

Elizabeth Mendez Berry

With its treeless sidewalks and garbage-strewn abandoned lot, Hope Street between East Somerset and West Lehigh didn't exactly look like a beacon in November 2008. But the threadbare North Philly block had an inspired name, and local muralist and Las Gallas art collective member Michelle Angela Ortiz decided to support the Obama campaign by creating a mural there to encourage community members to vote. She pitched local residents on the idea of a "Latinos Para Obama" mural in the vacant lot, and they agreed.

Ortiz and a team of 50 local residents and friends cleared the area of garbage and painted the 30 foot mural, which features an image of Barack Obama giving thumbs up as two children look on. The words, "Esperanza para nuestro futuro," (Hope for our Future) frame the work of art. The mural was completed in just four days, on November 1st, 2008.

More than a year later, Ortiz and her fellow Gallas Magda Martinez and Julia Lopez took me on a tour of Philly murals the day before the National Association of Latino Arts and Culture's conversation on aesthetics. Our journey through the boulevards and alleys of the city ended on Hope Street: reggaeton rumbled down the block; empty bottles and other debris littered the vacant lot. But the mural was immaculate. A list of dreams from the children of Hope Street had been added by Ortiz, in February 2009, after the mural was tagged with gang graffiti: it reads, in part, "I hope for a safer neighborhood. I hope for love. I hope for peace. I hope for unity."

For Ortiz, who grew up in South Philadelphia, murals have always been a way to challenge injustice and build community. She painted her first in high school, in response to a racial incident. "I create murals to give voice to communities that feel that their stories are unimportant, to represent a visual history of those that contribute to the spirit of the community," said Ortiz. "A public work of art can reach so many people, no matter race, social status, and gender. Murals create an outdoor gallery where they reflect the spirit of the community *for* the community."

Philadelphia's streets are a living museum, one that veers from old school portraits to contemporary graffiti, paint barely dry, in a short block. They also tell stories;

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Note from the Editor:

This essay was commissioned by NALAC following a convening of artists, scholars, art administrators, and cultural activists in Philadelphia in January 2010. It is one of three essays commissioned after three conversations. Although the content reflects solely the perceptions of the author, the essay also offers a snapshot of crucial themes, priorities, and ideas that are shaping the meaning and evolution of Latino arts and culture. NALAC is circulating these essays among cultural workers and thinkers as an invitation for further dialogue and to stimulate research on the opportunities and challenges that Latino arts and culture face in the 21st century.

About the Author:

Elizabeth Mendez Berry's work has appeared in the Washington Post, The Nation, Vibe, the Village Voice, Smithsonian, and Time, among many others. She is an adjunct professor at NYU's Clive Davis School of Recorded Music, where she teaches music journalism. She writes about the intersection of pop culture and politics, and is known for her bold hip hop feminism. She has also worked for non-profit organizations, including the Drug Policy Alliance, and was a founding board member of the League of Young Voters. She has won several awards for her work, including the top music journalism prize for "Love Hurts," an expose of domestic violence in the hip hop industry. Of Colombian and Irish Canadian descent and raised in Toronto, she now lives in Queens, NY. She has a masters in journalism from Columbia University. For more visit her website: www.mendezberry.com

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in north Philadelphia, where Latino murals from the ‘70s to the present are concentrated, one can see Boricua heroes: there’s *independentista* Pedro Albizu Campos elegantly rendered in black and white mosaic, and the prerequisite Technicolor piece in honor of deceased “portly Rican” rapper Big Pun. With the migration of Latinos from other places, murals celebrating Cesar Chavez and the Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral have also taken their place on neighborhood walls.

And while murals have long been recognized as a core example of the broader, albeit contested, movement known as “community arts,” Ortiz makes it a point to stress that, if divorced from a grounded methodology, they too can be aloof—even if they’re sitting right at street level. Ortiz takes pains to make her work a “community affair.” She often relies on local volunteers to help paint and even design a piece, and lists their names on the wall alongside her own. These murals are public art, not restricted to the wine and cheese gallery scene, and they tell the stories of shifting communities.

