

Representational Abstractionism and Realism: Two Approaches to Chicano Art and Literature

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Chicano art has been described as a canon of representation distinct from mainstream American art. After all, Chicano artists often represent different subjects than mainstream artists, especially those artists who were active during the Chicano civil rights movement. But how distinct are their strategies of representation from those of the mainstream? Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, among others, takes a representationally realist approach in presuming that one of the distinguishing features of Chicano art is the verisimilar representation of the experiences of Chicanos. In this paper I argue that Chicano art can also be described as critiquing the contingent nature of social relations, such as holding a collective identity as Chicano, by drawing attention to the necessarily arbitrary and distinct nature of representation, just as mainstream abstract art does. I term this position representational abstractionism. First, I argue through a reading of Ybarra-Frausto's essay "Rasquache: A Chicano Aesthetic Sensibility" that his nominally descriptive account in fact prescribes a representationally realist aesthetic to Chicano art. Then, I develop a reading of Raúl Salinas' poem "Un Trip through the Mind Jail" that demonstrates how the search for a collective identity as a Chicano would be better thought along representationally abstractionist lines. This framing of Chicano identity as a contingent product of representation, I conclude, enables a different aesthetic politics, namely it renders the politics of authenticity incoherent.

The Chicano Movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s made a new form of collective identification available to peoples of Mexican descent living in the United States. In the domains of visual arts and literature, Chicanos set about transposing the sociopolitical project of the Movement into the realm of aesthetics, mainly through replacing external depictions of Chicanos within Anglo-American culture with representations of their own making ("The Chicano Movement" 129). This aesthetic project was accompanied by the formation of Chicanoist literary and artistic criticism that attempted to interpret, describe and historicize this project in terms of its aesthetic strategies. Early critics made Chicano art and literature recognizable as distinct canons of representation through descriptions and interpretations that reached beyond disinterested analysis, leading to the validation and dissemination of these works throughout the larger world of art criticism and the academic reading public.

In their articulations of an aesthetic project, critics constituted Chicano art as its own representational space by insisting on its distinctness from mainstream American art. The art historian and literary critic Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, for example, opposed the Chicano art movement to mainstream art movements because the former goes beyond "the level of the work" to "extend meaning beyond the aesthetic object to include transformation of the material environment as well as of consciousness" ("The Chicano Movement" 141). In context, Ybarra-Frausto writes from the standpoint of an art historian, which is to say his explicit aim is to describe an aesthetic, not prescribe one.¹ However, one may then ask if the division he

proposes between art that "extend[s] meaning" and "art about itself and for itself," is not, in fact, prescriptive in its insistence on the distinctness of Chicano art (141). For through its dwelling on its own constructedness, mainstream abstract art also often calls into question the constructedness, contingency, and therefore changeability of social realities.² Ybarra-Frausto's descriptive claim, then, works in part through prescribing a presupposition about art in general, that it usually does not engage the social world.

The formation of a representational space for Chicano art and literature occurred, on the one hand, through the prescriptive force of a descriptive aesthetics that insisted on the difference

alternative artistic discourses. For 'Hispanic' art, this selective incorporation often foregrounds artwork deemed 'colorful,' 'folkloric,' 'decorative,' and untainted with political content" (146). His attempt to provide an account of Chicano art with "consistent and defining stylistic features" (146), especially when considered contrapuntally with the mainstream power structure he describes, both describes and, in my view, prescribes an aesthetic, but through a different mechanism than the one I lay out in this essay. This mechanism appeals to the place of Chicano art and art history within an aesthetic field, bestowing upon it the valence of institutional critique. The positioning of Chicano art vis a vis mainstream art is outside the scope of this essay. Within the aesthetic field of the American artworld in the latter half of the 20th century, it is nonetheless true that movement-based ethnic art, such as Chicano art was often derided as "illustrative," "essentialist," and "cultural nationalist" by mainstream art critics (García; cited in Noriega 21), as art that "never rose to the challenge of modernism and its investment in aesthetic autonomy, formalism, individualism, and internationalism" (21). If Ybarra-Frausto's comment could be interpreted as positioning Chicano art as a postmodern practice that rejects "art about itself and for itself," the contrast he is drawing may function as a critique of historiographical perspectives that locate Chicano art outside of American art history as opposed to alongside its postmodern contemporaries. This is not incompatible with a reading of his comment as also drawing a contrast against abstract art, especially since the art practices he goes on to describe in his essay are predominantly figurative, not abstract, engaged, as Bourdieu might put it, with a primary referent outside of the universal of stylistic possibilities that is the history of artistic form, i.e., the comparatively autonomous realm of art history.

