



## ***Raised as roosters: Relief prints and drawings by Abel Alejandro and Guerra***

On view September 19 – December 5, 2020

Coinciding with the 30-year anniversary of the groundbreaking historic survey, *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965-1985* (CARA), Angels Gate Cultural Center presents ***Raised as roosters: Relief prints and drawings by Abel Alejandro and Guerra***. Alejandro and Guerra, widely respected for their rendering and printmaking skills, share a selection of new and recent works on paper which provide an opportunity to reflect upon themes of Xicano identity, masculinity, and traditional Mexican visual motifs.

Born in the region called Tierra Caliente in Michoacán, **Abel Alejandro** emigrated to the United States as a child. A self-trained printmaker, he pays homage to the traditions of master engravers through his dedication to the craft. Frequently, Alejandro draws upon his life experiences in order to examine the concept of masculinity, manhood, and codes of conduct through the lives of men in his life. In some works, a rooster (*gallo*) becomes a metaphor and symbol for manhood, valor, machismo, and patriarchy. As Alejandro interprets it, the aim of this beautiful, regal (albeit common) creature is to convince an opponent of its wisdom and prescience. Yet it is a fierce animal, possessing the primal instinct to fight until its enemy is dispatched. Similarly, men can embody this quality, this sense of cunning, this unique nature, according to the artist. This makes the rooster an ideal subject of inquiry.

Growing up in the rural Santa Maria Valley, near the town of Guadalupe, California, **Guerra** became accustomed to the expressions of pride and family tradition that were exhibited through farming expertise. Wearied, however, by the patriarchal nature of both Mexican and American cultures in the Central Coast, Guerra sought out alternative means to express his creativity by studying printmaking, bookbinding, and papermaking. Drawn to notions of ancestral knowledge, experiences, and sacrifice, Guerra has turned his attention to explorations of sanctuary—those safe places that serve our wellbeing. Reflecting upon his multifaceted identity, in his relief prints, he references decorative motifs and symbology from architecture and ornament that connect the Moorish occupation of the Iberian Peninsula to the Spanish conquest of the New World, and ultimately with contemporary Mexican American culture.

Prior to *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965-1985* (CARA), Latinx art surveys typically presented works produced in Spanish-speaking nations spanning the Americas and Caribbean, leveling out the differences that make each site distinct. With the 1990 exhibition at the Wight Gallery at UCLA, agency for its artistic themes emerged through a process of self-definition that coincided with the objectives of the broader Chicano movement. The show's curators collaborated closely with the CARA National Advisory Committee to ensure that the art and its cultural context were not neutralized by presentation in mainstream museums and galleries across the country. Speaking about this history-making traveling exhibition, Chicano historian Margarita Nieto, observed then that Chicano art was not different from "so-called" mainstream art, but that it had a "bite to it" and vitality that came from the confrontation of "living on the edge."

Although Chicano gave way to other terms of self-definition in the 1990s and 2000s, use of the word Xicano is having a renaissance now, in this time when a young and enlarging Latinx population is grappling with issues of immigration, gentrification, and identity in the United States. The change in spelling to Xicana/o reflects a commitment within the movement to honor the intersectional nature of identity, in recognition of differences in class, race, gender and sexual orientation. Sustenance is found in the celebration of *Mexicanidad* and indigeneity. Moreover, Xicanismo is inclusive, welcoming recent immigrants from Mexico, as well as those from other nations in Central and South America. Likewise, no longer a niche mode of expression, Xicano art expands and flexes to address current cultural circumstances.

This shift, from Chicano to Xicano, plays out in the artwork of Alejandro and Guerra. One subtext of *Raised as roosters* is the acknowledgment by the artists of the continuing call to resistance in the movement. They also recognize their "in-between" status—as put by Alejandro, even today each is perceived to be "too 'white' to be Mexican and too 'brown' to be American." Both feel as well that since the iconography of Xicanismo has been introduced and absorbed into the mainstream of California culture, it is time for the visual vocabulary and narratives to be expanded.

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