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Art

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"Los Four Mural" is a cooperative painting done by Chicano artists Carlos Almaraz, Roberto de la Rocha, Gilbert Lujan, Frank Romero for exhibit at County Museum of Art.

Art

'Los Four' a Statement of Chicano Spirit

BY WILLIAM WILSON

● Some days one wishes to hide under the covers. You would not think that such a cheery occasion as the County Museum of Art's exhibition of "Los Four" could create such a headache.

It is this perfectly decent four-man show by Carlos Almaraz, Roberto de la Rocha, Gilbert Lujan and Frank Romero, all young artists from Los Angeles. It also is something else, different but not quite separate, an exhibition of Chicano art.

Chicano art is what you would call a subcultural style. No individual invented this style, it grew naturally as an indigenous expression of thousands of Chicanos in the Southwest. It is an urban folk style. As far as I know it took shape in the 1940s among adolescent Mexican-Americans. Hallmarks included heavily oiled ducktail haircuts and spit-shined shoes with three sets of soles for boys; pompadour hairdos, brass bangles, peasant blouses, short black skirts and white shoes and socks for girls. Graphic expression included small tattoos and large wall graffiti announcing affiliations with gangs like Los Flats or with sweethearts. Automobiles called "low riders" appeared after World War II. The name derives, I think, from the fact that springs were shackled so cars rested close to the ground. It also may connect to the fact that style required drivers to slump low in the seat looking imperturbably—ach—cool, as reflected in a modest black by Lujan.

Basic Elements Remain

Chicano style has altered somewhat but basic elements remain traditional. "Los Four" expresses many of its facts and all of its spirit through artists returned to grass-roots after professional college art training. They worked together on two mural-size paintings using spray cans to produce ebullient versions of graffiti walls in romantic, sugary colors. They cooperated on a huge pyramid "altar" laden with Chicano and Mexican popular culture memorabilia, lacquered dolls and masks, painted ceramic figures, books and who knows what all. Artists were aided by family and friends making what Lujan called a work of "cultural process art."

Lujan seems most involved of "Los Four" in Chicano life-style art. His quarter of the exhibition includes the actual front end of a low rider, flawlessly finished in burnt sienna primer. It also includes a sort of domestic "altar" of baby pictures in vivid Kodachrome—a calendar with an illustration of the Virgin Mary and a Mexican beer ad depicting a muscular Aztec either rescuing or sacrificing a lovely unconscious maiden in the jumble of objects.

"Los Four" is agreeable as an ensemble statement of a strong, self-titled Chicano culture. Individual works are closely hung and unlabeled. It requires a little study to sort out

four personalities. In many ways the show discourages criticism, mainly demanding the audience participate in artists' loving feelings.

I did. Having grown up in the midst of all that, it was easy to get lost in waves of nostalgic "American Graffiti"-type affection. What ever happened to Connie Aragon?

What ever happened, come to think of it, to the museum as a bastion of cultural excellence?

Affection or no affection, "Los Four" is housed in an art museum. Nobody pretends that every item in every museum is a bona fide masterpiece. One hopes, however that everything is striving to be a clear, quintessential example of its genre.

"Los Four" is far from clear. That is partly because museums' standards are no longer clear. Museums recently developed an anxiety to be "responsive to the needs of the community."

That is a legitimate desire although it might be argued they were previously responsive to the needs of the community which decided it needed something else worse than it needed aesthetics. It needed a platform to air the point of view of special interest groups. That made museums subject to political influence.

"Los Four" functions partly as a spoof of the

museum, its bloodlessness and general uptightness. The mirror reflects both ways. The museum's stuffiness reflects "Los Four's" self-conscious scruffiness. If both sides can accept those balanced truths with a laugh maybe both will learn something.

"Los Four" is unclear because the last decade saw alterations in accepted notions of what constitutes art. Aestheticians, including me, recognized that socially generated forms like Chicano art are artistically viable, just like folk music is viable.

Why not then do an exhibition of Chicano art, the real article, unfiltered by the interposition of four college-trained artists who, by the very act of leaving the barrio, ceased to be authentic folk artists?

Probably because museum curators are still haunted by the specter of a disastrous exhibition at New York's Metropolitan called "Harlem on My Mind." It was intended as a socially responsive exhibition showing affection for the folk traditions of the black community. Black people detested it as campy and patronizing picturing them as quaint, clannish, urban peasants with amusingly naive, picturesque ways.

Speaking for a e_m_n_t

Some Mexican-Americans will respond similarly to "Los Four" despite the cachet of the artists. They cannot possibly speak for all Mexican-Americans. Almaraz claims to speak for that segment of the community disenchanted with the American melting pot. He is frankly a politician. He presents the exhibition's single largest painting, a scene in Mexican muralist-cum-political cartoon-style showing a confrontation between noble members of the United Farm Workers and evil-looking figures labeled "Growers," "Teamsters" and police.

Is the responsive museum now obliged to offer equal time to equally polemical social art by cops, truckers and farmers?

I hope not. Presumably the material is presented as art to be appreciated for its intrinsic merit. When we listen to a Jerry Lee Lewis record we don't dump on him as a Southern redneck sadistic sexist because he is an artist of a high order who raises his subject matter to a realm of art that is sublimated fantasy. Freud allows us to entertain any thought or image as a fantasy even if Marx insists with equal vigor that every matchbook cover is a political statement.

Politics is not art criticism's business even if the artist himself is politicized. Art criticism's business is to speculate about how effective the art expresses whatever he chooses to say. To a degree all

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This folk-style lithograph by Roberto de la Rocha reflects the urban.

Statement of Chicano Spirit

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the "issues" surrounding "Los Four" are decoys distracting from the central issue of aesthetic clarity, aptness, justness and pointedness. (Consider context. When Almaraz's big painting is hung at a UFW meeting the central issue is politics.)

Aesthetically all four artists strike me as competent, even gifted, men just beginning to find themselves. The core of that identity seems, for each, to be the mystique of Chicano folk art. So far they are only as good as indigenous examples at their very best.

All work with passion, tumbling out ideas seriously in need of further development.

The cooperative murals seem to be trying to graft graffiti to the tensions of Jackson Pollock. They fall between schools.

Frank Romero presents colorful reliquary boxes containing patterns in cut paper surrounding precious pictures of loved ones. They are sweet and vital but not quite together.

Roberto de la Rocha has a delicate, pyrotechnical drawing style that flashes across about 75 examples combining elements of Picasso, psychotic art, adolescent style and Chicano emblemism. When he slows down he produces such intensely affecting poetry as that inscribed "A Chita Con Todo Amor."

Lujan's individual pictures include fascinating playing card-size drawings of magical people and paintings, vaguely reminiscent of Philip Evergood,

that only seem to need to continue deepening without locking into their own stylizations.

Almaraz's work is the most dense and far ranging of the four. He has experimented with abstraction and strange figural fantasy expressionism that seem to predate his immersion in politics. Like the others he seems just discovering a direction for his obvious gifts and energies.

The County Museum of Art has, perhaps,

discharged a felt social obligation with "Los Four." As a compromise between conflicting contemporary currents the exhibition is perhaps not a bad one considering all artistic compromise feels squishy.

I hope "Los Four" proves a launching place for the maturing of four gifted men, not just a flash in the general obscurity. That, of course, is partly up to them.

Meantime the museum ought not be surprised to receive complaints from many artists, equally talented as "Los Four," that they are disadvantaged by having no special circumstances to promote their talents.