains a marginalized category in the art world" (Noriega 2008, p. 17). New generations of artists emerged that would have a more tenuous or complex relationship to the political movements from the past. Nevertheless, these changes have not led to the demise or disappearance of their art, by any means. Quite the contrary. Recent developments in this art movement have proven that this is an arts practice that thrives on a constant dynamic of disruption and innovation. These artists from the 1960s and 1970s knew that they needed to disrupt the arts establishment in order to be visible. It was this liberatory vision that made their work so innovative and radical for its time. This philosophy of rupture has continued into the 21st-century practice of Chicana/o art where artists continually seek to disrupt static and stifling expectations of themselves and their work. Chicana/o art deploys an unapologetically critical vision of the world and of itself, one that assures us that this work will always be exciting, unexpected and irreverent.

In what follows, I will provide a brief and selective overview of Chicana/o art's history of innovation and disruption, concepts that have defined the very ethos of this movement. By conducting close iconographic and formal analyses of key works in this history coupled with discussions of the social commentaries embedded in the imagery, I will highlight the multiple and continual ways Chicana/o artists deploy an aesthetic of disruption and innovation with their work. This aesthetic comes out of a necessity to carve out spaces within an arts establishment that excludes them but also out of a desire to imagine different worlds where colonial hierarchies, be they in the art world or society at large, are of no real consequence. The goal is, as Chicano artist Harry Gamboa stated, to negate "that the Chicano community was a disposable phantom culture" (1991, p. 63). This approach to art production also reflects Chicanas/os' vision of the artist's role in society. I have argued elsewhere that while Western culture often regarded the quintessential artist as an individual genius who operated above the humdrum goings on of daily life, Chicana/o artists saw themselves as deeply entrenched in the everyday experiences of larger communities:

> Chicana/o artists could not afford to simply retreat into their studios to explore the contours of their artistic imagination, for they were often compelled and driven to understand how their individual creativity related to the process of community building and preservation, a task they could not achieve by remaining in cultural, social and political isolation.
> *(Latorre 2008, p. 8)*

Moreover, the very fact that Chicanas/os make art and demand visibility of this work in a society that renders them invisible is disruptive in and of itself. That these artists should insist upon challenging the precepts of modern and contemporary art with their visual language is downright daring.

Museums and galleries of the early 1970s in the United States and Europe were dominated by the work of minimalist, abstract and conceptual artists. Chicana/o artists who came of age during this time, however, were living a markedly different reality from that of the predominantly white art world. They were as much concerned with formal innovation as they were with making visible their social realities. For many of them, the mostly non-figural and apolitical language of abstraction did not lend itself to the cultural needs of their work. These artists were also conscious of the fact that the authors of *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*, the quintessential manifesto of Chicano nationalism drafted in 1969, called upon artists to put their work at the service of the political struggles of the time: "We must insure that our writers, poets, musicians, and artists produce literature and art that is appealing to our people and relates to our revolutionary culture" (*El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*, accessed 2016).

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An important social reality that concerned many Chicana/o artists in the 1970s and beyond was the plight of migrant farmworkers whose experiences with hardship and labor abuses were highlighted by the creation of the United Farm Workers (UFW) founded by two charismatic activists, César Chávez and Dolores Huerta. For Chicano painter Daniel DeSiga from Walla Walla, Washington, exposing the harsh and punishing realities of farm work were both personal and political projects. As a child and adolescent, he spent most of his summers laboring in asparagus and beet fields. By the time he got to college, DeSiga had become involved in the UFW movement and joined the Sacramento-based artistic collective called the Royal Chicano Air Force (DeSiga, n.d. accessed 2016).

