

## Texas in Riverside: “Cheech Collects” at the Cheech Marin Center for Chicano Art and Culture, Riverside, California

by Ruben C. Cordova | October 7, 2023

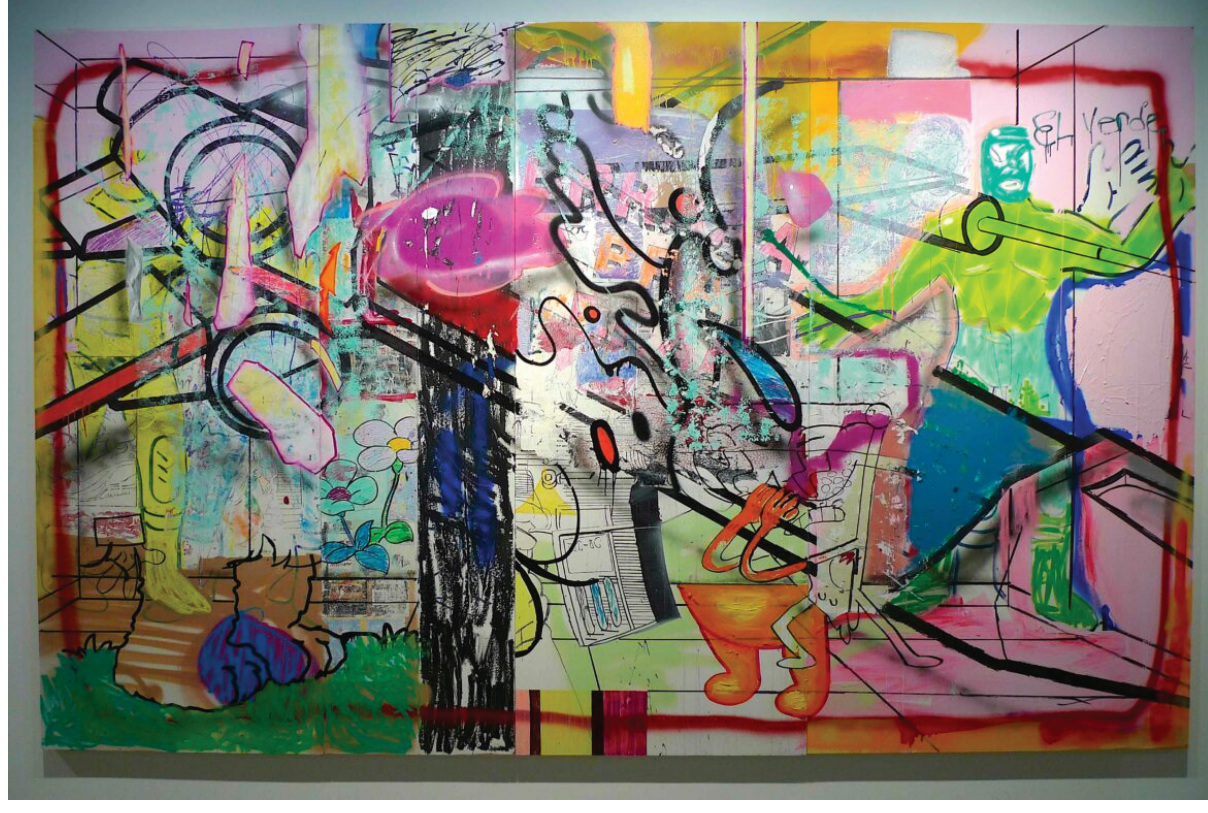


Eloy Torrez, “It’s a Brown World After All” [portrait of Cheech Marin, detail], 2006 oil on canvas, 60 x 60, gift of Cheech Marin. Photograph: courtesy of the artist. (Illustrated artworks are in the collection of The Cheech Marin Center for Chicano Art and Culture, the Riverside Art Museum, unless otherwise noted.)

