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ART REVIEW
WILLIAM WILSON
Los Angeles Times (1886-Current File); Feb 27, 1974; ProQuest Historical Newspapers Los Angeles Times (1881 -)
pg. E1



A NEW ART.—Robert de la Rocha, left, and Gilbert Lujan with a portion of the exhibition, "Los Four."
Times photo by Tony Barnard

ART REVIEW

A Bit of the Barrio at County Museum

BY WILLIAM WILSON
Times Staff Writer

Half of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's contemporary gallery is its usual sleek and sophisticated self. The other half looks like the setting for a fiesta, a "West Side Story" rumble or, possibly, a revolution.

It has been invaded by "Los Four"—Charles Almaraz, Robert de la Rocha, Gilbert Lujan and Frank Romero—Chicano artists armed with spray cans. They make a new kind of art that combines the popular folk art of the East L.A. barrio with what they learned about art in college—and are partly trying to forget.

Locomotives are a huge political-cartoon painting of a tense confrontation of the United Farm Workers with Teamsters and growers, painted by Almaraz for the first conference of Cesar Chavez's union; two big mural-size paintings executed together by "Los Four," sprayed with swords of pink, azure, silver and a rainbow of sugary. Passionate colors formed into the familiar graffiti of sun-drenched barrio walls; the front end of a low-rider Chevy brought to a flawless finish by Lujan.

"It will go back on the car after the show," he said. "We can't afford to have a car just sitting

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FOLK ART.—Carlos D. Almaraz, left, and Frank Romero, are two of Los Four whose contemporary art is on display at the County Museum of Art. Times photo

Bit of the Barrio at County Museum

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there for show. Our art has to be partly utilitarian."

There are delicate, elaborately poetic portraits of friends surrounded by the barrio environment and icons by De la Rocha. Romero makes endless versions of a painted heart, a common folk symbol, and little reliquary boxes of bright cut-paper whose patterns surround photos of loved ones.

"It's fun to make art like this," said the bearded artist. "My mother will like the fact my daughter's picture is in the museum. It's too formal here. Don't spill that coffee. We've been sitting on the carpets all week installing the show, eating lunch and playing guitars.

Star of David

"When we decided to paint our first mural together at UC Irvine, it was hard for four strong-minded guys to give up their egos. We got migraines and yelled at each other. At the end the gallery director, Hal Glicksman, was hot to put something in the mural. He added a little Star of David very timidly. It ends up being the kind of art people want to be involved with. It's fun. It's the people's art."

The idea for "Los Four" was conceived by UCI gallery director Glicksman and Lujan, who recently took his MA. Glicksman suggested that Lujan pick the other artists. Lujan selected his three friends.

The exhibition was picked up and greatly expanded by LACMA modern curator Jane Livingston and co-curator Cecil Fergusson. It remains on view through March 31.

Cultural Process

The idea of a "people's art" is expressed everywhere, even though each artist has a distinctive individual version of the style. A huge step-pyramid "altar" is heaped with all manner of Chicano and Mexican (even Oriental) popular folk trinkets, mainly fantastic lacquered papier-mache figures and masks.

This combined effort included not only the artists but friends and relatives who brought treasures. De la Rocha, ironical, quiet and sucking a lemon, described it as a work of cultural process art.

Almaraz, the most openly political of the four, connected many of his feelings and convictions to the art. The large paintings, for example, are done in house paint. He doesn't expect them to survive for millenia. He is against private property and the art system. He is against quality in art.

"Using quality as a basis for art benefits museums, collectors and investors, not artists. I now have \$3 in my pocket borrowed from my grandmother. Too many artists arrive broke at their own opening."

Why has he taken this antiestablishment, materially difficult position?

"I love people more than art."