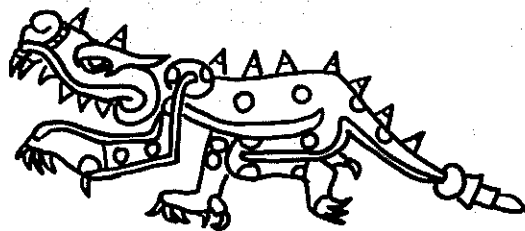


SIGNS FROM THE HEART:

California Chicano Murals



**Edited with an introduction by
Eva Sperling Cockcroft and Holly Barnet-Sánchez**

**Social and Public Art Resource Center, Venice, California
University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque**

© Social and Public Art Resource Center, 1990. University of New Mexico Press paperback edition published 1993 in association with Social and Public Art Resource Center. All rights reserved.

11 10 09 08 07 06 05 04

5 6 7 8 9 10

Book design by Cynthia Anderson and Christienne de Tournay

Funded in part by: Ahmanson Foundation, ARCO Foundation, California Community Foundation, California Council on the Humanities, McDonnell-Douglas, Lear Siegler Foundation, Pacific Bell Corporation, National Endowment for the Arts, Visual Arts, and University of California at Irvine, Fine Arts Department.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Signs from the heart: California Chicano murals / edited with an introduction by Eva Sperling Cockcroft and Holly Barnet-Sánchez.

p. cm.

Originally published: Venice, Calif.: Social and Public Art Resource Center, 1990.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8263-1448-1

1. Street art—California. 2. Mural painting—20th century—California.

3. Mexican Americans—California—Politics and government—Pictorial works.

I. Cockcroft, Eva Sperling. II. Barnet-Sánchez, Holly. III. Social and Public Arts Resource Center (Venice, Los Angeles, Calif.)

ND2635.C2S56 1993

751.7'3'08968720794—dc20

93-17526

CIP



HUELGA

1965-70

Andy Zermeno, Taller Grafico of the United Farm Workers
photo offset poster

p. 55-67

**Tomás
Ybarra-Frausto**



**Arte
Chicano:
Images
of a
Community**

At significant junctures in our human development we ask and respond to fundamental questions concerning our self-identity, our history, and our future. The same questioning occurs within groups of people at particular moments in their historical

trajectory. For Mexican-descended people in the United States, the 1960s was such a period of introspection, analysis, and action. Multiple socio-political mobilizations brought forth issues of deep resonance within Mexican American communities throughout the country. Rural agrarian struggles, urban civil right confrontations, student activism and myriad other battles for self-determination and cultural reclamation coalesced into a collective national consciousness known as the "Chicano Movement." The repertoire of varied political responses reflected a heterogeneous community united by social positioning of class, race and ethnicity which cut across generational and regional lines.

Among the common denominators were the facts that most Chicanos belonged to the working class, that they maintained variants of a generalized Mexican culture, and that all had the experience of living in the United States. Also they were mainly a young population working and living throughout the country in the Northwest, Midwest and Southwest.

Inscribed within a social nexus of exploitation and disenfranchisement, Chicanos asserted their historical imperative as generators of culture rather than mere receptors of cultural expression from the dominant culture. Reclaiming their imagination, they proclaimed their self invention within an aesthetic project that linked visual artists, poets, musicians, and dancers to the various political fronts of *el movimiento*.

■ THE CHICANO AESTHETIC PROJECT

An initial task was to re-think representation, the role of the artist, and the social function of art. In opposition to the dominant culture, the Chicano had been conceived as the "other" and reduced to a system of ideological fictions in North American culture. Configurations of the "other" always included themes of backwardness, degeneracy, and inequality. As Chicano visual artists countered the external visions and commenced to create vital and positive visions of themselves and their environment they provide a challenge to orthodox, hierarchical culture by positioning a more democratic forum with open participation. Individuals could be both workers and artists. In fact, the visual artist was seen as a sort of cultural worker. Art was necessary but not privileged or special. Visual experience was thought to stimulate the viewer to fuller comprehension of the complex human environment and the social needs of people within it.

