I want to tell a story about leaf blowers and the city of Los Angeles and the function of aesthetic practice, in particular methods of customization, in mediating conflict. This is a story about neo-industrialization and postindustrialization in Los Angeles, which has coincided with the Latinization of a working poor population, and the resultant debates over quality of life. I find the story particularly powerful in its suggestion of the role aesthetics may hold in our understandings of quality of life in an increasingly post-industrial, globalized sphere. In order to foreground the role of aesthetics, I will frame my discussion within the work of a specific artist, Rubén Ortiz Torres, while focusing on the role of customization and collaboration in his work. The artist’s 1998 Power Tools series and Alien Toy, the 1997 video installation in the form of a lowrider pickup truck, incorporate the traditions of lowrider customizing, and thus Chicano vernacular aesthetics, in a contemporary installation format.

[Slide 1] Rubén Ortiz Torres is a transnational artist officially recognized by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Services as an “alien of exceptional abilities.” A Chilango living under the shadow of the Hollywood sign, Ortiz Torres’ work addresses various global expressions and concerns that result from the overlay and fusion that shape cultures in postnational contexts (Armstrong, et. al 2000: 75). The lived experience of more and more people, including transnational artists, migrant workers, diasporic communities, and exiles, occurs outside the cultural norms idealized by the state and this situation often results in transnational cultural formations that move beyond ethnic and national lines.¹ [SLIDE 2] These transnational cultural formations, hybrid identities, and border zone shifts “are changing the way we understand the North/South divide and reshaping the Americas” (de la Campa 2000: xiv).
The art of Rubén Ortiz Torres highlights the magnification and globalization of hybridity in distinct cultural contexts. In his work focused on the processes of cultural hybridization, Ortiz Torres identifies how staples of national identity have been transfigured in popular use and circulation and then reconfigures them yet again. All sorts of assumed social meanings and aesthetic conventions are tweaked in the process. The popular reworking of icons and emblems, which carry charged meanings and function to designate territory, fascinates the artist.

Ortiz Torres’ 1998 sculpture series *Power Tools* consists of customized leaf blowers made in collaboration with Gody Sanchez. These power tools used by landscapers, gardeners, and maintenance workers have been customized as if they were glistening lowriders. During the course of a period of intense political uproar that accompanied a multi-layered controversy about gasoline-powered leaf blowers in the City of Angels, Gody Sanchez was inspired to create a machine that would help ease the heavy labor of gardeners without creating noise and pollution. Sanchez, an auto mechanic by trade, adapted one of the leaf blowers to run on an electric motor. Rubén Ortiz Torres customized another leaf blower with metal-flake candy apple paint, a 24-karat gold plated engine, velvet upholstery, and a lowrider bicycle club plate. These functional sculptures - one fitted for style, one for efficiency - play on recent controversial legislation against the use of leaf blowers in the City of Los Angeles.

A 1996 Los Angeles ordinance banned the use of gasoline powered leaf blowers from being used within 500 feet of residential property. Advocates for the citywide ban claimed that their “quality of life” was being threatened, arguing that the noise from the blowers destroyed the serenity of their neighborhoods and prevented telecommuters from working at home. Leaf blowers, the ordinance charged, were a public nuisance and contributors to noise and air pollution. The penalties written into the original law were harsh: up to a $1,000 fine and six-month jail sentence for gardeners using leaf blowers and their employers.
In the city of the stars, the leaf blower became the subject of a hotly contested legislative debate. Opponents to the ban argued that the ordinance was misguided and that the City Council had submitted to mounting pressure from affluent Westside residents to pass the ban without examining existing alternatives, or offering gardeners a grace period to adjust. To almost everyone’s surprise, the leaf blower was at the center of one of the city’s loudest and seemingly interminable conflicts and drew further attention to the enormous divisions within the city. The ensuing battle - pitting largely white, wealthy, and politically powerful Westside celebrities and homeowners against the mostly Latino immigrant gardeners who tend their lawns - became a hot topic in the national media, including syndicated television shows, such as *Politically Incorrect*, *The Daily Show*, and *Entertainment Tonight*. It also became part of the national debate on immigration, since numerous supporters of the ban contended that most of the gardeners were undocumented, and, thus, these anti-leaf blower campaigners argued, did not have the right to work in the U.S, let alone the right to bombard citizens with noise and pollution.

