LATINO CATALYST



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

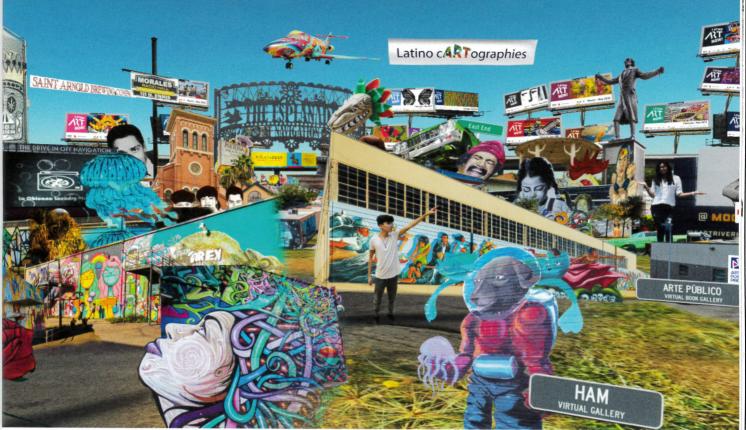
Over the past five years, the University of Houston's Center for Mexican American and Latino/a Studies (CMALS) has significantly impacted the local arts scene, particularly for Latino artists. Through various projects and events, including the city-wide Latino Art Now! (LAN) event in 2019, annual billboard 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 standalone 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



Latino cARTographies Digital Board unveiled September 29, 2022

Opposite page: Veronica Ibarguengoitia EcoPoster, 2019

and public knowledge tool reflecting Houston's Latino art land-scape. This immersive, bilingual touchscreen allows visitors to explore over 250 Latino artists, 81 landmarks, and more than 3,000 images, creating a museum-without-walls experience. Latino cARTographies provides access to personal stories and insights into the motivations and symbolism behind the artworks.

CMALS continued to innovate, presenting annual billboard art displays featuring new Latino artists each year, and offering immersive art programs celebrating local artists and their supporting organizations. These digital projects aim to preserve, educate, and entertain, showcasing Latino art in innovative ways. In 2023, CMALS hosted a free immersive art program that attracted 1,600 attendees across eight showings, resulting in requests from other cities to display the *Latino cARTographies* digital board.

Through these efforts, CMALS has supported the redefinition of American art, hosting art salons, exhibits, and virtual programs. The galvanization of Houston's Latino community to host LAN and the subsequent development of *Latino cARTographies* have shifted the trajectory for Latino artists, sparking new arts initiatives. Collaborations with media partner Gibson Interna-

tional enabled the creation and curation of the digital board, despite the challenges posed by the global pandemic.

Reflecting on these past five years, CMALS has assessed the impact of their initiatives through artist surveys, media coverage, event attendance, and community feedback. The distribution of *Latino cARTographies* to six satellite locations, including the Houston Heritage Society Museum and George Bush Intercontinental Airport, has expanded its reach and impact.

Houston's increased attention to Latino art is evident in the creation of new positions for Latinos in decision-making roles and the development of Latino arts initiatives, such as Houston's BIPOC arts network and the ALMAAHH organization, aiming to establish a Latino Museum. CMALS's contributions have been instrumental in the growth and recognition of Latino art in Houston, offering a model for other cities to capture and preserve the cultural contributions of their diverse communities.

By fostering an inclusive arts environment, CMALS has played a crucial role in transforming Houston's art landscape, ensuring that Latino artists and their rich cultural heritage are celebrated and accessible to all.