



# Mirror of a Kaleidoscopic Culture

With 80 exhibitions rolling out during September at 70 venues in a 120-mile radius from downtown Los Angeles, an ambitious program hopes to reshape art history from a Latino perspective.

Carlos Almaraz's 'Crash in Phthalo Green' (1984) MUSEUM ASSOCIATES/LACMA

By Peter Plagens

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1 COMMENTS

Los Angeles

The U.S. is the second-largest Spanish-speaking country in the world. Latinos are a plurality in California, with about 45% of the population in the state's eight southernmost counties and just a tick under half the population of Los Angeles County. Glenn Phillips, curator at the alternative space LAXART, says, "We are more similar to Latin America than we are to Europe." Small wonder then that the deputy director of the rich and influential Getty Foundation, Joan Weinstein, admits that the purpose of "Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA," the Getty-sponsored panoply of cultural events, aims to flip "the history of modern and contemporary art, beginning with the Latino perspective."

**Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA**

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Will it work? one is tempted to ask. Sure. But that answer could get torn to shreds in the thickets of identity consciousness (what's "good" to an older Anglo critic might be irredeemably bad to, say, a younger Latino artist), and cultural politics (down the road, huge sums of money and public support are at stake). Suffice it to say that enough of PST LA/LA (those initials cutely standing for "Latin America" and "Los Angeles") is worth looking at to overcome the fact that this third iteration (the first tackled the New York establishment's neglect of West Coast modern art; the second concerned architecture) teeters on the edge of dysfunctional gigantism.

Just how Broddingnagian is this PST? It consists of 80 exhibitions rolling out during September at 70 venues in a 120-mile radius from downtown L.A., and will result in 60 catalogs. The chronological span reaches from pre-Columbian treasures to performance art from, well, right now. The ethnic spread includes Chinese artists living in the Hispanic Caribbean and racially Japanese artists residing in Lima. Exhibition topics include the U.S.-Mexican border ("Bridges, not walls" might as well be offered as a free tattoo at every show), whether craft can be fine art, and queerness among Chicanos. (A language note: "Chicanos" seems to have made a comeback as a designation for Americans of Mexican descent, but the wannabe trend—to gains little the likes of "Latina" and "Latino" with "Latinx"—pronounced "Latinex"—gains little footing in PST.)