Remaining outside the official cultural apparatus, Chicano artists organized alternative circuits to create, disseminate, and market their artistic production. The interpretive community, those who decide what counted and had value as art were often the artists themselves. Going against the normative traditions of art as escape and commodity, a prevalent attitude towards Chicano art objects was that they should provide aesthetic pleasure and delight while also serving to educate and edify.

■ ALTERNATIVE FORMS AND SPACES

Unified by the shared intention of using art as part of the struggle to achieve new and more credible human values, Chicano artists by the mid-1970s had become producers of visual education. Murals, billboards, posters, easel paintings, and new forms of communal ceremonies all served to establish a code of visual signification that was meaningful, commonly understood, and collectively validated. Reflecting a multi-cultural reality, Chicano art amalgamated and united elements from both Mexican and Anglo American artistic traditions. This artistic syncretism corresponded to the historical *mestizaje* of the Chicano and provided artists a vast repository of subject matter and a wide repertoire of styles.

Beyond the formulation of aesthetic models, the artistic community began the arduous task of creating a viewing audience. Recognizing the "high art" system with its norms of privilege and exclusion would be intolerant to Chicano art, a non-art world centered network of support and information was established. Exhibitions were not to be mounted in museums or galleries but rather in community sites such as parks, storefronts or meeting halls. Art was integrated with political rallies, *barrio* social events, and community cultural celebrations where viewers were encouraged to interact with the art and artists. Exhibitions promptly became

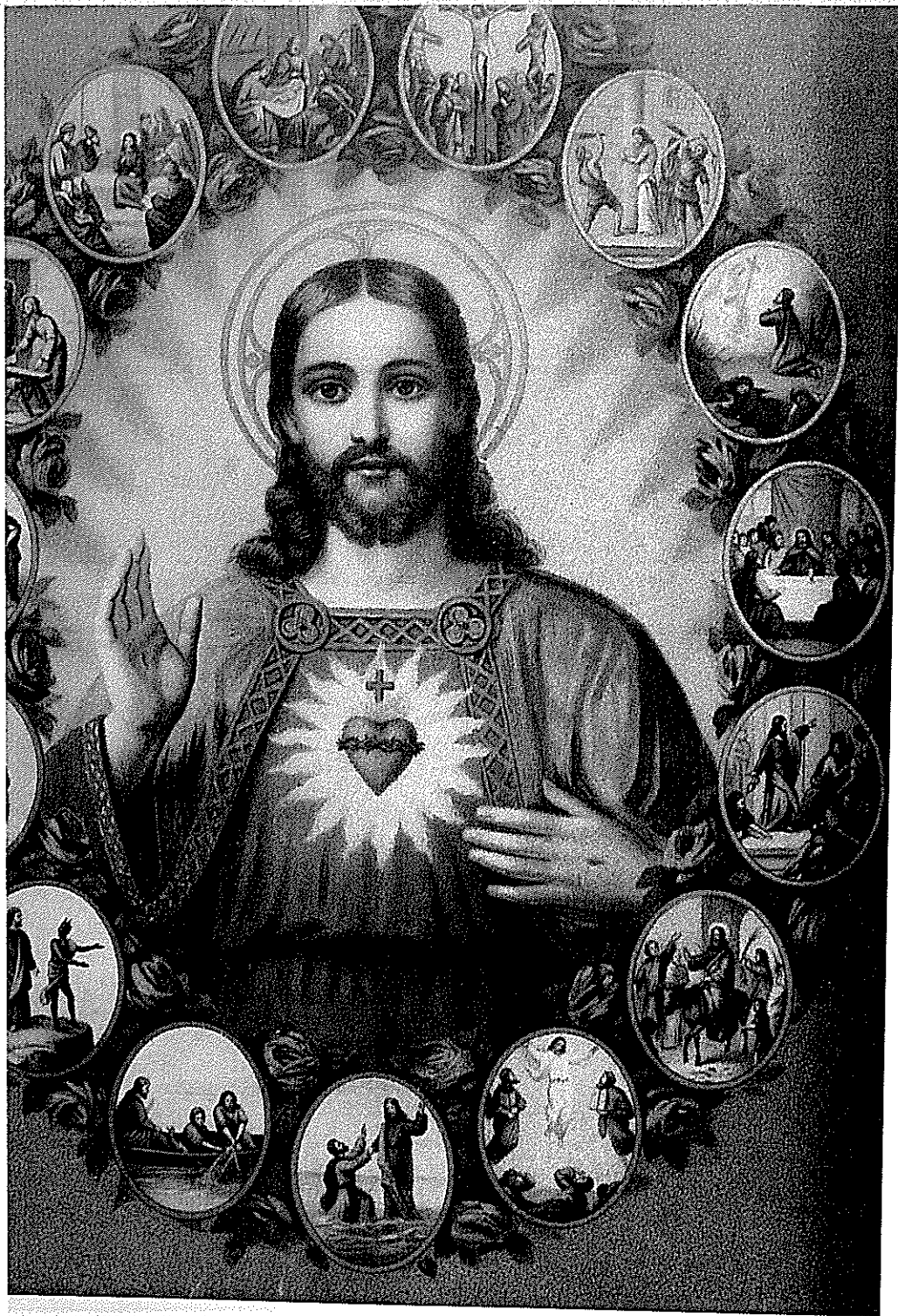
communal celebrations in comfortable environments where art was demystified and given an accessible ordinary dimension.

