

Chicana Art: The Politics of Spiritual and Aesthetic Altarities.* Laura E. Pérez. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007. 408 pp.

Reviewed by Rachel V. Gonzalez

Laura E. Pérez's *Chicana Art: The Politics of Spiritual and Aesthetic Altarities* is a critical reading of culturally and spiritually motivated art and its recontextualization in the public sphere. Pérez focuses on the presence of *the spiritual*, an "interconnectedness of all beings, human and non human" (p. 18) in the works of politically conscious contemporary Chicana feminist artists. Within Chicana art theory, the spiritual is invoked alongside *the political* and *the aesthetic* as a tool for rearticulating a cultural, social, and political self. Pérez's work builds dialectics across artistic genres, creating a composite reimagining of the way in which Chicana feminist artists are destabilizing institutional assumptions of artistry, social power, and the nature of the spiritual through a language of visual art in context.

Pérez gives form to the s/Spirit by creating a work guided by "ancient but relevant alternative knowledges" (p. 27). Motivated by Mesoamerican, American Indian, African diasporic, and feminist treatments of the religious and the spiritual, *Chicana Art* is a culturally and spiritually involved offering to the academic community meant to educate and elevate through a call to engagement, proximity, and change. Drawing on the Nahuatl literary trope of *diphrasms* (p. 14), Pérez bridges an intellectual and linguistic gap between western and non-western canons of art and meaning making by focusing on the way her collaborators honor *the partial*, *the fragmented*, and *the unseen*—here visual reality meets social reality.

Surveying the works of over forty different artists across media such as painting, printmaking, sculpture, photography, film, video, installation-art, altars, and literary works, Pérez illuminates how notions of "non-institutional spiritualities" (p. 2) have informed the work of Chicana artists since the rise of the Chicano movement of the 1960s. Inspired by artistic and political movements across Latin America, Pérez creates a rhetorical space to discuss the ways in which Chicana artists are reinterpreting iconic religious symbols of Mexican America, especially those traditionally used to socially and sexually dominate women of color in order to re-contextualize them as symbols of empowerment.

Pérez explicates how each piece that strives to invoke a spiritual way of knowing and understanding fundamentally destabilizes assumptions about Chicana culture as a whole. In questioning cultural icons, these artists question themselves, reinterpreting and changing in the process of personalization and localization that blossom in the context of the public museum. This process of reimagining lends visibility and credulity to what many consider, as Pérez notes "suspect" [systems of] knowledge, "the cultural differences of the non-western, the female, the queer and the poor" (p. 6). This text is a metadiscourse on the history of Chicana resistance, where modes of resistance take on public characteristics with private meaning, undervalued domestic culture refunctionalized and reinscribed in the public realm as aesthetically invested.

* This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA.

“Aesthetic,” as a politicized term is refigured to extend beyond Euro-American constructions to encompass context specific notions of art and design (p. 7). Through *Chicana Art* Pérez elucidates how individual artists with common cultural histories mobilize and make material their spiritual realities through their artistic media, while refiguring definitions of contemporary art, and bring a personally engaged spiritual consciousness into the institutional contexts of museum exhibitions. Pérez offers readers a glimpse of works that contemplate the social and cultural bodies traditionally concealed, now revealed in museums, offering them a public life, reinterpretation, rebirth.

Moving and unapologetic, Pérez’s work concentrates on the art of Chicanas who straddle the creative borderlands between the tangible and not fully figured. Spiritually conscious art making is rooted in the politicization of religion. It is at its core a reclamation of space, and resistance to the social and “territorial dispossession and dislocation” of Mexican American experiences in the United States (p. 147). Chicana artists mobilize cultural symbols, such as the ubiquitous *Virgen de Guadalupe*, to invoke *the spirit* in their work as a means of transformation and healing, in the process of both creation and reception. Across media, these artists infuse their work with a kind of “do-it-yourself spirituality” (p. 2) that emerges as a response to a cultural legacy of social indeterminacy and cultural fragmentation characteristic of hybrid Chicana culture (p. 21). *Chicana Art* seeks to bring to the fore conceptions of artists as Mexica (“Aztec”) *tlacuilo*, glyph makers, who go beyond contemporary Eurocentric cultural assumptions to reveal the artistic process as the reshuffling of vivid, co-present realities.

Self-ascribed Chicana artists, often condemned to the social and cultural periphery bring into institutional venues their lived reality, and do spiritual work. As artists cum *curanderas*, they wrestle with, refigure, and reformulate the views of the spiritual that empower them as individuals, while questioning the role of artists in society (pp. 21-22), in particular those present in the privileged spaces of the public museum.

Through examinations of Chicana artistry Pérez seeks to expand ideologies of *hybridity* and *mestizaje* by looking at the seams of cultural and spiritual contact, starting here with the mediated encounter that defines the contemporary museum experience. Beautifully written and dynamically personal, *Chicana Art* allows scholars an alternate reading of not only the role of artists in society, but also the way in which demographic shifts in contemporary museums are changing experiential expectations and the fundamental character of *the* museum in institutional culture.

Pérez ends with a call to action, asking critical scholars of art and culture to question how museums, as institutions of cultural heritage, choose whose heritage is displayed, prioritized, valorized. Involved art, in this case those infused with *the spiritual*, gives new shape to museums and museum culture rather than taking on the burden of institutional assumptions. In this light, this work of the visual may one day mark the museum as a place of self exploration, of intimate self awareness, a place to see the truth and beauty of the s/Spirit unfold before us.

Rachel V. Gonzalez is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology at Indiana University. Her research examines the role of young Latinas as narrators and artists

in elaborate coming-of-age celebrations known as quinceañeras. Her work focuses on contemporary Mexican American communities in California.