

Latino cARTographies: *Mapping the Past, Present and Future of Houston's Latino Visual Art*

By Pamela Anne Quiroz
and Juana Guzmán



Under the leadership of Dr. Pamela Anne Quiroz, director of the University of Houston's (UH) Center for Mexican American and Latino/a Studies (CMALS), plans are underway to launch the groundbreaking digital board, *Latino cARTographies: Mapping the Past, Present and Future of Houston's Latino Visual Art*.

This portable, bilingual, and interactive digital board funded by the University of Houston is the result of a three-year collaboration led by Dr. Quiroz, with the curatorial leadership of former vice president of the National Museum of Mexican Art in Chicago, Juana Guzmán, the CMALS Research Team, and the International Gibson Group.

The idea for **Latino cARTographies** began when Dr. Quiroz organized the city of Houston to host the country's premier Latino art event, *Latino Art Now!* Dr. Quiroz conceived the idea for the digital board and viewed it as a way to create a dynamic but permanent tribute to the Latino artists of Houston. She then persuaded the Gibson Group to collaborate with CMALS to achieve this goal. The result is a twenty-first-century mode to access the arts and experience culture – **Latino cARTographies** – that maps the past, present, and future of Houston's Latino art. By utilizing technology that preserves, represents, and promotes Houston's Latino visual arts and communities in

an equitable and inclusive manner, CMALS is transforming how we experience art in the twenty-first century.

Background

When Professor Quiroz came to the University of Houston in 2015, she sought to strengthen the research component of the Center for Mexican American and Latino/a Studies and to expand its reach. Therefore, in 2016 CMALS joined the country's oldest national Latino research consortium, the Inter University Program on Latino Research (IUPLR) to become one of its twenty-four institutional members. Two years later CMALS was selected to host the *Latino Art Now!* conference, and the following year, it became the headquarters of the IUPLR.

In the visual arts, the IUPLR has been a pioneer and a strong supporter of the emerging field of Latino art and art history by serving as the umbrella organizer of research working groups and hosting its signature *Latino Art Now!* conference. This national forum provides an in-depth examination of Latino art through documentation and scholarship, and critical evaluations of the production of visual art in Latino communities.

In the past six years, the IUPLR has developed projects in visual arts and technology with innovative research in digital humanities. CMALS has advanced this research by



“A 21ST Century Mode of Accessing Art and Experiencing Culture”

The digital board features several icons in continuous movement with sound effects, music, and video interspersed throughout the cityscape.

All photos courtesy of the Center for Mexican American and Latino/a Studies at the University of Houston.

building Houston’s first portable, bilingual, and interactive digital board. Spearheaded by Professor Quiroz, CMALS created one of the greatest citywide partnerships that mobilized mainstream museums, grassroots arts organizations, galleries, government offices, Houston’s tourism bureau, artists, academics, educators, arts advocates, and arts practitioners in ways never imagined in the city of Houston. The information gathered from the *Latino Art Now! 2019* conference laid the groundwork for **Latino cARTographies** that can be utilized citywide through multiple public service venues such as schools, arts organizations, libraries, local events, and universities. It may even serve as a model for

other communities throughout the United States to provide an alternative way to access and experience art, history, and culture.

Latino Art Now! (LAN) and its Spring of Latino Art in Houston 2019

As a permanent yet dynamic visual archive, **Latino cARTographies** is a digital platform designed to educate and engage the public. It merges art with technology to address the historic inequities of Houston’s underserved, underrepresented Latino artists, arts centers, and communities and presents an alternative to the traditional ways in which people



