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A Critical Account of Charles Bojorquez's Graffiti Art in Los Angeles

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts

in

Art History, Theory, and Criticism

by

Philomena Jazmin Lopez Rivas

Committee in charge:

Professor Mariana Wardwell, Chair  
Professor Norman Bryson  
Professor Gloria Chacon  
Professor Rubén Ortiz  
Professor Jordan Rose

2020

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Chair

University of California San Diego

2020

DEDICATION

*para mi familia*

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## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

A Critical Account of Charles Bojorquez's Graffiti Art in Los Angeles

By

Philomena Jazmin Lopez Rivas

Master of Arts in Art History, Theory, and Criticism

University of California, San Diego 2020

Professor Mariana Wardwell, Chair

This thesis focuses on a photograph that captures Charles Bojorquez in the act of painting in 1975. The photograph features two writing columns known as *placas* juxtaposed with a 5'x 6' spray-painted image of the stencil *Señor Suerte*. Bojorquez attributes *placas* to pachucos from the 1940's and understands these written documents as representing a form of solidarity. *Señor Suerte* is an illustration of a skeleton lavishly accessorized with a wide brimmed hat outstretching from its face and a fur wrap draping over its clavicle. The skeleton with a grimacing smile outstretches two crossed fingers to its hollow eye sockets. The image of *Señor Suerte* is fragmented into three distinct spaces of interaction along with the reproduction



techniques, meaning attributed to the image by different audiences, circulation and asserted value. The image has three surfaces and circuits to consider: walls of the public space, flesh on the bodies of members from a particular gang, and on canvas. The original 1969 location is on the staircase of the Arroyo Seco Parkway where Charles Bojorquez first spray painted the image. Images reproduced by the artist are fragmentations of the original image. The secondary is a tattoo on the flesh of those who identify with the gang The Avenues, reproduction and circulation of the image occurs parallel to the prison industrial complex by unknown materials, tools, and producers. The third form of fragmentation is as a painting produced by the artist himself on canvas that is either held in private collections or acquired and exhibited in art institutions.

## Introduction

In the predawn morning hours on September 22, 2009, the Los Angeles Police Department and federal Drug Enforcement Administration led a raid with the intent to arrest fifty-four members of The Avenues gang.<sup>1</sup> Charges against the gang included the murder of Juan Abel Escalante-an LA county sheriff's deputy, six other murders, drug-related activity, and undisclosed crimes. Joel Rubin reports in the *Los Angeles Times* that The Avenues gang emerged in the 1950's and had origins in Highland Park and Northeast Los Angeles. The gang has an estimated membership base of 400. Many members are reported to carry the insignia tattoo on their skins described as "a skull with a bullet hole in it...wearing a fedora."<sup>2</sup> In this particular instance, federal agencies of the state apparatus read the tattooed image of the skull as a sign of affiliation with The Avenues. Years later, online records of Bonhams' 2012 Street Art auction mark a 1979 painting of the same grimacing skeleton known as *Señor Suerte* sold for \$50,000 USD.<sup>3</sup> Perplexing to this study is whether or not purchasers in the art market are aware of the criminality associated to the image and its continuous existence as an insignia on brown bodies. Furthermore, the monetary value and circulation of the painting inside a museum indicates that the image simultaneously exists in several spheres. These two paradigms open interrogations on the role of the artist and the different values the moniker emits to varying audiences.

Charles Bojorquez, also known as Chaz, has extensive training in fine arts and enriching travel experiences. He developed his artistic practice in ceramics and painting at Chouinard (1968-1970), painting at California State University Los Angeles (1967-1968), and

<sup>1</sup> Joel Rubin, "Massive raid in Glassell Park nabs 44 avenues gang members." *Los Angeles Times*, September 22 2009. Accessed November 20, 2018, <https://latimesblogs.latimes.com/lanow/2009/09/massive-raid-in-glassell-park-snags-44-avenues-gang-members.html>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Bonhams Urban Art Lot 20 Los Angeles, October 29, 2012. <https://www.bonhams.com/auctions/20511/lot/20/>

calligraphy at the Pacific Asia Art Museum through instruction by Master Yun Chung Chiang (1966-68)<sup>4</sup>. As an adolescent he studied Pre-Columbian art, sculpture, and ceramics at Universidad de Artes Plasticas in Guadalajara, Mexico through SF MOMA. In the late 70's he spent three years traveling the world extensively to learn about calligraphy and script with his partner, Blades; visiting a total of thirty-five countries.

In 1969 Charles Bojorquez created a stenciled image of *Señor Suerte* that was representative of himself. The object and technique for the stencil was derived from the political use of two-tone stencils during the student protests of 1968 in Mexico City. The instrumental political aspect and social engagement commonly seen in Chicano Art is in the image's connecting alliance to the criminalization of gangs. The connection occurred when the image was appropriated by The Avenues and became a visual symbolizing Avenue 43, both a geographical space of the city and gang. We will consider the relationship between individual artist and community collective in regard to the socio-political conditions and policy implemented to criminalize and imprison vulnerable people of color; as this is a group of people that closely identifies with the artist's work. As I develop my work, I will use the appropriate terminology to describe The Avenues, for the time being I alternate between gang and cholo.