DeSiga's paintings and murals became recognizable for their social realist style and the recurring images of farmworkers toiling in vast agricultural fields (Image 27.1). *Campesino* (Farmworker; 1975) has perhaps been one of his most recognizable works, as it was featured in the historic CARA exhibition.[1] With this painting, the artist presents the spectator with a fairly simple and straightforward composition depicting a male farmworker bending down as he is working the land. He is both invisible and hyper-visible. DeSiga underscores his invisibility by rendering this figure anonymous and faceless, as viewers are unable to see who this person is and what his face looks like. He is but one of the countless workers who engage in the physically and mentally taxing work of planting and harvesting the land controlled by the agricultural industry. Yet the artist simultaneously undermines this invisibility by placing his *campesino* at the very center of the composition; his bodily presence and labor take up a large portion of the picture plane, thus making this farmworker hyper-visible as well. The relative iconographic barrenness that surrounds this *campesino* further highlights and frames him. The cultivation field extends into the horizon, making it appear as if it stretches out interminably below a cloudless sky. We are thus to conclude that this farmworker will need to toil in this seemingly boundless land for hours on end. DeSiga places the spectator's eye level close to the ground so that it appears as if we are looking up at the *campesino* from a lower vantage point. This visual device deployed by the artist endows the central figure with a monumental quality, a feature that is further enhanced by the pyramid shape his bending pose creates. Though he is the anonymous and faceless laborer, he takes on the aura

Image 27.1 *Campesino* (Farmworker; 1975), Daniel DeSiga

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of a national monument in DeSiga's painting. By illustrating agricultural labor in such a fashion, DeSiga was not only calling for greater recognition of migrant farm workers; he was also demanding that they be celebrated for their critical contributions to the U.S. agricultural economy.

Campesino was also an important image because it drew attention to the use of the short-handled hoe or "*el cortito*," a farm tool that forced laborers to bend down for extended periods of time while working the fields. Used primarily for thinning and weeding, the use of the tool caused debilitating back injuries. By the 1960s, the tool had been banned in many states in the United States, in large part thanks to the social justice demands of the UFW. Saúl Sánchez, in accounts of his own experiences working in sugar-beet fields, also spoke of the negative effects the use of the tool had on a person's sense of dignity:

> To say that it had been a humiliating way to earn our daily bread is to understate the brutality of its effect on our character, the toll it took on our subtracted self-esteem. Working year in and year out in such an awkward, dehumanizing position required not just superhuman endurance but also a hardening of one's psyche. It seared one's soul to see one's self, and one's entire family, forced to adopt such a servile position.
>
> *(Sánchez 2014, p. 164)*

The fact DeSiga then chose to highlight the embodiment of subordination that the short-handled hoe signified may seem counterproductive. However, though this farmer is depicted bending down in this "servile position," the dignity and monumentality that is also part of his representation undercuts the possibility that *Campesino* reproduces the negative connotations of the pose. The artist thus actively disrupts the signification of subservience attached to the bending position. Such a disruption then creates an innovative aesthetic whereby DeSiga deploys a pared-down and minimalist composition, much like other artists of his time, but without the apolitical, abstract and non-figural style of avant-garde minimalist painters and sculptors celebrated by the art establishment.

Aside from DeSiga, the cause of the UFW has been a recurring theme in the work of many other Chicana/o artists. The activist and political accomplishments of this labor union coupled with the incredible courage and resolve demonstrated by Huerta and Chávez have been powerful inspirations for these artists. Beyond just mere inspiration, however, many of them possessed an intimate relationship to the plight of migrant farmworker, for they themselves and/or their family members had toiled in the fields. Such is the case of Ester Hernández, whose work spans over four decades, having produced some of the most iconic and emblematic images associated with the Chicana/o movement (Image 27.2).

Her serigraph print *Sun Mad* (1982) is perhaps the most celebrated and visually effective work of art associated with the UFW cause. Deploying an economy of formal means and simplicity in design, Hernández created an image that became an emblem of the struggles in the fields. *Sun Mad* not only exposed the oppressive working conditions that farmworkers endured but also shed light on the environmental harm that comes as a result of the profit-driven agricultural industry. Hernández here appropriates the popular logo image for the Sun-Maid raisins, an image that the company, Sun-Maid Growers of California, has used for over one hundred years. At first glance, Hernández's rendition seems quite similar to the original design, as the general composition and color scheme are virtually the same. The young woman in the bonnet and dress, however, is not a virtuous maid, but a *calavera* or skeleton gazing sardonically back at the viewer. Hernández has also changed the text which now reads at the bottom of the painting: "Sun Mad Raisins, Unnaturally Grown with Insecticides, Miticides, Herbicides, Fungicides." These seemingly small but strategic transformations completely de-center the company's