1 In "The Chicano Movement, the Movement of Chicano Art", Ybarra-Frausto implicitly responds to the exhibition *Hispanic Art in the United States*, which caused controversy within the Chicano community. "[T]he power structure of mainstream art journals, critics, galleries, and museums," he writes, "selectively chooses and validates what it projects, desires, and museums as constituent elements of various

between Chicano art and literature, and, on the other, mainstream art and literature. This was achieved through assumptions made in descriptive analyses, which were not about Chicano art per se but about the nature of art itself. This paper aims to question one of these assumptions, that the project of Chicano art proceeded on representationally realist terms, that what artists sought to accomplish through their work was the more or less verisimilar representation of Chicano lived realities. It puts pressure on this assumption through a close reading of Ybarra-Frausto's catalogue essay, "Rasquachismo: A Chicano Sensibility" (1991). The goal is not to show that all Chicano artworks are representationally abstractionist, but to point out how description may condition the readings of certain Chicano artworks as realist even when they are not. After my reading of "Rasquachismo," I will offer a representationally abstractionist alternative to Ybarra-Frausto's realist reading of "Un Trip to the Mind Jail" by the Chicano poet Raúl Salinas.

By *representational abstractionism* I do not mean the tendency in Western art since the late nineteenth century towards aesthetic abstraction as opposed to figuration, but the recognition that artworks are abstract by definition in their necessary distance from the social reality they are understood to represent. Artworks achieve an abstractionist effect by calling attention to their own artificial character in a move that invites us to question not only the aesthetic representations proffered in art but the social facts to which they allude.³ Art is abstract, but it's also embedded in the world. For example, Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) is abstractionist in the sense that its readymade form impelled viewers to interrogate their assumptions about the nature of an artist's creative labor. The artworks of the Impressionists would also count as abstractionist under my definition since they drew attention to the prevailing theory of art by not aiming at the imitation of real life pointing up its contingency to expand the meaning of art to include works whose artistry lay precisely in their non-imitation of life (Danto 573-75). Because Impressionism focused on perceptual experience over and against the mimetic representation of a reality prior to it and recognized by an art audience, it was attuned to present moment and change rather than oriented towards the past. Impressionist art was as self-consciously constructed as Duchamp's ready-mades.

One may, at this point, readily object that this was precisely the distinction Ybarra-Frausto was aiming to draw between mainstream art and Chicano art. Impressionist art and ready-mades are self-consciously constructed, but the social facts they call into question pertain primarily to the art world. In contrast, Chicano art engages with social facts that go beyond it to address issues of broader political, social, and cultural concern. The case for Chicano art, as with other forms of ethnic American art, must be different. The relevant sense in which it is different seems to be that Chicano art as a category presupposes a correspondence between art and the set of social facts pertaining primarily to Chicanos such as biculturalism, barrio culture, urban youth culture, and so on. Abstractionism in Chicano art in this sense is referential in a way that mainstream art is not always and that accounts for descriptive aestheticians, such as Ybarra Frausto, reading aesthetic strategies as realist instead of abstractionist. Philip Harper phrased the conundrum for an African-American abstractionist aesthetic as follows, though his observation

holds for Chicanos as well: "how can a work clearly enough ground itself in the real-world racial order as to register as *black* while at the same time clearly enough *dissociating* itself from lived reality as to register as productively *abstractionist*." As Harper argues, the referential nature of African-American abstractionism makes that "lived reality" "available for critical interrogation" but only if instead of embracing realist norms for the interpretation of art such as an assumed verisimilitude, we embrace a set of abstractionist protocols. This often involves a sustained scrutiny of a text's claim to realism, as I will demonstrate through my reading of Ybarra-Frausto's catalogue essay on rasquachismo.