■ A NEW ART OF THE PEOPLE

Having codified the role of the artists as a visual educator, having structured an alternative art circuit for production and distribution, and steadily working to create an audience, the fundamental task was to elaborate *un nuevo arte del pueblo* (a new art of the people) created from shared experience and based on communal art traditions. Necessarily, a first step was to investigate, validate, and incorporate authentic expressive forms arising within the complex and multi-faceted Chicano community. In opposition to the hierarchical dominant culture with implicit distinctions for "fine" and "folk art", attempts were made to eradicate boundaries and integrate categories. An initial recognition was that everyday life and the lived environment were the prime constituent elements for the new aesthetic.



PUERTO ALEGRE BAR
1980s
Cordova
Mission District, San Francisco
approx. 10' x 25'
A *pulqueria*-type mural.



*SACRED HEART
OF JESUS*
20th century
Anonymous
Mexican lithograph
9" x 12"

Cultural practices of everyday life were seen as nutrient sources for Chicano art forms. As *barrio* customs, rituals, and traditions were investigated, they yielded boundless sources of imagery. Many communities have long supported Spanish language newspapers (like *La Opinion* in Los Angeles) in which artists have created a vigorous tradition of satirical caricature and illustration. These graphic traditions were now continued in the Chicano Movement press. Large scale outdoor painting (murals) in the exuberant style of Mexican *pulqueria* art often decorate *barrio* groceries, meat markets, restaurants, and bars. Created and signed by skilled commercial artists, such paintings can be nostalgic (an evocation of a Mexican village), humorous (a butcher shop with a frieze of little pigs dressed as chefs and cooking humans), historical (a restaurant with panels depicting heroes of the Mexican Revolution) or informational (a bar named "La Sirena" with a facade featuring cavorting mermaids, Neptune, sea nymphs and assorted sea creatures). Painted in brilliant color with simple compositional schemes and a direct rendering of forms, Chicano *pulqueria* type art is a colorful and charming ongoing tradition of art in public spaces; it is lively, witty, and often rhetorical. The historical panels from this tradition are especially significant in the development of Chicano murals. Opposed to the decorative *pulqueria* type art which is outdoors, the historical panels were painted indoors in restaurants or community meeting halls, places where families gathered. These panels were self-contained pictorial renderings of historical events such as the Battle of Puebla (in the 19th century) or the legend of Cuauhtemoc (an Aztec hero of the 16th century). Functioning as didactic tools, they served as visual reminders of the historical past.

Another pervasive form of popular art in the *barrio* is the yearly issued *almanaque* (chromo-lithographed calendar) given to customers by local merchants who commission them as promotional materials. Although created as advertisements to sell products, the *almanaque* traditionally excludes the product from the visual itself. Rather, the plates feature Mexican genre scenes such as evocations of *milpas* and *ranchitos* (agrarian landscapes), *charros* and their *senoritas*, indigenous myths, and the full pantheon of Mexican national heroes. The Virgen de Guadalupe is another preferred image in the *almanaques*. Often the calendar illustrations are saved from year to year and displayed in the household like contemporary posters.

