



“Striving Toward Multiple Ideas of Community”: Chicana Art, Artists, and Affectivity in Los Angeles

Joseph Daniel Valencia

What does the Chicana art community look like today? How is it represented? As a curator and writer in Los Angeles, my mind conjures images of work by artist Shizu Saldamando, who for the past two decades has created numerous portraits of artists and friends from the city. Saldamando stands as a critically important documentarian of L.A.’s Chicana art community, and several Los Angeles artists represented in *Xican-a.o.x. Body* share the honor of being depicted by her.¹ Saldamando’s realistic color-pencil drawings and oil paintings engage with the history of portraiture and issues of representation by foregrounding subjects of color often sidelined by dominant culture. Each of her subjects is rendered from an intimate perspective; her simple yet visually stunning compositions invite viewers to witness their subjecthood and brilliance.

While Saldamando’s early portraits are comprised of people of color from backyard parties and underground music and club scenes, today she mostly depicts artists and friends within her predominantly Chicana and Latinx inner circle. “The older I get, the more niche my community has become,” she said in an interview. “But this community is very creative, with many people striving toward multiple ideas of community.”² This multiplicity of community is represented in portraits of rafa esparza (fig. 1), whom Saldamando first met at an event at East Los Angeles College more than a decade ago, and Gabriela Ruiz (fig. 2), whom Saldamando frequently encountered in queer underground nightlife spaces such as Club Scum, a monthly queer punk party founded in 2017 and

hosted at Chico Bar in Montebello, California. “rafa turned out to be a light and love within this city,” she said. “He is constantly bringing people into his orbit.”³ Saldamando also deeply admires Ruiz and her work as a younger artist who often takes creative risks and promotes an unapologetically queer, feminist, and Latinx perspective. Prior to being painted by Saldamando, Ruiz recalls seeing Saldamando’s work and acknowledging her as one of the first Chicana artists she had ever encountered. Seeing the artist’s portraits from the same underground spaces that Ruiz had frequented resonated with her. “She was painting people that I knew. People I could relate to,” said Ruiz in an interview. “Finding Shizu opened Pandora’s box.”⁴ Indeed, Saldamando’s work empowered Ruiz to pursue her own path in the arts and simultaneously provided a reference point for producing artwork rooted in community. Ruiz has since exhibited art installations and performed locally and around the globe, establishing herself as a rising star of the scene.

Saldamando’s portraits, and the individual subjects she represents, can be taken as a starting point to examine the Chicana art scene of Los Angeles and shed light on the importance of community and collectivity within a new generation of artists in the city. The artistic network comprised of Saldamando, esparza, Ruiz, Mario Ayala, Alfonso Gonzalez Jr., Fabian Guerrero, Sebastian Hernandez, and Guadalupe Rosales, among others, reveals how Chicana artists in Los Angeles create art, community, social space, and cultural capital on their own terms and through intentional and

Detail from rafa esparza, *Corpo RanfLA: Terra Cruiser*, 2022–23 (p. 119)

