

chocolate syrup into repulsive concoctions; beating and raping; or clandestinely urinating in someone's soup.

Exploring the full range of the human condition is not a bad thing; it is art's highest function. Like the late Viennese Actionist Hermann Nitsch, who sought catharsis through blood-and-guts spectacle,⁴ McCarthy momentarily sheds the repression of the so-called "degenerate" impulses in his performances, creating a safe space to enjoy and examine unique proclivities. (He's described this as "venting."⁵) An important distinction between McCarthy and Nitsch's work, however, is that while Nitsch's primary concern was his audience's experience, McCarthy has said that he is "not trying to satisfy an audience," but that his "responsibility is to the ideas."⁶ At the heart of McCarthy's practice is the exploration of power—not just through the powerful figures he portrays, but the power instilled in an artist who has accumulated great wealth and esteem for inserting his penis where it's not wanted. With the art world's blessing, McCarthy occupies an insulated space of great privilege, where the American Dream seems to be alive and well, and fascism is not a real threat, but a kink. From the outside looking in, this space looks like great fun: its occupants freely go where society says not to, regardless of how many of us might say, "please don't."

1. For McCarthy, the "A&E" also alludes to Adam and Eve & Arts and Entertainment.

2. Lisa Phillips, "Introduction," *Paul McCarthy* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, Ostfildern-Ruit, and Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2000).

3. Hauser & Wirth, "Paul McCarthy A&E Drawings A&E Drawing Session 2021 With Lilith Stangenberg," press release, 2022, <https://vip-hauserwirth.com/gallery-exhibitions/paul-mccarthy-ae-drawingsae-drawing-session-2021with-lilith-stangenberg/>.

4. Hermann Nitsch, "Herman Nitsch talks about his work at Massimo De Carlo in London," interview with Alex Jovanovich, *Artforum*, May 15, 2018, <https://www.artforum.com/interviews/hermann-nitsch-talks-about-his-work-at-massimo-de-carlo-in-london-75363>.

5. Kristine Stiles, "INTERVIEW: Paul McCarthy: 'My work refers to my private, forgotten or repressed memories. I recognize them as existing, but I am not sure how they relate to me. Are they specifically my trauma, or someone else's?'" *ARTSPACE*, August 6, 2020, https://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/qa/interview-paul-mccarthy-my-work-refers-to-my-private-forgotten-or-repressed-memories-i-56624.

6. "Paul McCarthy in 'Transformation,'" Art21 video, 18:06, October 21, 2009, <https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s5/paul-mccarthy-in-transformation-segment>.

L.A. Memo: Chicana/o Art from 1972–1989 at LA Plaza de Cultura y Artes

March 18–
August 14, 2022

Images can be sites of resistance. I was reminded of this at a recent visit to LA Plaza de Cultura y Artes, where the group exhibition, *L.A. Memo: Chicana/o Art from 1972–1989*, brought together 31 artists who sought to subvert and critique the expanding media culture of the '60s and express cultural pride. The works were primarily drawn from the collection of community healthcare provider AltaMed, which concentrates its holdings on Chicana/o artists,¹ resulting in a slightly hemmed-in vision. Since the exhibition

drew from a corporate collection, some of the more experimental, conceptual, and collaborative practices of the era—for instance, the photographs of Laura Aguilar, Kathy Vargas, and Ricardo Valverde; the genre-defying paintings of Yolanda López, René Yañez, and Charles "Chaz" Bojorquez; or the pioneering performance and installation work of artists like Edmundo "Mundo" Meza—were notably absent, ultimately offering a somewhat neater and teleological story of Chicana/o resistance. Despite its circumscribed focus, *L.A. Memo* highlighted the impact that these artists have had on the city and its art discourse, and, in turn, the impressions the city left on them.