Since the Catholic religion is a paramount influence in the lives of most Chicanos, it is natural that artists gain inspiration from religious imagery and practices. *Estampas* and *altares* have been a direct iconographic influence in the work of many Chicano artists. *Estampas* are chromo-lithographed religious images that are sold in *barrio* stores or dispensed by church groups. They are vividly embellished depictions of favored images such as El Sagrado Corazon de Jesus (the Sacred Heart of Jesus), El Santo Niño de Atocha (the Holy Child of Atocha), La



**WHERE HEROES
ARE BORN**

1983

Juan Orduñez

3881 No. Broadway

East Los Angeles

6' x 20'

Virgen de San Juan de Los Lagos (the Virgin of San Juan of the Lakes), and myriad others. Inexpensively or elaborately framed, such images stand in almost every room of Chicano homes. Each saint has an accompanying tale, and many young children are enthralled by the oral renditions of their ancient and heroic exploits. Indeed, the saints in the *estampas* are often regarded as cultural heroes. Having such an impact on the imagination, it is no wonder that *estampas* emerged as primary sources of Chicano imagery found in murals and other art forms.

In the ongoing assessment and re-interpretations of *barrio* culture, many artists focused on *altares* (home religious shrines) as expressive forms which typified the confluence of tradition and change. They are environmental pieces that project continuing cultural and spiritual statements. In their creative eclecticism, *altares* reflect particular concepts of beauty, orthodox religious and spiritual beliefs, and display treasured objects deriving from significant events and situations in the lives of their creators.

In Chicano homes, they served as part of daily life. Typical constituents might include crocheted doilies and embroidered cloths, family photographs, *recuerdos* (personal momentos such as flowers or favors saved from a dance or party), *santos* (religious chromos or statues) especially venerated by the family, and a melange of many other elements. The grouping of the various objects in a particular space — atop the television set, on a kitchen counter, atop a bedroom dresser, or in a specially constructed *nicho* (wall shelf) appear to be random, but usually respond to a conscious sensibility and aesthetic judgement of what things belong together and in what arrangement.

By the mid-1970s in the thrust to foment a *nuevo arte del pueblo*, Raza artists began the process of investigation and reintegration with vast resources of *barrio* popular art. One necessary cultural task was to demonstrate how the Chicano community had maintained and adopted elements from Mexican folk culture. *Almanaques*, *altares*, *estampas* and *pulqueria* type art were appropriated as examples of cultural continuity and adaptation. There was also a conscious effort to validate expressive forms specifically rooted in the American urban experience. The style, stance, and visual discourse of sub-cultures within the Chicano community were also acknowledged as generators of specific art forms. *Placas* (spray painted gang graffiti), *tatuajes* (India ink tattoos made with improvised needles), customizing of *ranflas* (low-rider cars), youth gang regalia, *pinto* (prison) art such as *panuelitos* (ballpoint or pen and ink decorated handkerchiefs), the self-presentation of *cholos* and countless other expressive forms evoke and embody a *barrio* sensibility — a sense of self worth that is defiant, proud, and rooted in resistance.

