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The Art of Community: An Interview with Malaquías Montoya

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Delia Cosentino (DC): Let me first say that it is a real pleasure to have you here in Chicago, at the National Museum of Mexican Art, on the occasion of this excellent exhibition [*Galería sin Fronteras*, from the private collection of Gilberto Cárdenas, Winter-Spring 2014]. Your painting, *The Immigrant's Dream* (2003), provides the first visually arresting vision of the show for visitors. I know that you started experimenting with the issue of immigration, especially in the 1980s, but I was fascinated by the details of your early experiences [growing up] in the San Joaquín Valley [Central California]. I'm wondering at what point you first started to awaken the sense of who you were and how to articulate your identity. Did you realize that so many of the people from your own community were immigrants struggling either through the Bracero Program or with some of the same issues that maybe in a decade or two you would really grapple with [in] your work? Were you already recognizing immigration as a central concern from an early age?

Malaquías Montoya (MM): I think I was, because growing up in that area I remember at a very young age being out late at night and coming home and hearing this loud commotion, and all of a sudden stopping and seeing immigration [officers] chasing two or three men down the alleyway. And you could see the men, most of the men half-dressed because they were awakened at night, and they're running down the alley, and the police or the *migra* making more of a joke: "Hey, look at that son of a bitch, look at him get up that fence, I think we got [him]." And then, you know, flashlights and such, and I remember seeing gentlemen running and the look of their faces, which was a look of terror, and I remember thinking how glad I was that their children were not there to see their fathers being pursued like a sport, you might say. So at that age, no, I didn't know that I was going to go on and do images of these people, but they stuck with me. They really stayed with me for many years.

DC: Those are powerful memories for sure.

MM: Yes, really, yes.

DC: So *El Movimiento* [Chicano Civil Rights Movement] in its first decade or two is sometimes described as somewhat geographically fragmented, with the clearest coalescence in California, of course in San Diego, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. While you were at Berkeley, the formation of your collective MALA-F [Mexican American Liberation Art Front, founded in 1969] seems to have been an extremely important step in building alliances between artists and other groups. Can you talk about your awareness of similar activities outside of the Bay Area at that point? Did you have any connections to artists here in Chicago, for instance, like Mario Castillo, or Ray Patlán, who had also been moved by things like the *Plan espiritual de Aztlán* [Chicano nationalist manifesto, adopted in 1969]?

MM: In 1970, I was being considered for a position in a newly formed Chicano Studies Department at UC-Berkeley because I had been a student during the Third World Strike demanding an Ethnic Studies Department. We were actually demanding a Third World College but we ended up getting an Ethnic Studies Department, made up of Chicano Studies, Native American, Asian, and Afro-American Studies. Because part of the *Plan de Santa Bárbara* [a manifesto calling for Chicano Studies in higher education, adopted in 1969] talked about an art component to a department, they considered me for a position because, being a student, I had already been actively involved and had exhibitions and other things. So I was given a grant that summer of 1970 to [travel] throughout the Southwest and photograph and meet other Chicano artists for a possible class that I might teach. And that's when I went to Denver and met Corky González, I met Manuel Martínez who was then an artist there in Denver, now a well-known artist in Albuquerque. I went to New Mexico and met Nino Padilla who was a returning veteran from Vietnam who was there doing artwork. Every place that I went, it was like I never left the Oakland area; everybody was awakening, everybody was having meetings. The artists were discussing, "What do we do, what's our role as artists?"

That was very refreshing to me to leave Berkeley, leave Oakland, and that it was happening everywhere else, and that gave me a sense of encouragement that we weren't far off with what we were doing in Berkeley and Oakland with MALA-F. And we still consider ourselves MALA-F, Mexican American Liberation Art Front. We were using [the descriptor] "Mexican American," but yes, we were aware that things were happening. I went to Arizona and then I went to Los Angeles, and this was right after the moratorium [1970], so I got to meet a few of the people. I interviewed some of the people there during that time; Ramsés Noriega, who was one of the organizers of the moratorium and also an artist who did a lot of political work.

