

In addition to such varied examples of cultural production, the book includes a number of strong, more strictly art historical essays. Paula Birnbaum's exposition on the *Société des Femmes Artistes Modernes* explores how themes of the modern Madonna depicted by the women of this French art collective can be understood as socio-political commentary. Though only a short excerpt from her forthcoming book on French interwar women artists, Birnbaum's essay provides a concise overview of the ways in which the work of the FAM intersected with contemporary political and cultural debates surrounding modern motherhood, including pronatalism, breastfeeding, and popular ideologies of femininity.<sup>1</sup>

In the essays grouped as "Re-Imagining Gender and Race," Celia Stahr offers a critical re-reading of Frida Kahlo's 1932 *Self-Portrait on the Border Line between Mexico and the United States*. In an engaging cross-cultural comparison, Stahr draws parallels between the New Woman and Kahlo's "New Mestiza Woman" to examine how Kahlo played with gender stereotypes across cultures. Stahr further positions the painting as a critique of the American Ford industry, and in doing so links Kahlo's work to that of Georgia O'Keeffe, a connection that, Stahr argues, has been too long overlooked. Stahr's multilayered discussion newly situates Kahlo's painting within American art of the 1930s and presents the work as an outsider perspective on American economic and cultural issues of the time.

The most compelling essay of the entire collection is Despina Stratigakos's investigation of women architects in the

Weimar Republic. Stratigakos spells out the conflicted nature of women designing primarily domestic interior spaces as she asserts that "women architects walked a tightrope between staking a claim to the burgeoning housing industry and a desire to avoid gender stereotyping" (210). In addition to highlighting several architects and designers and the narrow path of opportunity offered to them in this overwhelmingly male field, Stratigakos offers a fascinating literary parallel as well. Analyzing the 1932 debut novel by Swiss writer Johanna Böhm, *The House of Single Women*, Stratigakos argues that Böhm acknowledges and draws out the contemporary cultural tensions around the idea of women as architects. Perhaps inspired by Frankfurt's Home for Professional Women and its protagonist loosely based on architect Grete Schütte-Lihotzky, Böhm's novel speaks to the problematic and gendered assumptions, and even the "deviant morality," associated with single women in the field of architecture (211).

Paralleling the broad scope of materials addressed, the collection surveys a wider geographic area than simply the expected regions of Western Europe and the United States. Laura Allen presents a case study of Japanese painter Yoshida Fujio in part to elucidate how early-twentieth-century Japanese women who made the controversial choice to paint in a Western style (*yōga*) found ways to promote their cause. Tusa Shea investigates how women artists in British Columbia appropriated Aboriginal textile motifs, offering a complicated look into the gendered and transculturated spaces of craft. Anna Novakov examines the street pho-

tography of Yugoslav artist Ivana Tomljenovic, although admittedly, most of the discussion focuses on Tomljenovic's years at the Bauhaus.

Unfortunately, the appearance of the book does not equal the caliber of the scholarship. The relatively unimaginative title effectively encompasses the wide-ranging essays of the volume but does nothing to sell the book. Many of the essays contain typographical errors, and the images are disappointing—relatively few are reproduced, all in black and white, and in many cases they are no better than poor-quality photocopies.

Despite its aesthetic shortcomings, however, *Essays on Women's Artistic and Cultural Contributions 1919-1939* offers a geographically and materially expanded investigation into an already much-examined time period. Not simply seeking to raise up and insert historical women into an existing canon of artists, most of the essays aim instead to enlarge and even redefine our understanding of cultural production and its location. Birnbaum and Novakov's interdisciplinary approach pushes art historians to consider the larger category of material culture, and in doing so provides a welcome addition to the existing scholarship on women artists in the interwar period. •

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#### Notes

1. Paula Birnbaum, *Women Artists In Interwar France: Framing Femininities* (Burlington and London: Ashgate, forthcoming).

## Yolanda M. López

by Karen Mary Davalos  
UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center  
and University of Minnesota Press, 2009

Reviewed by Dina Comisarenco Mirkin

The publication of a book on Yolanda M. López (b. 1942), one of the most prominent artists of the Chicano civil rights movement, was

a long overdue scholarly debt. Karen Mary Davalos, an associate professor of Chicana and Chicano studies at Loyola Marymount University who has published extensively on Chicano Art,<sup>1</sup> proved to be a fitting choice to fulfill this important academic project. This laudable book sets the foundation stone for the enriching analysis of López's highly iconic work.

