

Chicano artists create monuments for their

By Susan Geer
Special to The Register

Monuments. The word conjures up grand and timeless images — ancient Egyptian stone obelisks standing upright in the searing sun of centuries, the long, polished black-marble slabs of the Vietnam War Memorial splitting the earth like a dark wound.

Perhaps that's why the current exhibit at Orange County Center for Contemporary Art — "Stele/Chicano Monuments" — is initially so confusing for the viewer. We enter expecting monumental pieces of Chicano art loaded with strong political statements or historical orientation but encounter instead a subtle introduction to the Chicano heritage and its values.

In her statement accompanying the exhibit, guest curator Linda Vallejo, a Long Beach artist, defines the stele as an upright inscribed stone or marker. In this exhibit the stele is meant to form a historical and formal framework for an examination of the art of the Southland Chicano culture.

Vallejo solicited work supposedly stimulated by the memorial stele concept and selected 11 Chicano artists from Orange County and Los Angeles as representative of the wide range of styles and media used by the Chicano community. The 14 pieces in the exhibit are intended as a partial record of the local Chicano culture and its art.

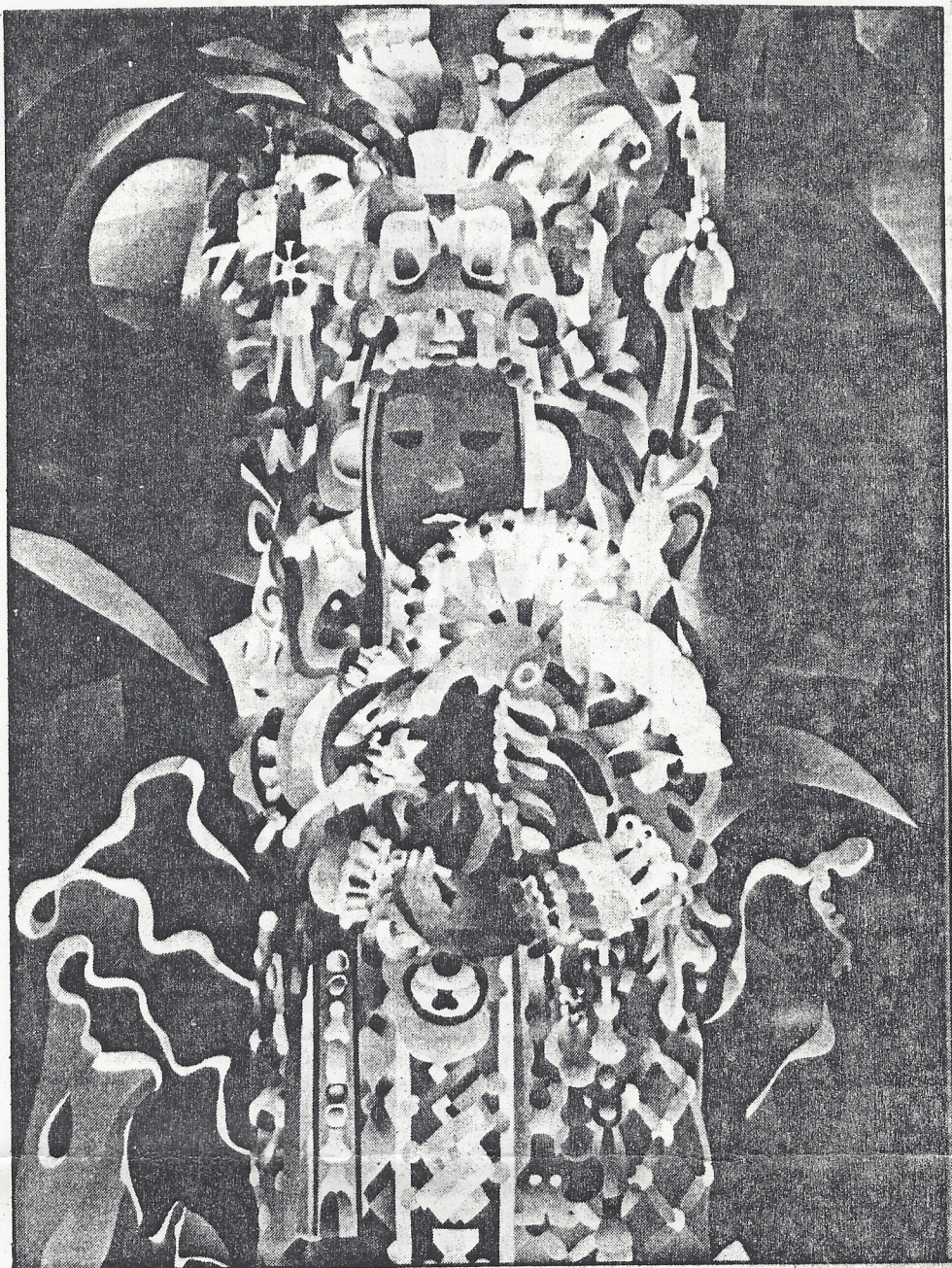
I had a hard time seeing the stele or monument aspect of some of the work included in this show. The form is sometimes abstractly present, as in Michael M. Amescua's assemblage, "Georgia," with its small boulder held aloft by a rusting iron armature. But I can find no trace of upright form or inscription in Yreina Cervantez' small watercolor, "Cerca de Islas Mujeres." I suppose it could be argued that each piece functions as a sort of recording marker of the art and people of the Chicano community. But that argument could be applied to the art of all cultures, and that's a pretty broad framework to hang a show on.