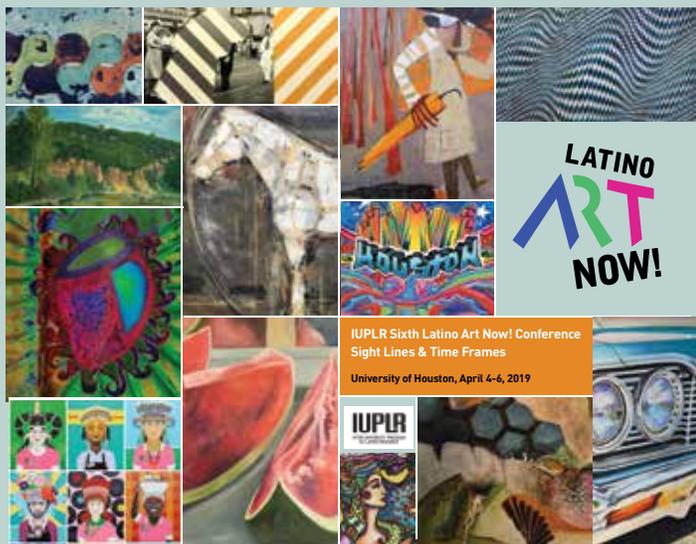
Sin Fronteras, located in the Latino community of the Near Northside, before it was destroyed.



Sin Fronteras after it was painted over.

have accessed art and culture. **Latino cARTographies** plays a critical role to not only capture the artistic and cultural contributions of Houston’s Latino artists but also to preserve public works of Latino art that have been lost. In the span of three years since the planning and implementation of the digital board, several public works have been destroyed. One example is the *Sin Fronteras* mural that was painted over in 2021.

What we know about accessibility, cultural equity, and museums



Latino Art Now! Houston program.

In his analysis of how urban space and social experiences are racialized, Dr. George Lipsitz described how seemingly race-neutral spaces are actually embedded with assumptions that facilitate white privilege and, thus, reaffirm the existing social order.¹ Art museums are such spaces and, despite an increasing awareness of the need to reach out to communities of color, a new discourse of inclusion, and the use of multimedia approaches to enhance visitor experience, museum culture has not really changed all that much in the twenty-first century.²

According to a new Culture Track survey, the most commonly cited problem with museums, as perceived by communities of color, is racism. Issues of access (cost), lack of representation, and heightened policing of space when communities of color visit, make museums barriers to cultural

participation for communities of color. Like all museums, art museums preserve and present our collective identities and histories, but they also implicitly and explicitly serve as “white sanctuaries” and tell us which groups are superior, which groups belong, and which groups are “otherized.”³

Although Latinos represent a founding culture of American society, Latino visual art production has been conspicuously absent in U.S. historical art canons, major exhibitions, publications, and narratives. And though Houston is home to the second largest urban Latino population in the United States, Houston still does not have a museum to provide alternative space for the celebration of cultural productions.

If museums are indeed the “mental parks of cities” that promote a particular set of histories to give people a sense of place, identity, and achievement, then it is critical that all communities have a space to celebrate our collective identities, histories, and contributions.⁴ **Latino cARTographies** provides this opportunity for our Houston Latino communities and makes their contributions visible.

The Vision of Latino cARTographies

This digital artscape is a community-centered permanent tribute to the artistic and cultural contributions of Houston’s Latino artists, Latino arts organizations, and the Latino communities they serve. **Latino cARTographies** captures the public works of art such as artist Leo Tanguma’s *Rebirth of our Nationality*, a historic Chicano Movement art mural sprawling 240 x 18 ft. and originally created in the early 1970s, which is located on Canal Street in the East End community.

Latino cARTographies also allows users to explore social issues, as demonstrated by local Latino artist Rigo Miller, whose masterpiece *Basura De La Tempestad* (*Trash of the Tempest*, 10 x 20 ft.) speaks to the atrocities experienced by children separated from their families and held at U.S. detention centers.

In addition to images, **Latino cARTographies** draws on library archives, oral histories, and artists’ biographical notes and interpretations to understand how artists view their art and their vision for its future. Also included are

Artist Leo Tanguma’s mural Rebirth of Our Nationality (panorama view) on Canal Street in the East End community.





Center for Mexican American and Latino/a Studies-University of Houston's Latino Art Now Billboard Project @ Expressway, HTX ART Bus created by Veronica Cabrera Morena and Mobile Art Studio for the Artists, founded by artist Tony Paraná.

museum movement, we need to pursue multiple avenues to feature these incredible artists. **Latino cARTographies** is another way to provide support for our Latino communities by pointing Houston residents, schools, and national and international visitors to view in person the plethora of art created by Houston Latino artists. The overwhelming and positive reaction to **Latino cARTographies** by local artists and arts leaders who previewed the digital board suggests that **Latino cARTographies** can be a powerful tool to counter the historic underrepresentation of Latino arts in mainstream museums and galleries.