According to local reports, the move to ban the raucous leaf blower had been stirring for over a decade, but was not a major issue until several Westside celebrities galvanized a campaign against the cacophonous power tools. [SLIDE 7] The reviled noise of leaf blowers shot the nerves of several prominent Westside homeowners, most notably Julie Newmar (“Catwoman” on the *Batman* television series), who wrote the mayor threatening to move to New Zealand if the annoyance from this “three-foot extension of a gardener’s masculinity” was not cut short. Newmar co-founded ZAP (Zero Air Pollution) and with other Westside celebrities rigorously rallied for the citywide ban on the machines. An ensemble cast of faded prime-time celebrities (“has-bos,” as they say in Tinsel Town), including Peter Graves (superagent on the *Mission Impossible* television series), Meredith Baxter (*Family Ties* sit-com mom), Tony Danza (*Taxi, Who’s the Boss?*, and currently trying to resuscitate his career with *Family Law*), accepted the mission of battling the ubiquitous blowers. The micro-issue controversy focused on the leaf
blower provides an aperture for probing the political tensions and conflicts situated at the psychogeographic core of the city that raged across issues of class, ethnicity, labor, immigration, the environment, and issues regarding public and private space.

In order to get public attention for their cause, gardeners formed the Association of Latin American Gardeners of Los Angeles and were joined by the Japanese-American Chamber of Commerce in rallying against the leaf blower ban. When the ban went into effect on July 1, 1997, more than 1,000 gardeners and their families marched through downtown to City Hall demanding a postponement. What followed was an escalating series of protests that caught politicians by surprise and drew international attention. The Association of Latin American Gardeners began protesting in non-conventional ways – marching barefoot through the streets of downtown Los Angeles or leaving piles of brooms and rakes in front of City Hall - tactics that recalled those of the United Farm Workers movement led by César Chávez and Dolores Huerta in the 1960s.

To the mostly affluent Angelenos who participated in the twelve-year campaign to ban it, the leaf blower is a noisy, filthy contraption that fouls the air and shatters the calm of their well-kept neighborhoods. To the gardeners who use it, the leaf blower is a vital, labor-efficient tool of the trade that has enabled them to earn a living in a competitive service-based industry. Gardeners in southern California, most of whom are self-employed, are generally paid by the yard, not by the hour, and typically receive anywhere from $40-70 a month for weekly visits to a home. (For the employer, this monthly fee is roughly equivalent to a cable bill). The gardeners survive on relatively low, under minimum, wages by serving many homes, which they manage by using labor saving power equipment, such as mowers, weed wackers, edgers, hedge clippers, and chain saws, in addition to leaf blowers. Without the leaf blower, gardeners feared that they would have to do twice the work for the same pay. In other words, banning gas-powered blowers meant that workers would earn less by servicing fewer yards, or that yard owners would
pay more for lawn maintenance. From the perspective of the Association of Latin American Gardeners, the new ordinance meant a significant increase in labor and a loss of income.

Since its invention in Japan in the early 1970s, the leaf blower has become an enormously popular device in California. In fact, gas-powered blowers first came to prominence in southern California, where the droughts and conservation efforts of the early 1970s prompted officials to forbid residents to use water to hose down driveways, parking areas, sidewalks, and other paved areas. Blowers have since been sold in California by the millions, half of those in the Los Angeles Basin, and their popularity has spread across the country. Thus, a new form of mechanized grounds maintenance introduced what had been an upper-class luxury to the masses. While covering the debate, the Christian Science Monitor described the leaf blower as “the perfect example of technology run amok” (Rueter 1997: 19), since manufactures seemed relatively unmotivated to produce quieter, more efficient, or less polluting machines.

