
Exhibition Review: *Sandra de la Loza: Mi Casa Es Su Casa*

Sandra de la Loza: Mi Casa Es Su Casa. Armory for the Arts. Pasadena, California: January 27–May 12, 2019.

Southern California artist Sandra de la Loza describes herself as a performative archivist. Her ongoing collaborative project, the Pocho Research Society of Erased and Invisible History, is perhaps the most direct reflection of how her work melds the functions of historian, curator, and scholar. Her practice extends to a long-time involvement as an activist and supporter of spaces that are platforms for artistic production, community action, and critical dialogue concerned with the histories of people of color.

Recently on view at the Armory Center for the Arts in Pasadena was a one-person exhibition of de la Loza's immersive installation *Mi Casa Es Su Casa*. It was first exhibited in 2002 for her graduate exhibition at Cal State University, Long Beach, and then again in 2003 in a group show, *Finding Family Stories*, at the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles. The Armory revisited this important body of work by the artist during this critical time when the raw political debates over immigration and conversations about decolonization dominate our current political climate. De la Loza, who is Chicanx, interrogates power in California, where the history of discrimination toward people with Mexican ancestry has been oppressive. This current reappraisal of her older work creates the opportunity for necessary conversations with audiences who perhaps were not prepared to encounter her ideas seventeen years ago.

Mi Casa Es Su Casa was installed in the upstairs Armory Gallery. On the left were speakers, from which emanated a sound piece made as part of the installation, *Whatcha Talkin' bout*. On the right, old-fashioned wallpaper with a common floral pattern covered the lower third of the wall, mimicking the artist's family living room. Hung in a row above the wallpaper were a series of family photos, both in black and white and in color. The figures in the photographs are in conventional poses, doing conventional things, acting out the apocryphal American Dream. However, the identities of the individuals have been obscured. They are cut out, blurred, or replaced with image reversals, a process in which the cutout figures leave a negative space that is filled with other imagery altogether [Image 1].

At the end of the gallery, cut out of a panel, was a life-size outline of a woman holding a child, which served as a screen for a video. The imagery in the video included Los Angeles



IMAGE 1. *Mother and Child* (2003) by Sandra de la Losa; courtesy the artist.

streetscapes, views of the Los Angeles River, the city's skyline, various images of graffitied fences and walls, and an assortment of urban materials. This imagery mirrored many of the textures and images in the framed photographic works [Image 2].

De la Loza uses her family photos as the source material for her investigation into how dehumanizing cultural mythologies alter a person's self-worth and sense of identity. She views the photographs as fakes, fabrications. She finds a level of conformity in them that reflect how her family is forced to assimilate, to act like everyone else in the face of the



IMAGE 2. Installation view of *Mi Casa Es Su Casa* (2018) by Sandra de la Loza; photograph by Ian Byers-Gamber.

cultural violence visited upon them. Whether this violence was external or internalized, de la Loza's view of home is something that is contested. Loss of power and the struggle to reacquire it, erasure of identity and the need to identify with something personally authentic underlie her project. The photographs are an investigation into the archetypes she finds in the intimacy of the home. She looks at how representation betrays itself, when colonized people allow themselves to be turned into one-dimensional caricatures. Cutting her family members out of the home photographs is not arbitrary, and might be an act of liberation from colonization. The artist is proposing that the subjects of colonization have come to believe that because they act like everyone else, do as they are told, they deserve the standard status and treatment they receive. This pernicious pattern of discrimination and resultant self-loathing de la Loza implicitly rebukes.

The sound piece was a cacophony, but as visitors listened more closely and tuned into it, voices separated and recongregated to form their own logic. De la Loza recorded over thirty people, some casually speaking, some giving oral histories, and mixed in loops of Mexican folk songs and hip-hop music. This mash-up created a nonlinear narrative in which stories were suggested rather than told. It echoed off the photos, and provided the aural part of the immersion that enfolded visitors within the intimacy of the installation.

Perhaps the lack of literalness in *Mi Casa Es Su Casa* is what made it approachable at this moment in time. Discussions about decolonization and immigration can become heated because so much emotion surrounds them. There are lives at stake, and there is also a great deal of power in play. Paradigms are shifting, yet not always in the ways we could have imagined. Dialogue and understanding are not always so easy. Sometimes a more poetic approach

through art can, as in *Mi Casa Es Su Casa*, bring it all home in a way that makes learning about each other the most important thing. De la Loza's show also signaled the responsibility of artists who work to deconstruct cultural mythologies. What happens when these representations are successfully pulled apart, as de la Loza did in her exhibition? Perhaps the ongoing challenge for these frontline cultural workers and artmakers is the creation of authentic contemporary mythologies that are unburdened of past baggage or idealized beyond recognition. I suspect that de la Loza's continued inquiries, important voice, and powerful work are doing just that. ■

CLAYTON CAMPBELL is an artist and writer whose newest work, *Tales From The Downslope: But Picking Up Speed Really Fast; Photographs, Short Stories, Commentary* (2018), can be downloaded at www.claytoncampbell.com/book-store.