The works in the exhibition were loosely grouped into two categories: media critique and Chicana/o identity. In the first gallery, artists took aim at mainstream media, commenting on the lack of cultural representation in advertising and Hollywood. In *Pillow Talk* (1979–80), Patssi Valdez imagined the female Latinx icons she yearned for, but wasn't seeing in the glossy magazines of the time, by inserting her friend Betty Salas into a fashion spread pastiche. Wearing a strapless, skintight bodysuit, long gloves, and heart-shaped sunglasses, Salas lounges nonchalantly on plush yellow cushions. Other works address a Hollywood interpretation of Los Angeles: Teddy Sandoval's mixed-media works explore the physical ideals perpetuated by the film industry; Joey Terrill's paintings reimagine storyboard music titles as queer love narratives; and in Linda Vallejo's video *Take a Bite*



Roberto Gutierrez, *Madness in Vietnam* (1987).
Image courtesy of the artist and
LA Plaza de Cultura y Artes.

(1977–2017), the artist hijacks Warhol-esque screentests in a melee of color and gestural markings.

AltaMed Curatorial Assistant Rafael Barrientos Martínez, who guest curated the show, focused the exhibition on the years following the 1970 National Chicano Moratorium, a demonstration led by Chicax activists in protest of the disproportionately high number of Latinx individuals who were sent to fight, and ultimately die, in the Vietnam War.² While the Chicax community was fighting for civil rights and representation, their stories remained absent from mainstream media; *L.A. Memo*'s first gallery succinctly, albeit safely, articulated both the explosion of activism and its subsequent silencing. Harry Gamboa Jr.'s photograph *Iris Crisis* (1982) depicts his body obliterated by pieces of white tape. In the image, he is a blank canvas, his identity invisible. Only one work in this gallery directly addressed the war: Roberto Gutierrez's *Madness in Vietnam* (1987), a haunting oil pastel self-portrait. The artist's eyes are wide, his brow is furrowed, and his hair stands on end. Staring out from behind a metal window, he appears to scream and gasp for breath, invoking the grim reality of PTSD suffered by many individuals in Gutierrez's community. The drawing is one of the few in the exhibition that is not part of the AltaMed Art Collection, which, given how few works in the show, at least on the surface, grapple with overtly controversial issues, I can only speculate is due to its scope and objective. The Chicano Moratorium

provided a curatorial framework for the exhibition, yet, in artwork form, references to the Vietnam War were scant.

The second gallery moved away from media critique to explore a sense of place. Many artists explored ideas of indigenismo, a belief that counters the dominance of colonial influence, by making work that honors their Indigenous cultural heritage and a connection to the land. A notable shift from the first gallery, these works looked at how the Chicax community developed personal and collective identity within their relationships to visual traditions from what are today the American Southwest and Northern Mexico. Carlos Almaraz's *L.A. Memo* (1980), from which the exhibition took its title, fuses an exported ideology of Los Angeles—palm trees, sunshine, and glamor—with his experiences as a Chicax man. Swirling together in a jumble of oil pastels, Almaraz's scene suggests that these parallel identities are not mutually exclusive, but equally important aspects of his personhood. Nearby, Arturo Urista's *Welcome to Aztlan* (1987) laid out a map of the original homeland in Aztec migration stories—a place where the regions that now sit on either side of the U.S./Mexico border were not separated by arbitrary demarcations and where inhabitants could travel freely. The themes of this gallery felt in contrast to those of the first, revering and reaching toward the land, while looking back on cultural histories, rather than using contemporary culture as a framework. The different camps are an

affecting combination across the show, and work to explicate the variety of approaches adopted by Chicax artists of the time. This tension was well articulated by Randy Kennedy in 2011, who wrote that for Gamboa, “the best way to exercise artistic freedom and express solidarity with the Mexican-American cause was, paradoxically, to run screaming from most Mexican-American art.”³ A founding member of the influential Chicax performance collective Asco, Gamboa and his peers wanted to distinguish themselves from the stereotypes imposed by mainstream culture. Meanwhile, others, like Lujan and Urista, embraced cultural iconography as a pathway toward inclusion.

While *L.A. Memo* attempted to flesh out these histories, it was at times limited by the curatorial constraint of its provenance—the AltaMed Art Collection. Collection shows will always be affected by an institution's overarching aims and themes: As part of their holistic approach to healthcare, AltaMed places art throughout their service sites. These are usually clinical spaces that are open to the public and in which the artworks are not closely attended, so, understandably, practicality would influence the works collected—often meaning that they are domestically scaled, on paper, and under glass. Inevitably, curating from a collection leads to a partisan approach, and the ambitions of *L.A. Memo* felt limited by the practical concerns of the collection. Nevertheless, the exhibition produced a welcome

presentation of the core ideas and ideologies most urgent to Chicana artists in this specific era of L.A.'s history, a time marked by a multifaceted and complex vision of what it meant to be Chicana.