DC: So you must have realized you were really a part of something much, much bigger?

MM: I did. Coming back to the Oakland area and sharing this and then finally teaching a class at UC-Berkeley on the Chicano art experience—it was interesting because I met a lot of artists in Nuevo Mexico, especially whose names were Rodríguez, Hernández, and they wanted to know why I wasn't photographing them. They said, "Malaquíás, you know I do illustrations for this book," and they were fine artists, but it was hard for me to say, "Look, right now I am doing artists who are involved in saying things about what is taking place right now," and they would say "But Malaquíás, my name is Rodríguez, you don't think I would have an impact on young students, just knowing that I was an artist?" So it was sort of hard distinguishing between a Mexican artist, a Mexican-American artist, and what we were trying to identify as Chicano artists at that time.

DC: Something more conscious, in that sense, more political.

MM: Yes, that had more political conscience. It was hard to explain it because it was not completely formed in my mind.

DC: This was all a very formative period.

MM: We didn't know who we were; we were just trying to define ourselves.

DC: And it must have been frustrating but also exciting.

MM: Exciting, very exciting, sure.

DC: Well, I know that one moment of coalescence was this manifesto that you and your wife [artist Lezlie Salkowitz-Montoya] published—I know you didn't call it a "manifesto" but it was sort of seen that way in retrospect—in 1980, called "[A Critical Perspective on] the State of Chicano Art," in [the journal] *Metamórfosis*. That evoked a number of very strong reactions and responses from artists and art historians; in that statement you called upon artists to reaffirm their commitment to the original goals and values of the Chicano Movement to produce an art of protest and resist alignment with the mainstream art market. Did any of the reactions to your statement move you to reconsider your critical perspective at that point?

MM: Ah, not really, but I'm not going to write another. Let them do what they want to do. I feel very committed to what it is that I want to do and if people say, "Malaquíás, I agree with you," fine, but people were very angry at it. But it came about simply because I would come home and complain to Lezlie, "You know so-and-so did this and so-and-so did this," and finally she said, "Look, why don't you just sit and write it?" So I sat down and I started taping, writing notes, dictating it to Lezlie and then finally it was put together [in] *Metamórfosis* by [the journal editor,] Ricardo Aguilar. And then I was contacted by a group from Cuba [to see] if I would go and deliver that in Cuba, so in 1980, myself and three other people went. I, as an artist, a few others—a scholar, a young activist, and a lawyer—the four of us were invited to come to Cuba and present what it was that we did.

DC: Did you also present that in Mexico City, [as] I had thought?

MM: It was intended for Mexico City, but then the funds fell through and it never happened.

DC: One of the critiques [was] by [art historian] Shifra Goldman; she promoted this idea of resistance rather than separatism, and she argued there was an economic necessity. Another one of the responses was something that was unpublished, the response from [artist] Graciela Carrillo who talked about the sort of patriarchal structures of not necessarily your position, but more broadly the [Chicano] Movement, and the foundations of the

movement as having excluded women. That was a critique that was even more fleshed out in the wake of the CARA exhibition [*Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation 1965-1985, 1990-1993*] in the work of Alicia Gaspar de Alba who, again, was not taking up your statement or your position, but more broadly the patriarchal foundations of El Movimiento, and Chicano art movements specifically. So I wonder if that feminist critique of Chicano art was something that you increasingly were becoming aware of, or that really you saw it as very separate from what you were doing?

MM: Well, I really never thought about it because the people with whom I worked, including Manuel Hernández and a few others, we would ask [women] to be in all our exhibitions, we had women in our shows and in our community; We never really thought about ourselves as [a part of that bigger foundation of the Movement], we were just exhibiting. When Shifra [Goldman] made that comment in that article and then she calls me up and says, “Let’s do it in Germany because they wanted to do it,” I said, “Shifra, this is not to air our laundry out.” The whole thing about separatism and all that, I said “This is a strategy; we are in a struggle against a very powerful, powerful [system],” and I said, “and so somehow we have to sacrifice certain things in this struggle so that we don’t get caught up in it.” And so it’s not that I’m saying separate but if the people that I want to reach are not in museums, why should I exhibit in museums? Our exhibition has to take place here and in the community until we develop that core, that people in the community that are going to say, “These artists speak for us.” It has nothing to do with being a separatist or anything; it’s just that right now, in this particular time, in this struggle, we have to do something different. We have to do something different because that [system] is very, very powerful and The Movement is losing its romanticism. People don’t want to be revolutionary artists anymore because no one comes to interview you. You don’t get published in newspapers; it’s just work every day within our communities and that’s not very romantic when you look at it.