These close readings on several distribution modes of a singular image will discuss working class aesthetics in relation to an iconography of Chicano art. There is a sense of obscurity presented by the fragmented spray paint reproductions of the original 1969 and the same could be said for the process of tattooing the image onto the bodies of the inmates, since the materials and techniques unknown to us.<sup>5</sup> Ambiguity relates to the unknown aspects of the

<sup>4</sup> He attended Chouinard before it was revamped as CalArts. He had to reapply during his second year and was denied acceptance to continue his education there.

<sup>5</sup> Based on personal conversation with Norman Bryson, November 2018.

gang and the detachment language presents. Despite the fact that paintings on canvas succeeding the photograph are simple in shape and form in a similar manner to the writing style seen in earlier roll calls, they are not easily comprehensible.

The trace of the social circumstances the image and the paintings are interconnected to includes the history of the Zoot Suit riots of 1943 and the incarceration of people in the prison industrial complex. Arguably, the artwork's close association to the socio-historical and political experiences of people assaults the spectator. Last year marked the 50<sup>th</sup> year anniversary since the creation of the image in 1969. The time span expanding over five decades provides us with the opportunity to consider how tagging, doubly marginalized from the mainstream art world and Chicano exhibitions, was pivotal to the personal identity of the artist and the foundation for his Chicano art.

## Section 1: Street

In a 1975 photograph taken by Blades, a large stencil with black paint residue lies next to Chaz facing a wall containing a spray-painted image and two *placas*. The photograph of the spray-painted image and indistinguishable writing forms are part of an art historical tradition of writing in Mexican American communities. Art historian Marcos Sanchez-Tranquilino provides a clear definition for the term, he defines the documents also known as roll calls as a “public display of kingship ties, corporate liaisons, territorial ownership (or dominance) and collective strength.”<sup>6</sup> The stencil of the skeleton titled *Señor Suerte* that Bojorquez produced in the public space of his Highland Park neighborhood functioned in a similar manner to the roll calls. *Placas* feature aliases for individuals and groups, the written documents that list names of Chaz’s acquaintances have a strong demand to be understood and read. The organizing layout directs a viewer to read the name of the group, members, and individual who wrote it. Bojorquez’s first-person accounts provide detailed explanations of his practice where he explains the connection between advertisement design layouts to roll calls:

This squarish, prestigious typeface was meant to present to the public a formal document, encouraging gang strength and creating an aura of exclusivity. The placa is written in a contemporary high advertising format, with a headline, body copy, and a logo. These three major building blocks of corporate public advertising can also describe the type layout from ancient Sumerian clay tablets to the Constitution of the United States. The headline states the gang or street name, the body copy is your rollcall list of everyone’s gang name, and the logo refers to the person who wrote it by adding his tag at the end... Besides just looking at the surface, this is an image that demands to be read and understood. These inscriptions achieve incredible sophisticated aesthetic heights and disclose the concerns of the neighborhood.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Marcos Sanchez-Tranquilino, “Mi Casa No Es Su Casa: Chicano Murals and Barrio Calligraphy as Systems of Signification at Estrada Courts, 1972-1978,” (Master’s Thesis, UCLA, 1991),48.

<sup>7</sup> Charles “Chaz” Bojórquez, interview with Karen Davalos, September 25, 27, and 28, and October 2, 2007, Los Angeles, California. CSRC Oral Histories Series, no. 5. Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2013.

In another account from his essay “Graffiti is Art!!: Los Angeles 'CHOLO' Style Graffiti Art,” Chaz elaborates “I designed and built commercial art for fifteen years until 1986. That experience made me understand the true nature and sheer power of mass advertising.”<sup>8</sup> Despite having a straightforward conceptual model that seemingly presents a clear document to be read and understood, the text cannot always be interpreted because difficulty in reading is a desirable goal and Bojorquez’s style is not entirely accessible to all. The limited audience is a distinction to his work in the realm of advertisement, where legibility is also an important factor. A mindful concealment of power in the highly stylized letters resonates with prison kite documents written inside prisons. Like *placas*, kites can be read by a selected audience and raise complications on accessibility based on insider and outsider knowledge.

An understanding and interpretation of the text leads to enunciating the names where the speech act is indicated by quotation marks surrounding the *placas*. In contrast to anthropologist Susan Phillips who approaches writing as a text to be decrypted or decoded, Marcos Sanchez- Tranquilino interprets the message behind *placas*. Both of these scholars position themselves in relation to the art they are studying, either as familiar or unfamiliar with writing. I was able to read a portion of the work based on my own knowledge and understanding and by using information from Bojorquez’s oral history interview led by art historian Karen Mary Davalos. Most significantly, it was brought to my attention that the writing is written vertically instead of horizontally after @dekovicious661 commented on an Instagram post from November 30, 2018. The header on the *placa* on the left says “veteranos,” the second row is a set of nine triangles indicating space. There are nine names written vertically. From left to right the first five names can possibly state “blades,” “eaton,”

<sup>8</sup> Charles “Chaz” Bojorquez, “Graffiti is Art!!: Los Angeles 'CHOLO' Style Graffiti Art,” <http://www.graffitiwrite.com/GraffitiisArt.htm>

“fisheye,” “ronnie,” “delilah.” Outside the enclosed block is another set of writing, “Chaz, Ave 43, C/S, año loco 1975.”<sup>9</sup> C/S is *con safos*, meaning with protection or respect. The *placa* on the right states “veteranas.” The first column is written from the bottom to the top it says “la loca.” A set of crosses in the block indicate space similar to the “veteranos” *placa*. The first two of the seven names are “blades,” and “delilah.” Furthermore, the significance of the number 43 is elaborated in the 1975 book *Street Writers: A Guided Tour of Chicano Graffiti* by photographer Gusmano Cesaretti. He explains that the Highland Park borough provided the surrounding community with several numerical avenues to identify with:

Kids are born in the avenues, like Avenue 43, Avenue 52. So they get the name from the street and carry it along. The avenue they come from becomes important. They write their name, and the name of the avenue. It’s a community symbol. There may be several gangs from the same avenue, but they all write “Avenue 43”<sup>10</sup>

Like the kids Cesaretti was describing, Chaz carried out this community symbol “Ave 43” in his early works on the Arroyo Seco riverbed that runs along the historic “first freeway of the west.” The Pasadena Parkway was built in 1940 following the route of the Arroyo Seco from the San Gabriel Mountains into the Los Angeles River, this passage was used by Tongva Native Americans.

Writing is part of a vernacular Latino language that has historically materialized in spaces inhabited by working class Latino groups from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present moment. This time period is supported from various accounts including from Bojorquez and Jerry and Sally Romotsky. Initial origins of roll calls in Los Angeles are credited to Latino shoeshine boys who marked their territory on the sidewalk using daubers followed by Pachucos

<sup>9</sup> C/S means *con safos*, see Sylvia Ann Grider, “Con Safos: Mexican-Americans, Names and Graffiti,” *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 88, No. 348 (Apr. - Jun., 1975), pp. 132-142 Published by: American Folklore Society Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/539192>

<sup>10</sup> Gusmano Cesaretti, *Street Writers: A Guided Tour of Chicano Graffiti*, ed. Tony Cohan, (Acrobat Books: Los Angeles), 1975.

who used sticks and tar to mark their names on the Los Angeles River.<sup>11</sup> I suggest that following historical events such as the Zoot Suit Riots of 1943 when sailors and marines violently attacked Mexican youth, roll calls signified presence in contested spaces.<sup>12,13</sup>

The relationship individuals have to power is in the resistance to subjugation under imposed laws. Mauricio Mazón reminds us that the Zoot Suitor is a complex figure in U.S. society, as the idealized figure contains ideas of nationhood, patriotism, and assimilation. The resistance to assimilate to a dominant white culture is traced by the artist to Zoot Suitors in the 40's, Pachucos in the 50's, cholos and vatos in the 60's and 70's. The correlation between the symbolic figure of the pachuco to that of the cholo offers the opportunity to create a new Chicano image. In "The Representation of Cultural Identity Zoot Suit 1981" Rosa Linda Fregoso examines the depiction of Chicano barrios in popular culture. Fregoso states that negative portrayals of Mexicans have existed as early as the nineteenth century and the strategy of Chicanos being intentional in the affirmation of a new Chicano identity "have indeed refashioned alternative national/cultural identities that deconstructed the explicitly racist discourse of U.S. culture."<sup>14</sup> Bojorquez follows this narrative in his description and understanding of cholos, pointing to the complexity of Chicano figures where cholos and vatos doesn't necessarily indicate criminal.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Bojorquez, "Stroke as Identity" in *Cholo Writing: Latino Gang Graffiti in Los Angeles*, Francois Chastanet, Dokument Press, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Charles "Chaz" Bojórquez, interview with Karen Davalos, September 25, 27, and 28, and October 2, 2007, Los Angeles, California. CSRC Oral Histories Series, no. 5. Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2013.

<sup>13</sup> See Acuna; Griffith; Madrid; Mazon; McWilliams

<sup>14</sup> Rosa Linda Fregoso, "The Representation of Cultural Identity in Zoot Suit (1981)" in *Theory and Society*, October 1993, Volume 22, Issue 5, pp 659-674.



## Section 2: Flesh: *Señor Suerte* Tattoos

In the 1967 sketch the skeleton resembles the figure smoking a joint on the product packaging of ZIG-ZAG cigarette rolling papers. Bojorquez deliberately omitted the joint and thus skewed the direct reference to the ZIG-ZAG product because he did not want to deliver the message of drug use to his community. The skeleton's choice of apparel marked by an extravagant fur collared long coat and wide brimmed hat is aligned with the style of black culture as exemplified in the 1972 film *Super Fly*. The life span of the image begins in 1969 with stencil's first inception as a spray-painted reproduction and its momentary suspension in 1986. Soon, the burgeoning skull that was once only visible on public surfaces flowing alongside the stream of the Arroyo Seco, expanded onto breathing flesh becoming significant to people living in the neighborhood as a sacred image of protection. On flesh, *Señor Suerte* served as a talisman to protect the individual who carries it from gunshots. The image of *Señor Suerte* as a form of protection correlates with La Virgen de Guadalupe tattoos and the Zapotec god Xipe Totec who dressed himself in human flesh.