The extended debate consistently focused on the quality of suburban life. Meanwhile, the well being of the laborers who used the tools, strapped to their backs, usually with no protection other than cotton balls stuffed in their ears and nostrils, rarely, if ever, emerged as an issue. And, this despite the fact that the Sierra Club and other environmentalists have long insisted that gardeners suffer the most from blowers, since extended exposure to fumes and dust can prove lethal (Lovitt and Price 1997: 3). The initially ignored gardeners, however, quickly became activists on the front lines of civic politics and on the front pages of international newspapers. The Association of Latin American Gardeners ultimately waged a hunger strike on the steps of City Hall. In January 1998, eleven people – gardeners and supporters – vowed to starve themselves to death if the city ban on leaf blowers was not rescinded. “This is not a hunger strike about leaf blowers,” Adrian Alvarez told the Los Angeles Times. “It’s a hunger strike … about access to the democratic process” (Graham 1998: 47). The hunger strike continued for seven days and attracted extensive media coverage and brief worldwide attention. For example,
the London *Financial Times* commented on the significance of the protests, “The leaf-blower, of all things, had come to represent the class divisions of Los Angeles” (Financial Times 1998: 4).

[SLIDE 8] While watching the evening news report on the gardeners’ hunger strike, Gody Sanchez, a Salvadorian refugee and auto mechanic living in Van Nuys, was inspired to “save his brothers from slow starvation” (Ortiz Torres 1999: 31). He entered his garage intent on creating a cleaner and quieter machine and quickly developed a successful prototype. Sanchez transformed a gasoline-powered leaf blower into an electrical one by using an ordinary car battery and a lightweight fan, the same type used to cool automobile radiators. On the fifth day of a hunger strike, Sanchez surprised the protesting gardeners when he showed up outside the mayor’s office, strapped on his electrical leaf blower, and presented a demonstration of his customized contraption cobbled together from car parts. Some of the protesters deemed the machine rather weak although ameliorable, and both local officials and gardeners soon recognized that a viable solution was in sight. Several media representatives were also on hand for Sanchez’s demonstration and were impressed by the homemade customized machine and its inventive potential.⁹ As the *Los Angeles Times* announced, “It’s a pollution-free, whisper-quiet leaf blower built from common car parts that may have enough power up its nozzle to sweep the blower ban debate right out of City Hall” (Pool 1998: 1).

Indeed, the hunger strike was brought to a close within two days after striking gardeners received a written promise from Mayor Richard Riordan that city officials would help the gardeners find legal substitutes for the banned power tools.¹⁰ In addition, the Mayor established a task force to study quieter, cleaner leaf blowers and explore the possibility of establishing a loan program for gardeners to purchase improved machines.¹¹ Meanwhile, Gody Sanchez continued to tinker in his garage and develop a battery of additional prototypes. For one, Sanchez adapted the silencer from an automatic weapon into the exhaust pipe of a filtered gasoline-powered leaf blower to produce a quieter, lighter, and more powerful machine. Further
inventions included gas-fueled hybrids fitted with electric starters, while others incorporated gadgets like a water sprinkler to reduce the amount of dust generated. Sanchez’s customized leaf blowers revealed to many, including Rubén Ortiz Torres, that the city’s protracted political conflict was largely related to faulty industrial design.