Historically, murals have been one of the most visible forms of Latino art, and so it was appropriate that NALAC’s meeting about Latino aesthetics was held in a city with such a vibrant history of street-level storytelling. Some of the pieces capture a wistfulness for a tropical homeland; others are defiant in the face of imperialism—but they all invite a conversation about the role of the past in the present, the there in the here. They stake a claim on the landscape: this is what *Latinidad* looks like.

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strongest currents in Latino arts—though certainly not the only strand of this complex movement.

This was made clear on this Saturday in January, 2010, the day after my North Philly mural tour, when a group of fourteen artists and scholars convened at the University of Pennsylvania’s wood-paneled Casa Latina to discuss what they do and why they do it—what makes Latino art “Latino” and what makes “art” such an important element of the Latino cultural experience. And while none of the participants were muralists, most if not all had a history of deliberately engaging community members and community issues through their work. That being said, many of them were adamant in defending their right to do art for its own sake as well—for beauty and reflection, for instinct and ideals, and not for therapeutic reasons.

Call to Self

NALAC united an impressive cast of conversationalists: a dancer; a filmmaker; musicians; theater folk; a visual artist, and writers. The artists came from New York, Florida and California, and places in between. Some were born and raised in the United States, others were “*hecho en Mexico*” (or Cuba or elsewhere). Some make work that engages directly with traditional Latino forms (the Chicago-based musical ensemble Sones de Mexico, for example, was created “to keep Mexican ‘son’ alive in its many regional forms”), while others are focused within the borders of their own bodies. Dancer Merián Soto, who led a much-needed after-lunch stretching session, said “I’ve done salsa shows. I’m doing breathing now.”

The day's agenda was driven by an expressed desire to find what academics refer to as "articulations" of practice. Latino artists do the work. But they get few opportunities to talk about it, criticize it, theorize it, frame it, and contextualize it in relation to other artistic currents. For many artists, teaching at community art centers provides the minimal stable income to be able to continue doing the art. It can be exhausting. But on this day, the invitation from NALAC offered a breath of fresh air. *En familia* (among family members), the group seemed eager to plunge into the depths of the difficult topics of identity, value, and that much derided concept, quality, that has for so long been used as a tool of exclusion against Latino artists.

To support this intention, the group also included two scholars: curator Tey Marianna Nunn, of the National Hispanic Cultural Center in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and Ramon Rivera-Servera, a professor of Performance Studies at Northwestern University in Chicago. Legendary Latino arts scholar Dr. Tomas Ybarra-Frausto was the day's moderator and provocateur.

Dr. Ybarra-Frausto began the conversation by sketching out data about the Latino population of the United States. His review of the well publicized demographic transformation that Latinos are bringing to the U.S.—41.3 million people, a population larger than many Latin American countries—established a framework that seemed utterly familiar to the group. Demographic data about the impending minority/majority reversal in the U.S. can serve as a reality check for Latino artists, scholars, and cultural workers. It is they, in the last instance, who are charged with the responsibility for representing and interpreting the myriad ways in which Latinos manage to weave their story into the fabric of this country. Some approach

this assignment skeptically. Others flatly refuse it. Still, there are many who see it as an opportunity to counter the often problematic images of Latinos that dominate mass media.

In his remarks, Dr. Ybarra-Frausto emphasized the heterogeneity that characterizes this emerging (and at the same time ancient) Latino Nation. The fact is that there are Latinos of African origin, mestizos, whites, indigenous, and more, and they come from the wealthy, working, and middle classes. There are those who have been here for generations, and immigrants who arrived this morning; *algunos hablan español*, some are fluent in Spanglish, and some speak neither. Some grow up considering themselves Latinos, whereas others first encountered the term in the United States. "When I was a boy growing up in Colombia, I didn't know I was Latino," said Michael John Garcés, who spent his childhood in Medellín and Bogotá and now directs Cornerstone Theater in Los Angeles.