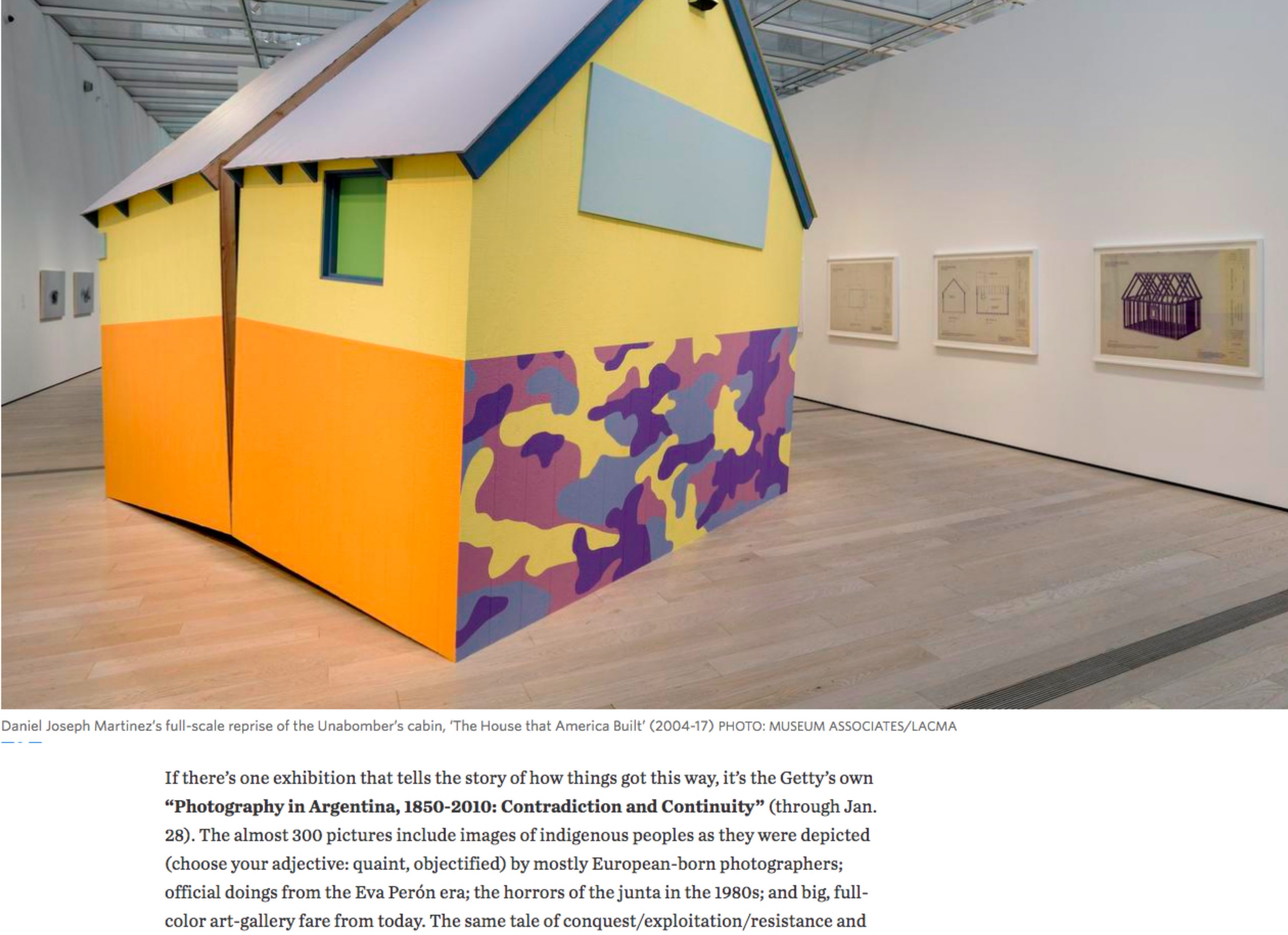


Marcos López 'La reina del trigo' (Galvez, Provincia de Santa Fe ('Queen of Wheat. Galvez, Santa Fe Province'), 1997, print 2017 PHOTO: MARCOS LUPEZ

LA/LA will also stage a plethora of musical and theatrical performances at the Disney Concert Hall, the Hollywood Bowl, and CalArts' Redcat theater downtown. A roster of events not included is probably shorter, and given the godawful traffic in Southern California, anybody planning to see all the PST shows should think of leasing an apartment.

For instance, it took me about three hours total to travel from the small first part of "How to Read El Pato Pascual: Disney's Latin America and Latin America's Disney" (through Jan. 14) at the MAK Center for Art and Architecture (housed in a vintage Raymond Schindler house on the near West Side) to the much bigger second section at the Luckman Fine Arts Complex on the campus of California State University, Los Angeles, in East L.A., and then back across town to lodgings. But the 30 miles at an average of 10 mph were worth it.

