

# “Occupied Aztlán”

Yolanda M. López talks to Elizabeth Martínez about Armando Rascón's turning point multimedia exhibit.

*Bay Area artist Armando Rascón's multi-media exhibit "Occupied Aztlán" was shown at the San Francisco Art Institute March 31–April 30, 1994 as the work of this year's Adaline Kent Award recipient. Born in 1956 in Calexico, California on the U.S.–Mexico border, Rascón had participated at a young age in the Chicano/a movement of the late 1960s and as a United Farm Workers volunteer. His work has been shown internationally; he recently curated an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York entitled "XICANO RICORSO: A 30-Year Retrospect from Aztlán."*

*Yolanda M. López comments on Rascón's San Francisco show in this interview with CrossRoads editor Elizabeth Martínez. (A previous interview with Yolanda López appeared in CrossRoads' May 1993 issue.)*

YL: One of the things that struck me most about the show is that it had a real solid, political look. This is quite different from the work that many Chicana and Chicano artists are producing now. Much of the women's work lately has focussed on spiritual and psychological values expressed through reclaimed goddesses and the celebration of women. I truly don't know what male artists are doing but not very much as far as being overtly political, I think.

So Armando's exhibit caught me a little off guard when I saw the announcement for his show. "Occupied Aztlán," the exhibit's title, alludes to the famous book published by Rudy Acuña in 1972, *Occupied America*. The book is an immediate reference for Chicano activists.

EM: And the term "Aztlán" is very political.

YL: Yes. Now when *Occupied America* came out, it was the first time many of us had seen our history discussed from a Chicano viewpoint. It reflected an anger we all were feeling. So Armando's title "Occupied Aztlán" is very telling.

The work itself in the exhibit is what I call Chicano art: overtly partisan, political, and particular to the artist's life and experience. It is also totally within the language of contemporary art, conceptual art. It speaks the language of artworld art. Both

of those points are significant—it is a highly, directly politicized show and it's done within the context of artworld, conceptual art.

EM: Can you explain that art world context a little more?

YL: Armando's show has the look of a sophisticated exhibit and it's within the discourse of theories of media about using popular images. Popular images are the way that the media construct and define culture and values. Throughout the exhibit there is a deconstructionist treatment of images. The most obvious example of this is the piece where he has a small video monitor showing "A Touch of Evil," the Orson Welles film with Charlton Heston in pancake makeup as a Mexican policeman, and his blonde wife Janet Leigh. The movie was filmed in Calexico, at the border. The film is about corruption, Mexican societal corruption and the corruption of a lone U.S. lawman. Evil in the form of corruption is portrayed as endemic in Mexican society and individualized in the U.S.

Next to the monitor is a section of the actual border fence, a huge metal slab with circular holes in it. [This is the fence, now 24 miles long, that has been built near San Ysidro; plans are to extend it.—EM] It's a modular unit. Looking at the movie, the fence, the whole piece, you begin to multiply it mentally. In a sense, Armando is implying that the film itself, the culture, produces the fear which then produces the fence. Fear is implied by the strength of the cast-iron fence. The whole piece is very elegant in its minimalism.

Along one wall the artist has displayed dittoed test papers from his fourth grade elementary school class on social studies in Calexico. By reading them in Armando's exhibit we see the indoctrination—how history is presented uniformly to California students. It's over-simplified and, to a large degree, insults the intelligence of children by implying that they can't understand anything but the most homogenized, sanitized version of our history as told by European Americans. Armando's direct, 9-year old boy's responses are corrected and graded by the teacher in red ink.

ELIZABETH MARTINEZ is a writer, activist, women's studies instructor and an editor of *CrossRoads*. She is currently at work on a film version of her book *500 Años del Pueblo Chicano/500 Years of Chicano History in Pictures*.

YOLANDA LOPEZ is a San Francisco-based Chicana visual artist/activist who teaches at the California College of Arts and Crafts and the University of California, Berkeley.

EM: Do you remember being taught anything in those classes about Mexican people in California? The Indians were there a little, and the Spaniards but...

YL: I grew up in San Diego being taught that my forefathers and foremothers came across on the Mayflower. I recited the pledge of allegiance every morning and enjoyed singing "America the Beautiful." I didn't think about it too much, but participated as part of understanding my identity as an American. For me it was extremely potent to see Armando's school papers and be reminded of all that. Armando is not only showing the kind of education Mexican-American children get about themselves. He is demonstrating why Americans who are not Mexican-Americans have the attitudes they do toward us.

The exhibit is very clean, very spare. The tone of it is quiet and measured. Armando's rage is clearly there, but it's logical and implied. The whole post-modernist sense of irony is here.