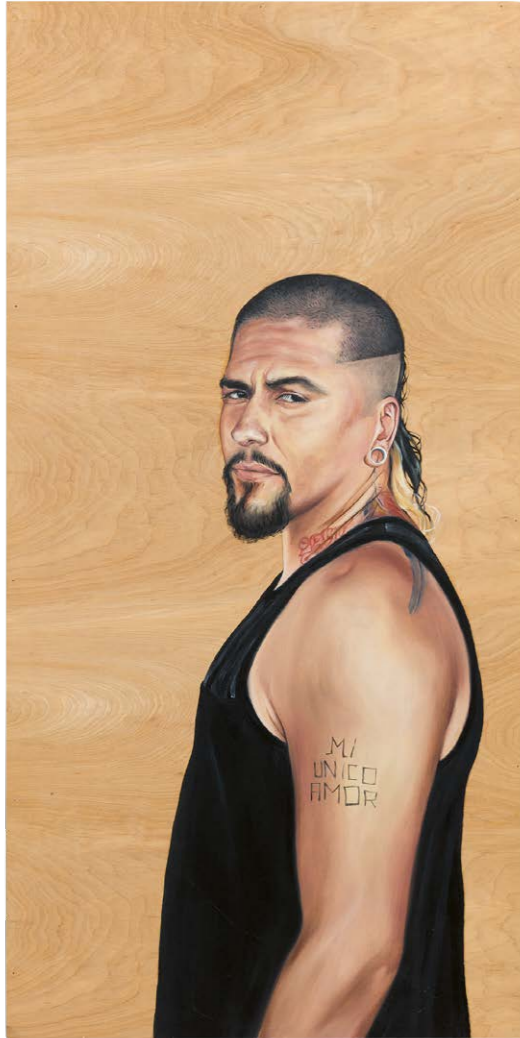


FIG. 1. Shizu Saldamando, *Rafa, El Unico*, 2013. Oil on wood panel, 48 x 24 in. Collection of Commonwealth & Council.



FIG. 2. Shizu Saldamando, *La Gabbi, Leather Papi*, 2018. Oil, glitter, spray paint on wood panel, 36 x 47 in. Collection of George M. Yin.

affective structures of friendship and support. While the Chicax body alone is a rich site of critical inquiry, this essay traces the groupings and intersections of Chicax bodies, plural, to reveal equally important ways of moving and being in the world.⁵

Los Angeles provides the site for this focused study on the intersection of Chicax art and modes of collectivity. The city's fraught history of systemic racism, police brutality and surveillance, housing discrimination, gentrification, and displacement, as well as exclusionary practices of mainstream art institutions, have disproportionately affected Chicax communities and communities of color. The development of the city paid little regard to Mexican and Chicax communities, notably decimating their neighborhoods to make way for freeways and commercial interest developments such as Dodger Stadium, which further created communities with little access to one another and with significant discrepancies along the lines of race, ethnicity,

national origin, and class.⁶ For the Chicano generation of the 1960s and 1970s, a place such as Whittier Boulevard in East L.A. became a product of these processes but also an active site for socialization, protest, and art-making.⁷ The streets of this enclave are now viewed as a landmark of cultural heritage and resistance and have served as a well-spring for vernacular and intergenerational cultural traditions to arise such as lowrider car culture, backyard parties, and other forms of public and private socialization.⁸ Many of today's Chicax artists recognize and are empowered by the legacy of cultural resistance and modes of collectivity that helped to define new social and cultural spaces, local traditions, and politically infused artistic practices. Despite the slow turn toward diversity, equity, and inclusion within art and museum spaces, the Chicax artists described herein continue to thrive and utilize their platforms inside and outside of institutions to find their community and flourish creatively.⁹

rafa esparza is an especially important artist and anchor in today's Chicax art scene in Los Angeles; his work has traversed institutional, cultural, and public spaces both in L.A. and internationally. The artist has notably foregrounded collaboration and collectivity as an integral part of his practice, calling upon community to produce drawings, paintings, sculptures, installations, and performances. Often working in adobe, a material he learned how to make from his father, esparza creates massive installations with the help of various members of the intersecting communities to which he belongs. In *de la Calle*, his 2018 solo exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, esparza and collaborators transformed the gallery's project space into a showroom, workroom, and studio with large adobe slabs coating the floor and parts of the walls. The exhibition shifted the function of the gallery from a static presentation space to a malleable space that could be utilized to meet the needs of esparza and his community. The exhibition culminated with an elaborate guerrilla parade-like procession through downtown's outdoor *Callejones*, also known as The Santee Alley, with many of the clothes and props used in the performance created within the project space throughout the exhibition's run. *a la calle*, as the performance was called, was activated by numerous visual and performance artists, fashion designers, photographers, and queer nightlife performers from Los Angeles and created a substantial buzz

and interest within the art world and on social media due to the collective visibility and cultural capital of the group (fig. 3). Despite its being a relatively private and unpublicized performance, esparza and community members utilized its subsequent visibility to spotlight the district's vendors and shoppers, aligning themselves with and paying homage to a predominantly Latinx working-class micro-economy and the community it sustains each day.¹⁰