Philosophy aside, it is obvious the artists were selected because they draw consciously and unconsciously upon their Chicano heritage to arrive at their images. This gives the show a unity that, despite the language barrier, allows even someone from a different social and political background to understand and share the artists' various concerns.

Many of the images lean heavily on familiar Mayan Indian carvings. These images, frequently lush and jewel-like as in "Madre de Yachalum," the painting by Roberto Delgado, seem to be archetypes, indicative of an underlying reverence for nature and the Earth that pervades much of the work in the show.

Ben Valenzuela sees nature and contemporary man to be at odds in his coarse "Stele for a New Technology." He uses the ancient stylized figures symbolic of fertility and an assortment of mass-produced plastics to try to blend the natural world of the past with the sterile techno-fabrication of the present. It's a horrific vision.

Olivia Sanchez Brown is less overt about her cultural associations, and her



'Madre de Yachalum' by Roberto Delgado is based on a stele in Honduras.

sensibility to nature is far more calming. Her installation "From Here to Eternity" has two large polished aluminum slabs resting on a bed of gray sand. By footing the highly reflective surface of the monoliths with vivid blue spray paint she simultaneously alludes to a cultural stereotype of barrio graffiti while creating a haunting fragment of undulating landscape.

In this exhibit, Jose Lozano, Emigdio Vasquez, and Diane Gamboa are the chroniclers of the present-day Chicano community. Lozano describes his world in a chain of graphite and charcoal drawings that run through the endless faces, titles and hype of local movie-house marquees. Vasquez, a muralist, presents a small painting, "We Shall Be All," honoring the common laborers whose hard work founded the nation.

Gamboa's small tableau "Eat Your Heart Out" is perhaps the most moving of the three. However, because it is highly personal, its content appears to be the least specific to the Chicano community. Using the symbols of her Catholic background, Gamboa expresses private anguish bordering on the romantic fanaticism found in early Spanish art. On an altar-like table covered with a hand-

stitched cloth there is a single place setting. For this solemn dinner ritual, however, the meat is a red and blue human heart pierced by spikes. The garnish is a crown of thorns.

The work in this exhibit runs the gamut from slick to unsophisticated. Probably

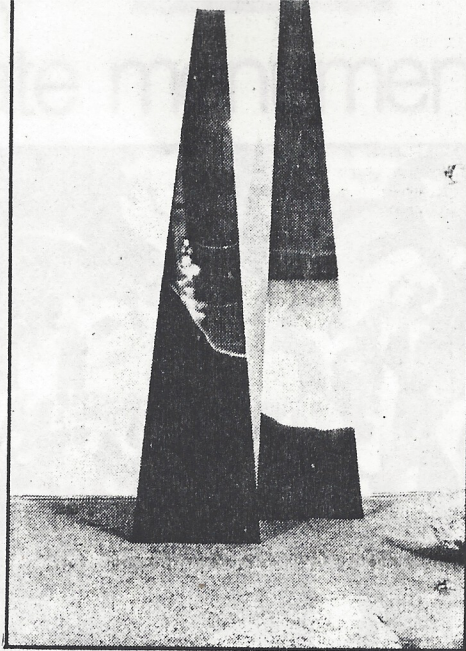
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We owe some of the most delicious images of 20th-century France to Jacques-Henri Lartigue. Born in 1895, he has been photographing the women in his life for the past 84 years, beginning with his nurse, mother and grandmother and moving on to his three wives, the women at the Auteil races, writers, actresses, artists and Parisiennes strolling down the Bois de Boulogne.

In search of character and joy in living rather than pin-up prettiness,

culture



'From Here to Eternity' is aluminum.

REVIEW

What: "Stele/Chicano Monuments."

Where: Orange County Center for Contemporary Art, Harbor Business Park, 3621 W. MacArthur Blvd., Space 111, Santa Ana.

When: Through April 25. Open noon to 5 p.m., Wednesday through Sunday.

Admission: Free.

Call: 549-4989.

because only a few of the artists are art institution graduates, much of the work has a folk art quality and directness that is appealing. It's tough in a 20th-century culture exposed to so much mass media to maintain this unaffected simplicity. But it is this quality and the work's innate reflection of cultural awareness that makes the exhibit interesting. Chicano artists are steadily mining the wealth of their centuries-old culture and symbology. With various levels of success, they are arriving at images that quite clearly convey their unique ethnic experience.

CHOICE

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he seems to have located a beauty of spirit in the entire female sex.

A selection of Lartigue's photographs is on view through May 24 at Susan Spiritus Gallery, 522 Old Newport Blvd., Newport Beach. Gallery hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. Call 631-6405 during gallery hours for more information.

Cathy Curtis