Rasquachismo as an aesthetic sensibility is realist in its insistence on tying Chicano urban working-class ("barrio") material culture and practices to the aesthetic strategies deployed by Chicano artists. Its claim to realism is premised on its comprehensiveness since Ybarra-Frausto posits it as a "vernacular idiom encoding a comprehensive worldview" "rooted in Chicano structures of thinking, feeling and aesthetic choice" ("Rasquachismo" 155). As such rasquachismo in art is for him aestheticizing a set of practices observable in everyday life in the barrio. He underlines this view rhetorically through juxtaposing descriptions of these practices outside of art with their particular adaptations in a variety of art media including drama, installation art, and narrative fiction. At the most macroscopic level, he achieves this juxtaposition by transitioning in the first section of the essay from a general overview of rasquachismo ("very generally, rasquachismo is an underdog perspective...") to identifying features of it in everyday practice in a manner that he explicitly flags as associative and not exclusively about art: "what follows, then, is a nonlinear, exploratory, and unsolemn attempt to track this irrepressible spirit manifested in the art and life of the Chicano community" (156). The following and final section of the essay, titled "historical continuity," then provides a series of examples across genres and periods of art that exemplify the rasquache sensibility (156-160). In terms of the essay's general structure, Ybarra-Frausto makes the relatively uncontroversial point that artists who see themselves as part of the same tradition by virtue of membership in the same culture often deploy similar strategies and that these strategies help their various artworks cohere together as a tradition. However, at the paragraph-level in the first section of the essay, his juxtapositions of everyday practices and their consequences for art imply a more determinative role for the former: Art does not so much call the rasquache sensibility practiced in everyday life up for comment as exemplify it. Ybarra-Frausto writes, for example, that part of the rasquache sensibility are a set of coping strategies ("movidas") that connote "resilience and resourcefulness" within the barrio; these strategies ("the use of available resources") engender the aesthetic strategies of "hybridization, juxtaposition, and integration" (156). Subsequent paragraphs in the first section follow a similar pattern of commenting on an aspect of a rasquache sensibility before drawing a conclusion about the strategies it engenders in art. In at least two instances this realist patterning leads Ybarra-Frausto to overlook objections to a cross-generic aesthetic sensibility based on the differences between particular genres.

The first instance occurs when he describes the visual distinctiveness of the barrio as projecting a "visual biculturalism" through its pairing of traditional items from Mexican popular culture with those from American mass culture (157). This biculturalism and the "visual interplay" it seems to effect is characteristic of some artworks in the *CARA* show, which primarily focused on visual artwork, because the spatiality of visual art readily facilitates this

³ Social facts are contingently true by a virtue of a social group taking them as such. An example of a social fact may be the statement "there are two genders," which evaluates as false among some social groups. In contrast, a fact such as "the sun rises every morning" may be contingently true, but its truth value is independent of any given social group evaluation of it.

“interplay” (157). In contrast, the “interplay” would be harder to achieve in linguistic genres due to the linear progression of language through time. As Saussure explains, “auditory signifiers [such as those of language] have at their command only the dimension of time. Their elements are presented in succession; they form a chain” which is why language attempting to describe visual phenomena can only do so incompletely (70). Linguistic genres pose a challenge to *rasquache* as a realist aesthetic insofar that attempts to render a biculturalism indexed specifically to the *barrio* will be limited by their need to excerpt specific scenes from *barrio* life, or, even, parts of scenes. The logic of language calls attention to the contingent and therefore artificial nature of excerption from a *barrio* lifestyle that is experienced in both space and time. Language as such remarks the distance between, on the one hand, the representation of the *barrio* proffered by Ybarra-Frausto and, on the other, the *barrio*’s reality. Yet we can readily imagine that an easy objection to this argument would be that language in its everyday use often does aim to represent the non-linguistic world as accurately as possible. Certain linguistic artforms, however, draw attention to their distance from everyday language use with one in particular often being characterized by that feature: poetry.⁴