At the 2017 Whitney Biennial, arguably the nation's largest and most visible contemporary art platform, esparza created an adobe rotunda in one of the galleries and invited artists Beatriz Cortez, Eamon Ore-Giron, Gala Porras-Kim, and Dorian Ulises López Macías to showcase new work in the space. Titled *Figure Ground: Beyond the White Field*, the installation referenced the Indigenous land upon which the museum sits and the institutional racism and hierarchies that have precluded Chicax and Latinx artists and community members from being welcomed and represented inside the Whitney and other primarily white institutions. esparza's installation facilitated new space within the museum, powerfully materializing a network of artists from Los Angeles and other locales within the New York museum and effectively "Browning" the Whitney's institutional space with art, materials, and collectivity rooted in the exhibiting artists' Chicax, Mexican, Central American, and South American cultural backgrounds.



FIG. 3. noé olivas performing as part of rafa esparza's *a la calle*, presented on June 16, 2018, through the arcades around Santee Alley in the fashion district of downtown Los Angeles. Photograph by Ana Briz.

esparza has also served as a mentor of sorts to several emerging artists he has collaborated with over the past decade, including Ruiz, Sebastian Hernandez, and Fabian Guerrero. When Guerrero moved to Los Angeles from Texas, he recalls esparza contacting him on social media about his photographs. “rafa asked me ‘what do you do with your work? Do you show?’” Guerrero recounted in an interview. “I thought, ‘Huh? They just go on Instagram.’”¹¹ esparza would then invite Guerrero to participate in a group exhibition, *Pasado mañana* (2018) at Commonwealth and Council, which initiated meaningful friendships and feelings of belonging for Guerrero within his new home city.¹² Although Guerrero did not move to Los Angeles to become an artist, the networks of creative people he would eventually foster, thanks to individuals such as esparza, would motivate and inspire him to strengthen his practice and push himself creatively.

Guerrero’s *Queer Brown Rancheros* series (2016–ongoing, see p. 126) documents queer and Brown bodies to express intimacies of friendship and shared background and experiences within *norteco* culture. Through bold compositions, Guerrero’s queer Brown subjects, adorned with *ranchero* clothing and accessories, powerfully reclaim a culture that has been fraught with the conservative, homophobic, and patriarchal attributes of Mexican society. The series was Guerrero’s first project that drew directly from personal experience, utilizing photography as a vehicle for connecting with like-minded individuals who desired to signal their own contributions and belonging within *norteco* culture. The series is ongoing, perhaps never-ending. “I am always building on the series with the right people and stories,” Guerrero said. “It’s about creating with intent, not volume.”¹³ Guerrero’s portraits continue to cultivate community at the intersections of Mexican, Chicanx, and queer, while the artist’s use of his own queer Brown body in recent studio portraits published on social media emphasizes narratives of self-actualization, empowerment, and desire as counterpoints to heteronormative and traditional cultural expectations (fig. 4).

Social media plays an important role also in the work of artist and educator Guadalupe Rosales, who since 2015 has utilized Instagram to cultivate Chicanx community through two crowd-sourced archive pages. *Veteranas and Rucas* focuses on Southern California Chicana and Latina experiences, while *Map Pointz* documents 1990s party crews, ditch parties, and rave and techno scenes that were often sensationalized by the media. Both accounts source images through accessible and participatory relationships with the public, Rosales sharing captions provided by contributors, and followers engaging in online exchange through the comments section of her posts. These digital archives effectively challenge the misrepresentation and historical erasure of Latinx communities in Southern California through methodologies of lived experience and embodied remem-

brance, while also serving to generate new community and public interest in Chicanx aesthetics, cultural traditions, and sociality rooted in the region.¹⁴

Painters Mario Ayala and Alfonso Gonzalez Jr. are also interested in Chicanx history and culture, translating Los Angeles vernacular aesthetics into their large-scale paintings, mixed-media works, and installations. Ayala’s use of airbrush techniques draws parallels to car culture, while his usage of digital tools such as the Adobe Creative Suite helps him to map and synthesize complex compositions that incorporate imagery from street and vendor signage, tattoos, magazines, graffiti, and lowrider aesthetics. Gonzalez’s paintings reference the city’s public spaces and layered surfaces, simultaneously rendering and excavating its history through gaps and layers of paint, graffiti, signage, and geometric forms. Ayala, Gonzalez, and esparza had once maintained studio spaces within the same building in Boyle



FIG. 4. Tony Krash, produced in collaboration with Fabian Guerrero, *Fabian Guerrero*, 2018. Photograph, 12 × 8 in. Collection of the artist.