DC: It’s trench work.

MM: But [Shifra] just wanted to hear that maybe we can do the article in Germany; an important article and I just saw it as something that I wanted to express myself,

and I meant what I said. Sometimes I think that maybe it is more clear today than it was then. It hits the mark more today than it did then. At that time, I think that I was just seeing the beginnings of a lot of things that were taking place and that’s what was angering me. But when you look at the Cheech Marín show [exhibit, *Chicano Visions: American Painters on the Verge, 2001-2007*], and you type in Chicano and—boom—up jumps Target and Clear Channel supporting, [and] all of a sudden you start seeing César Chávez associated with Target, the Chicano Movement with Clear Channel, that’s exactly what I was talking about at that time [in 1980]. It is very dangerous to play with fire; you know you’re going to get burned.

DC: It’s a slippery slope.

MM: And the people in the museums and galleries don’t really understand where we’re coming from. We haven’t had the chance to educate them because we want to educate our community. So when you exhibit somewhere and a San Francisco critic comes down and tears you apart, he’s supposed to do that. He’s against what it is that we are doing, and so why should we concern ourselves with what he says? We want to know what our community says about us and what we are doing.

DC: I love what you said earlier [in a public presentation, the same day as the interview] in response to the question that you had gotten as a young artist about where [at which gallery] you exhibit. And you explained, “My works are on display all the time, just drive down the street.” That is really beautiful! Let me ask you about labels a little bit. One of the more recent exhibitions of Chicano art [*Phantom Sightings: Art after the Chicano Movement*] was organized in 2008 at LACMA (Los Angeles County Museum of Art), and used the term “post-Chicano.” I’m wondering what you think of this language and the fact that in the catalog, it says that these artists don’t necessarily even want to be grouped according to the idea that they’re Chicano artists. I wondered if you could share any thoughts about that? Have you confronted the reality that there are artists that are of Mexican-American roots but that may not want to be called Chicano?

MM: Well, I have and I do; I have no problem with that. There is an article that I used in my class, an article written by my son [Maceo Montoya] when he took a class at

Columbia [University]. He had to do a paper on art and war, so his idea was, “Gee, what if I did a paper on the war [by] different artists, the war of art groups?” So his professor said, “Sure,” so it’s a letter to his father and he talks about, “I sit here in this library and I see your name now,” but the letter goes on and says, “Could it be a battle that you lost, because I see the articles in Los Angeles [about] these kids [who] no longer want to be called Chicano and they get angry because they are labeled as this?” And he asked a question, “Well, you know what made them angry, you know, I mean, whites? They have a group themselves, you know, they are also a part of a group, and [I wanted to ask them] what was it that the label “Chicano” made you feel ashamed of, that you don’t want that name?” So it was a really interesting thing that he was doing. But the thing with labels [like] “post-Chicano” and [such]; I really don’t get involved in that because like in all historical movements, the academics have taken hold of what was once a people’s movement. And they give it a language, they confuse it, and then do things and somehow have to legitimize it. So now it is Latino art, it’s Latin art, and again fall into that sort of pit hole. Because they are in academia, and academia says you have to do this in order to do whatever, so they try to take this people’s movement into that and it gets washed down. It gets side-tracked and then it’s like the people in the community almost have to start all over again to keep that thing going.