Latino cARTographies demonstrates how Latino arts and culture have been instrumental in serving as a powerful catalyst for cultural, economic, and social change in the city

of Houston. By capturing visually, the Latino art of Houston in a single space, **Latino cARTographies** displays how artists confront a variety of social issues and inequalities, such as xenophobia, racism, sexism, environmental degradation and disaster, homophobia, and classism.

One example of community empowerment and how Latino Art strengthens communities by transforming spaces is the Harrisburg Art Museum (HAM). Though no longer opened to artists, this vibrant warehouse once showcased a wide range of murals, graffiti, and street art, as Houston Latino artists improved the wellbeing of the community.

H.A.M. Harrisburg Art Museum, 4300 Harrisburg Boulevard in the East End community.





Houston low rider community artist Victor Jimenez passing on the tradition. Photo by and courtesy of Jay Villa, featured in *Streetseen Magazine*.

Another value of the digital platform is that it allows us to maintain and enhance standards of quality while democratizing access. This artscape of Latino Houston allows the community to see itself and to celebrate its contributions to Houston and American society. With a targeted millennial generation of students and the broader Houston population, we see this as an important teaching tool and resource for the classroom supporting the visual arts and technology fields.

In contemporary society, art museums have become sites where visitors are also now consumers who can purchase culture. **Latino cARTographies** has the potential to increase economic opportunities and visibility for Latino artists who have historically had limited access to mainstream arts opportunities by providing direct access through the placement of QR codes on the board to link visitors to artists and arts organizations. As a repository of information that can expand as the community of artists expands, **Latino cARTographies** will be connected to a microsite on the web and is projected to have a long and sustainable life.

Unlike the parameters of participation established by museums, **Latino cARTographies** is predicated on user participation. We invite visitors to touch, explore, and participate in the creative process. *Everything* on the board is meant to be touched and examined. Virtually anything a visitor touches will feature pop-up text, video, images, interactive art projects, hot spots, QR code links, and even music!! The power of the digital board is that it can frequently be updated, information and images can be archived, and it can increase interactive arts related projects.

Outcomes

Using the metrics of prior digital boards created by the Gibson Group, we anticipate **Latino cARTographies** will attract hundreds of thousands of microsite visitors and student users per year.

To date, **Latino cARTographies** has mapped roughly more than 155 artists, 2,000 images, 7 Latino communities, 80 landmarks, 17 arts organizations, and other sites of importance to Houston's Latino communities.

As a didactic resource that can be easily transported to libraries, schools, museums, city, and academic events, we anticipate substantial use by Houstonians and scholars and visitors from outside of Houston. In short, this project will bring the museum to the community and the community to the museum.



Tatiana Escallón Studio in the Third Ward, Houston.

Conclusion

Latino cARTographies is CMALS's gift to the Latino and greater Houston community, a resource that documents Latino cultural contributions in depth, while also serving as a tool to generate social discourse in the humanities. Eventually, the goal is to expand Latino cARTographies access through multiple installations throughout the city of Houston and virtual access through an App.

Latino cARTographies is also a powerful step towards changing the racist and exclusionary practices of mainstream art institutions that continue to elide the artistic and cultural contributions of communities of color. It is an accessible and inclusive model that represents the formal and informal Latino arts, celebrates the cultural and historic contributions of Houston's Latino communities, nurtures the seed of creativity and innovation of the present, and embraces new technologies for the future. **Latino cARTographies** is a game changer. □

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Juana Guzmán, is co-founder and former president of the National Association of Latino Arts and Culture (NALAC), former vice president of the National Museum of Mexican Art in Chicago, National Arts Strategist and Associate Consultant for the Bloomberg Philanthropies' Art Innovation Management Program (AIM), and member of the Federation of State Humanities Councils.