The *Power Tools* installation equates the creative process of customization with the way Sanchez adapted an industrial product to meet urgent social needs. Sanchez’s work exemplifies “an artistic process of customization, in which a resourceful individual adapts an industrial product to his or her own practical, social, and political needs” (Ortiz Torres 1999: 31). By recycling and combining different parts from cars, appliances, and even weapons, Sanchez created “funky-looking mechanical collages that alter the original form of the leaf blower while improving its function” (Ibid.). [SLIDE 9] Thus, in a manner akin to the *Alien Toy* installation, *Power Tools* explores the interchange between form and function that characterizes customization’s relationship to industry and technology as well as style and labor. *Alien Toy UCO (Unidentified Cruising Object)/ La ranfla cósmica ORNI (Objeto rodante no identificado)* (1997) is a video installation on wheels. The centerpiece of the installation is an award-winning lowrider pickup engineered and built by Salvador “Chava” Muñoz. The vehicle no longer resembles a conventional truck, but an automated, Frankenstein-like rendering of one with several moving elements. Tricked out with sixteen hydraulic systems, this bust-apart truck is capable of fragmenting itself into four independently operating sections and performs an incredible array of hydraulic hijinx. The bed of the truck ascends several feet into the air and divides into four spinning parts. The doors pop out and rotate with frantic velocity while the hood jumps off and twirls. As if such automotive acrobatics were not enough, the entire front cab of the truck separates itself from the back and drives independently while the rest of the car dances. [SLIDE 10]
As the *Alien Toy* installation both indicates and exaggerates, lowriders represent a masterful, and often resourceful, fusion of technical dexterity, artistic skill, and aesthetic vision.\(^\text{13}\) Lowriders and customs cars are unique personalized vehicles, which the author and counter-cultural aesthete Tom Wolfe once called “monuments to their own styles” (Wolfe 1965: 5). Accordingly, car customizing represents a critical and adaptive attitude among consumers to thwart the design, function, and aesthetics of industrial production.\(^\text{14}\) In other words, industrial products (namely the automobile) are manipulated and improved upon by consumers who did not (necessarily) produce them.

The distinctly stylized youth cultures associated with lowriders and custom vehicles originated in the car-saturated prosperity of post-World War II southern California. \([\text{SLIDE 11}]\) While hot rodders and drag racers formed a youthful, ebullient Euro-American “underground,” Mexican Americans proceeded in the opposite direction and created lowriders. Rather than emphasizing speed, like their hot rod and “California rake” counterparts \([\text{SLIDE 12}]\) lowriders were *bajito y suavecito* - low and slow - built to be seen and admired while cruising in all their candy-colored glory just a few inches from the pavement of Los Angeles’ wide boulevards. Street-hugging lowriders, with their meticulous attention to detail and hydraulic lifts, have been a public icon of Chicano culture, identity, and style in the southwest since the late 1940s.\(^\text{15}\)

\([\text{SLIDE 13}]\) From the beginning, lowriding was as much about ethnic identity as about machinery (Neil 2000: 1). The cultural production of lowriding is a densely textured expression of American ethnicity (Stone 1990: 87) and represents the hybridization of a principal icon of the American dream (Gaspar de Alba 1998: 60).\(^\text{16}\) As a medium of personal and cultural expression, Raza customizers transform automobiles into aesthetic and political signifiers. Raza customizers have retranslated a national icon of pride, progress, and prosperity - the automobile - into a vernacular form of Chicano style and labor. In the urban barrios of the southwest and in select
museums, lowriders - a culturally distinguished form of labor, cultural production, and taste – are now considered “The Picassos of the Boulevards.”

When considering both *Power Tools* and *Alien Toys* it is important to underscore that the original forms, which ultimately suggest the final installation art format, were created and used outside of a specific fine arts framework. In this way, Rubén Ortiz Torres has worked with independent customizers, who have produced lowrider automobiles and leafblowers, and through collaboration re-customized the objects for museums. In the context of museum exhibition, *Power Tools’* balanced juxtaposition of the tradition of California assemblage with the functional directives of the Bauhaus and the customizing practices of Chicano lowrider car culture is strikingly powerful. Certainly much of this power emanates from “beyond” the object itself and involves the social-political context and narrative that generated it and that it then participated in. This is not to suggest, however, that *Power Tools* lacks aesthetic value or operates “an-aesthetically” like Duchamp’s readymades. Actually, the *Power Tools* sculptures are stunningly seductive and beautiful and have been customized by Ortiz Torres to further accentuate the productive exchange between style and function.