FIG. 5. Alfonso Gonzalez Jr., *Hombres*, 2021. Latex, enamel, glass, and permanent marker on wood panel, 36 × 48 in. Collection of the artist.

Heights, establishing it as an important space for the potential for cross-fertilization, dialogue, and resonance across practices. Moreover, both Ayala and esparza made unofficial contributions to one of Gonzalez’s works, *Hombres* (2021), a four-panel mixed-media painting that the artist had hung in the studios’ shared bathroom space (fig. 5). Gonzalez placed the work in the bathroom to examine how it might function similarly to a surface in a public bathroom, where taggers leave their marks on the mirrors, walls, and doors. “[Mario] did a tiny tag without asking, which I was hoping he would do,” recounted Gonzalez in an interview.¹⁵ Ayala’s ballpoint pen drawing of a *Piss Drunx* logo, an abstracted *P* and *D* associated with the infamous skateboarding crew, made connections to both Ayala’s and Gonzalez’s interests as teenagers in search for community and socialization outside the structures of school and home. esparza’s contributions to the artwork were much more elaborate and reference gay cruising culture: a drawing of a man with a

phallus in his mouth, various phone numbers and bilingual hookup messages, as well as a circular cutout to signify a glory hole. These contributions to the artwork offer queer dimensions to Gonzalez’s original consideration of public space usage, referencing the illicit and sometimes fleeting points of sexual connection that take place in bathrooms, parks, and other public areas. Taken together, *Hombres* illustrates the affective and collaborative spirit of these artists’ studio spaces through layered and multiauthored creativity, while specifically reflecting on how these artists and the communities to which they belong claim and utilize public space.

Gonzalez previously had his studio at home in East Los Angeles, often utilizing his backyard to photograph and display completed paintings. In early December 2019 Gonzalez gathered artists and friends at his house for a two-day backyard party and pop-up exhibition called *L.A. FONTS*. Co-organized with esparza, the event was born from a series

of shared meals and conversations between Gonzalez and other artists who identified the backyard as a historically important social space and culturally specific venue poised to effectively discuss and display Los Angeles Chicana art.¹⁶ The familiar site for a *carne asada* became an exhibition platform for artworks by Ayala, esparza, Gonzalez, Hernandez, Rosales, Ruiz, and others—a site-specific presentation grounded within community and the cultural legacy of *barrio* life in the city. When I had attended the event on its second day, Gonzalez invited me inside his home to see other artworks on view, including framed drawings, prints, and posters. As we returned to the backyard, I noticed that tucked away in the kitchen was a birthday cake that read “Feliz Cumpleaños Sebastian.” Like a true backyard party, the event was also a celebration, marking the birthday of visual and performance artist Sebastian Hernandez, who had just turned twenty-nine. In this way, *L.A. FONTS* served as a unique yet familiar platform to consider how Chicana art is presented and contextualized in Los Angeles, while also calling attention to alternatives that are rooted in community as opposed to primarily white institutional art spaces.

Queer nightlife is another space that has proved generative for many artists in this network, including esparza, Guerrero, Hernandez, Saldamando, Rosales, and Ruiz. For Hernandez and Ruiz, who largely developed as performance artists in queer clubs and parties, nightlife has been formative in shaping their sense of community and refining their artistic practices. More specifically, the queer underground party Mustache Mondays, active from 2007 to 2018 in downtown Los Angeles, served as a vital convening space and incubator for artistic experimentation, socialization, and community-building in Los Angeles. The cultural impact of Mustache and its cofounder, the late Nacho Nava Jr., lives on through the work of these artists and many others who continue to socialize within the city’s multicentric nightlife landscape and work collectively in related art, film, music, and performance scenes.¹⁷ This collectivity is expressed in visual and performance art collaborations by esparza, Hernandez, and Ruiz, including *Corpo Ranfla* (2018, see p. 52, fig. 3), a performance by esparza and Hernandez at the Mayan Theatre in downtown Los Angeles; *Escandalos Angeles* (2018), a performance by Hernandez and Ruiz at Club Scum in Montebello; and *Nostra Fiesta* (2019), a mural by esparza, Ruiz, and friends at the New Jalisco Bar in downtown Los Angeles.¹⁸ Additionally, since 2019 Hernandez has overseen their own

