

CHEECH MARIN PRESENTS



*The Chicano Collection/La Colección Chicana* reflects the complexity, contradictions, and compassion of its Chicano collector, Cheech Marin. This collection brings together limited-edition digital prints of original work in Marin's private collection. It at once documents his own collecting over two decades and argues for a "Chicano school of painting" within American art since the 1960s.

The inherent contradictions in trying to have it both ways are actually productive ones that give insight into Marin's larger effort to situate Chicano art within *American* art and arts institutions. Change is never easy and straightforward. After all, the criteria by which the art world operates have—to some extent—contributed to the exclusion of Chicano art and artists. So do we use these criteria? In making an argument about a Chicano school of painting—one comparable to the other schools of painting recognized in art history—Marin answers, "Yes!" But in defining *Chicano* as a distinct filter through which to see the world, he also answers, "No!" What Marin is getting at is that Chicano artists *have* made contributions to American and world art history over the past four decades, but they have *also*—to some extent—been doing something different that requires its own language and evaluative criteria.

*The Chicano Collection* embraces these and other contradictions in order to make room for complexity and compassion with respect to Chicano art. Consider the following:

- Marin's collection—like all significant American collections—starts as a personal obsession and then, over time, becomes inflected with the historical objectives of being specialized and comprehensive. Nearly half of the artworks represented in *The Chicano Collection* were acquired *after* Marin started working on the exhibition, *Chicano Visions: American Painters on the Verge* in 2000. In these latter acquisitions, one sees the persistence of a personal, idiosyncratic obsession (he likes what he likes) as well as a more self-conscious gesture toward reflecting and shaping Chicano art history.
- In foregrounding an historical and aesthetic argument about a Chicano school of painting, Marin relies upon a democratic ethos shared by community-based organizations: each artist is represented by one print. This method also reflects the fact that the collector knows the artists. In other words, while his argument is historical, it is nevertheless

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grounded in social relations, not an *abstracted* sense of value, distinction, or even taste. He acquires and selects with a sense of the other people in the room.

- The art itself points in a number of directions, informing the viewer about the artist, the collection, and art history (whether Chicano, American, or world art). But, as a collection, the works have as many differences as they do commonalities, especially in terms of style, technique, and subject matter. What unites the collection is that the artists identify themselves and their art as *Chicano*. They also more or less work within a similar color palette. But what these artists make of these two things—identity and color—suggest not so much a "school" of painting as a college with many schools. Clearly these works "belong" together under the sign of *Chicano*, and as a coherent and specialized collection, but they also participate in other schools, movements, and genres.
- Finally, while originating in Marin's own collection, *The Chicano Collection* includes several exceptions: works that remain in the collection of the artist or of another collector. In this respect, *The Chicano Collection* acknowledges the limits of any single collection in either documenting the collector's own tastes (he will always want more work) or sustaining a historical argument (there will always be more work). But it also opens the door for the viewer to become an active collector, too.

In her study of American art collectors in the first half of the 20th century, Aline B. Saarinen concludes, "They were not only possessors: they were also possessed." Indeed, collectors often speak about their collecting as an addiction, obsession, and compulsion. Some have even formed support groups, such as the Chicano Art Collectors Anonymous, which was active throughout the 1990s. While there is a self-deprecating humor to the way in which collectors describe themselves, it is important to note that their "addiction" is part of a larger process that involves the individual artist and collector, the art object, social institutions, and public culture.

Cheech Marin exemplifies the four characteristics that often define art collectors: (1) an incidental or accidental start, (2) the eventual adoption of "collector" as a self-designation and social identity, (3) the sense of addiction, and (4) the function of the collection as an extension of self. But the "extension of self" is also a profoundly social act, particularly in the American context. As W.G. Constable noted over four decades ago, "The virtual necessity of each generation of [American art] collectors beginning at the beginning ... has helped stimulate ... the conscious intention of the collector that his collection should not pass to his descendents, but ultimately

benefit the community." In other words, American art collectors' efforts are at once an extension of self and an intention to contribute to our shared public culture.

In championing Chicano art, Cheech Marin has one distinct advantage over the curators, critics, and collectors who precede him: around the world, "Cheech" is perhaps more widely known than "Chicano art." Through the force of his celebrity he has been able to bring this work before mainstream audiences around the nation. Celebrity may draw an audience into an exhibition, but only the substance of the artwork can impress itself upon the viewer and continue to do so after he or she returns home. With that in mind, Marin has clearly articulated a personal passion, a political commitment, and an aesthetic argument. These things are not without contradictions, but they do have the virtue of getting a public airing and of facilitating the presentation of the artwork itself. *The Chicano Collection* extends that effort through digital reproduction that can be exhibited, archived, and studied in a wide range of public institutions. Viewers may disagree with some of the selections (and omissions), challenge the idea of a school of painting, question the absence of other art forms, or even bemoan the loss of "aura" that belongs only to the original artwork. Some may even reject the idea of "Chicano art" as a viable category.

Cheech Marin would have it no other way: he wants argument, debate, and contestation. Silence or quiet agreement does not help integrate the artwork into museum exhibition, art history, and public culture. Getting this work on the gallery walls is only a first step—a hard-won achievement, to be sure. But bringing Chicano art back into public view—again and again—will require *other* arguments, *other* artists and artworks, and a commitment to cultivate a diverse audience base. Therein lies Cheech's compassion. He has made his case—quite literally in terms of the portfolio that encases the collection—but he knows that in the end what really matters is that we have an opportunity to look at the art itself. Look and you will see not a school, a movement, or a style, but colors and forms that move the eye and that speak to the art's own participation in the world. As artist Margaret Garcia explains, "I define Chicano painting by painting." We have had too few opportunities to see and engage that definition—the one coming from the art and the artists. History will decide the rest.

—Chon A. Noriega, Ph.D., 2003