As the first museum devoted entirely to Chicano art, “the Cheech” will raise visibility and access to Chicano art and culture. With good reason, ARTnews refers to it as a game changer. The Cheech Marin Center for Chicano Art and Culture, a component of the Riverside Art Museum, is dedicated to actor Cheech Marin’s 700+ work collection, the bulk of which has already been donated to the institution. It is housed in a landmark building (the former main library) in Riverside, 55 miles east of Los Angeles (2-4 hours away in traffic) in an area of California known as the Inland Empire. It is described as “the world-wide home for Chicano art and culture in Riverside”.

In addition to a rotating permanent collection, a community gallery, and ample space for major traveling exhibitions, the center will generate scholarship and, through internships, it will train future museum professionals from regional colleges. Marin and local officials hope that it will help to bring about a cultural renaissance in Riverside, a majority-Latinx city with a population of around 330,000.

In this review, I begin by highlighting Texas artists in the inaugural installment of the Cheech’s permanent collection, which is called Cheech Collects. I compare this exhibition to Chicano Visions: American Painters on the Verge at the San Antonio Museum of Art (SAMA), the first venue on a long (2001-2007), high-profile tour of Marin’s collection that visited 12 cities, which I reviewed in Voices of Art (VOA) (vol. 10, #1, 2002: 16-18). I assess Cheech Collects in its entirety, and I examine the circumstances of the museum’s creation. Finally, I discuss the museum’s future plans and potential.



Candelario Aguilar, Jr., “El Verde,” 2020, mixed media on panel, courtesy of Cheech Marin. Photograph: Ruben C. Cordova.

Candelario Aguilar’s El Verde is one of Marin’s most impressive recent acquisitions.

In El Verde, Aguilar renders an outline of a Star Wars X-Wing fighter that traverses the large painting from the upper left to the lower right. This outline is partially dissolved and effaced. It shares this quality with many other partial images that mimic the appearance of having suffered deterioration during a long life on the street. Like a much-graffitted wall, the panel is a palimpsest that reveals many layers of labor, which includes several partial images, including the eponymous green Mexican wrestler standing on a tiled floor on the right.

Through the contrasting thick-and-thin lines and overlays of spray paint, one can make out (moving from right to left) the brown-yellow lower torso of Winnie the Pooh, the magazine and trigger of an assault rifle (in the lower center), pop-inspired spring flowers, and green grass. Images of life, death, and childhood are commingled.

I inquired whether these diverse elements had particular significations, or whether they were there by chance. Aguilar replied: “It’s both. Time and circumstances take their place in my work. Everything in life seems to be by chance.”

Aguilar’s works typically feature tension between abstraction and figuration, which he characterizes as “push and pull.” For the artist, it is a dualistic reflection of “the bilingual, border region environment that I’ve lived in for 50 years.” He adds: “To me, figural forms represent a grounding, a sense of reality and of the familiar.” For Aguilar, abstract forms, on the other hand, “represent freedom, a detachment, a break from the weight of reality.” He generally wants to have both elements in his paintings, and working out the proper balance between the two is one of the challenges of his art. The act of breaking up figural forms serves to render them more abstract, which is how the artist achieves his balance.



Candelario Aguilar, Jr., “El Verde,” 2020, process shot. Photograph: courtesy of the artist..

In the above process shot, taken at an early stage of work on the big painting, we can see at least six partial renderings of the Mexican wrestler El Verde. Aguilar was riffing on Andy Warhol’s paintings with multiple images of Elvis Presley. He doesn’t know much about wrestling, and he chose El Verde simply because he was green, a color associated with marijuana (which endows the grass in the lower left with another layer of meaning).

The collaged comic elements are visible directly behind the artist. As of yet, there is no inking of the Star Wars X-Wing fighter. Most surprisingly for me, the scribbled black bar that divides the painting is already present at this early stage. The sound effects caused by the assault rifle, which are so familiar from Roy Lichtenstein and the combat comics that inspired him, will largely be effaced when the painting is complete. At this early stage, it almost seems as though El Verde is fighting against the assault rifle.

The assault rifle, the weapon of choice for mass shooters, is blocked off on the left by the vertical wall of childish scribble marks. That rifle — as well as the visual rendering of its sound effects — is increasingly contained by the various layers Aguilar adds to the painting. He almost buries it completely, but the magazine and the finger on the trigger remain, providing an almost hidden note of menace in an image filled with naïve and innocent forms. It is Aguilar’s way of saying that we can try to forget about gun violence, but the danger is always there, no matter where we go.