Symbols of protection on the body and the creation of a "body altar" are similar to the reproductions of La Virgen de Guadalupe tattoos on the backs of individuals where the body is a site of spiritual and religious meaning. La Virgen de Guadalupe is a reoccurring icon in Chicano art, her image appeared as a symbol during the Mexican War of Independence and in posters during the Delano strikes. La Virgen is also reframed in artworks by Esther Hernandez, Alma Lopez, Yolanda Lopez, and Cesar Martinez. Graciela Iturbide's *La frontera* and Delilah Montoya's *La Guadalupana* (1999) both capture La Virgen de Guadalupe tattoos. The photographs demonstrate the placing of the tattoo on the backs of individuals as symbols of protection. In her essay "The Digital Imprint and the Guadalupe En Piel" Delilah Montoya explains that the common ritual practice of tattooing La Virgen de Guadalupe is purposeful and

falls under a collective consciousness. Montoya elaborates that the cholo figure can be viewed as the god Xipe Totec. Mesoamerican scholar John Pohl provides a clear summary of Xipe Totec from Codex Rios:

Thipetotec is he whom we have mentioned above as performing penance, like an Quetzalcoatl, on the mountain of thorns. They named him The Mournful Combatant: they celebrated a great festival in his honor, which they called Tlaxipehualiztli (Tlacaxipehualiztli). He was one of the gods of the Tzapotecas (Zapotecs). They dressed themselves on his festival in human skins taken from those whom they had slain in war; because they say that he was the first who clothed himself in this manner.<sup>15</sup>

Delilah Montoya's connection between cholos and Xipe Totec is based on the totality informed by dualistic views of male and female energies present in the image of La Virgen. Most importantly to Montoya is the materiality of flesh and not the placement of the tattoo on the body. Influences between tilma, skin, and attributed symbolism are explained:

If one considers the tilma as an Aztec ritual cloak that was worn by Juan Diego when the Guadalupe miraculously imprinted her image onto the maguey fabric, the cloth is not only a symbolic "magical alteration of reality," but also becomes a metaphor for the second skin. For Aztec society, the second skin evokes the memory of the Xipe Totec's flayed skin garment, which was presented to this deity following sacrificial rituals in observance of military and fertility rites. The Xipe Totec was believed to be the male equivalent to the earth and moon goddesses, Tonantzin. During the ritual, the male youth to be flayed wears a mask made of female skin as a symbolic representation of Tonantzin, who some suggest is reincarnated as the Guadalupe. The tilma is associated with the Xipe Totec ritual, because the sacrificial female, representing the goddess Tonantzin, wears a maguey tilma as part of the ceremony. With all this in mind, the contemporary tattooing of the Guadalupe onto the back of the Hispanic inmate is not an odd coincidence – that is, if one trusts the collective consciousness. In many ways this practice suggests a ritual act meant to provide protection against harm and also empowers the inmate during conflict by wearing "Our Lady." In following the myth, the tattooed inmate can be thought of as a symbolic Xipe Totec who is the male aspect of Tonantzin and, by wearing the Guadalupe, he empowers himself with both the male

<sup>15</sup> John Pohl, "John Pohl's Mesoamerica Ancient Books: Borgia Group Codices, A Colonial Era Decipherment of Codex Rios, (Borgia Group)," *FAMSI*. <http://www.famsi.org/research/pohl/jpcodices/rios/index.html>

and female energies.<sup>16</sup>

I believe that tattooing *Señor Suerte* is comparable tattooing images of Guadalupe because it is also understood to protect and empower the individual. Moreover, associations to Xipe Totec through the wearing of the skin parallels the adoration of the body with images as discussed by Serge Gruzinski in *Images at War: Mexico from Columbus to Blade Runner (1492-2019)*.

Gruzinski emphasizes that images served as vehicles for cultural mestizaje and looks beyond the signifier and signified binary in search of the role religious images played during colonial Mexico. Christian images or imaginaire entailed a fluidity to redisplay themselves and were in a constant battle against Mexican idols of worship resulting in a war of images. These images do not have one fixed meaning or truth, instead we can see how they are vehicles for communication in the same capacity as speech and writing.<sup>17</sup> La Virgen de Guadalupe is a prime example used to illustrate and provide evidence for Gruzinski's argument. Written sources point to a preconquest place of worship known as Tepeyac hill to honor the mother of the gods Toci, then known as Tonantzin. The hill was repurposed to worship La Virgen de Guadalupe after Juan Diego's miracle of roses. Gruzinski's concept of the baroque body that adorns itself with *ixiptla*, the many manifestations of the gods in Nahuatl, fragments the distance between idols and worshipper.<sup>18</sup> A critical inspiration stems from Alfredo López Austin's *Hombre Dios* that influenced Gruzinski's argument on *ixiptla*. *Xip* translates to "piel, cascara, o cobertura," skin, shell, or coverage and *is* the gods.<sup>19</sup> Gruzinski asks, if the baroque body, now considered to be a "virtual flesh retable," can be considered the corporeal

<sup>16</sup> Delilah Montoya, "The Digital Imprint and the Guadalupe En Piel," December 5, 2000. accessed February 24, 2019. <http://www.delilahmontoya.com/Essays/DigitalImprintGuadalupeEnPiel.html>

<sup>17</sup> Gruzinski, *Images at War*, 3.

<sup>18</sup> Serge Gruzinski, *Images at War: Mexico from Columbus to Blade Runner (1492-2019)*, Duke University Press: Durham and London, 2001.

<sup>19</sup> Alfredo López Austin, *Hombre-Dios: Religión y Política en El Mundo Nahuatl*, (Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1989), 119.

culmination of sanctuaries?”<sup>20</sup> The baroque body adorns itself with paintings and tattoos and breaks the boundary between body and image to become a shrine itself. The framework of *ixiptla* raises the concern on what was being represented by *Señor Suerte* before and after The Avenues decided to tattoo their bodies. The Avenues gang provides an additional value apart from monetary value. The epistemic state violence in the policing of migrant neighborhoods, the exploitation of people within the prison industrial complex, clandestine territorial marker, and protection have important implications for the study of Chaz’s work.

