

ASCO ELITE OF THE OBSCURE

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LACMA

by annie buckley

LOS ANGELES In the early 1970s, as the Chicano Movement intensified, four graduates from Garfield High School in the Mexican-American neighborhood of East Los Angeles—Harry Gamboa, Jr., Willie F. Herrón III, Glugio Nicandro (known by his middle name, Gronk) and Patssi Valdez—started making art together. Their elaborate drawings fusing Mexican-American motifs and psychedelic fervor were published in the political and cultural journal *Regeneración*, and they began to collaborate on equally fantastical and makeshift public performances. Soon the foursome emerged as an artists' collaborative extraordinaire, taking on institutional authority, economic inequity, Hollywood, community violence and other subjects with equal parts candor and glamour. They created a wildly innovative and sophisticated body of work, eventually assuming the name Asco (disgust or nausea in Spanish), after responses to their early, radical performances. "Asco: Elite of the Obscure," organized by C. Ondine Chavoya, associate professor of art at Williams College, and Rita Gonzalez, associate curator of contemporary art at L.A. County Museum of Art, was the first retrospective of the collaborative's work. The show was as expansive, intelligent and intensely researched as the complex artists at its heart deserve.

The chronological exhibition began with photographs from Asco's first performance, *Stations of the Cross* (1971). Dressed in priests' robelike garments with their heads painted as *calaveras* (skulls), the artists carried a 15-foot cross made of painted cardboard along Whittier Boulevard in East L.A. and laid it in front of the neighborhood Marine Corps recruiting center. There, they observed five minutes of silence in homage to soldiers killed in Vietnam, of whom a disproportionate number were Mexican-American. The only remaining evidence of the event is a series—on view in the show—of black-and-white photographs taken by Seymour Rosen, founder of Saving and Preserving Arts and Cultural Environments (SPACES). Drawing on Mexican Catholic rituals and the tradition of public processions, this early performance-memorial established hallmarks that stayed consistent throughout Asco's wide-ranging work: the simultaneous humor and seriousness, the costumes pieced together from what was on hand, the drama and the bravado, and perhaps most important, the layering of social, political, cultural and personal agendas into one exuberant and idiosyncratic event.

From here, the show explored creativity and critique through paintings, drawings, mail art, videos and costumes as well as numerous photographs—that double as documentation and art—of events, interventions, graffiti and performances. During Asco's 15 years of activity, the group made work that boisterously defies categories such as public and private, concrete and conceptual, art and life, and blurs not only implicit boundaries among mediums but also finer distinctions between, for instance, a performance and its residue. For their exceptional series "No Movies" (1972-78), which they envisioned as a new form of cinema, Asco painted their faces, donned handmade costumes and enacted cinematic narratives that invoke science fiction, B movies and Surrealism. Photographs of the scenarios were widely distributed to movie houses around the U.S., serving as "stills" of otherwise nonexistent films.

Other photographs document numerous public actions that interrogate such subjects as Chicano identity, gang warfare and the institutionalization of muralism. One of these actions, *Spray Paint LACMA (or Project Pie in De/Face)*, 1972, was inspired by a visit to LACMA during which Gamboa was disheartened by the replies of a curator he queried about the lack of Chicano art in the collection. In response, the artist, along with Gronk and Herrón, created one of Asco's many street-art projects, claiming the

resultant tag of their names on LACMA's exterior wall to be the museum's first Chicano Conceptual art piece.

Vibrant, phantasmagorical and incisive, Asco's work is fittingly summed up by Gamboa with the phrase "*el camino surreal*" (the surreal road/path), a play on the historic El Camino Real highway traversing Spanish colonial California. As Chavoya and Gonzalez write in the catalogue, "Asco's performances and the staged scenarios captured in their images convey the elevated reality, or surreality, of living during a moment of political upheaval, rampant police brutality, and the daily need to be in survival mode."

Photos: (left) Asco: A La Mode, 1976, black-and-white photograph by Harry Gamboa, Jr., 11 by 14 inches. (right) Seymour Rosen: Asco's Stations of the Cross, 1971, gelatin silver print, 18 by 24 inches. Both at LACMA.

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