

3 Artists Receive S.F. Awards	p. 3
Agnes Martin in La Jolla	p. 5
Ellen Land-Weber's Collection	p. 11
Interpretations of Technology, N.M.	p. 13

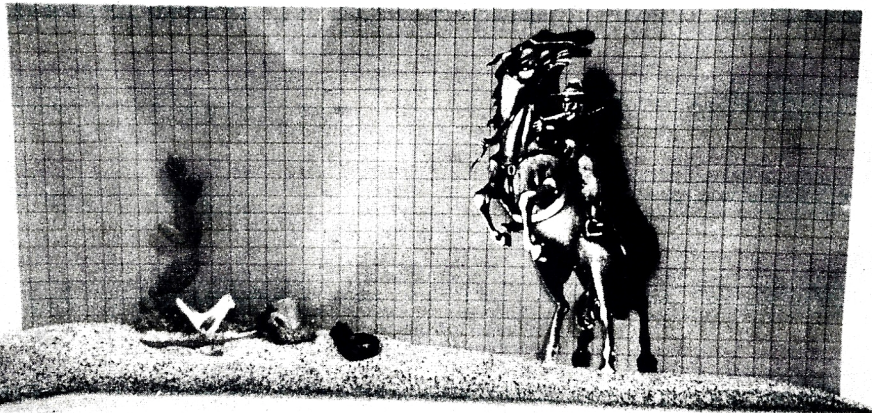
ARTWEEK

THORNS AND ROSES

Los Angeles / Shifra M. Goldman

On September 4, festivities on Olvera Street (original site of El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Angeles) officially opened the bicentennial celebration of the founding of the city in 1781. The next day, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, Inc. (LACE) inaugurated the *Espina/Thorn* exhibit featuring the works of six chicano artists: Carlos Almaraz, Elsa Flores, Louie Perez, Teddy Sandoval, John Valadez and Linda Vallejo. The juxtaposition of these two events — and the fact that Almaraz's bicentennial poster has been designated the "official" one — reflects certain ironies and also certain realities. It was Carey McWilliams in *North From Mexico* (1948) who pointed out the false mythology that claimed the first Los Angeles settlers were of "Spanish" origin, and that, after the infamous Zoot Suit riots, "Mexicans are still not accepted as a part of the community."

This was still true in 1974 (albeit more subtly) when Almaraz exhibited at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art as part of Los Four. The group had breached the wall of institutional indifference to Mexican (now chicano) art and was greeted by patronizing critical reviews (Peter Plagens in *Artforum*, William Wilson in the *Los Angeles Times*) which seemed in agreement that barrio art was all very well as folk expression, but should be left in the barrio. College training had "corrupted" the artists and the Los Four exhibit had "museum-ized" them. (A



Teddy Sandoval, "Buried Treasure," from "Plastic Sandbag" series, 1980, mixed media, at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions.

strange comment for an era when colleges and universities had taken over the training of artists, and museums became logical places for exposure.)

Espina/Thorn is a refutation of those judgments that had added racist insult to critical injury. The works of Almaraz, Sandoval, Valadez and Vallejo (the performance piece by Flores and Perez was too close to press time for inclusion) are certainly not folk art, even of the urban variety, though they do draw upon folk and popular motifs — life in the central city and mysticism ranging from the pre-Columbian to Catholic to Jungian. Both Almaraz and Sandoval deal with the California car culture, but in vastly different ways. Almaraz, who has been through an abstract expressionist phase

(it still shows), was influenced by the Mexican muralists and did brutally expressive cartoonlike murals and paintings in the early 1970s, is still working within the trajectory he began with his work at LACMA in 1974. Now his paintings are controlled, refined and enriched. His *L.A. Wrecks Series* are landscapes of brilliant horizontal color bands (like Diebenkorn using hues of Munch or Tamayo) in which head-on collisions between automobiles, or autos and small planes, take place. The beauty of the color combined with the violence of the image seems like a metaphor for Los Angeles.

Sandoval (collaborating with C. Anderson) approaches the theme in *LA 200/DUI* with relative "coolness." Huge sheets of clear and black plastic suspended from shower-curtain rings (shades of Warhol's plastic flowers and rain) are tracked with broad yellow and silver lines and dashes we associate with freeway dividers. Small, stylized, blue Ford Fairlanes are choreographed in changing patterns across the sheets: some in collision, some following the markers faithfully, some unregimented as they leave the discipline of the freeways.

In addition to his *Wrecks*, Almaraz exhibits a series of nocturnal scenes in rich pastels. Coyotes are registers of black, gleaming-toothed, snarling animals on bands of red-purple. Only the green nopales (prickly pear) remove them from Pollock's (Jungian?) Roman wolf. In chicano culture, coyotes are not only animals of the Southwest, but are also a nickname for unscrupulous agricultural labor contractors. In Sandoval's original and witty *Plastic Sand-Bag Series*, each bag is wall-suspended with tacks; a layer of sand provides the "ground" for a landscape with nopales on which a *charro* rears his horse, or chicanos in jeans function in graffiti-covered cityscapes.

Valadez executes meticulous pencil drawings of life-size figures or city scenes. *La Sad Girl* draws on the barrio

nickname for a solemn young chicana seated on a bank of television sets (U.S. culture), while sensationalist Mexican publications flutter before her on clothespins attached to the ubiquitous nopal. The nopal, says Valadez, symbolizes something that lives in a different environment, resists pain and is tough, as *La Sad Girl* would like to be. *706 So. Broadway*, also a long vertical format on paper, is a realistic and detailed rendition of a downtown toy store in which gay toys contrast with a crumbling wall.

Vallejo's three-dimensional works, anchored on Arches paper and enclosed in vacu-form plastic domes and sheets, or diamonds and squares, are carefully crafted constructions of mixed media. The grounds are richly chromatic monotypes of silkscreen, lithograph, paint and dye, on which have been mounted forms made of folded paper, papier mache, plastic, welshwool, wires and honeysuckle vines. The images thus created are emblematic, suggesting crosses, pyramids, pre-Columbian serpents, the four cardinal points, etc. The corkscrew wires and honeysuckle seem to be emanations of cosmic energy, and in fact the artist calls the group of works *Energy Series*.

One last word must be written about the title of this collective show. *Espina* was chosen by the artists as a poetic invocation of the multiple meanings that the thorn has for their culture: the crown of thorns, the sacred heart with thorns and fire, the nopal thorns which yield the delicious edible tuna (prickly pear), the Cuban symbol of the rose with single bloodied thorn, the rose of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the maguey (century plant), etc. All these symbols, and many more, have appeared in various transformations in chicano art over the years. □

Shifra M. Goldman is a Latin American art historian whose book, *Contemporary Mexican Painting in a Time of Change*, will be published in January 1981.

Linda Vallejo, "Amoeba (Dedicated to Quetzalcoatl)," 1980, mixed media, 22" x 21" x 8"