### The Avenues Gang

In the *Señor Suerte* tattoo the expansion onto flesh indicates a form of political alliance by the artist where the tattoo is of and for the streets. While the value of the image increased once in circulation in the market, the street value and meaning of the tattooed image was also in flux with the varying numbers of membership and reproductions. The social conditions of The Avenues were neither stagnant nor pacified. The invocation of fear into larger U.S. society through the slogan of “wrong way death” propelled by mass media created a stereotype around the terror of Latino cholos killing innocent white children, while gang on gang violence was somehow sociably acceptable. Mass media outlets delivered a sensationalized narrative on gangs including The Avenues to mainstream U.S. society, such as the homicide of three-year-old Stephanie Kuhlen in 1995 that brought The Avenues to nationwide attention. The History Channel series *Gangland* aired an episode on The Avenues titled “Highway to Hell” on February 5, 2009.<sup>21</sup> The episode that states the mid 1980’s saw an alleged increase in the gang

<sup>20</sup> Serge Gruzinski, “Images and Cultural Mestizaje in Colonial Mexico, *Poetics Today*, Vol 16, No. 1, Loci of Enunciation and Imaginary Constructions: The Case of (Latin) America, II (Spring 1995), pp 53-77, 67.

<sup>21</sup> Hewlitt, R. (Director) (2009). Highway to hell [Television series episode]. In Pearman, V. (Executive Producer), *Gangland: Season 4, Episode 1*. Los Angeles, CA: The History Channel.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I6x7dmpK160>

membership with five hundred members, which parallels the time period when Bojorquez did not see ownership over the image. Several visual key factors in this mass media broadcast including sound effects, narration voice, and terminology used to dehumanize people including “gangsters” deliver an emotional rhetoric of fear. According to *Gangland*, there had been a previous confrontation earlier the evening of November 3, 1995. Three year old Stephanie was a passenger in a vehicle that took a wrong turn and was mistaken for a rival gang. In the coverage of the homicide by *The New York Times*, CNN, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *LA Weekly*, the reporters and voices of community members interviewed criticize the selected coverage of the event because similar homicides involving other innocent children were not covered by mainstream media outlets and these homicides did not receive legislative action in Washington D.C. like the Kuhen case did. *Gangland* provides a pseudohistorical account and journalism covering the incident provides investigative information around similar crimes in the 90’s and includes voices of the community members. *The New York Times* reported:

Hovering along the dusty alley where 3-year-old Stephanie Kuhen was slain last weekend, residents of the mostly Hispanic Cypress Park neighborhood shared the shock and anguish of the city at large. But they also expressed their particular despair that it had taken the death of a white child to draw attention to the urban war zone in which they live.<sup>22</sup>

CNN stated: “That gang, as well as others in that area, are getting more and more violent as time goes on; primarily because the police department just does not have the resources to handle that type of situation,’ said Lt. Harold Clifton of the Los Angeles police department.”<sup>23</sup> More locally, Gregory Rodriguez for *The Los Angeles Times* reported

In 1995, Stephanie's was one of 10 gang-related murders of children under age 10 in Los Angeles County. Among the victims were three 1-year-olds and one 2-year-old.

<sup>22</sup> Kenneth B. Noble, “Child Is Slain, and a Neighborhood Voices Its Frustrations, *New York Times*, September 22, 1995 <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/09/22/us/child-is-slain-and-a-neighborhood-voices-its-frustrations.html>

<sup>23</sup> Wrong turn costs a child's life." CNN. September 18, 1995.

Presumably, these Latino and black children were no less innocent than Stephanie. Nor were their deaths less tragic. Yet, why did their murders not make front-page headlines or prompt calls to clamp down on gang violence?<sup>24</sup>

Finally, LA Weekly reports

In Washington, D.C., Stephanie's death touched lawmakers, who granted Los Angeles \$1 million to help pay for a team of 14 more police officers, a few prosecutors and probation officers to concentrate on arresting and prosecuting the Cypress Park gang members.<sup>25</sup>

The state's decision to arrest and heavily prosecute gang members shows the inability to act beyond the prison industrial complex and implement forms of restorative justice. Instead of considering equal access to higher education and after school programs as viable solutions proposed to prevent the incarceration of vulnerable youth of color, Washington D.C. granting Los Angeles the funds to incarcerate people is a prime example of the racist ideology of the 80's and 90's that built new prisons in California. Issues of the working-class Latino neighborhoods area are not brought into consideration. We are reminded by Angela Davis in *Are Prisons Obsolete?* that penitentiary sentences need to be abolished as the solution to social and economic conditions, but as Joel Rubin reports in the Los Angeles Times, "Most of the Avenues members and associates included in the indictment are being charged under the federal Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act, which allows prosecutors to pursue more serious prison sentences."<sup>26</sup> In consideration of the prison time system as the basis to enact punishment so eloquently explained by Angela Davis, punishment in the form of time inside the prison "resonates with the role of labor-time as the basis for computing the value of

<sup>24</sup> Gregory Rodriguez, "Is the Value We Place on a Child's Life Colorblind?" *Los Angeles Times*, June 08, 1997 [http://articles.latimes.com/1997-06-08/opinion/op-1246\\_1\\_cypress-park](http://articles.latimes.com/1997-06-08/opinion/op-1246_1_cypress-park)  
<http://articles.latimes.com/1999/jul/18/local/me-57198>

<sup>25</sup> Janet Gilmore, "Avenue of Assassins' Quieter: Gangs Still Feared Where Lost Family Ambushed," *Daily News*, Los Angeles, CA, February 24, 1997.