Significantly, the collaboration between customizers re-presents the inventive potential of aesthetic meaning. As Ortiz Torres has described the process, “By customizing an already existing product, he [Gody Sanchez] speaks through the culture at large, locating his art within a social framework rather than isolating it as the product of a singular voice” (Ortiz Torres 1999: 31). The *Power Tools* installation participated in a complex debate, over how to strike a balance between one group’s pursuit of economic opportunity and another’s desire to protect what its members called their “quality of life,” by offering a pragmatic solution: an inventive, if modest, customized hybrid. Gody Sanchez “has proven the feasibility of an interactive nonlinear creative process,” Ortiz Torres related, “a kind of futurism where technology is not a goal in itself, but – through customization – a way to access a more democratic future for everyone” (Ibid.).
Customization characterizes the work of Rubén Ortiz Torres in almost all media and offers an alternative avenue for approaching the issues of globalization and hybridity so central to our current “New World Order” and the various, sometimes conflicted, responses to this newest form of Euro-American dominance. Globalization has meant the emergence of a new social and spatial structure. California became the epitomic site of the new global economy populated with venture capitalists, broken labor unions, flexibilzied wages, and new service and high-technology jobs (Keil 1998: 114). By the end of the 1980s, Los Angeles had become the paradigmatic example of the metropolis that relied on immigrant labor. The abundance of available immigrant labor has categorically transformed the daily routines and expectations in Southern California and has indisputably underwritten the “quality of life” that the region’s affluent residents count on. As reliance on the immigrant service and labor class has escalated in California, so has resentment at the societal transformations shaped by it. Clearly, the discussions around the contraband tool for mechanized gardening were not just about air and noise pollution. The gardeners and the economy they represented became the subject of a discourse on the meaning of the city, which questioned traditional ideas about Los Angeles as an American metropolis and as a global “cosmopolitan” heteropolis.

The *Power Tools* installation elucidated how communities excluded from the benefits of “world city formation” have formed networks of popular resistance to elite politics in an effort to democratize the polis. This space of critical civility was incorporated into an installation art format that was then incorporated into the museum, a prominent and enormously influential real and discursive space of civil society in Los Angles (and beyond). *Power Tools* not only referred to one such campaign to demand access to the political and economic sphere, but through museum exhibition also participated in and potentially extended this demand for access.
Here, hybrid identities are shaped in excess of national boundaries (Joseph 1999a: 145). In contrast to the proposition of a single nationality (for example, either Mexican or American), the notion of hybrid or border identities acknowledges the presence and synthesis of multiple cultures (Angeles Torres 1998: 178).

These transnational transformations, however, do not imply a lost, authentic, or pure culture waiting to be rescued or otherwise recovered. Rather, the concept of transnational and hybrid identities proposes that both host and home countries undergo transformation (Angeles Torres 1998: 181).

The Los Angeles City Council passed the original measure prohibiting the use of gasoline-powered leaf blowers within 500 feet of a residential area on November 11, 1996. The ban was originally scheduled to take effect the following July, but the City Council instituted a six-month moratorium so that the Los Angeles Police Department could study how to enforce it. An amended ordinance took effect February 13, 1998; the conditions of punishment were the most significant change from the original. Violations of the ban were now to be charged as an infraction punishable with a $270 maximum fine.

See, Peter Gumbel, “If you want to hear this Catwoman Hiss, Just Blow in her Ear,” Wall Street Journal (December 3, 1997): 1A. Newmar’s involvement in the ban was also the focus of the following national stories: Joel Stein, “Feud of the Week,” Time Magazine (December 15, 1997), and Wade Graham, “Fax from Los Angeles: The Leaf Blower Displaces Tibet as Hollywood’s Pet Political Issue,” New Yorker 74.9 (April 20, 1998): 47. The National Enquirer, according to one fan’s website dedicated to Julie Newmar, also covered the story and featured the explosive headline “Thousands of Gardeners Hate Julie Newmar” on the cover. See, http://www.geocities.com/juliecat4444/leafblowers.html (8/10/2001).