monthly queer party called *YOU*, where they manage the organization, promotion, operations, and talent lineups for each event. The party began at La Cita Bar in downtown Los Angeles and has morphed and found homes at numerous venues to accommodate the interests and needs of both Hernandez and their attendees. The COVID-19 pandemic saw a decline in in-person art and socialization, if only temporarily, but the party, as with queer nightlife in general, continues to provide new offshoots for creating art and community in Los Angeles.¹⁹

Curator and event producer Paulina Lara has also taken on the charge of creating new community space in the city. As the founding director of LaPau Gallery, an art space in Koreatown founded in 2021, Lara synthesizes her experiences in art and nightlife scenes to “create dialogues through interactive and thought-provoking exhibitions” that “push boundaries and create space for alternative voices.”²⁰ Although not explicitly focused on Chicana or Latina art, Lara maintains deep friendships with many of the artists highlighted in this essay and has notably served as a sounding board and support system for them in both their personal lives and professional endeavors. Her inaugural exhibition was a solo project by Gabriela Ruiz, *Grounding, Prevent from Flying* (2021), a culmination of years of friendship and creative collaboration. The opening reception was a true celebration of queer and Brown joy, as many of the duo’s closest friends and associates were in attendance. Here, showing up and showing out reflected a sense of love and support for the duo, and a stamp of approval on Lara’s independent ventures. Lara has since presented solo exhibitions by artists Maria Maea, Gary Garay, Dorian Ulises López Macías, and LOS JAICHACKERS (Julio César Morales and Eamon Ore-Girón), among others, each accompanied by thoughtful and culturally relevant DJ and music programming.²¹ These projects have been well received, establishing a strong reputation for Lara and her gallery as a community space and venue that spotlights some of the city’s most cutting-edge talent.

Community, collectivity, and affectivity each play indispensable roles in the Chicana art scene of Los Angeles, from intersecting networks of support and care to the creation of new and collaborative art, performances, and installations. The friendships and creative output of this network point to a notion of Chicana community that is transformative and constantly expanding; creating and nurturing shared values and putting them into practice across a variety of spaces

and artistic media to reveal a dynamic interplay of art, friendship, and community for Chicana artists in the twenty-first century.

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1. These include rafa esparza, Sandra de la Loza, Jay Lynn Gomez, Alfonso Gonzalez Jr., Ester Hernandez, Sebastian Hernandez, Patrick Martinez, Guadalupe Rosales, and Gabriela Ruiz.
2. Shizu Saldamando, interview with the author, 2021. While this essay contains some quotes from interviews conducted with the artists, it also draws upon first-hand and second-hand knowledge gained organically over time through varied friendships and relationships within the Chicana and Latina art scene in Los Angeles.
3. Saldamando, interview with the author, 2021.
4. Gabriela Ruiz, interview with the author, 2018.
5. The late theorist José Esteban Muñoz has notably written on world-making potentialities for queer people of color. See José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).
6. Historian Eric Avila has developed significant scholarship on these processes and their ongoing legacies in Los Angeles. For systemic racism in housing, see Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); on freeways, see Eric Avila, *The Folklore of the Freeway: Race and Revolt in the Modernist City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).
7. See Anthony F. Macias, *Mexican American Mojo: Popular Music, Dance, and Urban Culture in Los Angeles, 1935–1968* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).
8. Accounts of these diverse forms of socialization are further considered in Gerard Meraz, “Backyard Parties in East L.A.: Memories of a 1980s DJ,” *KCET Artbound*, February 21, 2017, <https://www.kcet.org/shows/artbound/backyard-parties-dj-culture-1980s-east-los-angeles-gerard-meraz>; and Carribean Fragoza, “Cruising Down SoCal’s Boulevards: Streets as Spaces for Celebration and Cultural Resistance,” *KCET Artbound*, February 24, 2017, <https://www.kcet.org/shows/artbound/cruising-down-socals-boulevards-streets-as-spaces-for-celebration-and-cultural-resistance>.
9. For a wonderful (and queer) account of Chicana artists in Los Angeles between the 1960s and 1990s, see C. Ondine Chavoya, David Evans Frantz, and Macarena Gómez-Barris, eds., *Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano L.A.* (Munich: Prestel, 2017).
10. See Carolina Miranda, “Why Artist Rafa Esparza Led a Surreal Art Parade through the Heart of L.A.’s Fashion District,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 25, 2018, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/miranda/la-et-cam-rafa-esparza-ica-la-20180625-story.html>.
11. Fabian Guerrero, interview with the author, 2021.

