
Book Review: *Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano L.A.*

Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano L.A., by C. Ondine Chavoya and David Evans Frantz with Macarena Gómez-Barris. Munich: ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives at the USC Libraries/DelMonico Books Prestel, 2017. 414 pp., 349 color illus., 230 b/w illus. \$60 (paper), ISBN 978-3791356693

Axis mundi, Latin for “world axis,” refers to the center of the world and the connection between Heaven and Earth. Spanning multiple cosmologies and philosophies, the concept points to an intersection of realms and a hub around which multiple forces revolve. It is also an apt metaphor for the life and work of Edmundo “Mundo” Meza (1955–1985), the prolific, prescient, protean, and under-sung queer Chicano multimedia artist at the heart of *Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano L.A.*, the resplendent catalogue for the groundbreaking exhibition of the same name. Co-curated by C. Ondine Chavoya and David Evans Frantz, it was held in West Hollywood, California, at the Museum of Contemporary Art Pacific Design Center and the ONE Gallery as part of the Getty Foundation’s Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA, a series of exhibitions and events over 2017 and 2018 exploring the connections between Latin American and Latinx art in Los Angeles. *Axis Mundo* continues to tour the United States through 2022.

In his brief lifetime, Meza was seemingly omnipresent in multiple sub- and countercultures across Los Angeles. He was born in Tijuana, Mexico, in 1955 and raised in the working-class, Mexican immigrant, and Mexican American enclaves of East Los Angeles and Huntington Park. A painter by training, he was also a costume designer and makeup artist who collaborated on performances with Chicano artists Gronk and Robert “Cyclona” Legorreta. He modeled for Anthony Friedkin and Steven Arnold, two of the most prominent chroniclers of twentieth-century urban gay culture in the United States. With his lover and friend Simon Doonan, Meza created provocative window displays at Maxfield Bleu, a tony fashion boutique in West Hollywood, and made a cameo appearance in the video for Kim Carnes’s 1981 hit single “Bette Davis Eyes.” In addition to linking L.A.’s east side and west side—with their distinct geographic, demographic, and socioeconomic poles—Meza straddled multiple scenes, movements, and worlds.

He embodied and enacted intersectionality years before feminist scholars of color would coin and ponder that term.

While Meza is its “conceptual axis,” *Axis Mundo* is by no means a celebration of a single artist and his legacy. Rather, the catalogue (like the exhibition it accompanies) brings together more than fifty artists and groups, among them Laura Aguilar, Judith Baca, Alice Bag (née Alicia Armendariz), Jerry Dreva, Ray Navarro, Pauline Oliveros, Phranc (née Susan Gottlieb), Teddy Sandoval, Joey Terrill, and Patssi Valdez, and a diverse array of mediums, including painting, photography, performance art, mail art, zines, fashion, and music, from the 1960s through the early 1990s. By presenting this multitude of works and artists, not all of whom were or are Chicano, *Axis Mundo* sets out to destabilize canonical formations that privilege a particular artist, artistic form, or movement. It highlights connections among gay liberation, second wave feminism, and the Chicano movement and draws attention to the widely overlooked and decidedly queer artistic practices and cultural politics undergirding *el movimiento*. And while it excavates a history that is very much grounded in Los Angeles, *Axis Mundo* locates the work of Angeleno artists in national and international conversations about such subjects as the emergence and flowering of glam rock and punk rock, opposition to the 1973–85 military dictatorship in Uruguay, and mobilization against the mounting AIDS crisis. Because its goals are so ambitious, *Axis Mundo*’s scope is, too. It delivers a bold, refreshing, sometimes funny, often raunchy, poignant, and long-overdue history of queer Chicano art in Los Angeles.

Chavoya and Evans, along with Macarena Gómez-Barris, present nine cogent academic essays; a foreword by Joseph Hawkins, director of the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives at the University of Southern California libraries; Chavoya and Frantz’s coauthored introduction; and a stirring afterword by Doonan. The academic essays

address a variety of seemingly disparate subjects, such as fashion, self-presentation, and queer publicness (Frantz); the articulation of psychedelia and Mesoamerican cosmologies in queer Chicana art in the 1970s (Iván A. Ramos); *pachucas* and aberrant femininities (Leticia Alvarado); the figure of the “homohomeboy” in Chicano print culture of the 1970s (Richard T. Rodriguez); the junction of first-generation conceptual art and queer Chicana activism in Southern California (Julia Bryan-Wilson); the use of mail art to advocate for the freedom of political prisoners in Latin America (Chavoya); the convergence and divergence of the queer and the punk in Los Angeles in the 1970s and early 1980s (Colin Gunckel); the intersection of AIDS, abstraction, and art (Joshua Javier Guzmán); and Laura Aguilar’s portraits of habitués of the Plush Pony, a bygone Latina lesbian bar in L.A.’s El Sereno neighborhood (Gómez-Barris). Interspersed among the academic essays and images are poems by Jack Vargas and Gerardo Velázquez and “Eso, me está pasando,” Ray Navarro’s powerful 1990 essay about being an HIV-positive Chicano gay man and media activist. Taken together, the scholarship and the primary sources they engage—in particular the so-called ephemera, the stuff that was not supposed to be important, much less endure, such as photocopied invitations, postcards, notebook drawings, concert flyers, and a T-shirt emblazoned with *MALFLORA* (“lesbian”) across it—speak to the rich and varied history of queer Chicana art, activism, and life in Los Angeles. As a research undertaking alone, *Axis Mundo* is formidable in its harnessing and presentation of sources. Smart and clear, the essays function as a useful compass for navigating the worlds those sources build.

Although *Axis Mundo* “takes its cues from, but flips the script on, exhibitions that seek to chart the circle of lesser-known artists surrounding a more lauded figure” (25), certain artists, namely Meza, Navarro, Sandoval, Terrill, Vargas, Velázquez, Roberto Gil de Montes, and the group Les Petites Bonbons, come to the forefront. All merit our attention, and all are men. The academic essays by Alvarado, Bryan-Wilson, Gunckel, and Gómez-Barris help offset the catalogue’s androcentrism. Still, some of the women and not-entirely-male artists, like Faith Wilding and ¡Cholita!, a band that billed itself as “the female Menudo,” receive scant attention. Meanwhile, Gómez-Barris’s “The Plush View: Makeshift Sexualities and Laura Aguilar’s Forbidden Archives,” the final academic essay in the volume, feels a bit like an addendum, perhaps because Aguilar’s work, while germane, was not part of *Axis Mundo*. (Aguilar’s work was the subject of *Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell*, a solo show at the Vincent Price Art Museum that was also part of Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA.)

Notwithstanding this unevenness, *Axis Mundo* is a magisterial record and example of world-making. More than a recovery project or an enunciation of the politics of presence, it charts, in Chavoya and Frantz’s words, “a network of affinities, connections, affiliated aesthetic and conceptual practices, and political alignments” (25). By bringing that network into relief, it illuminates the distinctive and defiant counter-publics that queer Chicana artists and their collaborators, allies, lovers, and friends built and continue to cultivate.

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