Davalos's methodological approach

combines firsthand, very personal biographical information on the artist, with whom she worked closely, with the semiotic analysis of some of López's works. The author's clear and direct language makes the reading of the book a pleasurable experience for academic and nonacademic audiences alike. The unusual methodological perspective proves particularly apt to exemplify the intimacy of the artist's private and



Fig. 1. Yolanda M. López, *Self-Portrait* (from *Tres Mujeres/Three Generations* series) (1975-76), charcoal on paper, 4' x 8'.

public realms of action, establishing a theoretical prototype that could be extrapolated to study other socially or politically active artists.

The book starts with a preface written by Chon A. Noriega, director of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, who recognizes López's transcendent work in regard to both the Chicano civil rights movement and women's struggle. The heart of the book is comfortably organized into six concise, well-illustrated chapters that allow readers to follow the evolution of López's career. Within these chapters, interesting and helpful interpretations reflect on some of the complexities of paradigmatic examples of her conceptual production, imbued by postmodernist artistic strategies. Rounding out the volume are a well-documented exhibition history, and a complete listing of bibliographic and other sources that constitutes an invaluable tool for other researchers wishing to pursue further, more specialized studies.

In her introduction Davalos lays out keys that allow readers to understand López's works. First is the simultaneity of her arrival to art and politics, from her early participation in the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) at San Francisco State College (now University) and in the streets of the Mission District of San Francisco. Second is the complexity of her artistic production, whose different components should not be isolated but, on the contrary, seen as complementary tools used by López to fight against patriarchy, racism, and inequality. Davalos mentions as well that López is "her own best art historian, offering conceptual and historical analysis of her work in interviews, pamphlets, and brochures that have accompanied exhibitions" (3). In fact, as is often the case with contemporary artists, López assumed this role because her firm theoretical background allowed her to do so, but also because of the fragmentary quality of the few and belated scholarly examinations of her work, even the most paradigmatic series including the *Guadalupe* triptych (1978).

The first chapter, "From la frontera: Family and Courage in San Diego," bespeaks the weight of her family history in her artistic approach. Based on López's childhood memories and family mythology regarding her grandparents' migration from Mexico to the United States—their crossing the Río Bravo by boat and miraculously escaping the bullets of the Texas Rangers—the chapter offers a revealing antidote to the more popular, romanticized views of the Mexican Revolution. Within this context, and as Davalos points out, López's portrayal of family members and self-representations that would characterize her mature work have not only a self-referential quality but a symbolic one. This allows the artist to represent and reflect on the painful collective experience of her displaced people and of so many other oppressed groups around the world, especially women. López's straightforward artistic approach, intended not to glorify but to express the dignity of her characters, as Davalos rightly points out, finds its roots in the artist's painful family history. In another insightful section Davalos also describes the unusual life of López's mother, Margaret,

a hard working, activist, creative woman—of a type not circumscribed within the stereotypical mold of Mexican abnegated motherhood—as an influential figure for López, who learned from her dignity, a love of beauty, and to challenge traditional gender expectations.

Next, in "In the Trenches: Development of a Political Artist," Davalos traces López's involvement in the Bay Area Chicano civil rights movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Departing from López's paradigmatic poster *Free Los Siete* (1969), Davalos makes enlightening comments regarding the importance that visual arts played within political movements, not just for López but for other Chicana and Chicano artists as well. She demonstrates how, in spite of low expectations of them, women care about politics and create works of art intended to be politically and socially influential. Davalos also points out that the artist was deeply satisfied by the wide circulation of the poster as opposed to the limited exposure of more traditional works by other contemporary Chicano artists, meant to be exhibited in museums and art galleries. It would be interesting to pursue some of the possible connections with contemporary political and artistic works by tracing some of the probable inspirational sources for López's poster, for example Faith Ringgold's *God Bless America* (1964), since both works share compositional and expressive contents.

In this chapter Davalos continues tracing López's process of political awareness through her active participation in the TWLF at San Francisco State College, particularly in regard to the group's demand for the creation of an ethnic studies program. The experience of hopeful and idealistic militancy of Latin-American youth meeting the brutal repression of the government marked not just López but also the lives of her generation as a whole. Once again, Davalos's account, undoubtedly based on López's personal memories, reflects a profound empathy that allows the reader to understand the strong and lasting impacts of such dramatic experiences. One of the most outstanding merits of the books resides in Davalos's extraordinary sensibility in tracing the origins of the artist's interest

and later approach to artistic expression. She makes it clear that López's works, as with those produced by other political artists, are not the result of a spontaneous and arbitrary choice but the culmination of a process that has to do with transcendental life experiences—not just individual but collective. Davalos's account of López's awareness of her lifelong feeling of difference and exclusion, as well as the realization of the social constructions that defined the differences, and the overarching need to have the "other's" own version of history, is an extraordinary text whose interest surpasses the book's explicit subject.