Dr. Ybarra-Frausto refers to the themes he laid out in his introduction as *puntos de partida* (points of departure). In a sense, they constitute a core curriculum for making sense of the complexity of the Latino presence in the United States. The art that has emerged out of the everyday experience of Latinos living in what the Cuban poet José Martí termed auspiciously "the entrails of the monster," can be vexing to insiders and outsiders. It is an art that ranges from political posters, figurative traditions, and social realism to conceptual, minimalist, and abstract art. "Representing," I heard one young artist say, "can be tricky." But the "trick" has as much to do with negotiating political questions of inclusion and social equity as with a

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persistent Latino attachment to reconstituted forms of home, place, land, and nation. Martí's use of the word "monster," to be precise, was not only a simplistic reference to an evil empire, but also to the enchantment, expansiveness, and seduction that the United States represents for Latinos. That story—of dreams, desire, and possibilities—sits side by side with the struggles for civil rights and social justice.

Dr. Ybarra-Frausto explored these themes eloquently. He spoke of the "call to self," and fundamental questions like, "Who am I? Where do I come from?" that spur cultural production. He asked what it is that unites the Latino community. "Maybe not language, but a historical experience of colonization, immigration, and racialization," he said. Latinos have been a part of the United States since before the pilgrims came, and when there was New England, there was also New Spain. "We are not an add-on culture, not an appendix, but part of the central narrative of this country," he said. To him, the Latino experience is the quintessential American experiment: "It's about getting along with different folks," he said. "It's cosmopolitan. It's not static, it changes with time. Sometimes there's a break, sometimes there's continuity. It's a fusion between the old and the new."

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Bits and Pieces

Many stories are woven into that narrative, some of them represented by the group at the Casa Latina. Paul Flores, a second generation Californian of Cuban and Mexican descent initially used his spoken word to communicate the Latino experience to non-Latinos: "what it's like to inherit the experience of Spanish at home but not at school," he said. Later, he focused on making poetry for his own community. Saxophone player and composer Yosvany Terry grew up in a legendary Cuban musical family; he arrived in New York in 1999, and has dedicated himself to combining his Afro-Cuban musical repertoire with avant garde New York jazz. Rigoberto González grew up in Michoacán, Mexico and now lives in Queens, New York, where he writes poetry and prose for a new generation. Sofia Quintero, a Bronx native of Dominican and Puerto Rican descent, writes elegant street stories for "women who love hip hop even when it doesn't love them back."

For many of these artists, location has played a key role in how their work has

evolved. German Pérez moved from the Dominican Republic to New York City, transforming his aesthetic and his relationship to his culture. "When I lived in the Dominican Republic, under Trujillo, everything was political," he said. "My work was focused on rescuing symbols from the country, like *las hermanas Mirabal*." Later, he began to explore his cultural heritage, creating a series of illustrations of Taino legends. "But when I moved to the United States, nobody cared about my country," he said. "Some gallery owners called my Taíno work voodoo. I had to find a mix between where I was coming from [and where I was living]. I found out that creating an aesthetic that I called 'Caribbean pop art' was a lot more acceptable to U.S. audiences."

Those at the meeting represented a huge range of aesthetic traditions, many of which aren't specifically Latino; they had embraced punk rock, slam poetry, Theater of the Oppressed, Brecht, and Brahms at various points in their careers. Some are most intrigued by

Latino art that defies preconceived ideas: Ramon Rivera-Servera collects portraits that are not identifiably Latino. “It may look like any other portrait,” said Rivera-Servera. “The only thing that makes it Latino is the title, ‘A Puerto Rican Suburban housewife.’”