The second instance when Ybarra-Frausto overlooks generic differences between art media brings to mind the formal logic of poetry. In his discussion he addresses the formal elements of altar composition — “precise repetitions, replications, and oppositional orders of colors, patterns, and designs”— to demonstrate the *rasquache* preference for composite organization (157). However, he does not address how it is that the individual elements of an altar cohere together to form the meaning of the composition as a whole. He does, though, provide a list of possible altar elements whose organizing principle seems to be metonymy: “plaster saints, plastic flowers, bric-a-brac, family photographs, and treasured talismans” (157).⁵ Each element contributes to the religiosity and intimacy of the home altar through its standing in for either an aspect of religious devotion or a memory in a family member’s life. Notwithstanding that each element of a composition may be loosely associated with many other elements outside of it, the composition’s meaning as a whole—as a home altar—depends on the ability of each of its elements to be understood as securing a single referent. The referential logic of metonymy as a trope supersedes associative, metaphorical interpretations of the altar. Yet to be convinced that this is always so for Chicano compositions of any genre, one would have to ignore that metaphor often is the trope that distinguishes poetry from other artforms (Jakobson). Though metonymy serves a similar function of securing stable referents for poems—and this is evidently the case for socially-engaged poetry such as Chicano poetry—poems are distinguished from other types of writing by

4 The sensuality of poetic language could be the spatial dimension of poetry. Language can be spatial, or textual, and not just temporal in this sense, but our treatment of language may nonetheless mute its sensuality.

5 Metonymy could also be applied to the analysis of visual art. An extremely metonymic composition, for example, may have its features index particular objects or events outside of the artwork. Visual metonymy seems different than linguistic metonymy, though, despite, in both cases, metonymy and metaphor being thinkable as two poles for representation. One difference may be that visual signs, whether symbols, indices, or icons, tend to impel viewers to locate the referent of the sign in a way that linguistic signs do not as readily. In my view, this is why some audiences find abstract art more frustrating than experimental writing, even when both no longer aim at representation in the sense of there being a readily recognizable referent to locate. If I am correct about the distinction between the visual and the linguistic with regards to metonymy, then Ybarra-Frausto’s claim that *rasquachismo* is a cross-generic aesthetic sensibility, as opposed to primarily a visual one, is a rhetorical overreach.

their relative open-endedness of meaning. If metaphorical language more generally works by casting one object in terms of another, metaphors in poetry account for the propensity of poems to open up new perspectives on reality. The logic of metaphor in poetry, then, can urge readers to denaturalize seemingly necessary relationships between particular representations and reality as ones among many—as arbitrary.⁶ In contradistinction with the example of a *rasquache* composite organization Ybarra-Frausto provides, poetry insists that any relationship between individual elements, the composite whole, and the social world may be secured as part of a *rasquache* aesthetic sensibility only if one underplays the relationship’s arbitrariness.

The distant and arbitrary relationship between representation and reality that poetry discloses suggests that the possibility of *rasquachismo*, as Ybarra-Frausto describes it, depends on presupposing representational realism. One must already be committed to believing that the aesthetic representations of Chicano art more or less correspond to the set of social facts about the *barrio* and its people. Ybarra-Frausto takes this presupposition as justified by the history of Chicano art since the Chicano Movement:

“Turning inward to explore, decipher, and interpret elements from the Chicano cultural matrix, artists and intellectuals [during the Chicano Movement] found strength and recovered meaning in the layers of everyday life practices. The very essence of a bicultural, lived reality was scorned as un-American by the dominant culture... a necessary response was to disown imposed categories of culture and identity and to create a Chicano self-vision of wholeness and completion” (159).

The representationally realist commitment lies in the response of displacing “imposed categories” with a “Chicano self-vision” drawing on a shared cultural matrix, evacuating “culture and identity” of their previous contents as opposed to calling the coherence of either category into question. Indeed, that the self-vision is one of “wholeness and completion” as opposed to fragmentation and indeterminacy suggests that the project of Chicano art must be capable of delivering up a coherent set of representations.⁷

6 Metaphors can also imply natural relationships between objects. If I were to describe Langston Hughes’ poems as “bluesy”, for example, I am implying a relationship between his poetry and the blues that could be construed as natural. It is not entirely clear to me if “bluesy” naturalizes the relationship on account of being metaphorical — in which case, the new perspectives that metaphorical descriptions disclose may seem astoundingly obvious in hindsight — or of being a particular kind of metaphorical description. I suspect that the latter account better explains how terms such as “bluesy”, “funky”, “*rasquache*”, “folkish”, and “urban” work. These terms make the material basis of linguistic representation (i.e., that there is a referent) clear because there is an implicit over-determination of what the (“natural”) referent of the metaphor is, i.e., Black and Chicano culture. For a discussion of Black music as indexing Black experiences, see chapter 2 of Phil Harper’s *Abstractionist Aesthetics* (NYU, 2015). I am not interested in reading racialized metaphors as pointing us to the same, tired referents. Rather, I want to reclaim the force of these metaphors by pointing out how these metaphors can also de-naturalize relationships if adopt an abstractionist protocol that insists on recognizing their arbitrariness (not wholly arbitrary). This will become clearer in my discussion of the poem “Un Trip through the Mind Jail”.

