



FIRST VOICE, OUR VOICE...

By Eduardo Díaz, director Smithsonian Latino Center
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I recently attended the opening of *Galería Sin Fronteras* (Gallery Without Borders), an exhibition at the [National Museum of Mexican Art](#) in Chicago. The show features 92 works by 64 artists, mostly Mexican American, from the vast collection of Gilberto Cárdenas, a Notre Dame professor and a prolific Latino Art collector. *Galería Sin Fronteras* (or, as Gil jokes, *Galería Sin Dinero*) is the name of the gallery he opened in Austin in 1986. The gallery became a First Voice hub for Latino and Latina artists, community members, collectors and others. Sadly, it closed in 1999. The Chicago exhibition is a fitting tribute to Gil's legacy and his commitment to Latino Art. It is also reverentially dedicated to the memory of two pivotal figures in the field: artist and educator José Montoya of Sacramento, and artist and serigraphy studio operator Sam Coronado of Austin, both of whom

passed away in 2013.

As I coursed through the gallery I saw compelling pieces by some of our very best: Ester Hernández, Luis Jiménez, Carmen Lomas Garza, Malaquías Montoya, Delilah Montoya, Rupert García, Kathy Vargas, Vincent Valdez, Santa Barraza, César Martínez, Patssi Valdez, John Valadez, to name a few. *Galería Sin Fronteras* is thoughtfully curated by Cesáreo Moreno and beautifully mounted in a manner typical of the Museum, a cornerstone institution in Pilsen, Chicago's principal Mexican neighborhood.

Several of the artists in *Galería Sin Fronteras* are also featured in [Our America: The Latino Presence in American Art](#), an exhibition on view at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, through March 2 of this year. My first thought was that I hope *Galería Sin Fronteras* receives a fair and balanced review by the Chicago newspapers. This brought to mind the controversial review of *Our America* by *Washington Post* art critic Philip Kennicott last October.

Mr. Kennicott has reviewed art and architecture for the *Post* since 1999 and has been critical of the Smithsonian at times. His [critique](#) of *Our America* stirred things up a bit in the Latino Art world, principally due to his assertion that Latino Art was a "meaningless category." As a practitioner in the Latino cultural field for over three decades I took umbrage to his comments. I have a hard time stomaching a negation of the art production of a community of which I am a part and I have been serving for the majority of my life and professional career. As a Chicano, I love DC, but I do miss living in cities that are predominantly Latino, where art critics and aficionados alike are in closer proximity to the Latino experience and, by virtue, usually better informed, if only by osmosis. So, I will cut Mr. Kennicott some slack here.

Thankfully, his critique resulted in a thought-provoking and informative [online dialogue](#) with New York filmmaker Alex Rivera. In the dialogue, Mr. Rivera posed the following:

"And if you don't see the commonality of experience in that imagined community, then of course a survey of our artistic output would seem a fruitless exercise. And so: Do you think 'Latino' is a useful category for thinking about people? Does it illuminate anything about history or just confound? If not, what do we call ourselves? If so, why can't we have something called 'Latino Art?'"

I found Kennicott's identity-is-a-personal-construction response facile and troubling. Mr. Rivera also queried:

"I understand your observation that there's a lot of diversity within the imagined community of 'Latinos.' What big grouping of people doesn't embody diversity and conflict within itself? I imagine you regularly review shows of "American art" but never spend the review space critiquing the concept of "American."

Again, I found Kennicott's response unconvincing and disappointing. My sense is that, simply stated, he didn't know what he was looking at when he visited *Our America*. Our community of artists deserve better.

This August, the [National Portrait Gallery](#), another Smithsonian museum, will open *Staging The Self*, a Latino contribution to the Gallery's *Portraiture Now* series. I hope that anyone who reviews this exhibit will spend some time immersing themselves in the diverse communities and experiences that shape the work of the six artists to be featured, and critique it from an informed and balanced point of view. In the meantime, I will continue to applaud and support First Voice institutions like the National Museum of Mexican Art, which care for and about our community and its great artists.