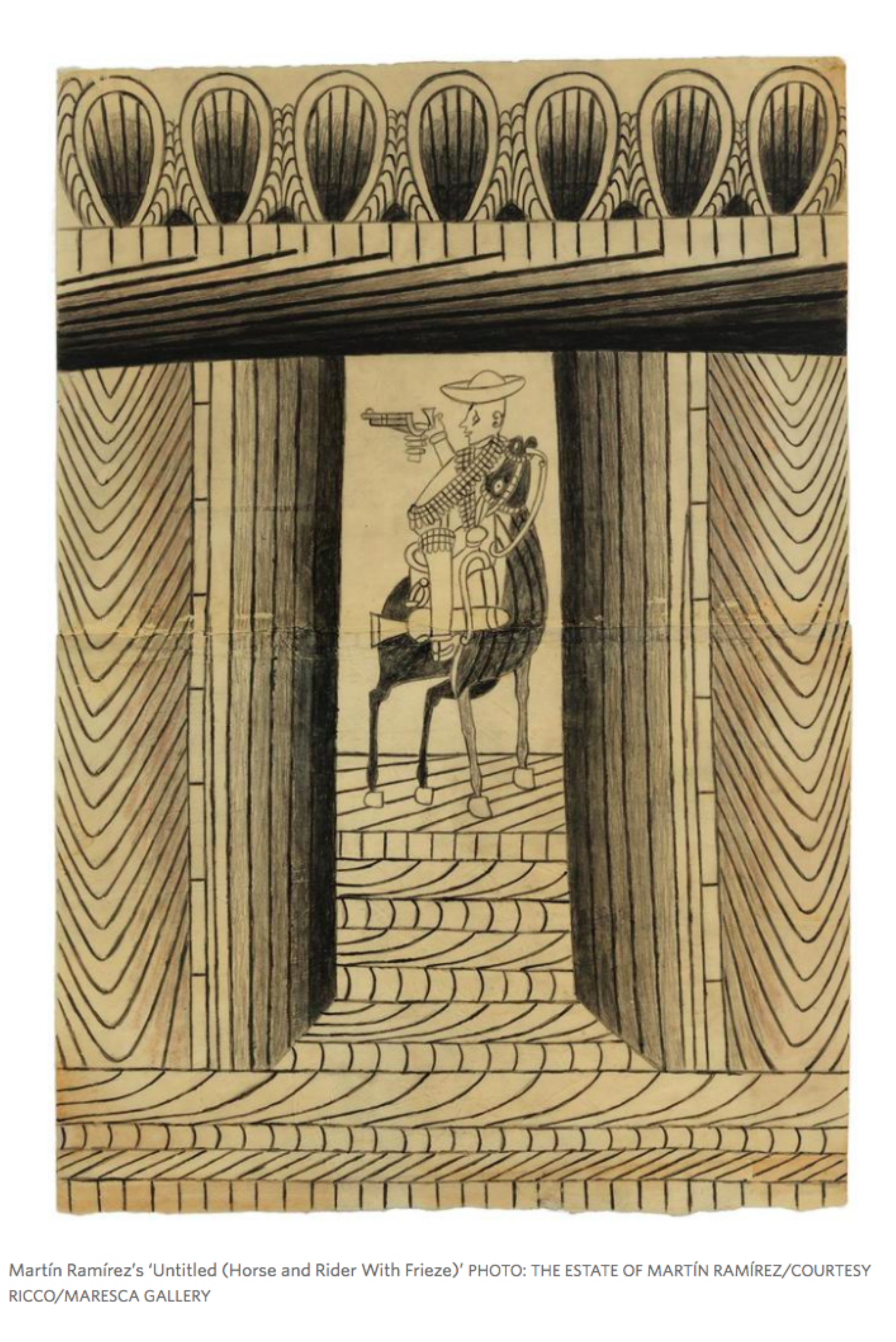
The works in both venues riffed cleverly on Donald Duck (as we know him), a curious avatar for a curious "cultural imperialism" (a term tossed around a lot during PST's opening days). One story has it that an artist in the employ of Diego Rivera gave a lecture on Mexican art to Disney workers displayed an image of a wide-eyed pre-Columbian duck. Fast forward to Disney's "Saludos Amigos," a postwar propaganda film for the Good Neighbor policy, then to all the current Mexican pop-culture and advertising appropriations, and finally to current artists on both sides of the border having cynical fun with the Disney fowl, and you have one leg of PST's leitmotif—inevitable and desirable hybrid culture.