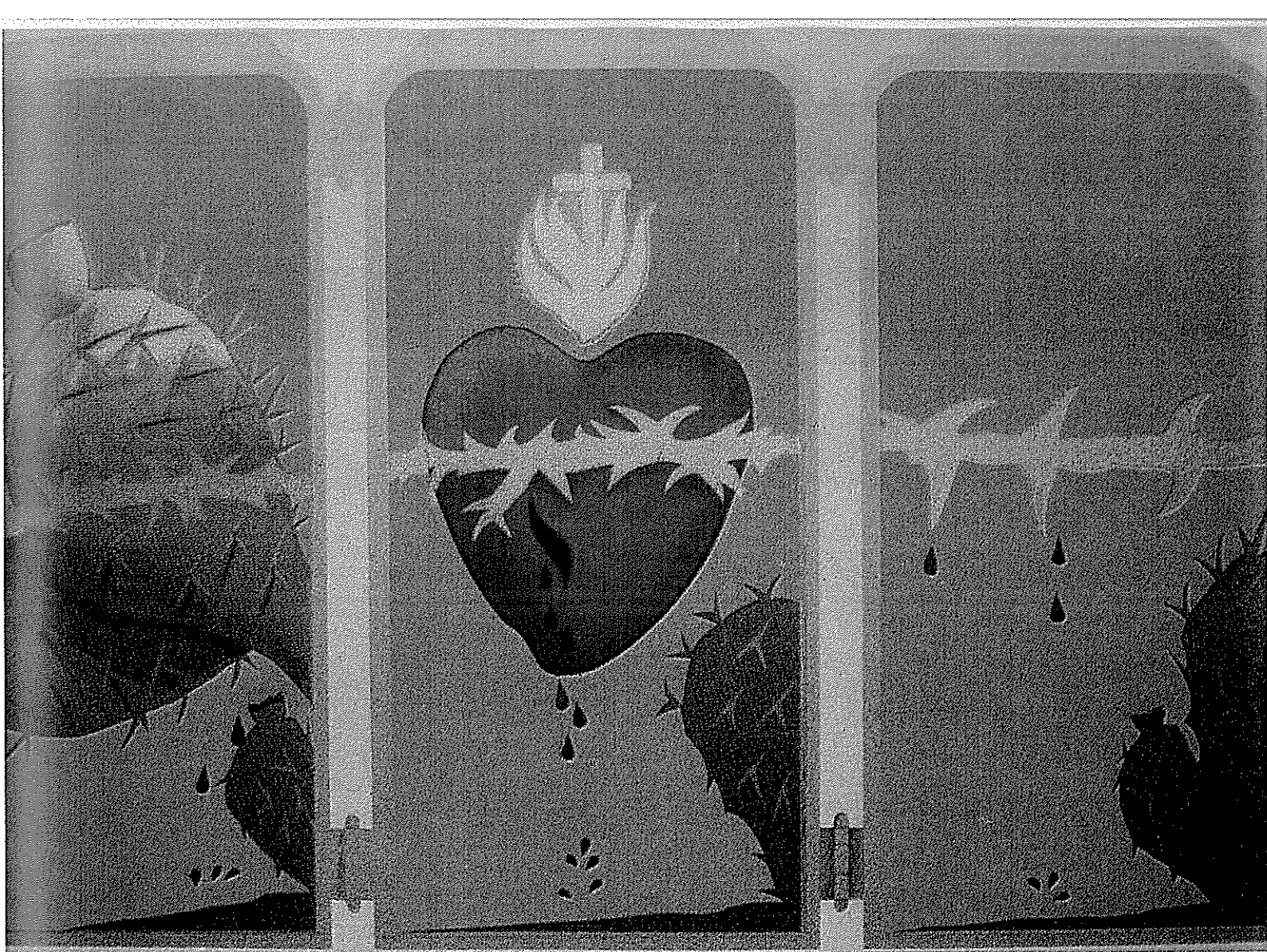
While learning and drawing inspiration from contemporary *barrio* expressions, Chicano artists also began the task of reclaiming artistic traditions rooted in ancestral heritage.

Sculptors especially found historical affinities in the *santero* and *penitente* art of the Southwest. The potent *santero* tradition has ebbed and flowed but continues as a vital contemporary idiom. *Santos* are sculpted or painted representations of Christian saints often anonymously created by self-taught or semi-professional artists. When carved in the round either in separate sections or in a single piece, the image is called a *bulto*; when painted on wooden panels, it is a *retablo*. *Santos* were ordinarily used in the home or in local churches as objects of veneration. Although functioning as religious icons, they were given human dimensions and integrated as art objects within the everyday life of the home. Chicano artists seeking to relate their work in a direct way with community concerns gained impetus from this historical antecedent of an art form developed and nourished directly within a social context.

The *Penitente* Brotherhood, a secular religious order, was another significant force in the formation of a durable artistic expression in the Southwest. *Penitente* art most often portrays Christ in his Passion through life-sized, realistic statues of the Ecce Homo (sorrowful Christ). Other typical *penitente* subjects are the skeleton or death *vanitas* figures representing the folly and transience of human life. Forceful examples are the *carretas de la muerte* (death carts) which contain powerful images of death affectionately known as Doña Sebastiana. The striking imagery and emotive power of *penitente* art had a profound impact on those Chicano artists forging an art which sought to communicate content with integrity.