12. The exhibition was co-organized by rafa esparza and Beatriz Cortez. Both artists are represented by Commonwealth and Council. See *Pasado mañana press release*, accessed February 20, 2022, <https://commonwealthandcouncil.com/exhibitions/pasado-manana>.
13. Guerrero, interview with the author, 2021.
14. As an example of generating new communities, in 2021 Rosales had just mounted a solo exhibition, *Drifting on a Memory* (2021–22) at the Dallas Museum of Art. Sited in the hometown of artist and friend Fabian Guerrero, who had recently returned to Texas from Los Angeles, the exhibition’s opening provided an opportunity for Guerrero to host Rosales, Ruiz, and friends during their stay in Dallas. For more on the exhibition, an immersive installation that transformed the museum’s 153-foot-long concourse into a walkable portal reflecting the iridescent surfaces and intricate design work of customized lowrider cars, see *Guadalupe Rosales: Drifting on a Memory*, accessed February 20, 2022, <https://dma.org/art/exhibitions/guadalupe-rosales-drifting-memory>.
15. Alfonso Gonzalez Jr., interview with the author, 2021.
16. *L.A. FONTS* artists not discussed in this essay include Carlos Agredano, Diana Yesenia Alvarado, Michael Alvarez, Rafa Cardenas, Carolyn Castaño, Mar Citlali, Karla Diaz, EJ Hill, Ellie Lee, Maria Maea, Jaime Muñoz, Gabriela Sanchez, and Mario Ybarra Jr.
17. This is the core argument of my master’s thesis, cited in footnote 18, and is also explored through a recent *KCET Artbound* documentary and accompanying article. See “Mustache Mondays,” *KCET Artbound*, Season 12, Episode 6, accessed February 20, 2022, <https://www.kcet.org/shows/artbound/episodes/mustache-mondays>; and Melissa Hidalgo, “How Mustache Mondays Built an Inclusive Queer Nightlife Scene and Influenced the Arts in L.A.,” *KCET Artbound*, November 17, 2021, <https://www.kcet.org/shows/artbound/mustache-mondays-inclusive-nightlife-and-contemporary-art>.
18. I have previously written extensively about these collaborative art and performance works. See Joseph Daniel Valencia, “Queer Nightlife Networks and the Art of Rafa Esparza, Sebastian Hernandez, and Gabriela Ruiz,” (master’s thesis, University of Southern California, 2020); and *Liberate the Bar! Queer Nightlife, Activism, and Spacemaking* (2019), an exhibition and public program series at ONE Archives that I curated with Paulina Lara. See also C. Ondine Chavoya’s essay in the present volume, pp. 48–59.
19. Some of these offshoots, specifically for Hernandez, include an artist talk and after party at the Ace Hotel on August 8, 2019, to discuss and celebrate their recent *Pistil* (2019) performance; and a VIP iteration of *YOU* during the 2020 Frieze Los Angeles art fair cohosted with esparza, Ron Athey, Commonwealth and Council, and Performance Space New York, and a featuring a performance by Vander Von Odd. See You Los Angeles, Instagram, accessed December 16, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/youlosangeles>.
20. See “About,” LaPau Gallery, accessed February 20, 2022, <https://www.lapaugallery.com/about>.
21. Paulina Lara, interview with the author, 2022.