In "Finding a Language: Deconstruction, Semiotics, Social Change," Davalos follows López's training in conceptual practices, mainly through her art classes with Martha Rosler and Allan Sekula. In this chapter, Davalos analyzes López's contribution to feminism and Chicano art history by focusing on two series, *Tres Mujeres/Three Generations* (1975-76; Fig. 1) and *¿A dónde vas Chicana?* (1978), and on the installation *The Nanny* (1994). All are concerned with the invisibility of migrant working women and represent important and paradigmatic contemporary works. Davalos analyzes issues related to material, scale, and posture that clearly unravel some of López's strategies to resist sexism and to help in creating a new, dignified collective imagery of Chicano women.

In the chapters titled "Guadalupe as Feminist Proposal" and "Collecting and Exhibiting Mexicana," Davalos concentrates on López's most famous series on the Virgin of Guadalupe (1978-88), and on videos and installation pieces such as *When You Think of Mexico: Images of Mexicans in the Media* (1986), *Things I Never Told My Son About Being a Mexican* (1985), and *Cactus Hearts/Barbed Wire Dreams* (1988). Although the introductory pages are quite promising, since the author sets herself the task of exploring how the artist deconstructed the popular religious image in order "to see how we represent ourselves" (81), the analysis seems to lack some cultural references that could have enriched her study. It is in fact worth mentioning that the Virgin's enormous popularity, both in Mexico and in the Chicano community

in the United States, is related to several profound reasons, such as her original appearance to an Indian, Juan Diego; the dark color of her skin; and her close association with the Mexican War of Independence. López seems to draw on this tradition of ethnic identity and freedom and take it to a new level of contemporary presence and democratization, suggesting that every Chicana now embodies her precious attributes. Comparisons might be made with *La Virgen de Guadalupe defendiendo los derechos de los Chicanos* (The Virgin of Guadalupe defending the rights of Chicanos; 1974) by Ester Hernández, and George Yepes's mural at St. Lucy's Church in Los Angeles (1995) in evaluating the history of the appropriation of the sacred image in the modern world. On the other hand, Davalos's recognition of the complex and polyvalent levels of readings interwoven in López's later installations and video works produced since the mid 1980s is once again stimulating and revealing. In her analysis of López's conceptual production, for example *Things I Never Told My Son about Being a Mexican*, Davalos successfully studies the complex issues of identity, assimilation, stereotypes, and cultural change that the powerful media can impose upon people and that are resisted and challenged in López's works, accurately establishing, once again, revealing connections among personal, political, and artistic realms.

The last chapter, "Yolanda's Got a Brand New Bag," is disappointingly short. After briefly reflecting about the origins of a series López was making inspired by Mexican tourist art—such as the tooled leatherwork portrayed in *Mexican Bag* (2003)—and launching questions related to her ideas about beauty, authenticity, and historical processes that determine how culture, heritage, and tradition pervade one's life and art, Davalos suddenly ends. The abrupt closure could be interpreted perhaps as a sign of López's ongoing, thriving career, and as an invitation to pursue further, more specialized studies that attempt to answer these and many other questions intelligently presented by Davalos in this groundbreaking book on Yolanda López's life and work.

Yolanda M. López is the second volume of the very commendable educational project entitled "A Ver: Revisioning Art History," launched in 2007, by the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center and the University of Minnesota Press. The endeavor is devoted to presenting Chicano, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican and other U.S.-based Latino artists, as a first step toward rescuing memories and calling attention to the historical transcendence of significant alternative creators absent from most art historical narratives due largely to their national origins.

As a part of this series and in general, Davalos's exploration of López's personal experiences and of Latina representations is an important contribution to our understanding of how images work within political struggles and how gender, racial, and cultural identity continue to be significant issues in our contemporary world. Davalos exposes the complexity and richness of this artist's work, the importance of her contributions to Chicano, feminist, and conceptual art, and some of the complex and fascinating issues related to the politics of representation. Both well-versed feminist readers and the general public will find this book immensely revealing and thought-provoking with regard both to the construction and representation of gender, racial, and cultural identity, and to López's extraordinary and significant artistic production. •

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#### Notes

1. Also by Davalos are *Exhibiting Mestizaje: Mexican (American) Museums in the Diaspora* (2001), and *The Mexican Museum of San Francisco* (2007).