His compassion and love for Chicanos are also there. That comes across on the back wall, where he presents the Plan de Aztlán, the Plan de Santa Barbara, and the statements from the United Farmworkers, which are very simple and very quick to read. [The Plan Espiritual de Aztlán came out of the first Chicano youth conference in Denver in March 1969 and then, a month later, the Plan de Santa Barbara was adopted at a California conference of the Chicano student movement.—EM]

Those statements contain the voice of the Chicano people and our yearning, our belief, that the United States government and the U.S. people would surely understand why Chicanos were marching, why Chicanos were protesting, if they heard our voice. So it's very moving to read these texts again. Of course most of the people going into the gallery space have never read these articles of American literature and that's part of what Armando is doing. I think he knows full well that all this is news to most Americans.

In one corner of the exhibit stands a TV playing a documentary produced by the Los Angeles Spanish-language station KMEX. The documentary is about the Chicano Moratorium against the Vietnam War in Los Angeles on August 29, 1970 – the big march, then the police attack, and the three Chicanos killed who included the popular Chicano journalist Rubén Salazar. It too exemplifies that we are not written into the history of the civil rights movement and certainly not into the history of the anti-war movement.

EM: Like that documentary, "Berkeley in the '60s," which shows nothing of the whole Third World Student Strike in the Bay Area that lasted five months. It's totally obliterated.

YL: It's very important that Armando includes in his exhibit the concept of Aztlán, with that huge yellow map on the floor – a map of the present-day U.S. Southwest. He links the concept of Aztlán with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the 1846-48 U.S. war on Mexico by giving the U.S. half of Mexico. The text of the treaty is on the wall. It's a legal document and it reifies the concept of Aztlán. [Aztlán, today the Southwest, is said to have been the homeland of the Aztecs, who migrated from there to what is now Mexico City.—EM].

Armando presents Aztlán as the real thing, not as metaphor. I don't know how many of us see Aztlán as a myth or metaphor. Perhaps he argues it both ways, but it's important to recognize, to talk about the concept of Aztlán, because it anchors Mexican-Americans as an indigenous people, as part of the

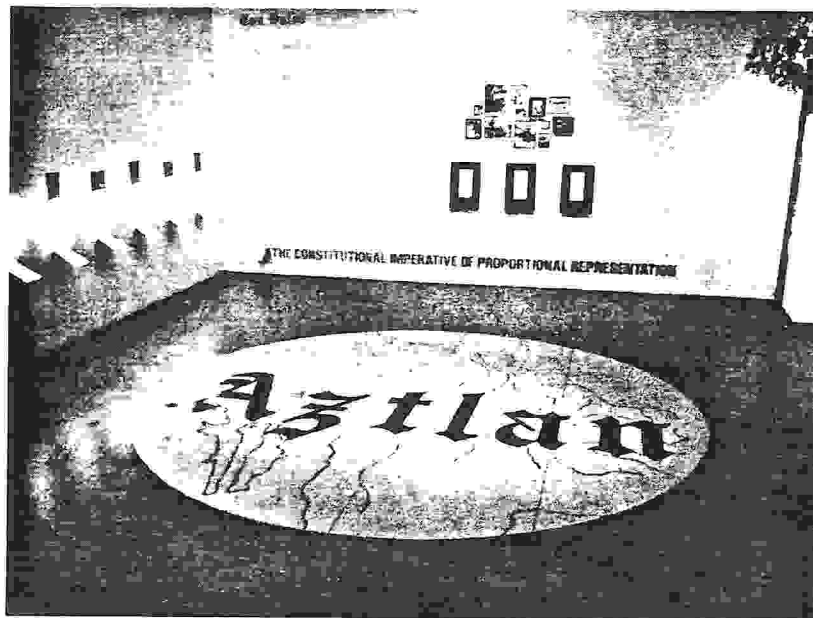


photo by Sven Weiderholt

Installation view of Armando Rascón's exhibit "Occupied Aztlán."

North American continent. We had been the northern frontier of Mexico; we suddenly became the westernmost edge of Manifest Destiny. Our identity remained the same among ourselves; our legal identity changed. If people understand that, then I think they have a key to understanding Chicanos.

EM: That whole experience is embodied in the word "colonization." You conquer first by force, then ideologically.

YL: Armando shows that very well with the slide show. He has the preamble to the Treaty written on the wall in Chicano handwriting, Caló. Overlaying it is a series of projected slides showing the border viewed from his home. There's a constant shifting image of people, and the fence and the traffic going across the border. To one side of that wall, on the floor, he has placed three hats and other ordinary

items left behind or discarded by people crossing the border in a hurry. You see straw cowboy hats, they can't be anything but Mexican. In a sense this is his way of dealing with that arbitrary shift of the border.

EM: What about the audio component? I didn't realize what it was when I first heard it.