<sup>26</sup> Joel Rubin, "Massive raid in Glassell Park nabs 44 avenues gang members." *Los Angeles Times*, September 22 2009. Accessed November 20, 2018

<sup>27</sup> Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003).

capitalist commodities.”<sup>28</sup> Davis contends that the prison sentence correlates to the calculation of labor-time into measurable time and money. The moment when the commodity form surfaced correlates to the period when penitentiary sentences became a principle procedure to enact punishment.

Furthermore, Bojorquez’s writing style is in direct conversation with prisoners counting time, his line work conceptually symbolizes the time of serving a prison sentence. The 1970 exhibition “Chicano Graffiti: The Signatures and Symbols of Mexican-American Youth” displayed ten bunk beds from the old Lincoln Heights Jail and a towel from Juvenile Hall. The bottom of one bed revealed names, romantic and religious symbolism, and various calendars used to count time. A simple system of lines and dots invented by Chaz also represents counting time. The lines in two of Bojorquez’s letters, the W’s and M’s are written in the same manner as tallying years in prison, these letters “are three lines straight down with the X on them, like when you’re counting time in prison four lines and an X. Four would be five.”<sup>29</sup> Lines indicating counting the time span of prison sentences is a subtle conceptual approach and crucial when considering how Chaz aligns his practice to social concerns.

The spray-painted image and tagged writing were created from the conditions of the street that encompass the visual vernacular language and was made with the intent to contribute back to that dialogue. Bojorquez was aware of the new mode of circulation his image had acquired in prison by the gang and recognized the popularity of the image, he explains the image is derivative based on a previous rendition on the body, the finished product is based from a pre-existing copy,

Taking a photo. Either somebody has a photo—but rarely. It’s just copied from some other prisoner to another cholo member and all that... It’s all done in prison. That’s not in tattoo shops. This is all of prison gang symbols, all done in prisons. So over a thousand

<sup>28</sup> Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete*, 42-44.

<sup>29</sup> Charles “Chaz” Bojórquez, interview with Karen Davalos, 146.

men with that. And they said if you wear that and if you get a shot, the skull will protect you, that you won't die. That's what they tell me... It started happening around—during the '70s, definitely in the '80s. It lost total contact with the artist or symbol.<sup>30</sup>

There is a blatant difference between parlor tattoos and prison tattoos because of the mechanisms used to attain tattoos in prison include unmeasurable amount of labor in hours, the exchange value, and risks involved. In the article "Tattoos, Abjection, and the Political Unconscious: Toward a Semiotics of the Pinto Visual Vernacular," B.V. Olguín argues that the criminalized *tatuaje* (tattoo) is "a potential site of individual resistance and collective empowerment" and an access point to the discourse established by Chicano convicts.<sup>31</sup> The process of tattooing inside the prison where the instruments are considered to be contraband enables convicts the opportunity to rearticulate themselves as counterhegemonic, the successfully completed tattoo illustrates the failure of the prison panopticon. Furthermore, a successful tattoo where several players are involved provides the prospect for convicts to be collectively transgressive.

Appropriation of the *Señor Suerte* imagery skews the intellectual property rights of the artist because The Avenues also continuously reproduced the image in a mode of circulation where the image became synonymous to them. The secondary meaning presents a rupture to the original meaning of the image where a new affiliation between the gang and the image presents a challenge to the initial association of the image when it was directly symbolic to Bojórquez. We recall Joel Rubins reporting for *The Los Angeles Times* stating that the gang carried an insignia of the skull on their bodies, separating the image from the artist who made it. While the stenciled image was confined to walls of the public sphere and street, the tattoo was earned and was not reproduced under the same conditions dependent on the artist spray-

<sup>30</sup> Charles "Chaz" Bojórquez, interview with Karen Davalos, 142.

<sup>31</sup> Olguín, B. V. "Tattoos, Abjection, and the Political Unconscious: Toward a Semiotics of the Pinto Visual Vernacular." *Cultural Critique*, no. 37 (1997): 159-213. doi:10.2307/1354544.



painting the image or tattooing the image on the body.

### Section 3: Canvas

In a like manner of numerous renditions, we can dispute whether or not the first spray painted image was intended to be a single work of art. Wide existence and visibility on the street was dependent on its reproductions in an unfolding manner of mirroring and duplication. In a painting of a *Chaz Skull* taken in 1969 on Pasadena Arroyo Freeway and in a photograph of a 1979 painting demonstrate how the artists perceived originality and duplication. *Señor Suerte* faces left in a 1969 image on the spiral staircase of the northbound 110 Pasadena Freeway entering Highland Park. The image was visible to incoming traffic entering the Highland Park area for a span of 15 years. *Señor Suerte* faces right in a 1979. I believe the direction the skeleton is facing distinguishes an aspect originality, *Señor Suerte* is also facing to the right in the 1975 photograph initially introduced. The image was intentionally reversed by Chaz.

Consideration on the changing intention in creating art for a public surface and art for a gallery or museum space raises questions on ownership and how the work is able to operate on different levels while still sustaining its protective ability in an alternative sphere.