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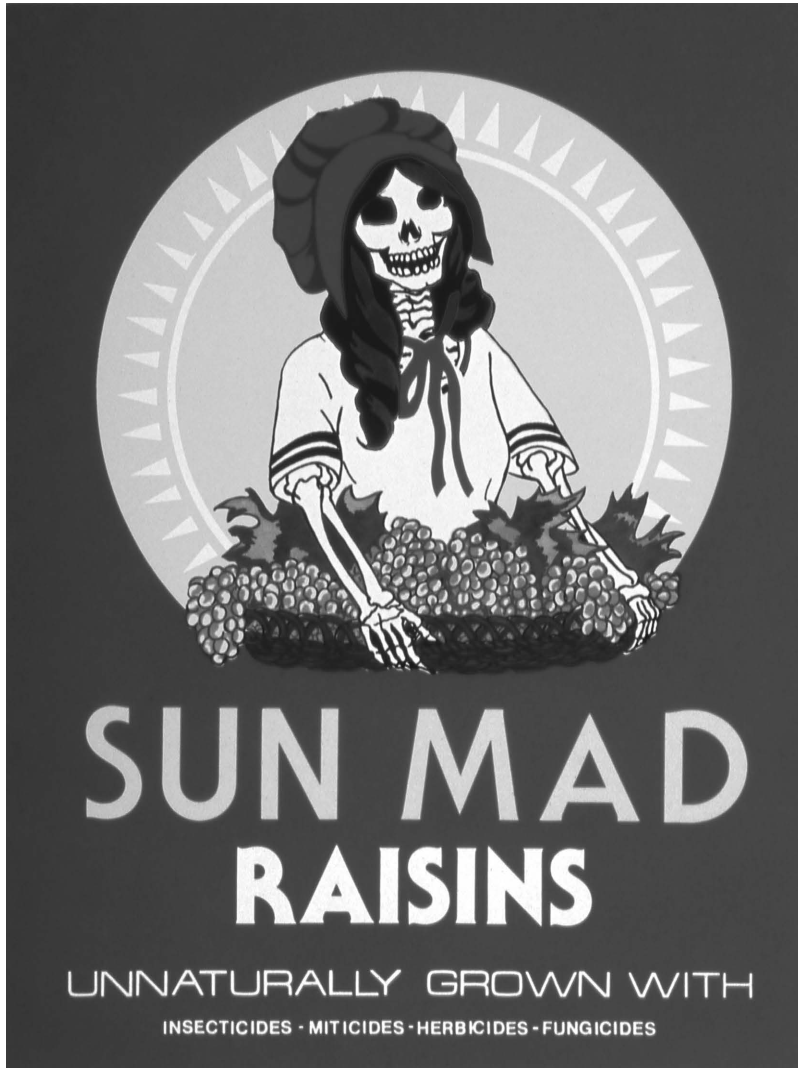

Image 27.2 Sun Mad (1982), Ester Hernández

advertising slogan that claims that consumers are getting "natural California raisins." The image thus calls attention to the use of harmful chemicals that farmworkers are exposed to while they work on the fields. The *calavera* then acts as an unsettling reminder of the adverse health consequences suffered by the *campesinos* in the fields and by those who consume those products. Geographer and urban planner Laura Pulido has argued that the political struggles of the UFW were both about economic and environmental justice. She further observed that "over time agriculturally related pesticide injuries [in California] have continuously counted for over 60 percent of all reported injuries" (Pulido 1996, p. 79). Health problems suffered by field workers included everything from eye irritation to chemical burn, severe lung and skin conditions, and systemic poisoning. During the UFW Pesticide Campaign (1965–1971), activists in the

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union insisted that consumers also needed to be concerned for themselves because they were eating produce laced with harmful chemicals (Pulido 1996, p. 205). The *calavera* in *Sun Mad* then functioned as a *memento mori* motif, reminding spectators of the possibility of death as a result of abusive and unethical farming practices.