In *penitente* art, careful attention to precise detail is secondary to the more significant "expressive" qualities often transmitted by distortion and exaggeration. Vigorous coloration, crude texture, and rhetorically simplified forms aid in creating the passionate mood of *penitente* sculptural figures. These stylistic aspects could well be related to the socially conscious mural art being created in California. Contemporary Chicano art, much of it full of indignation and outrage, could claim rightful affinity with the emotively charged antecedent expression of *penitente* art.

Knowledge about the Indo-Hispanic art forms of the Southwest came neither from academic or scholarly sources. It was gained from sources within the movement like *El Grito del Norte*, a newspaper issued from Española, New Mexico starting in 1968. This journal had a grass-roots orientation and placed a major emphasis on preserving the culture of the rural agrarian class. Often, photographic essays focusing on local artisans or documenting traditional ways of life in the isolated *pueblitos* of northern New Mexico were featured. Cleofas Vigil, a practicing *santero* from the region, traveled widely speaking to groups of artists banding together to form the nascent Chicano arts movement. The carvers Patrocinio Barela, Celso Gallegos and Jorge López, all master *santeros*, whose works were collected, documented, and exhibited by Anglo



DOLOR
1979
Ralph Maradiaga
Galería de la Raza/Studio 24
silkscreen
24" x 30"

patrons during the first part of the century, gained renewed significance within the budding associations of Chicano artists. Old and tattered exhibition catalogues, newspaper clippings and barely legible magazine articles that documented their work were xeroxed and passed from hand to hand to be eagerly scrutinized and savored. Some artists made pilgrimages to the museums and collections where their work was displayed and made photographs available to Movement newspapers and magazines. Primarily through this process of oral tradition and informal sharing of visual documentation, artists in California became aware of one of their ancestral folk traditions, an artistic tradition rarely incorporated into "official" art history. Thus the recovery and transmission of *santero* and *penitente* art was accomplished by the same sort of working class artists who had produced it.

Although *penitente* and *santero* art are not acknowledged as primary or direct influences on Chicano art (except for artisans maintaining the tradition in the Southwest), they form explicit nutrient sources in the establishment of an artistic continuum with Chicano communities. Because of their popular roots and their development in a communal social nexus, they offer abiding proof of the process by which a durable art tradition can be integrated into daily life.

Stressing public connection rather than private cognition, artists continued their quest to evolve fluid and integrative art forms. The goal was not simply to reclaim vernacular traditions but to re-interpret them in ways allowing for historical change.

An original inventive manner of organizing the community through art-centered activities was the creation of collective secular celebrations often based on traditional customs. *La Fiesta del Maiz* (Corn Festival), *El Dia de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) and many other group observances were developed to nurture and sustain ethnic pride and cultural solidarity as a necessary first step towards the formulation of a new cultural resistance. Artists working at the various art *centros* throughout the country set themselves the task of inventing new forms of secular ceremonies and rituals; their purpose being to sustain and transmit the political goals and cultural ideals of the emerging Chicano ethos.

Especially prevalent were ceremonials that stressed neo-indigenous elements. Ancient and surviving Indian cultures were valued as root sources from which to extract lasting values that would bring unity and cohesion to the heterogeneous Chicano community. Re-enactment of indigenous rituals gave the modern Chicano community access to the now mythical sources of its cultural identity and to assert that identity through symbols that made statements about unity, destiny, survival and endurance. Furthermore, the *neo-indigenismo* purveyed in the rituals and ceremonies gave authority and legitimacy to the political *indigenismo* which flourished as a dominant aspect of the cultural nationalist phase of the Chicano Movement.

Affirmation of indigenous heritage led artists to study and internalize the works of Miguel Leon-Portilla, Angel Garibay and other scholarly interpreters of the philosophy and art of the ancient Mexicans. Through such intellectual channels as well as through the oral tradition of community elders and sages such as the Conchero dancer Andrés Segura, Chicano artists gained insight into the spiritual and aesthetic roots of their own expression. The pyramid, the Aztec calendar stone, design motifs from ancient cultures and the entire pantheon of gods from Mayan, Toltec, and Aztec cultures became root metaphors in Chicano art, not as empty reminders of past glories but as powerful symbols of contemporary relevance.