At the same time, there were recurring themes in their work: an engagement with the Latin American aesthetic repertoire—a creative heritage that is often maintained through practice, not by being archived—as in Yosvany Terry and Juan Dies’s music, which embraces and expands on traditional Cuban and Mexican rhythms. According to Ybarra-Frausto, the Latino aesthetic is as heterogeneous as the community itself. “It’s an aesthetic of bits and pieces,” he said. “It’s kaleidoscopic, and as you move, the patterns shift.” He mentioned the “barrio baroque” aesthetic, which Ybarra-Frausto described as “the aesthetics of accumulation,” and which conjures images of altars, ornate ceramic figurines, and rituals. Lillian Jimenez mentioned the Puerto Rican artist Pepon Osorio’s 1994 barbershop piece, “*En la barberia no se llora*” as an example of this unique Latino avant-gardism. “He takes the ritual of male grooming, and feminizes it with doilies. There’s no empty space,” she said.

One bone of contention was the role of Euro-American forms in Latino art, the result of what Ramon Rivera-Servera called “a traumatic but productive encounter,” a.k.a. colonization. Several bristled at the idea that their work was the offspring of European traditions—Paul Flores, for example, had been an architect of hip hop theater as an alternative to European forms. But for others, particularly filmmaker and activist Lillian Jimenez, European work was a source of inspiration. “I have a radical orientation to art—[my goal is] to defy conventions, to not pander to the audience,” said Jimenez. “I went back to the ‘30s films, the neo-realists of Europe. In the 60s, we were the organizers, we were the action; the camera was being attacked by the cops. We were thinking about where you place the camera, how you break down that hierarchy.”

In his one-man show, NE 2nd Avenue, actor/writer/director Teo Castellanos zeroes in on the residents of one Miami avenue, in the tradition of other solo performers like John Leguizamo and Danny Hoch. “I wrote it because I wanted to bring my city to a much wider audience,” said Castellanos, who has been pleasantly surprised by the warm response his Miami stories have earned from audiences in Europe and Alaska who’ve never been to the Miami-Cuban enclave of Hialeah. Though he doesn’t play favorites, Castellanos has a soft spot for one of his characters, a Cuban *balseero* named Juan, who provides comic relief with a side of wisdom. “So I go from one jail in Cuba to another one in America; *que cosa caballero*,” is one of his lines. Directed by Michael John Garcés, the Cornerstone Theater director, the piece won the Edinburgh Fringe festival’s prestigious Fringe First award. “The show is about finding our commonalities, and not so much our differences,” said Castellanos, who quotes Victor Hugo: “speak of your village, and you speak universally.”

Castellanos is gratified that Latinos embrace his work, but has succeeded in capturing an audience that doesn’t necessarily know what the word “abuelo” means. But even the Latino audience is broadening and blurring, and as it cross-pollinates, it becomes more omnivorous. Young “Mexiricans” listen to reggaeton, and you can buy several country’s permutations of *maiz aplastado*-- arepas, pupusas and tortillas—in a store owned by Salvadorans. Still, during the meeting, Ybarra-Frausto was clear that just because the lines between Latino communities in the United States are more permeable doesn’t mean they don’t exist: he contrasted “the fantasy of mutuality with the reality of tensions,” but was also optimistic that these relationships would develop into productive partnerships, “*juntos pero no revueltos*.”

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Who is the art for?

While the Latino community has achieved significant victories since the civil rights era, when art and politics were braided tightly together, most of the artists at the table still feel a responsibility to their community, their core audience. But how to fulfill that responsibility isn't always clear. “There's a tension between accessibility and challenging audiences to step out of their comfort zone,” said Juan Dies. For writer Rigoberto González, being true to himself meant choosing to write for a specific group, and not worrying about being all things to all Latinos. “I'm an immigrant and I write in English,” said González. “The first question I get is, ‘Do you write in Spanish?’ And because I don't, it's ‘*Tú no eres de Michoacán, eres pocho.*’ And I become a little resentful, as if my experience is less valuable, that something was lost when I wrote about times when I spoke only in Spanish in English. But the reality is that so many young people access queer literature in English. What do I say to people who don't like my work? I'm not talking to them. I'm talking to their children.”