With *Sun Mad*, the artist relied heavily on the aesthetics of disruption and innovation to communicate in direct and complex ways the experiences of labor abuse in the fields of the profitable U.S. agricultural industry. Hernández drew from a large repertoire of pre-existing popular imagery at her disposal. *Sun Mad* recalls simultaneously histories of fine art, popular culture, and advertising, all of which are subverted and disrupted to varying degrees. Hernández assumed multiple and overlapping audience populations with *Sun Mad*, banking on their knowledge of older visual traditions. For instance, Chicana/o or Mexican spectators were likely to be familiar the *calavera* motif in the central figure, a common sight during *Día de los Muertos* celebrations in Mexico and the United States. These same individuals are also likely to recognize Hernández's allusion to turn-of-the-century Mexican printmaker José Guadalupe Posada, who used *calaveras* in his broadsides to critique Mexico's social inequalities. Viewers with some knowledge of European and Euro American contemporary art will probably recognize the artist's nod to Pop Art and the likes of Andy Warhol who, like Hernández, also used advertising imagery in his silkscreens. Finally, more general and popular American audiences will undoubtedly identify the Sun-Maid logo, a common sight in U.S. supermarket isles. While these audiences can be very distinct, they may also overlap and recognize these visual traditions simultaneously. Hernández, however, disrupts and innovates on all of those traditions at once. The innovation that she creates here is dependent on the images' familiarity. The artist's disruptions are purposeful in their intent to provoke strong emotions, either negative or positive. The strong emotions that the artist elicits can prompt the spectator to delve deeper into the image, including its social message.

With the possible exception of Posada's *calaveras*, none of the references in *Sun Mad* are necessarily politically radical or subversive, but they become so when Hernández transforms them and/or juxtaposes them against one another. For instance, the image of the Sun-Maid on its own is meant to recall an idyllic (though utterly fictional) past, as described in the company's website: "Life was much simpler, more rural, a lot less hectic and sunbonnets were still part of women's fashion in California" ("The Sun-Maid Girl," accessed 2016). Images that circulate widely and massively like the Sun-Maid motif are meant to invoke feelings of comfort and safety for those who consume them. Hernández purposely disrupts the comfort and safety associated with the Sun-Maid brand to expose the labor abuses and environmental harm that this seemingly benign image conceals. The innovative aesthetic elements contained in *Sun Mad* are heavily dependent on disruption; in other words, they rest upon the subversion of many established, time-honored and canonical visual traditions. While the art establishment might demand that artists produce truly new and original work, Hernández defiantly proclaimed with this work that her artistic contribution here was the iconoclastic revision of a damaging and deceitful image, namely the Sun-Maid figure.

The tension inherent in the conflicting expectations coming from the mainstream art world and the Chicana/o movement resulted in a hybrid visual language that reflected a desire for aesthetic innovation and for social justice content at the same time. Such was the case of the artistic collective known as Asco, a group of East Los Angeles artists that included Patssi Valdez, Willie Herrón, Gronk, Harry Gamboa Jr., and others. The group formed in 1971 under the name Midnight Productions because, as Herrón recalled, "we were doing street stuff and simultaneously working on *Regeneración*, the zine, from '71 to '74" (Latorre 2016). They adopted the name Asco later in 1974 when they exhibited a selection of their worse work in Self-Help Graphics, which they called "asco" ("nausea" or "disgust" in Spanish). With their work described by C. Ondine Chavoya as "critique and seduction, play and provocation, and activism and abstraction"

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(Chavoya 2000, p. 240), Asco's vision of disruption and rupture was directed not only at the art world but also at the limitations of Chicanismo within the political movement. Their work betrayed an ambivalence about what it meant to be a Chicana/o, thus taking, in the words of Noriega, "a more ambiguous and fluid approach to identity" (Noriega 2008, p. 20). Asco's work could be best described as a kind of performance art focused on public interventions. Gamboa spoke of their work as "conceptually political" (González 2008, p. 48) alluding to the group's simultaneous engagement with avant-garde aesthetics and social justice concerns.