Because that whole thing of, “Well, there is a Latino art now, post[-Chicano],” it’s confusing to me. I understand when Gil [collector and sociologist Gilberto Cárdenas, in the public presentation earlier in the day] talked [about] what they’re trying to do [with efforts to establish a National Museum of the American Latino in Washington D.C.]. We are trying to have museums for Latino artists, but still the people that are in the community who go to work and come home and drink beer and look at *novelas* do not go to those museums. The people that go to the museums are you and I; we got degrees, we now teach, we go to schools, and you start to get a mixture between culture and business, and once that starts to happen the aspect of culture loses its liberatory effect. You can’t mix the two. I just don’t think it really works. Because if you look at the Conquest, the Spaniards had to come and destroy everything that was us, everything. They didn’t want to leave any remnants that might remind someone of how great they were. And then once that

people forgot about it [and] went on with their lives, then the Spaniards were able to reintroduce it again in a different form, a more subtle form. So now you have *ballet folclóricos* at Bank of America; the people there at Bank of America are drinking beer and looking at the *ballet folclórico*. They have no idea what the *ballet folclórico* is about, they have no idea what *Cinco de Mayo* is about. But we are performing. What we are doing now is giving them our culture; now they don’t even have to conquer us anymore. Now we give it to them in the form of what we’re doing, our art. Now people walk around with a “Ché” buckle—they don’t know who Ché was. They walk around with a Zapata outfit that’s a t-shirt, and you start to lose all of that. So now we are being conquered by ourselves; now you have people that dress like they just got out of prison; that’s become a fashion statement. You have the *pinto* look, the shaved head, you have all of those things.

DC: It’s all been sort of deracinated, taken away from its foundations.

MM: Exactly.

DC: Well, do you describe yourself as a Chicano artist or are you just you?

MM: I consider myself a Chicano artist. And a Chicano artist is not just someone who just does art. Chicano artists, the way we understood it at that time—some of us did—was that we were becoming that new man, that new person. We looked at ourselves differently, we looked at our family differently, we looked at our women differently, we looked at our children differently. We weren’t just those people that talked about *la comunidad* and *la familia* and then you went home and neglected your wife and your children. But this is a serious look at ourselves as men and what we are supposed to be about, and what our women are supposed to be about, and the relationship they have to us. So it was a very serious thing. So what “Chicano” means to me is that total transformation into a new person and that was the goal that some of us had in the early Chicano movement.

DC: A self-actualized person?

MM: A self-actualized person!

DC: So you mentioned the word “Latino,” and the exhibition that just closed at the Smithsonian on *Our America: the Latino Presence in American Art* (2013-2014) also occasioned great fervent responses, one of which was from an art reviewer [Philip Kennicott] for the *Washington Post*, who basically said there’s lots of good art there but “Latino art” is a useless category for analysis. And it was artist and filmmaker, Alex Rivera, who retorted that without shows like this, essentially, when are any of these artists going to have the occasion to even be reviewed by the *Washington Post*? So I wonder, though I think that you made reference to this earlier, whether or not you think that Latino art is a useful category, or are you more wedded to a more historically and politically engaged term like “Chicano?”

MM: I think that’s what it is, what you just said there. As long as we fall into that, as just us as artists doing things and struggling with that term, the artists and what do we do. And yet no one in the community could care less about what the museum thinks or what they think about “Latino.” You know they’re concerned with making a living, and we as artists should be there trying to figure [it] out, because we have the luxury to maybe not have to work from 8 or 6 in the morning to 9 o’clock at night, so we might be able to interpret their pain, their suffering and what they are going through, and present it to them and say, is this what you are talking about? Now that kind of artwork is not going to get picked up. It should, but it is not going to get picked up, because art is a business. It really is a business. It’s like when you go to New York, all the different galleries are like 15 channels; you go here, you go to this one, you go to this one, you go to this one, and who’s this? And you know they don’t want art that says, “There is a problem here and the problem is that you are responsible for this problem and you should be held liable for it.” They don’t want to hear that because to them, it’s money; they’re talking about money. We have to make money and they’re the ones who dictate what art is. They dictate in the museums, they dictate what our [art is], and then art historians pick it up from them, art historians teach it, and then it comes back. So then art schools pick it up, “Oh my God, I want to do this; I want to do this.” Then you have young Chicanos who come in to art school and they’re saying “What are you doing? You can’t do that, that’s not art.”