7 There is a difference between offering new representations within the same categories and challenging the concept of categories as such. The latter strategy, which was common among early Chicano conceptual artists, is arguably not so much an *identity politics* as an interrogation of the context for thinking about identity that the categories make possible. As Chon Noriega explains, the conceptualist art collective *Asco*, which was active and prominent during the Chicano Movement employed this strategy: “For *Asco*, what made Chicano identity performative was not that it named itself against all odds, as an act of defiance (the oft-used “I am Chicano” of the era), but that it was constituted within a set of social relations largely defined by the mass media and the corporate liberal state. As such, *Asco* saw identity as less a question of form and content — that is, a proper name, and more one about the *context for speaking and being heard*.” (24; my emphasis).

The formation of a Chicano self-vision achieved through a consistent refusal to accept social facts as necessary truths—including those structuring a sense of self and community—is the abstractionist alternative Ybarra-Frausto overlooks. In individual artworks, this may manifest in a divergence in the meaning contributed by cultural content and its embedding in particular forms wedded to particular logics. That at least Raúl Salinas employed the above strategy in his poetry suggests that the collective project Ybarra-Frausto aimed to describe may, in fact, have admitted more of abstractionism than he presumes. Moreover, in “Un Trip through the Mind Jail” Raúl Salinas enacts this strategy precisely through the conscious failure of the particular representations of barrio culture he invokes to overcome the distant and arbitrary nature of aesthetic representations as such. Thus, a reading of “Un Trip” oriented towards recognizing its abstractionist character casts doubt on both Ybarra-Frausto’s reading of it as “an attempt of showing how [Raúl Salinas’s] experience might be typical and representative of the Chicano community” and his presupposition that representations of barrio culture generally are realist (“Introduction” 10). The interpretive question motivating an abstractionist reading of the poem is whether or not the speaker accepts the limits that linguistic representation poses for his attempts to represent the past.

The poem progresses towards its end as a series of vignettes of life in a neighborhood that the poetic voice assures us was his own during his youth. Presented through a series of stanzas all related to each other through their refrain of “neighborhood of,” the speaker’s reconstructed past dominates the theme of the poem even as the necessary serio-temporal progression of poetry points out how this past is lost in time. The images on offer, though, are not simply temporal elaborations but spatial ones since through his invocation of particular characters in delineated situations he seeks to create the sense of a place, namely his neighborhood of La Loma, Austin. Among many other things, he tells us, La Loma is peopled by “[m] odest Mexican maidens dancing,” “kids barefoot/snotty-nosed,” and “girls from cleaner neighborhoods” who can be seen at, respectively, a “dilapidated community hall,” on “muddied streets,” and at parties at “Guadalupe Church” (55-56). Yet the incessant march of the poem forward leaves each vignette-stanza to flicker out, leaving the neighborhood of La Loma as only a loose series of associations for the reader, and its people as, at best, only partially reconstructed subjectivities.

As the poem draws to its end, the speaker seems to reconcile himself to this necessary incomplete recollection of the past borne out of its distance from the present. If the associative recollections of the La Loma he once knew cannot recuperate the neighborhood’s existence, he affirms that the act of recollection in the present is nonetheless all too real. He does so while explicitly invoking the on-going poetic present in the most self-conscious moment of the poem. He remarks that “only the NOW of THIS journey is REAL!”, where the capitalization of “NOW” and “THIS” draw attention to their grammatical function of marking a moment of enunciation which enables identity (re)formation through poetry (59). The

poem continues to remark the difference between the speaker as an enunciating subject and a subject of one of his recollections, when the speaker directly addresses the neighborhood: “neighborhood that is no more/ YOU ARE TORN PIECES OF MY FLESH!!!!” (59). The subject alluded to by the possessive pronoun “MY” is embodied. His persistence as a subject in the enunciating present assures that the past participle “TORN” can modify the pieces of his flesh without fully annihilating his subjectivity; otherwise, he could not be speaking. On the contrary, his past subjectivity as a member of the neighborhood is not secured in reality but must be insisted upon through the reframing of an absence, “TORN PIECES”, as a presence — a point of identity he longs to retain. Once again addressing the neighborhood in the second-person, he concludes, “Therefore, you [the neighborhood] ARE”, letting the copula emphatically pronounce an existence that is not fleshy—not embodied (59).