The 1996 ban brought the City of Los Angeles in line with more than 20 other California municipalities that had restricted blowers due to concerns about noise and air pollution and associated health hazards. As Rubén Ortiz Torres has pointed out, “Ironically it was the same City of Los Angeles that recommended the use of this contrivance to save water when clearing leaves in times of drought. Indeed, the City bought 300 leaf blowers for use by their city workers. But the law did not apply to them, just to private gardeners” (Ortiz Torres 1999: 30).

According to the industry trade association, almost 1.5 million leaf blowers were sold in the U.S.A. in 1997.

Like other gardening tools, such as weed wackers and lawn mowers, leaf blowers use a two-cycle, gasoline-powered engine that is not very efficient and are just as noisy as an older model motorcycle. A 1996 report by South Coast Air Quality Management District found that leaf blowers released 5.6 tons of hydrocarbon emissions per day into the region. However, the AQMD report added that leaf blowers did not generate as many hydrocarbon emissions
as lawn mowers, which emit 7.4 tons per day, or edge trimmers, which discharge 7.6 tons.

Overall, lawn maintenance contributes as much as 5 percent to the City of Los Angeles’ smog. On the other hand, automobiles are responsible for 55 percent of the state’s air pollution – with power plants and heavy industry accounting for the rest.

8 In an editorial in the Los Angeles Times, Frank del Olmo noted the general disregard for the gardeners when he wrote, “I’m not suggesting that there is villainy or even bigotry at work here. But it illustrates a cavalier attitude too many Angelenos share with other residents of the American West. We build great cities in one of the most inhospitable parts of the world and then take for granted the people and resources that make it possible for us to live here so comfortably” (Olmo 1997: 5).


10 In February 1998, State Senator Richard G. Polanco (Democrat, Los Angeles) introduced legislation that would override Los Angeles’ leaf blower ordinance by placing the blowers under state regulation and setting noise standards for them. Polanco argued, “It was insensitive of the City Council to strip workers of one of their fundamental tools without providing a grace period or replacement tool.”

“A government body would never shut down a ‘big business,’ such as an oil company refinery, because it is polluting the environment,” he continued. Grace periods and financial assistance are routinely offered to help such high-profile industries comply with new regulations. Polanco added, “It’s absurd that this sort of consideration was not given to poor people working in our yards” (Mejia 1998).

In 1999, a total of four bills addressing the leaf blower issue were introduced to California State Senate.

11 One month after Sanchez premiered his leaf blower on the steps of City Hall, the Department of Water and Power organized a Leaf Blower Technology Task Force and announced it would help find a solution by investing up to one million dollars to promote new leaf-blower technology. The South Coast Air Quality Management District also began to urge manufacturers to develop “zero pollution” lawn equipment and specifically allocated $35,000 for the development of an electric or battery-powered, backpack blower. Propelled by such initiatives, the industrial design firm Aero Viromenet displayed its prototype for a more efficient and quieter electrical leaf blower in August 1998.

12 Muñoz’s truck, known as “Wicked Bed,” was the bed dancing world champion in the “Radical Class” – the most free-form category in custom car competitions – between 1994 and 1997.
Originally, the deviously low figuration was achieved by strategically concealing sandbags in the trunk, or by placing blocks between the axle and springs, to drop the chassis for temporary effects. Trimming the springs or heating them until they collapsed to the desired cruising height realized more permanent effects. Small wheels or chopping the car roof further accentuated the sleek and mean look of the prototypical “lead sled.” Through crafty and inventive design, lowriders often rode so close to the ground that the automobiles threw sparks as they cruised.

