

LATINO CATALYST



How a Small Ethnic Studies Center Helped Transform Latino Art in Houston

Over the past five years, the University of Houston's Center for Mexican American and Latino/a Studies (CMALS) has significantly impacted the local arts scene, particularly for Latino artists. Through various projects and events, including the city-wide Latino Art Now! (LAN) event in 2019, annual billboard art displays, and the development of a digital artist registry, CMALS has created a digital pathway that amplifies community voices and histories, transforming how Houstonians experience art and culture.

Despite the advances in recognizing Latinos, the nation's largest ethnic minority, their art, history, and cultural expressions have often been underrepresented in mainstream institutions. Houston, a city with deep Mexican cultural roots and a Latino population that exceeds 50%, has particularly lacked accessibility to Latino art and culture, especially in museums. While recent efforts have made some progress, funding for Latino arts and humanities has been insufficient, and there are few stand-alone cultural institutions within Latino neighborhoods.

CMALS's arts projects embody democracy in action, aiming to integrate Latino art into Houston's arts infrastructure. These initiatives began in response to community leaders and artists

protesting the lack of support for Latino artists and arts events. A 2018 study by the National Association of Latino Arts and Culture revealed that less than 5% of Houston's arts funding was allocated to Latino artists. As part of a national research consortium whose members included the Smithsonian, when she discovered the consortium was searching for its next site to host its national Latino Art Now! event, CMALS Director, Dr. Pamela Anne Quiroz, raised her hand and asked, "why not Houston?" This marked the beginning of a transformative effort to embrace and empower the city's Latino arts community.

The organization of *Latino Art Now!* Houston in 2019 was a resounding success, featuring 108 installations, exhibits, and performances by over 200 artists, and involving 70 organizations, including mainstream museums. The event generated substantial media coverage, reaching an estimated 77.2 million people through various channels. To further promote Latino art, CMALS partnered with Clear Channel to produce a public art exhibit of 56 billboards showcasing Latino artists throughout Houston, extending the artwork to digital billboards across Texas.

Dr. Quiroz, alongside Juana Guzman and Dr. Marisela Martinez, developed *Latino cARTographies*, an interactive digital archive

