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A collage by Gronk from "Asco: Elite of the Obscure, a Retrospective, 1972 -- 1987" at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

By RANDY KENNEDY Published: August 25, 2011

LOS ANGELES

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LATE one December night in 1972, three members of an art collective here clambered out of a battered green Volkswagen bug and spray-painted their names — "Herrón, Gamboa, Gronkie" — on a footbridge of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, appropriating the entire museum as their own work of art simply by signing it.

The next morning Harry Gamboa Jr. returned with the fourth member of the group, Patssi Valdez, and immortalized the act with a glam shot of her posing in tight pants and a red top near the signatures, looking away coolly and seductively like Anna Karina in a Godard movie.

The stunt by the collective known as Asco exhibited all the hallmarks of the group's outrageous style: angry, illicit, deftly and economically conceptual, and shot through with the high camp of Hollywood, whose sign they could see in the distance from the streets of East Los Angeles. The act

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was also pretty much noticed by no one except the four members themselves, who were always their own best audience. The paint was whitewashed before day's end; the Los Angeles art world went on its way, paying little attention to a group of artists whose street performances and other unclassifiable productions were as compelling as practically anything bubbling up out of the urban dereliction of SoHo or other parts of Los Angeles during those years.

Almost four decades later, the same museum the collective defaced because its doors weren't open to artists of their kind — Mexican-American, working class and poor, highly irreverent and politicized — is not just finally welcoming them inside but rolling out a red carpet for the occasion.

“Asco: Elite of the Obscure, a Retrospective, 1972-1987,” the first survey of the group's work, opens Sept. 4 as one of the Los Angeles County Museum's main offerings for the sprawling Pacific Standard Time event, more than 60 collaborative shows opening throughout Southern California in the late summer and fall to tell the story of postwar Los Angeles art.

Amanda Friedman for The New York Times
Clockwise from top left, Harry Gamboa Jr., Willie Herrón, Patssi Valdez, Gronk.

The Asco exhibition — organized with the Williams College Museum of Art in Williamstown, Mass. — has been almost a decade in the making. And its goal is nothing less than to rewrite part of that story and the broader history of urban art in the 1970s to give the collective its rightful place among the pioneers of its era. “It's a show that's phenomenally overdue,” said C. Ondine Chavoya, an associate professor of art at Williams College and one of the exhibition's curators. “I felt it was overdue at the very moment I learned about Asco's work many years ago. And now coming as it does as part of Pacific Standard Time means that it's not going to be isolated or singular. It's going to tie them in, finally, to a much larger history.”

The show is only one of several Pacific Standard Time shows delving into the history of Chicano art in the 1960s and '70s, whose attitude and look seeped into mainstream art in ways only now being recognized. But the story of Asco lies even deeper, one of a subculture within a subculture, a group of artists fueled not just by their marginal existence within their city and country but by their alienation from the Chicano art movement as well.

The members were, as Mr. Gamboa has described it, “self-imposed exiles” who felt 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 at the time, or at least from its political strictures and the stereotypes imposed on it by mainstream culture.

Asco's method was a kind of bombastic excess and elegant elusiveness that would have made Tristan Tzara proud, not to mention Cantinflas and Liberace. The Los Angeles Times art critic Christopher Knight wrote that the group “brought Zurich Dada of the late-1910s to 1970s Los Angeles.” But it was a distinctly Chicano brand of Dada, by way of David Bowie and Frank Zappa, drag and Pachuco culture, telenovelas and oddball UHF television stations, and New Wave and silent movies.

“Part of the art was just the idea that you would try to draw attention to yourself the way we did at a time when everyone around us was existing in despair,” Mr. Gamboa said in a recent interview, speaking of the guerrilla escapades of the group, whose members went their separate ways in 1987 and now barely speak to one another as the spotlight has reunited them.

In a 1997 interview with the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art, one of the group's founders, the artist who calls himself Gronk (though at times also Groak and Grunk) described the collective as “just a rumor to a lot of people for the longest time” and “sort of thought of as drug addicts, perverts.”

“All kinds of names were hurled at us by other Chicano artists,” he said.

The collective's chosen name, Asco, set the outré tone — it means disgust or nausea in Spanish and also evokes a sinister corporation or a mockery of the acronyms of the social-service organizations then proliferating in poor neighborhoods as a legacy of President

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Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society. But the foursome's unpredictable street theater and prodigious image-making beginning in the early '70s — fake publicity shots and film stills, Super-8 movies, mail-art fliers — made clear that they were not simply trying to express their disgust with racism, police harassment and the Vietnam War but also using revulsion as a raw material and spreading a fair amount of it around.

Their first performance, "Stations of the Cross," staged during the Christmas holidays in 1972 before the group had gelled or chosen its name, involved Mr. Gamboa, Gronk and Willie Herrón, another of the group's founders, mocking both Mexican Catholic holiday traditions and the look of classic Mexican murals. The three dressed up as macabre pilgrims and unsettled shoppers along Whittier Boulevard, East Los Angeles's central artery, trudging along with a huge cross made from cardboard, which they eventually dumped in front of a Marine Corps recruiting station; then they ran away.