Alvan Colón-Lespier, associate art director of Pregones Theater in New York, has thought a lot about the complex relationship between art and audiences. His Bronx theater is a vibrant community space that showcases popular folkloric acts like Los Pleneros de la 21 as well as the in-house theater company. He sometimes chafes against audience expectations that the plays they come to see will contain what he calls “a cultural affirmation moment.” “How do we imagine a practice of theater that doesn't have to explicitly deal with Latinidad?” he asked. “Can't I just do theater? My experience is that we as artists have been encumbered by so many responsibilities we don't ask other people to assume. You don't just do your work. You have to do education? I believe our work is to do our work. We do art for the sake of art. And art's goal is to transform the way we look at things, to transform and heal.”

The question “Who is the art for, and what do they want?” also came up when Ybarra-Frausto asked the group what a national Latino museum of art couldn't afford to leave out. Curator Tey Marianna Nunn talked about her experience developing shows at the National Hispanic Cultural Center in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where recent Mexican immigrants told her they were more interested in seeing Anglo-American culture, which was new to them, than anything Latino. In different regional contexts, the art that Latino cultural centers exhibit require as much translation *among* Latinos as it does in any mainstream setting. Nunn said that he mounted a show of Cuban art in Albuquerque and it was a challenge to lure audiences. Sofia Quintero spoke of the importance of considering popular culture when developing a museum, because “art and entertainment do overlap and intersect,” she said. For Lillian Jimenez, oral histories of crucial Latino arts institutions like Philadelphia's Taller Boricua, were a priority, so that visitors could understand “the context that formed the art,” she said. German Pérez mentioned the need to include crafts and folklore in the collection, and Alvan Colón-Lespier emphasized that no forms should be left out, even those that don't fit neatly behind a piece of glass, like dance, theater and music.

Pa'lante

The museum better known as North Philadelphia certainly has a point of view: many of its murals depict a provocative, vibrant Latinidad that's tough to ignore. In one piece, the Puerto Rican poet Juan Antonio Corretjer looks out at the street, saying, "*Yo sería borincano aunque naciera en la luna,*" almost daring viewers to challenge his Boricua (Puerto Rican) bona fides. This sidewalk museum is not a sanitized "multiculti" fantasy—though some of the murals are gentler than others—it's more a collection of opinion pieces celebrating the history of a community that has struggled, but struggled with style. It's art at its most audacious, inserting itself into the middle of intersections and the end of alleyways.

It represents the ideas that Ybarra-Frausto returned to throughout the conversation: *conocimiento, confianza y convivencia*. Latino artists of various backgrounds work together and alone to communicate their stories, both cultural and personal. Images of Chilean poets nestle next to Mexican revolutionaries and Yoruba orishas, and the whole neighborhood walks by these giants every day on their way to work, or school, or hanging out on the corner. It's a uniquely Latino landscape, one, in fact, that could only exist in the United States.

For muralist Michelle Angela Ortiz, having her work on these walls is an honor. "Grandmothers, police officers, homeless men and women, and children are all exposed to the art," said Ortiz. "They identify themselves with the work, they become curious about it, they admire it and their positive reactions reinforce the purpose of my work and my role as a com-

munity artist." This open air gallery is accessible and interactive, which means that local gang members sometimes punctuate pieces with their own tags. Ideally the Latino museum that Ybarra-Frausto mentioned would have some of the grit and beauty of North Philadelphia's mural gallery—perhaps it would even allow visitors to make their mark. North Philly passers-by may not always respond to murals the way artists would like them to, but they do respond. In so doing, they give each piece new life, and continue the community conversation that makes art matter.

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Lillian Jiménez
Executive Director
Latino Education Media Center
New City, NY

Tey Marianna Nunn
Director of Museum and Visual Arts Program
National Hispanic Cultural Center
Albuquerque, NM

Charles Rice-Gonzalez
Managing Director
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Bronx, NY

Conversation

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