The integration of cultural symbols with artistic expression was also generated by the newly designed form of communal ceremonies mentioned above. One such spectacle of much resonance was the commemoration of the first day of November of *El Día de los Muertos*. Customarily in Chicano communities, this day was set aside for visiting the cemetery, cleaning the graves of loved ones, setting out fresh flowers and remembering deceased family members and friends. There were no special rituals saved for individual meditations on mortality. Some communities also maintained the custom of publishing *calaveras*, broadsides of satirical verse embellished with drawings of skulls and skeletons based on the art of José Guadalupe Posada. Recent arrivals from Mexico might still bake *pan de muertos*, or set up an *ofrenda* (a profusely decorated altar with food and drink offerings honoring recently departed kin).

Perhaps receiving impetus from El Teatro Campesino which had long since incorporated the *calavera* tradition in its production, artists at the various *centros* focused on this tradition as a springboard for developing vital new forms of communal ceremonies. Self Help Graphics, an artists cooperative and community art center in East Los Angeles, can be cited as an example of how artists used the Day of the Dead tradition to mobilize the community while creating a spirit of unity and cultural pride. As described in a Self Help Graphics press release, the celebration takes place the first week of November and is open to all of Los Angeles. Opening with an indigenous ceremony at a near-by cemetery, the activities of the day continue with a colorful parade featuring costumes, *papier mache* crosses and masks, skeletons with smiles and *papel picado* (cutout tissue paper banners). Led through the streets by the sounds of traditional music, the crowds watch and spontaneously join in to conclude the march in front of altars assembled at the Self Help Graphics studio. Here the celebrants present offerings to the dead at festively decorated altars constructed by community participants in workshops held months before the event. Performing *teatros*, musician groups, and other festivities continue into early evening concluding with a candle lit procession.