Several years before Cindy Sherman started photographing herself as the protagonist in nonexistent movies to strip-mine the mechanisms of America's image-making, Asco began an extensive body of work called "No Movies," in which the members dressed up and photographed wildly cinematic scenes — one of the funniest and most memorable was called "The Gores," a sort of Mansonesque horror movie inspired by pop singer Leslie Gore — late at night on the Los Angeles streets. The images from these never-to-be movies were then mailed out widely like publicity materials, a project that, as the film scholar David E. James notes in the show's catalog, articulated deeply "both the affection and the anger, the desire and the hatred" the collective's members had for the movies, in which people who looked like them were almost never seen.

Asco's founders, now all in their late 50s, met at Garfield High School in East Los Angeles, which also produced the members of the band Los Lobos and became known later for the work of the teacher Jaime Escalante, of "Stand and Deliver" fame.

While Gronk was Asco's only gay member, an androgynous sensibility pervaded the group — in its photographs, its performances and particularly its look, with lots of shaved eyebrows and Theda Bara makeup.

In many of their no-budget, experimental antics, the group's chief worry was almost never the conventional one for artists — Will anyone pay attention to us? — but whether the attention they got would get them arrested or attacked or worse.

"I always felt like a bullfighter in many ways," Mr. Gamboa said in a recent interview over lunch with Mr. Herrón at the Los Angeles County Museum, only a hundred yards from the spot where they once spray-painted their names. "The art was to walk away unscathed but to have touched the danger."

And the danger was often very real. In one of the group's pieces, "Decoy Gang War Victim," from 1974, Asco members went at night to neighborhoods marred by gang violence and created fake crime scenes, in which Gronk would play a young corpse on the pavement, surrounded by police flares. The scene would be photographed and the pictures would be sent to newspapers and television stations, as a way to sow confusion both in the news media — which Asco saw as inciting and perpetuating gang violence — and maybe even among the gangs themselves, to prevent more violence.

The performance recalls one from 1972 by a fellow Angeleno and recent M.F.A. graduate, Chris Burden, "Deadman," in which he placed himself under a tarp surrounded by flares on a busy city street, where cars swerved to avoid him.

Asco's ideas sprang less from the kind of Conceptual explorations of performance and body art then pouring out of graduate art programs and more from their experience on the streets transformed by media-saturated urban savvy, what Gronk called an "aesthetics of poverty."

But the methods and results were often strikingly similar to those of more established artists.

"What we've been up against is the idea, I think, that these are just regional artists or that they mattered only within the context of a certain time in L.A.," said Rita Gonzalez, the show's curator along with Mr. Chavoya. "They never achieved the market success of a lot of their peers or the esteem within academia."

Part of this article, of course, growing out of a deep ambivalence about the establishment's embrace. The group's founders have since gone on to individual careers — Ms. Valdez is a painter; Mr. Gamboa teaches at the California Institute of the Arts and remains an active artist; Mr. Herrón is a painter and founder of the punk band Los Illegals; Gronk is a successful artist and stage designer, collaborating most recently with Peter Sellars.

But all, to varying degrees, have sought success only on their own terms. As Mr. Gamboa once told a Smithsonian interviewer, with wonderful Seinfeldian skepticism: "I look at that carrot and it looks a little spoiled to me. I'm not exactly allergic to carrots, but the way it's dangling — it just — it doesn't look right. It should be at least on a plate."

Even now that the Los Angeles County Museum is delivering the carrot on what is arguably a pretty nice plate — a show of photographs, films and artworks that will take up half a floor of the Broad Contemporary wing, accompanied by a hefty catalog — not all are so sure they're happy. "The big surprise of the show is that we're all going to be in it, too, stuffed," said Mr. Herrón, who wears a safety-pin earring and a pair of jet-black shades that never leave his face.

Like many struggling young bands that basically grew up together, Asco — which expanded in the 1980s to include a large number of new members and collaborators — eventually imploded, the result of longstanding rivalries and grudges among its founders, which linger today.

"We all defied Newton," Mr. Gamboa said by way of explanation. "For every action, there was a completely disproportionate reaction."

But the end result was not exactly a surprise for a group that usually operated at white-hot intensity, he said, adding that he had no idea whether the retrospective would ultimately result in the recognition he and his former collaborators deserved or whether, true to Asco's nature, the collective would always be more a legend than a fact.

"Who knows?" he said. "That's the way L.A. is, too. It's a desert with mirages. A thing happens and then, poof, it's gone."

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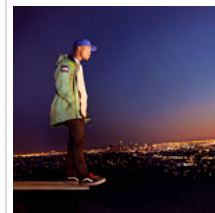
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