The dilemma the speaker alludes to between a subject whose capacity to enunciate hinges on its embodiment and a subject belonging to a recollected unembodied past is the problem of collective identity. The speaker seeks to identify with the collective of the neighborhood, but all he can guarantee for himself is his own individual identity. But this does not mean that the unbridgeable distance between a representation of the past and a present reality makes the effort of recollection fruitless for the speaker. On the contrary, to inhabit a collective identity while remaining oneself as a necessary feature of being an individual already implies a reconciliation with that distance. The speaker marks his acknowledgement of this fact by not insisting that his desire

to belong to a collective was ever wholly fulfilled: “i needed you then... identity... a sense of belonging / i need you now” (59). If, in the poetic present, the closest he comes to fulfilling this need to have a sense of belonging is through the recollections of La Loma he conjures up, the implication is that collective identity had only been secured for him in the past by insisting that, despite (or maybe because of) the necessary distance between the two, representations trump reality. It does not matter for him that the sense of La Loma as a place he has been conveying in the poem is at best only partial, for the selection of certain representations—those salient to barrio culture—was, in the final analysis, already arbitrary. But “arbitrary” does not mean meaningless.

Nor does the arbitrariness of representation preclude its potential for identity formation. Isolated from the barrio he once knew, the speaker insists that La Loma keeps him “away from INSANITY’S hungry jaws” (59). The speaker’s fear that insanity will consume his sense of self amounts to the claim that, for him, holding onto an individual identity involves maintaining a collective identity. Read through the analysis above on the speaker’s acknowledgement of the nature of representation, this claim does not entail that collective identity is independently real of the speaker and other individuals. Rather, it entails that maintaining a collective identity is an especially productive act of representation. Moreover, for the speaker, its productivity lies in part in the identifications it enables for him with people he does not know, and places he has not experienced. The poem’s final stanza consists of the speaker’s

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laying claim first to La Loma and then laying claim to other Chicano neighborhoods through his repetition of the possessive pronoun “my” (60). He is not, however, staking this claim on being able to recollect anything about all the neighborhood he names, but on his identification with other people who maintain memories of their own neighborhood. The collective identity tying all of these distinct individuals together is being a Chicano from a barrio, and the process through which it comes about is the individuated production of aesthetic representations.

This notion of a collective identity is radically different from Ybarra-Frausto’s representationally realist take in “Rasquachismo.” Indeed, the abstractionist notion of identity is the inversion of the realist notion in the role it ascribes to representation. The latter subordinates representation to reality in its insistence that the barrio as basis of collective identity precedes individual acts of aesthetic representation. Only *after* drawing upon a pre-representational barrio culture can Chicano artists said to be participating in a rasquache aesthetic sensibility. In contrast, the abstractionist view of identity exemplified in “Un Trip” holds that individual acts of aesthetic representation together produce and maintain the reality of the barrio. The difference is important because it indicts Ybarra-Frausto’s descriptive aesthetics program as a subtle form of prescribing a politics to art. I do not intend to fully elaborate on this point here, but already from the difference between the realist and abstractionist notions of collective identity, one can see how, among other things, each view entails a position on authenticity. Briefly: if Chicano barrio culture exists in a pre-representational sense, then individual artworks may fail to be authentically Chicano to the degree that they do not accurately represent Chicano barrio culture. However, if that culture owes its existence to the myriad ways it has been represented, then, assuming that the artist sought to represent Chicano barrio culture, no representation is less authentically Chicano than any other. More generally, the abstractionist view entails a methodological, and political stance, where the focus on describing/interpreting Chicano art lies firmly on how individual artworks or aesthetic projects such as that of Raúl Salinas are participants in an always in-the-process formulation of a Chicano culture. Descriptive aesthetics affects nothing less than how one looks at art, and what one sees.

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