Exhibition history of *Señor Suerte* and text based paintings shown in “Chicanarte” (1975); *Roll/Call* exhibited in “Chicano Art Resistance and Affirmation” (1990-1993) and *Ano Loco XIV92 Por Dios y Oro* at LACMA bring forth aspects previously discussed: the vernacular written tradition of Caló, youth culture, the historical events involving Mexican Americans, gangs, and the circulation in the street and on the body. *Señor Suerte* was validated by the art world, entered the art market, and became available as a commodity for consumption when it was shown in the exhibition space. Bojorquez first presented the stenciled image *Señor Suerte* as a painting on canvas in the 1975 exhibition “Chicanarte” at Los Angeles Municipal Art

Gallery in Barnsdall Park.<sup>35</sup> <sup>32</sup>The group show was organized by Comité Chicano and was the first statewide exhibition to group over a hundred Chicano artists. It was also a pivotal turning point in a purposeful creation of art considered to be Chicano that took into consideration a different audience and overall purpose.

Well, okay. It is '69 to the early '70s. I kept it totally separate. Actually, the first exhibit that I actually had with my skull was at the Chicano.[The] painting...and where I actually put the skull on the canvas, and took the canvas to a gallery, and exhibited in an art show. It turned that graffiti into something else...my skull tagging painting is basically ground zero. It's the core of my Chicano artwork was this skull tag, Señor Suerte. Mr. Lucky. And when I put it into the gallery, it changed it, because then—this is a long argument for the next twenty-five, thirty years, it's up until recently that I realized in retrospect that it's not graffiti anymore when it goes into a gallery. You know? It's argumentative. We can go back and forth and all that. But what really happens, graffiti is really what you do in the streets. There's an intent and purpose and a function into the streets. And the audience is different.<sup>33</sup>

The 1979 painting shown above was sold for \$50,000 USD and was exhibited in the 2008 exhibition “Los Angeles/Chicano Painters of L.A.: Selections from the Cheech Marin Collection” at Los Angeles County Museum of Art.<sup>34</sup> Rigid angular tags that have been present in barrios since the early 20th century assault outsiders both in the streets and in the museum by confronting visual and cultural understanding. The 1990-1993 traveling exhibition “Chicano Resistance and Affirmation” (CARA) organized at UCLA in 1983 by Cecelia Klein and Shifra Goldman showcased a Bojórquez painting synonymous to his writing titled *Placa/Rollcall*. The painting was a gift from the artist and is now part of the Smithsonian's permanent collection, it was last exhibited when it was part of the exhibition “Our America: The Latino Presence in American Art” in 2013. The institutional space of the gallery presents a rather interesting turn

<sup>32</sup> Boris Groys, *Art Power*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008.

<sup>33</sup> Charles “Chaz” Bojórquez, interview with Karen Davalos, 103.

<sup>34</sup> This exhibition coincided with “Phantom Sightings” at LACMA

in the projection of meaning because the gallery allows for a miniscule refraction from the immediate environment while still containing an access to language.

The complex writing system used in Charles Bojorquez's, *Ano Loco XIV92 Por Dios y Oro* reveals Chicano identity: Mexicano, Americano, Latino, Chicano, Hispano, Mestizo. One of the dates indicates a significant historical event, the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, a moment that Chicanos recognize as theft of the land of Aztlan by the United States. Furthermore, what are the cultural semantics evoked by Bojorquez's complex stylized writing system? Who has the agency to decipher it? How does graffiti as a form of communication operate once it is displaced from its original context of the streets and placed inside an art museum? As expressed in the exhibition "Mex/ L.A., Mexican Modernism(s) in Los Angeles, 1930-1985" presented at the Museum of Latin American Art, Los Angeles and Mexico share a parallel visual language based on the growth of the city and migration across the border. In the article "On Populist Reason and Chicano Modernisms," Mariana Botey groups Chaz Bojorquez's *Ano Loco XIV92 Por Dios y Oro* (1992) with other Chicano artists in relation to formation of Mexican-Chicano Modernisms based on a reemergence of 1930's Mexican renaissance.<sup>35</sup> Botey argues that a phantom language can carry many meanings, myth, and history. The morphing of a name into a sign is a quasi-hieroglyph that brings a Chicano experience and culture forward. Decrypted signs are hieroglyphics of modernity because they don't occur in the mainstream, but are rather geographically based to specific centers, in this case Los Angeles.

The conditions of the streets are brought into the museum space for an encounter with a different viewer and audience. The work of art gains from expansion onto canvas without

<sup>35</sup> Mariana Botey "On Populist Reason and Chicano Modernisms" in Mex/L.A. "Mexican" Modernism(s) in Los Angeles, 1930-1985 ed Selene Preciado. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2011, 74-83.

changing the meaning it has to the gang. A failure in reading and interpreting the writing allows for the work to function as a purely visual object because like advertisements, these letter forms also demand to be interpreted and read. Although the synchronicity of tags with imagery is a cryptic visual language that is difficult to decode, the viewer has an entrance to the work based on the familiarity of the language and style present in tags and roll calls.

The art market has created an economy for street art and purchasers who have the desire to acquire art associated with defiance against the state but is created and presented in a different set of conditions. The different values of the image raise an inquiry into the impact violence has on the perception of the work and the changing meaning in flux throughout five decades.