YL: The audio component is quite lovely. Again, it's his humor and yet his dead-eyed seriousness operating at the same time. At various intervals you hear the rhythmic Chicano clap. No voices, all you hear is the slow beat at the beginning. Then it speeds up faster and faster, and ends without any of the cheering which usually comes at the end, so you just hear it as a texture and a punctuation. You're not necessarily aware of it but there's a kind of familiarity without really knowing what it is. The aspect of recognition is very enjoyable. But you would never know if you weren't Chicano.

Another thing about Armando is that he's 37 years old and in a sense what we might refer to as the "Hispanic generation." But clearly he is a Chicano with a Chicano consciousness.

are mestizos, and recognize that our origin is within the Spanish and the Indian. The rape of the first Indian woman was, in a sense, when the first Mexicano, the first Chicano, was created. For me, the concept of Aztlán places my roots in this continent. I don't come from Spain or France. Our indigenous heritage is reinforced by the concept of Aztlán, because our position physically and to a degree spiritually is here. That's one of the ways in which the concept of Aztlán feels very comfortable, very right.

Historically mestizos have been part of the oppression of indigenous people. We have been complicit in that oppressive history. But that doesn't deny our relationship to native people, and our spiritual stake in this territory. I can understand Native American objections to our claim because there's a lot of real economic and legal implications, such as: if we claim to be indigenous people, are we going to start claiming funds and rights under the BIA? As far as I know, Chicanos have no such intention – our claim is more in the sense of a heritage, a recognition that we are part of this land. I think we really have to make it clear to our Native

American cousins that we have no intention of claiming any privileges of sovereignty or monies through our identification.

EM: At one point you said Armando doesn't treat Aztlán just as metaphor. Up to now I would say that when you talk about the concept, it is as metaphor. I have no problems with the metaphor of Aztlán but if you're talking about more, it gets complicated – even if Chicanos are not asking for BIA funds, that kind of thing. There is territory involved. See the swamp I am trying to lead you into?

YL: Since the fall of the Soviet Union I think just about anything is possible territorially. Highly unlikely but not out of the realm of possibility. We'll have to cross that bridge when we come to it. Meanwhile we have to make more alliances with native peoples. It may take a generation or more to work out what our relationship is, and what it means in terms of land and water. Those are important to both groups although Chicanos are more of an urban people today.

Back to Armando. I think he represents a turning point in Chicano artwork. He knows contemporary cultural theory. I think he represents a new breed that will not just be political artists but also cultural commentators. His show broadens the concept of Chicano art. The experience of the show was powerful. The issues he raises have their origin in the 1960s movement, but he confirms that we're still grappling with them. ■

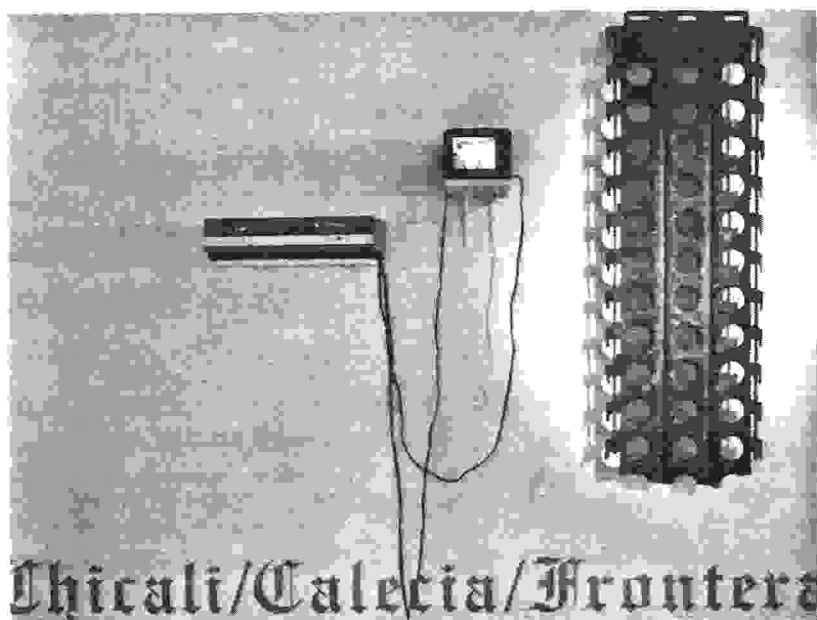


photo by Sven Weidenholt

Armando Rascón's "Two Artifacts: Touch of Evil and Displaced/Found Segment."

EM: I would like to go back to the issue of Aztlán. How do we deal with this concept when the area includes so many Native Americans who are not necessarily enthusiastic about calling this area Chicano or Mexicano turf?

YL: It's a difficult and complicated question. Part of the issue is related to who we are as a people; that we