On 24 December 1974, Asco staged one of their many iconic performance pieces in East Los Angeles, namely *First Supper (After a Major Riot)* (Image 27.3), which art historian Howard N. Fox described as follows:

> Asco and friends staged a formal dinner party on a traffic island, providing a curious spectacle for holiday rush-hour drivers – another absurdist activity designed to make spectators wonder about complex motives and hidden meanings but that mainly flouted convention and common sense.
>
> *(Fox 2008, p. 78)*

Fox further asserted that Asco's penchant for the absurd reflected Dada aesthetics of the early 20th century in Western Europe that challenged the "reason" and "logic" of bourgeois society. Their nod to European avant-garde traditions, however, was complicated by the specifically Chicana/o context of the performance. The location, the corner of Whittier Boulevard and Arizona Street in East Los Angeles, was not only in the heart of a predominantly Chicana/o part of the city, it was also the site of trauma for the local community, as Chavoya explains:

> The traffic island the artists occupied has been built over a particularly bloody site of the East LA riots as part of an urban "redevelopment" project in 1973. Following the riots, the

Image 27.3 First Supper (After a Major Riot) (1974), Asco

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> surrounding buildings, sidewalks, and streets were leveled and rebuilt to prevent further public demonstrations.
>
> *(Chavoya 2000, p. 245)*

The East LA Riots occurred when, as Harry Gamboa recalled, "rock-throwing protesters were shot by police with riot guns" (Gamboa 1991, p. 126). Given the history of violence and dislocation of that locale, *First Supper* was also a subversive act of "obstinate memory,"[2] a refusal to forget a neocolonial episode of repression. The theme of memory took on a transnational meaning as the members of Asco were also attempting to raise awareness about a recent episode of political violence. Only a year prior to *First Supper*, the country of Chile experienced a traumatic coup d'état organized by the nation's military and led by Augusto Pinochet. The participation of the CIA in the overthrow of Chile's democratically elected president Salvador Allende was particularly concerning to many politically minded Chicanas/os at the time who were highly critical of U.S. interventions abroad, including the Vietnam War. Among the props the artists included in this piece of urban intervention was a painting of a tortured corpse with all her/his extremities missing, allusions to Pinochet's use of state-sponsored violence to maintain power.[3] Asco's radical disruption of rush-hour traffic operated as a means of forcing remembrance onto a public – in this case passersby and motorists – who were likely to forget or disregard these recent histories of brutality and oppression, whether it was Chicanas/os affected by the East LA Riots or Chileans or others subjugated by an authoritarian regime. Asco created a new aesthetic that deployed the tools of conceptual and performance art within the urban space of East Los Angeles while also promoting the social justice demands of the Chicana/o movement. To do so, however, the artists had to engage in active disruptions of Eurocentric modernism, neoliberal organization of city streets and static notions of Chicana/o identity.

Asco had introduced the language of performance art to the Chicana/o arts movement in the early 1970s, a language that endured and flourished in the more recent work by other artists. Such is the case of multimedia artist and photographer Richard Lou, who began his career in the 1980s, most notably as part of the legendary artist collective called the Border Arts Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo active in the Tijuana/San Diego border region in the late 20th century. Though Lou is often identified as a Chicano artist, an identity he himself embraces, his background and life experience complicate facile categorizations of his persona. The artist is the son of a Chinese father and a Mexican mother, thus representing a biculturalism that wasn't always recognized by some of his Chicana/o peers. Though Lou always proclaimed his Asian identity side-by-side with his *chicanismo* – at times using the word "Chicanese" to refer to himself – the complexities of his hybridity have been most explicitly made manifest in his work from the past 10 years (Lou and Latorre 2016, pp. 214–225). Moreover, when the artist and his family moved to the South in 2001 – first to Milledgeville, Georgia and then to Memphis, Tennessee – his work began to reflect the particularities of that locale, as I have argued:

> As an artist whose work was so connected to local histories and site-specificity, the history and political dynamics of the American South would inevitably seep into his work. While always retaining his interest in the Mexican and Chicana/o experience in the United States as well as in border issues, his life in Georgia and Tennessee made him increasingly aware of the parallels and affinities between this experience and the histories of slavery, lynching, and right-wing extremism that are endemic to the U.S. South.
>
> *(Latorre 2012, N.p.)*

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The breaks that Lou has made with monolithic notions of cultural identity have more often than not operated as disruptions to the hegemonic societies that surround him. The history of racial tensions associated with the Confederate cultures of the South have been recurring objects of critique for the artist. He understood the American South as "a laboratory for all sorts of legislative, moral and cultural paradigms" that relate to issues of race, one that affected social relations throughout the United States and beyond (Latorre July 11, 2016). This work by Lou has highlighted how in the South the normalization of white supremacy is reified through public monuments and through expressions of historical heritage that exalt the "accomplishments" of political and military figures who promoted the institution of slavery and naturalized the practice of segregation. For example, in 2009 Lou enacted a public performance titled *ReCovering Memphis: Listening to Untold Stories* (Images 27.4 and 27.5), which took place at Nathan Forrest Park in Memphis

Image 27.4 *ReCovering Memphis: ReContexting Bodies* (2016), Richard Lou (the artist) personifying Forrest Davis.

Source: Photo by Kathy Barnes-Lou.

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Image 27.5 *ReCovering Memphis: ReContexting Bodies* (2016), Richard Lou (the artist) personifying Jefferson Davis.

Source: Photo by Kathy Barnes-Lou.

(now renamed Health Sciences Park). The park was notorious among people of color in the city for featuring an equestrian sculpture featuring Nathan Bedford Forrest who was, in the words of *New York Times* contributor Emily Yellin, "a Memphis slave trader, the original grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan and a war criminal who led a gruesome Confederate massacre of surrendered black and white Union troops at nearby Fort Pillow in 1864" (Yellin 2015, A11). The monument also housed the remains of Forrest and his wife, thus holding particular importance to groups such as the Sons of Confederate Veterans.[4] Lou's performance in 2009 took place on the very site of this monument and included the building of a temporary installation as well as live story-telling, music and dancing, all of which were intended to give a voice to communities of color often silenced by the white supremacist ideologies embedded in the Confederate military histories.[5]

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Seven years later in 2016 Lou would continue with his *ReCovering Memphis* project when he created a video installation titled *ReContexting Bodies*, focusing on the contested figures of Forrest and Jefferson Davis, a 19th-century Mississippi U.S. representative and senator who also became president of the Confederate States during the Civil War.

Using his own racialized body as the principal artistic medium for this performance/installation piece, *ReCovering Memphis: ReContexting Bodies* consists of a large, high-definition, 40-inch video screen placed vertically or in portrait position on the gallery wall. This mostly black-and-white video depicts the artist himself taking on the personas of Forrest and Davis. His body is cropped at the waist as he turns slightly to the left, thus alluding to Western traditions of portraiture depicting "great men" of history: "I was looking at portraits of Nathan Bedford Forrest and Jefferson Davis and selected the most iconic ones, the ones that they are best known for," Lou explained, "I tried to strike the pose that they had and wear some of the clothes that they had" (Latorre July 11, 2016). When he is personifying Forrest, Lou wears a Confederate-style military costume with two rows of buttons running up and down his chest while his portrayal of Davis has him wearing a 19th-century gentleman's suit, befitting of a stately member of the senate. For most of the video's runtime, Lou stands perfectly still maintaining the traditional portraiture pose, but because these are not still images of the artist but rather live action video, the spectator is able to see slight movements of his face and body, thus evoking a rather earie and unsettling effect. At several points in the video installation, which runs a total of 34 minutes and 22 seconds, the portraits of Forrest and Davis come alive when the video display goes from black and white to full color and the characters began to spout words attributed to the two men. Lou explained that the transition to color was