Violence operates as a trace to the social conditions that inform the works of art activated in the arc of perception and recognition. The connotations of systemic violence that inform the reversibility of meaning that occurs in the street and mainstream museum space challenges the aesthetic experience for the art consumer. Readability or misunderstanding creates a friction between accessibility and inaccessibility in consideration of class and race oppression, gangs, and criminality that is carried formally and thematically by the image. The perception of violence seen by a viewer correlate to art appreciation and vandalism, where if violence is solely recognized then graffiti paintings may be perceived as vandalism and as illegal. On the opposite end of the spectrum in the acknowledgement of violence, if violence is disregarded, the viewer perceives the aesthetically pleasing end result: a painting. The social criteria involved in reading the texts are skewed in the neutral spaces of the gallery and museum.

## Public Art and Political Identity

People who were in power to create art exhibitions for the general public openly perpetuated a form of institutional marginalization of Chicano artists from museum spaces. In addition to the exclusion of artists self-identifying as Chicano from mainstream spaces was the derogatory views toward graffiti and tagging because of the limited perspective that it was merely attributed to *cholo* culture. Bojorquez continuously emphasizes that graffiti was not art.

After a couple years I started showing these paintings in a couple of places in East LA like Self Help Graphics... they all hated it. Sister Karen, bless her heart, I love that woman, but she said 'This is gutter art. This is anti-Chicano. We're trying to push the Chicano identity, and this gangster art, this bad boy art is undermining everything we do.' Because Chicano to them was Cesar Chavez, family, religion, suppression, migration, all that. They said this ain't Chicano art! I said, OK they don't get it. I was confident that I knew enough about art... I was still young, but I was stubborn enough to say this is fine art, this is about identity, this is a social statement, this is about who we are. In some ways I hated conceptual art, but it was conceptual.<sup>36</sup>

Furthermore

I was in a big show in San Diego of Cheech's art, and the curator said she didn't know why I was in the show. She didn't think I was part of that Chicano movement. I said, this is our words, and our own voice. Latinos and curators gave me the hardest time

Although Bojorquez did not create art that was in formally representative of the initiatives of the Chicano art community, his practice transcends back to 1920's and 30's by rematerializing written art forms and raises notions of violence.

While we have a rich understanding of graffiti from the 1970's and a large body of gallery artists that applied graffiti strategies and techniques into their practices, such as Basquiat, there are gaps in the literature when it comes to the social conditions that influence

<sup>36</sup> "Interview with Chaz Bojorquez," Frank Castro, July 27, 2016, ([https:// www.lataco.com/interview-with-chaz-bojorquez/](https://www.lataco.com/interview-with-chaz-bojorquez/))

art practices. Art made from materials available inside prisons has not been widely discussed in the canon of art history, visual culture, or ethnic studies. The visual associations to the prison industrial complex now reach larger audiences outside the working-class origins through the invention of the single needle tattoo gun to create delicate black and white tattoos, ballpoint ink drawings, prison art, and cholo writing style. The systematic oppression of people of color into the prison is subdued in a preference to the visual culture created under these conditions, where any individual can enter a tattoo parlor and pay for a single needle tattoo without assuming the criminality of working-class people of color or exhibitions can solely focus on the material aspect.

Charles Bojorquez's early works and contemporary paintings are pivotal to a comprehensive study of 20th century art in the United States. Bojorquez states *Señor Suerte* is the "ground zero" of his Chicano art, and from an art historical standpoint we can also pinpoint the image as a hallmark for Bojorquez's artistic career because he was able to combine his graffiti practice with the mass appeal that parallels his subsequent advertisement career.

Artworks featuring *Señor Suerte* such as the painting exhibited in "Chicanarte" (1975) and *Roll/Call* in 1980 strategically eradicate violence that is associated with graffiti and gangs because the viewer is not exposed to the conditions that influence the production of the image. Paintings emblematic of letters and calligraphy are a further abstraction to his distinct letterforms painted in situ with the image of *Señor Suerte*, but still carry the context to the criminality that occurs in working class migrant neighborhoods. This unique ability to appeal to groups who influenced his practice is due to his Chicano working class aesthetics where he is strategically using the material from that culture. *Placas* and the technical delivery of the texts with obtainable materials (before spray cans became available) influenced the conceptual

framework Bojorquez appropriated, but it is important to note that Bojorquez was not personally affiliated with the gang. The artwork has an ability to appeal to the gang that covers its flesh with the image and the individuals who purchase the image as paintings at a significantly higher art market value without being considered as a form of cultural appropriation, furthermore providing the artist the opportunity to connect between insider and outsider.

## APPENDIX

The principle visual framework is a 1975 photograph that captures the stenciled image of “Señor Suerte,” the stencil as object of reproduction, “roll calls,” and Bojorquez  
<http://lalouver.com/ROLL-CALL-artists/>

Photographs by Graciela Iturbide

<http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/238954/graciela-iturbide-la-frontera-tijuana-mexico-mexican-1990/>

Photographs by Delilah Montoya

<https://www.mfah.org/art/detail/126584?returnUrl=%2Fart%2Fsearch%3Fartist%3DDelilah%2BMontoya>

Painting of the skull on the Pasadena Arroyo Freeway and painting created a decade later in 1979 <http://lalouver.com/ROLL-CALL-artists/>

Painting of the skull created a decade later in 1979

<https://www.bonhams.com/auctions/20511/lot/20/>

Charles Bojorquez, *Placa/Rollcall*, 1980

<https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/placarollcall-32848>

Charles Bojorquez, *Ano Loco XIV92 Por Dios y Oro*, 1992

<https://collections.lacma.org/node/211604>



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