



¿Y a mi, qué? Who Does the Civil Rights Movement Belong To?

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June 2014



I recently visited the Brooklyn Museum, eager to see [*Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties*](#). The exhibition is organized into eight sections and features 103 works by 66 artists. It was organized to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the passage of the Civil Rights Act, and purports, according to the museum's press release, to "explore how painting, sculpture, graphics, and photography not only responded to the political and social turmoil of the era but also helped to influence its direction."

Although it's not clearly stated, the exhibition is entirely focused on the black civil rights movement. *Witness* is on view through July 6, 2014.

Let me say, first, that I believe *Witness* is an important exhibition and needs to be seen. The work, from a Who's-Who list of foundational American artists, is beautiful, powerful and well organized. Fortunately, *Witness* is scheduled to travel and I encourage readers to see it if it comes to your city. *Vale la pena*.

I have to say, however, that as a veteran of the Chicano movement, I was a little disappointed. If I were a supporter of the Young Lords Party, Red Guard Party or the American Indian Movement, I might be similarly disappointed. And if I was a former Puerto Rican activist, I might be more than disappointed. The Young Lords was a Puerto Rican nationalist organization, established in Chicago and New York in the '60s to address discrimination and disparities impacting their community in the areas of health care, education, housing and nutrition. It engaged in multiple mobilizations, including building takeovers and the establishment of health clinics and feeding programs. It drew the support of thousands and published its own newspaper, *Pa'lante* (Forward). The movement inspired countless Puerto Ricans to aspire and achieve. It underpinned the establishment of Puerto Rican studies programs, cultural organizations, legal defense centers and other entities that continue to advocate for the advancement of Puerto Ricans. I think it's important to note that many Puerto Rican activists closely associated themselves with the Black Civil Rights and Power Movements. Not surprisingly, the Young Lords became one of the leading targets of COINTELPRO, an FBI program designed to disrupt and dismantle what it identified as subversive groups.

Importantly, the Puerto Rican Civil Rights Movement inspired several artists. Where was the powerful work of artists like Juan Sánchez, Carlos Irizarry, Jorge Soto Sánchez and Frank Espada? I understand that the exhibition is mostly about work produced in the sixties, but there are several pieces from the seventies in the show, which would seemingly open the door for a

photographer like Sophie Rivera. What about the work produced out of Taller Boricua, an early Puerto Rican arts collective? Could the organizers have consulted with Puerto Rican curators familiar with this historical period, like Yasmín Ramírez or Taína Caragol?

Brooklyn's population is 20 percent Latino. I'm going to go out on a limb here, but I'd venture to say that the majority of our population there is still Puerto Rican. My question then is: How can an exhibit in Brooklyn about the civil rights movement not include the history of the Young Lords, and the Puerto Rican political movement and the artists it inspired throughout the '60s and beyond? I was happy to see that the show included Raphael Montañez-Ortiz's assemblage, "Archeological Find #21, the Aftermath." Montañez-Ortiz is a conceptual, multimedia artist prominent within the deconstructivism art movement, and notable for his founding, in 1969, of [El Museo del Barrio](#), an *El Barrio* (East Harlem) institution. El Museo is the oldest Latino museum in the country and its founding is directly attributable to Puerto Rican activism.

As someone who lived and breathed the Chicano movement, I question its exclusion in this exhibit. It's hard for me to understand how a well-documented social and political movement born in the '60s that inspired thousands, elevated the plight of farmworkers onto the national stage, led to the creation of university departments, birthed many community-based organizations advocating for a wide range of social issues, and inspired many trend-setting artists, including Rupert García, whose etching, "Black Man and Flag," is featured in *Witness*, is not mentioned. The list of Chicano movement-inspired artists and collectives is a long and distinguished one. It's unfortunate that the museum did not probe further.

My sense is that the Brooklyn Museum missed a golden opportunity to interpret and contextualize the entirety and true scope and complexity of the civil rights movement in New York and in this country. I'd really love it if they'd go back to the drawing board and give another shot at telling a more complete story for all of us to more fully appreciate.