1. Teena Apeles, "AltaMed Enriches the Lives of Its Patients through Art," *KCET*, November 5, 2018, <https://www.kcet.org/shows/artbound/altamed-enriches-the-lives-of-its-patients-through-art>.

2. Louis Sahagun, "How an East L.A. protest gave voice to the Chicago movement," *The Los Angeles Times*, August 23, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/projects/chicano-moratorium/east-la-protest-gave-voice-chicano-movement/>.

3. Randy Kennedy, "Chicano Pioneers," *New York Times*, August 25, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/28/arts/design/works-by-asco-at-the-los-angeles-museum.html>.

(L.A. in Venice, Italy) Kelly Akashi at Barbati Gallery April 20–August 14, 2022

Last spring, Los Angeles-based artist Kelly Akashi traveled to Venice, Italy, and its neighboring island Murano to produce a new body of work for *Life Forms*, the inaugural summer exhibition at Barbati Gallery. Situated inside the Palazzo Lezze, the space offered a cooling refuge in the heart of the baking Campo Santo Stefano. Murano is renowned for its innovative role in the history of European glass-making, and Akashi worked with the local glassblowing community to produce some of the handblown glass sculptures included in her exhibition. The sinuous, meandering forms of these sculptures take advantage of glass's ability to molt, curl, and mimic the natural

world, particularly the vibrant biodiversity of its flora.

Akashi's sculptures place human beings within the context of these nonhuman agents, implying a cohabiting and leveling of lifeforms—in the artist's work, hands and figures coexist with plant-inspired iconography, coalescing into a system of support and interdependence. This notion is paralleled by her partnerships with local artisans—within a community of glassblowers in which knowledge-sharing is a tenet, teamwork is indispensable, and collaboration is intrinsic. By following the medium of glass to one of its historic epicenters, Akashi's show works to undermine the idea of "mastery," instead embracing humility and curiosity by seeking ongoing nourishment from process, material, and community.

Modeled after the Palazzo's floor, the slab of terrazzo included in *Floret* (all works 2022) aptly modeled Akashi's collaborative prowess. The hefty, elevated slab became a table that supported five handblown glass objects produced with the aid of master glassblower Matteo Tagliapietra. They incorporated techniques that are traditional to Murano glassblowing, such as murine and merletto, to create unique patterns based on plant cell specimens. In a nod to Venice's famed boating culture and canal-lined architecture, local boating rope tethered these spherical "florets" together into a cross-pollinated ecosystem of forms.

On the dimly-lit first floor, Akashi literally draped the human form with florals. The Palazzo's foyer was flanked

on either side by wall-mounted bronze casts of the artist's hands—a motif she returns to frequently across her oeuvre—holding shapely glass bulbs like floating offerings (*Life Forms*). At the center of the space, a relief of a human body was draped in knit bronze, like a bespoke weighted blanket. Titled *Heirloom*, the bronze blanket was constructed from an intricate and layered process: Akashi cast the blanket using hand-crocheted flowers and "knit" the form together through meticulous welding. The piece recalls Ana Mendieta's *Siluetas* (1973–80), a series of earthworks in which the artist imprinted her body into various natural landscapes, their hollow silhouettes sometimes filled with fire, water, or flowers. In *Heirloom*, the human form is inseparable from its floral shroud—the bronze flowers contour the body, whose defining human characteristics are hidden from view.

On the gallery's upper level, sparse scenes throughout each of the light-filled rooms further imagined human connections to the nonhuman world while also engaging in collaborations with the built environment. Tucked into a shelf in a small room was *April 2022 - Scarpa Graveyard; Murano (Matteo); Buona Pasqua Giudecca; Pearl*, a bronze cast of the artist's hand delicately holding materials culled from various areas in Venice: a cloth leaf, a green and black glass flower, a single white pearl, and pieces of rocks and broken-off edifices laid atop one another like geological strata. The bronze hand functions as a vessel for items gleaned