Aguilar’s goal is “an aesthetic that encompasses everything that is to be part of the border region.” Therefore, he says, his artistic vision is a compendium of border culture, one that is “beyond individual identity.” Aguilar characterizes his paintings as “a weaving, an orchestration” of a full range of mediums including: acrylic, oil, aerosol sprays, ink, soft pastels, solid markers, oil stick, fabric paints, and image transfers.

Aguilar explains why he uses so many mediums, materials, and forms of mark making:

From the very beginning it made sense for me to explore the possibilities of mixing it all up, like the human body made of bone, skin, hair, nails, blood etc. My work is made up of various mark- making mediums, creating the constant textural contrast, a push and pull between English/Spanish, Mexican/American, pizza/tacos, El Chavo del Ocho/Three’s Company.

For the artist, these forms of artistic mixing represent and reflect “a Frontera culture that is constantly mixing it up.”

Aguilar references art history, commercial media, film, and music. He combines this content with local iconography, which includes regional characters (such as the green wrestler), and such non-canonical influences as hand-painted signage, and his children’s scribbles and drawings. As major influences, he cites the following: George Lucas, Vincent Van Gogh, Pablo Picasso, Miles Davis, Conjunto musician Narciso Martínez, Cy Twombly, Robert Rauschenberg, Warhol/Basquiat collaborations, Rufino Tamayo, and Alfredo Bustinza.

Aguilar explains how film, music, and animation find their way into his paintings and installations: “imagery from the big screen or TV animation gets into my work” [in various ways]. These can take the form of “spaceships, color combinations, even phrases that could be applied as titles.” He notes a Steven Spielberg film called Ready Player One, in which a virtual world extends into the real world: “I’ve always liked the idea of cartoon animation walking around in real life.” Aguilar utilized this combination of realities, beginning in the mid-2000s, in works he refers to as his barrioPOP classics. This series of paintings includes Land of Peace (2007), Inside Job (2009), and Suite of the Freed Souls (2009). He characterizes this body of work as “barrioPOP with a surrealistic flavor.” Aguilar queries: “How else could I explain R2-D2 standing next to an appropriated Diego Rivera child playing the accordion with dragonflies and melting walls?”

According to the artist, El Verde was something of an artistic exorcism: “I struggled for quite some time while creating it. It just would not resolve, it kept requiring more and more work.” He worked on it for three months, and it was the last painting he completed before the Covid pandemic. He stopped work around January 21, 2020.

It also took some time for Aguilar to realized that it was finished:

The painting sat in my studio untouched for about 2-3 weeks. Walking by a piece and being able to ignore it is always an indication that I’m done and this is pretty much the case with all my work.

Aguilar elaborates on the mysteries of his art-making process:

I can see how it could look chaotic and maybe even disturbing. It turns out that I ended up dumping all my negative, positive energies, ideas and painting concepts into it, a sort of artistic dumping ground, a clearing of the mind. It’s almost always a mystery when starting an artwork because I never know what will come out of it. The importance of this painting for me is that I — unknowingly — was able to clear my mental path before the tragedy of Covid struck. I was able to have a clear mind for what was to come.

Aguilar says this is the first work he has been able to explain verbally: “for a long time I found it difficult to translate, or explain my work into words. Believe it or not, until this piece come along.” He was forced to engage in self-reflection when he was invited by grayDUCK Gallery director and owner Jill Schroeder to talk about El Verde for a gallery video. As the artist recalls, “I felt terrible having to turn her down because at that point I did not know what to say about the painting.” This experience made him realize that he had to learn to “articulate” his work.

On the drive home from Austin to Brownsville, the inability to talk about his work “weighed heavy on me.” During that drive, he found a way to think about the painting in verbal terms. Aguilar came to a conscious realization of something that he had always known: the knowledge that he had “always worked from my gut.” He just had to put into words that he had always worked intuitively, “always trusting my decisions as to what goes into my compositions whether it’s painting, music, assemblages or videos.”