But in Los Angeles and a lot of places where there was no Chicano artist who went to [grad] school, they’re trying to do art. But they’re meeting professors [who say] “That’s not art, what are you doing?” They have to somehow change what they’re doing so that they can graduate. But they bring some of their luggage with them, so now instead of doing really powerful work they are doing artwork like *Phantom Sightings* (LACMA, 2008). To me, that was like a very weak MFA show, students taking *sarapes*, and doing things, and calling it Chicano art.

DC: Meaningless.

MM: Maybe I shouldn’t have said that.

DC: I guess then I sort of have a sense about how you might feel about efforts to establish a Smithsonian Museum for Latino art, but what if some of your fine works end up being displayed on the National Mall in some future museum, how would you feel about that?

MM: Well, I think [there are already] in the Smithsonian, a couple of pieces. I didn’t know that Tomás Ybarra [-Frausto, Chicano scholar] would give it to them, but I’m sure that the work that I show is going to be somewhere where I probably wouldn’t [have put it]. But what is going to happen is that, like I said earlier today, it’s not going to have much meaning because we’re so consumed with everything else that even if we see a piece of powerful work, it’s not going to change minds. It’s not going to change your mind, because you might go home and think about it and think what a great piece of work. And then you turn on the television, you turn on YouTube, and all of a sudden you’re completely [brain]washed again into what the dominant culture wants you to do, [which is] do absolutely nothing.

DC: I can probably anticipate this answer to what may be my last question here, which is how, if in any way, has your audience changed? How do you think about the audience when you’re creating your art? Is it the same as you always did?

MM: Well, I think the audience that I hope to reach is still the same people, although I am not out in the community like I was, where I was having shows in storefronts and church gatherings and stuff like that, so

people could see my work. Because I am 75 and I am getting slower, so now [the] student population is my people that I reach and I teach. I'm retired but when I taught, I mean, I used to feel that if I have 50 students in front of me every day, I have a responsibility to teach them something about responsibility. And [how to] be an artist, through art. As long as I was telling the truth, I felt that I could stand up in front of any student at the university, not lying, telling the truth. This is how it is and I enjoyed that; the students responded very favorably. They wanted more because they had never been exposed to a lot of things; they would say, "Why didn't I find this class before?" and "Is that true?" and stuff like that. And I think at CCAC [California College of Arts and Crafts], my classes were the biggest in art school. But it was because "The professor, Malaquíás, gives easy grades." Well, why shouldn't I give easy grades when students are doing what they are supposed to be doing, and students are out not only producing posters, but they were out on the streets putting them up? That's what they were supposed to do; research your material for the poster and then you have 25 posters that you have to [take to] go out either [to] Oakland, East Oakland, Broadway, Piedmont, and put out those posters. Otherwise, it's a waste of time. And keep one for your portfolio because you might want one to get into grad school!

DC: Well, I think that with students like Carlos Jackson you have done an excellent job in reaching more audiences than you probably ever anticipated.

MM: Yes, exactly, that's a great compliment.

DC: So to circle back to where we began, I wonder, what do you feel has changed about immigration now, as opposed to when you were a small child, or when you started to engage with such issues in your earliest artworks? And relatedly, how have your more recent artworks about immigration evolved, if indeed you feel that they have, in any particular way?

MM: So much has changed because our policies have changed towards Mexico and Latin America. At one time, it was mainly Mexicans coming over, and now it's all of Central and South America that have also been affected by our policies. Also changed are the wars that took place in the 1970s and 80s and our attempt to stop

those wars because of U.S. interests and policies in those countries. My work has continued to address those issues and perhaps I am focusing more on the youth that are affected, i.e., *The Dreamers*.

DC: Well, Malaquíás, I really appreciate your time and your presence here. It's really an honor, and on behalf of all of us, I thank you.

MM: ¡Gracias!

DC: ¡A usted!