Daniel Joseph Martinez's full-scale reprise of the Unabomber's cabin, 'The House that America Built' (2004-17) PHOTO: MUSEUM ASSOCIATES/LACMA

If there's one exhibition that tells the story of how things got this way, it's the given Jan. 28) "Photography in Argentina, 1850-2010: Contradiction and Continuity" (through Jan. 28). The almost 300 pictures include images of indigenous peoples as they were depicted (choose your adjective: quaint, objectified) by mostly European-born photographers; official doings from the Eva Perón era; the horrors of the junta in the 1980s; and big, full-color art-gallery fare from today. The same tale of conquest/exploitation/resistance and social comment with a certain postmodern glamour to it is told in other PST shows, but—if you have the patience to stand and look at that many photographs on walls—the Getty's show tells it most fully.

The Los Angeles County Museum of Art's "Home—So Different, So Appealing" (an early opener up only through Oct. 15) attempts something of the same sociopolitical critique, but its few wow moments—such as veteran provocateur Daniel Joseph Martinez's most recent full-scale reprise of the Unabomber's cabin (titled, in scolding obviousness, "The House America Built," and painted in Martha Stewart colors)—don't entirely mitigate the exhibition's somewhat chaotic morphological variety. Still, "Home" is essential on anybody's PST tour.



Martín Ramírez's 'Untitled (Horse and Rider With Frieze)' PHOTO: THE ESTATE OF MARTÍN RAMÍREZ/COURTESY RICCO/MARESCA GALLERY

And what of pure pleasure—once thought to be a default component of exhibited art? The Getty's \$16 million in grants to participating institutions plus more from big commercial partners and the venues' own budgets ought to provide a little. For my money, the exhibition that most fills that bill is the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles's breathtakingly uncomplicated installation, in its new East L.A. converted-warehouse space, of "Martín Ramírez: His Life in Pictures, Another Interpretation" (through Dec. 31).

Ramírez (1895-1963) came to the U.S. as a young man to find work on the railroads. Unemployed in the Great Depression, he was picked up as a vagrant and thrown into a typically cruel mental hospital. In the 1940s, the art he made from melted crayons and burnt matches on formats patched together from paper cups and package wrapping was discovered and saved from trashing by a psychiatrist. Ramírez's stunning (there's no other word) drawings, which combine ingenious "outsider" figuration with passionately dizzy patterns, are both heart-breaking and inspiring. Closely following ICA LA's show in the beauty category is LACMA's self-explanatorily titled "Found in Translation: Design in California and Mexico, 1915-1985" (through April 1). As I said to someone with the museum, if there were one exhibition to which I'd like to back up a lift-gate truck at midnight, it's this one.



Sergio Allevato's 'California Flora' PHOTO: SERGIO ALLEVATO

Of the 14 shows I managed to view (see "traffic," above), the foregoing six get a thumbs up. A couple of others—LACMA's retrospective of the Chicano expressionist painter Carlos Almaraz (1941-1989) and the Museum of Contemporary Art's look back at the sculpture and conceptual art of the Brazilian-born (1942) Anna Maria Maiolino—are less than stellar because the work doesn't merit quite the vast space it's given. (The LACMA show runs through Dec. 3, MOCA's through Dec. 31.) To anybody but a publicist, that's a pretty good batting average. And the overall cultural upside to PST LA/LA probably includes increased attention to and attendance at such smaller showing spaces as the Angeles Gate Cultural Center down in San Pedro, and the Torrance Art Museum in the South Bay Area.

That said, PST's extreme diversity (each exhibitor was given curatorial near-cart blanche) approaches incoherence; other than the Spanish language, it's hard to find a unifying factor. The Getty's president, James Cuno, said at the opening press conference that PST LA/LA represents a "moment when art history changed." Not quite. PST LA/LA is a huge Baroque cathedral, not a whole Renaissance.

—Mr. Plagens is an artist and writer in New York.

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