> meant to coax the idea that these figures and their ideology are not part of a calcified past – an ideology set in the permanence of amber – that when I come into color, literally and figuratively, that these ideas are still at play, informing how we see and relate to each other.
> *(Latorre and Lou 2016, N.p.)*

About 5 minutes into the video's running time, the character of Forrest starts to deliver his 1865 "Farewell Address to His Troops," the speech in which he conceded the defeat of Confederate forces after the Civil War. "That we are beaten is a self-evident fact," Lou laments as he channels Forrest, "and any further resistance on our part would justly be regarded as the very height of folly and rashness." In spite of the defeat of his troops, Forrest sought to retain his honor and dignity by expressing graciousness in the face of adversity and by encouraging his men to "cultivate friendly feelings towards those with whom we have so long contended" (Latorre, July 11, 2016). He further praises his troops for their "courage and determination," which "elicited the respect and admiration of friend and foe." A few minutes later into the video, the Forrest character begins to recite different statements altogether that pertain to his profession as a slave trader. In these ads for his "business of buying and selling of negroes," Forrest extols the convenience, spaciousness and safety of his facilities, boasting about the superiority of his "services," which he personally guarantees. He further informs his clientele that he has "a good assortment of Virginia, Georgia and Carolina Negroes." The solemnity and decorum contained in the address to his troops is greatly contrasted by the brash manner in which he dehumanizes Black people, underscoring only their value as commodities and property.

The transition between the Forrest and Jefferson Davis characters in *ReCovering Memphis: ReContexting Bodies* is signaled by a simple black frame with text that explains where the Forrest quotes were taken from and then Davis quickly appears on screen. His pose and demeanor loosely resemble the famous Mathew Brady photographic portrait of the politician housed

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in the U.S. National Archive and Records Administration. Unlike the Forrest character, Davis never meets the viewers' gaze, appearing to wistfully look into the distance instead. Within a few minutes he begins reciting an excerpt from Davis's 1881 memoir, opening with the words, "Let the reader pause for a moment and look calmly at the facts presented in this statement," thus appealing to his audience's capacity for objective and judicious reasoning. He explains that the African peoples who were forcibly brought to the Americas through the Middle Passage were "gathered from torrid plains and malarial swamps of inhospitable Africa." They themselves, the Davis character contends, were slaves of "barbarian masters" who failed to teach them civilized behavior and "useful arts and occupations," having been "reared in heathen darkness." In his impassioned defense of slavery, Davis further argues that their subsequent subjugation and indentured servitude in the United States signified not a flagrant abuse of their basic human rights but a civilizing process that was "enlightened by the rays of Christianity." Their transition from their African homeland was marked by their transformation from "a few and profitable savages to millions of efficient Christian laborers." Rather than resisting this new life, "their servile instincts rendered them contented with their lot" leading to "mutual affection" between slave and master. However, the abolitionist and emancipation movements, the Davis character laments in a heightened state of exasperation, led them to "deeds of violence and bloodshed and set them out to devastate their benefactors." The artist then suddenly breaks character by speaking in his own voice and clarifying that these statements from his memoir correspond to Davis's response to "Abraham Lincoln's integration of African Americans into the U.S. army."

As the title of *ReCovering Memphis: ReContexting Bodies* suggests, Lou sought to disrupt the white supremacy that the figures of Forrest and Davis embody by placing his racialized body at the center of the racist discourse, as he understood that "the bodies of people of color are contested territory" (Latorre and Lou 2016, N.P.). The artist's deployment of the Chicano/Chinese body in such a manner immediately implies a subversion of the assumed whiteness connected to these revered figures associated with the southern Confederacy. Moreover, the term "ReContexting" is a hybrid combination of the words "re-contextualizing" and "re-contesting," thus implying that Lou was eliciting oppositional readings of Forrest and Davis from his audience. Influenced by recent racial tensions in the country, such as the numerous deaths of African Americans at the hands of police and the Black Lives Matter activist movement that emerged as a result of the civil unrest and outcry that such killings spurred, Lou wanted to establish a genealogy between current events and longer histories of racism and white supremacy, ones that were deeply embedded into the narratives of national origins in this country. Indeed, the disregard for the lives of people of color that current events of police brutality engender are also contained within the speeches and public statements by Forrest and Davis that Lou recited. "I wanted to say their words," Lou argued, "because they still resonate" (Latorre and Lou 2016, N.p.).

