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UCSB historian publishes testimonio of consequential Chicano artist Rupert García

The creative expression and critical contribution of California-born artist and educator Rupert García spans decades, his paintings, posters and reassessments of U.S. history running like signposts along the path of his life story.

Despite his substantial output and impact, however, a single collection of García's personal backstory and major works — one that tracks his evolution as an artist and the political upheavals that have shaped his worldview — had yet to exist. A UC Santa Barbara historian has filled that void.

"Rupert García is one of the most significant American artists of the last 50 years," said Mario T. García, a distinguished professor of Chicano/a studies and history and the author of "Rupert García: The Making of an American Artist, a Testimonio."

Published by [Rutgers University Press](#), the book is the first comprehensive text on García's life and art.

In a [free event](#) on campus, Mario García will discuss the book project and its subject with Melinda Gandara, an adjunct faculty member of the American Ethnic Studies Department at Santa Barbara City College and Art History Department at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Their conversation — part of the Interdisciplinary Humanities Center's ongoing Humanities Decanted series on creative projects of UCSB faculty members — takes place 4-5:30 p.m. on Feb. 24 in

the McCune Conference Room on the sixth floor of the Humanities and Social Sciences Building.

Ahead of the event, The Current caught up with Mario García for more on the process of collecting Rupert Garcia's testimonio.

What was it about Rupert Garcia's life and work that appealed to you as a historian?

Although not an art historian, I was aware that Rupert was a major Chicano artist. I had seen some of his powerful images and I used his image of Ruben Salazar as the cover of my book, "Border Correspondent: Selected Writings, 1955-1970" (UC Press, 1995). I was impressed by Rupert's images on social justice, anti-racism and anti-imperialist issues, all of which coincided with my beliefs and principles.

For the uninitiated, how would you describe a testimonio?

A testimonio is a Latin American genre involving an academic or a journalist and a political activist. The technique is oral history. In a testimonio, the subject is rarely in control of the narrative. This is what distinguishes a testimonio from an autobiography. In an autobiography, the writer controls the narrative. In a testimonio, the interviewer structures the narrative with his or her questions.

In addition, a testimonio involves a praxis. Rupert is a committed artist, but he is an activist as well. I want the reader to read Rupert's story, think about it and then, most importantly, act on it. Readers may ask themselves, "How can I be as committed as Rupert on issues of social justice, anti-racism and anti-imperialism and participate in social progressive causes?"

As the collector of the testimonio, what is your goal?

My goal was to capture Rupert's story and his voice. I prepared for our interviews by researching his life story, especially his art. Rupert provided me with many of the catalogs of his various exhibits, and I studied these to get a sense of his themes and his progression as an artist. From this research, I obtained many of my questions.

How did your scholarship guide or otherwise influence the conversation?

My academic training as a scholar led me to examine the work of art historians and artists who have written on Chicano/Latino artists, including Rupert, to learn from them how they approached their work. From some of these writers I took quotes which I inserted in Rupert's narrative in strategic locations. This allowed other voices, especially about Rupert, to be heard in the book.

As you gather a testimony, what techniques do you use to collect biographical information that's both important to history and appealing to readers?

Although Rupert is known for his art, he is also a person with a varied background. I approached this testimonio not as an art historian but as a historian of Chicano history. I wanted to know not only Rupert, the artist, but Rupert, the person. As a result, the first third of the testimonio reads more like a biography because I asked him about his family background in the Central Valley, specifically Stockton, where he grew up. I asked about his education. I asked about his experience in the Air Force during the U.S. war in Vietnam. I asked about his attending San Francisco State University and his classes as an art student and his participation in the 1968-69 Third World Liberation Strike. It's at this time that Rupert begins to systematically produce his art.

The subsequent story covers the evolution over five decades of Rupert's art and so many of my questions were about this evolution and about specific paintings. What is unique in this segment is that rather than having an art historian attempt to analyze Rupert's images, you have Rupert the artist analyzing his own images.

In the end, no art or academic jargon is used, for the most part. It is Rupert telling his story about his life and times.

What are the advantages of somebody like Rupert Garcia giving a testimonio instead of writing a memoir or agreeing to an authorized biography?

The advantages for Rupert to have me write his story is that it is the only way that his whole story would ever be told. Because of all of his art production over the years and his 20 years in teaching as a professor of art at San Jose State University, he would never have the time to write his story. It took my intervention at his encouragement to write his story.

Tags

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