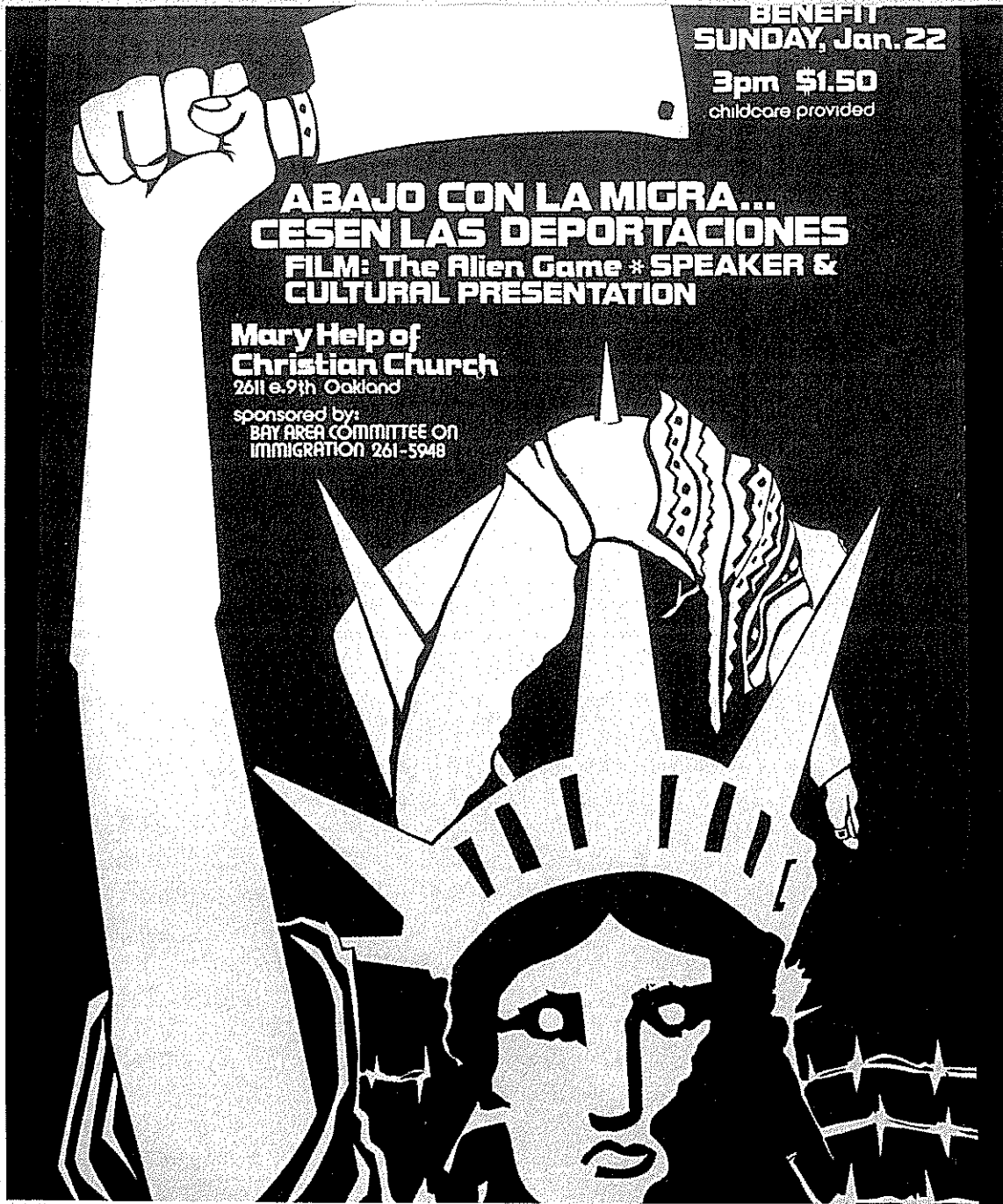
**BENEFIT
SUNDAY, Jan. 22**

3pm \$1.50
childcare provided

**ABAJO CON LA MIGRA...
CESEN LAS DEPORTACIONES**
FILM: The Alien Game * **SPEAKER &
CULTURAL PRESENTATION**

**Mary Help of
Christian Church**
2611 e. 9th Oakland

sponsored by:
**BAY AREA COMMITTEE ON
IMMIGRATION 261-5948**



ABAJO CON LA MIGRA

1979

Malaquías Montoya

black and white silkscreen poster

24" x 30"

In the spontaneity and spirit of the festival, the community has time to speculate and take cognizance of itself and its cultural traditions. The new forms of communal celebrations functioned as artistic strategies to symbolically transmit key assumptions of the Chicano art movement. They introduced and propagated many of the symbols, themes, and motifs being codified into a visual vocabulary by Chicano artists. While stressing pre-Colombian and indigenous subject-matter, the emergent visual vocabulary also incorporated urban types and explorations of the hybrid Chicano social milieu.

Integrally related to the human concerns of their local neighborhoods, artists pursued the vital tasks of creating art forms that strengthened the will, fortified the cultural identity, and clarified the consciousness of the community. The foremost aesthetic aim continued to be search for an organic unity between actual social living and art. By the mid-1970s posters and murals were ubiquitous purveyors of visual culture in Chicano communities.

For their visual dialogue, artists soon codified themes, motifs, and iconography which provided ideological direction and visual coherence to mural and poster production. In the main, this artistic vocabulary included referents to pre-Columbian, Mexican, Chicano, Anglo American, and international sources. The search was for a visual language that was clear, emotionally charged, and easily understood.

Pre-Columbian citations include pyramids, the Aztec calendar stone, cultural heroes like Quetzalcoatl, and deities like Tlaloc and Coatlicue. From the Mexican heritage references to revolutionary heroes and cultural traditions are widespread. Potent cultural symbols like *el maguey*, La Virgen de Guadalupe, and *la calavera* are prevalent. Chicano motifs like *placas* or the *huelga* thunderbird appear constantly with such heroic figures as Ché Guevara and Cesar Chávez. Anglo America provides satirical visions of Uncle Sam, the Statue of Liberty, and caricatures of the bourgeoisie — bosses, landowners, and robber barons. Internationalism entered the pictorial vocabulary of Chicano murals and posters with motifs and iconographic details from the people's struggles in Vietnam, Africa, and Latin America.

Creating a dialectical art is an ongoing process and marks the mature stage of the Chicano art movement in the 1980s. This phase entails the appropriation of the most advanced styles, techniques, and technologies in the persistent, disciplined, and continual effort toward developing an enhanced art of resistance — an art which is not a resistance to the materials and forms of art, but rather a resistance to entrenched social systems of power, exclusion, and negation.