A central component of *ReCovering Memphis: ReContexting Bodies* is the conscious and concerted performance of whiteness on the part of the artist. As he recites the words uttered by Forrest and Davis, Lou emulates their southern drawl and speech patterns as he sought to understand their "racism vicariously," thus trying to "challenge white supremacy using their own language" (Latorre and Lou 2016, N.p.). He does so by making clear to the spectator that whiteness, far from being a default social identity that is devoid of racial markers, is a social construct in need of constant maintenance in order to legitimize its power. We become conscious of the performativity of whiteness not only in this work by Lou – a man of color who can't claim white privilege – but also in society at large, as Forrest and Davis also performed whiteness through their overt expressions of racism and their active subordination of Black bodies. Faedra Carpenter – who has written about white performance among African American playwrights,

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performers and visual artists – argues that these cultural producers engage in such performances to express a "reactive response to the use of blackface minstrelsy" while also using "dramaturgical strategies to make whiteness 'strange,' thereby revealing it as a social, political, and economic construct" (Carpenter 2016, p. 3). Like the African American artists Carpenter has studied, Lou also sought to make whiteness "strange" by disrupting its assumed naturalness and normalcy within the social fabric of the South and beyond.

To conclude, close examinations of the rich, complex and varied history of Chicana/o art reveal that these artists have created a space of disruption and rupture with their work, one that has proven to be highly productive in its capacity to generate new and innovative aesthetics. While the U.S. art establishment has demonstrated an uneasy relationship to social justice activism, one that attempts to extricate aesthetic innovation from social justice practices, Chicana/o artists have repeatedly made a strong case for the idea that political conviction is not the enemy of creativity. Moreover, the heightened enforcement of power through violence, repression and the growing belittling of civil rights demands in the United States and abroad during the 21st century have made the Chicana/o aesthetic of disruption and innovation all the more necessary during an era of collective amnesia and detached complacency in the face of continuing histories of neocolonialism.

Notes

1 CARA was the acronym for "Chicano Art Resistance and Affirmation", a traveling show that took place from 1990 to 1993 and stands out as the first major Chicana/o art exhibition (Griswold del Castillo, McKenna, Yarbro-Bejarano 1991).

2 I borrowed the term "obstinate memory" from the title of the Patricio Guzmán documentary film by the same name (1997). In this movie, Guzmán returns to the country of his birth, Chile, to explore how younger generations remembered the country's dictatorship (1973–1989). What he encounters, however, is an active politics of forgetting where the human rights abuses of the Augusto Pinochet regime are swept under the rug, so to speak, in order for the country to "move forward." For me, the concept of an obstinate memory signaled a politicized refusal to forget the past, an insistence to insert episodes of injustice into the larger fabric of historical truth.

3 Eleven years after Asco's enactment of *First Supper (After a Major Riot)*, Willie Herrón created a series of large canvases for an exhibition at the Geffen Gallery in Los Angeles that depicted similarly tortured and dismembered bodies. "I did . . . around 14 Chilean torsos, painted. They were 7 by 11 feet canvases and I hung them from the ceiling along with a screaming male and a screaming female." Conversation with Herrón.

4 In 2015 the Memphis City Council voted in favor of removing the Forrest statue along with the remains of the Confederate general and his wife. Ibid., p. A11.

5 For information on ReCovering Memphis: Listening to Untold Stories, see Latorre, G. 2012, "Border Consciousness and Artivist Aesthetics."

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