Elaborate hydraulic suspension systems were developed in the late 1960s allowing the automobile’s chassis to be lowered and raised on command and “hop” while cruising. Car hopping utilizes a complex system of oil pumps, hydraulic pistons, and supplemental batteries linked by an elaborate wiring system to forcefully lift the car off the ground; this intricate set up is activated by switches housed in portable boxes under the car’s dashboard or by a joystick operated outside of the automobile. Multiple supplemental batteries and a pair of hydraulic pumps, often configured from airplane landing gear components and other World War II government surplus, were designed to replace the car’s front and rear shock absorbers. These hydraulic systems enabled lowered cars to travel at legal heights, and were consequentially recognized to have enormous performative and competitive potential. Enhanced suspension systems enable a 3,000 pound automobile to jump more than two feet off the ground and perform such feats as “the pancake,” in which all four tires bounce off the ground at once, or “the seesaw,” in which the car is sent teeter-tottering up and down and back and front. Lowrider Magazine reported that as of January 2001, the world record “Double-Pump” hop registered in at 72 inches (Lowrider 2001: 166).

Like many other writers, I have been very influenced by Gene Balsey’s “classic” essay on the topic. See his, “The Hot-Rod Culture,” American Quarterly (Winter 1950): 353-358.

On the surface, lowriders – with their multicolor, high-gloss paint jobs and murals, crushed velvet interiors, chromed embellishments, hydraulic suspension systems, and numerous other features – may appear like mere ostentation or an obnoxious display of conspicuous consumption, but the Chicano tradition of customizing lowrider vehicles engages in a critical and adaptive style politics that simultaneously puts into practice and disrupts the standard methods of fetishistic automotive consumption and signification. Since the roots of lowriding lay in castoff older cars bought cheap or inherited and then customized to the owner’s satisfaction, lowriders work within, yet at odds with, the well-defined routine of announcing social position and aspirations: These highly ornate automobiles are jalopies transformed into personalized luxuries. George Lipsitz maintains that lowriders defy the capitalist consumer mentality, as well as the mainstream’s obsession with speed and efficiency. Lipsitz has thus identified lowriders as masters of postmodern cultural manipulation because they “juxtapose seemingly inappropriate realities - fast cars designed to go slowly, ‘improvements’ that flaunt their impracticability” (Lipsitz 1990: 153).

Alicia Gaspar de Alba has described lowriders as “iconic of the Chicano’s cultural mestizaje” (Gaspar de Alba 1998: 60).

See Lorena Muñoz, “They’re the ‘Picassos of the Boulevard’,” Toronto Star (February 28, 2000), and her “High Time for Lowriders,” Los Angeles Times (February 3, 2000): Calendar 6. Both of these articles discuss an important

In the larger study from which this lecture is extracted and reconfigured, I investigate a disturbing congruence of events related to the apparent crossover success of Chicano-style lowriders: while the visibility of lowriders has accelerated in the global public sphere, the vehicles themselves have virtually vanished from public space in southern California.

The public debates and social issues, which Rubén Ortiz Torres’ *Power Tools* series responded and contributed to, underscore David Harvey’s scrutiny of the term “globalization.” In his recent book *Spaces of Hope*, Harvey indicates that the rise of the term “globalization” signals a “profound geographical reorganization of capitalism” compelling us to reconsider capitalism’s presumed “natural” trajectory (Harvey 2000: 57). Harvey argued that the term “globalization” itself is a powerful ideological tool used to legitimate and naturalize the uneven geographical developments across the world, which serve to either elide the physical and economic violence imposed on highly exploited laborers and construct such violence as an unfortunate but inevitable consequence of transnational capitalism (Harvey 2000: 65).

Ortiz Torres believes that the sculpture and the issues it represents truly belong to the city, and as such was genuinely pleased when the Los Angeles County Museum of Art acquired *Power Tools*. *Power Tools* was included in the massive millennial exhibition *Made in California: Art, Image, and Identity 1900-2000* along with *Alien Toy* and Ortiz Torres’ photograph *California Taco*. The exhibition was on view from October 22, 2000 – February 25, 2001 and was the largest-ever LACMA exhibition, a sprawling five-part millennium show exploring the state’s popular image and the role of visual culture in promoting such images or counter-images. See, *Made in California: Art, Image, and Identity, 1900-2000*, Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2000.