Interview of Dr. Josh T. Franco for ArteLatinx 2019: Blog post

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Dr. Josh T. Franco
National Collector at the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

Interviewer: Jonathan Orozco, UNO Art History Student, ArteLatinX 2019 Committee Member

As part of the OLLAS Exhibition, ArteLatinx 2019, we invited Dr. Josh T. Franco to talk about the X in LatinX and the connections between the theme of our exhibition “The Voice of our Roots”, art, and identity. Dr. Franco is currently National Collector at the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Previously, he was Latino Collections Specialist at the Archives (2015 – 2017). Here is an excerpt of the interview UNO student Jonathan Orozco did with Dr. Franco back in September of 2019. This transcript has been edited to focus on three themes: Identity, the importance of Latino Art, and on the X in LatinX. With this blog, we bring closure to ArteLatinX 2019.

On Latino Identity:

The adage, “We didn’t crossed the border the border crossed us” resonates with me. I don’t really have big immigration story in any recent familial memory. The last big immigration in our family...
was probably from Spain 500 years ago. Growing up in Texas, I was never asked where I was from because Texans—especially West Texans—typically understand that brown people have always been there, whether they like it or not. Simultaneously, it was always made clear to me that we are also *Mexicanos*. That never seemed to contradict that we were also Americans.

I began to call myself Chicano probably in my early twenties, right out of college when I lived in San Antonio. There, working with many arts and social justice organizations, I was educated about the history of the Chicano movement and Chicano art, and I began to take on that identity. It wasn’t until I went to Binghamton in upstate New York for graduate school that I experienced being asked about an immigration story, which I thought was interesting. That was an education for me. I learned that if you’re brown in upstate New York, it’s assumed that you’re a recent immigrant to the US. If you don’t sound like a Spanish speaker people think you’re second generation maybe. So I was asked often, “Where are your parents from?” And that was new. That’s when I began empathizing with that question in a personal way. To a very small degree, that gave me an idea of what it’s like to be a Latino who’s immigrated here second or third generation rather than having just been here for what seems like forever. There is nothing more or less authentic to either experience.

**On the importance of Latino Art:**

I don’t think it is one single body of art. There are artists who are Latino and whether that shows in their art or not, you know, is really up to them. Well, it also depends on curatorial and institutional frameworks too. If you think about *santeros/as* in New Mexico, for instance, they were not historically vying for spaces in commercial art galleries or fine art museums. The original concern of that practice is to create objects that inspire faith practices and give people a material connection to their syncretic Catholicism as it has evolved in the Hispano Southwest. But, it’s very much a form of art that could be, and has been, called Latino when taken out of a chapel or home setting and placed in a museum. This has happened frequently in the past few decades, so it provides a great case study for how this framework evolves.

What are the challenges of being a Latino artist? One is certainly the feeling of being pigeonholed and, for instance, receiving the majority of invitations to exhibit when Hispanic Heritage Month comes around. Or only being asked to be in shows that have “Chicano” or another ethnic moniker in the title. Though, for some artists I’ve met, that’s just fine. They are happy to operate in the world that way. You can see how that’s a double edged sword. It’s the question of audience. If you want to speak to a broader audience, then you’re not going to be happy being put in shows that are framed in such a narrow way.
Taking a step back, I wonder why “What is difficult about being a Latino artist?” is the question here in the first place. Why aren’t you asking “What’s great about it?” That would be a fun and joyful question to answer. What’s great about being a Latino, Chicano artist, and art historian like myself, for example, is that I always have the sense that someone’s got my back. As an artist, there are powerful ancestors and elders whose work and words I can discover and revisit for strength. As an art historian at the Smithsonian and within the broader discipline, there are dozens of peers and role models who I can rely on to answer my calls and emails and commiserate or celebrate with me. I don’t think that is cultivated much in general as one grows into professional roles in the art world, but in my experience, Latinxs in the museums and galleries I work with do this intentionally. I am never alone in my efforts, which is a truly powerful position.

It’s amazing to have that community. It’s happening here, right now. I’m in Omaha for the first time in my life. Then, I walk into an office full of brown people. We all get some base things about each other and that’s really, really nice. So, to me it’s much more fruitful to think about the benefits of being a Latino art historian rather than starting out with focusing on what’s so hard.

Of course, me being able to recognize that is a historical privilege based on decades of people struggling. We cannot forget the amazing artists and art workers who have come before us and had it really hard. They didn’t have offices in universities. They had to fight for them. And, because they did, we get to enjoy the benefits. I believe we honor that by being joyful in how we fill these spaces they fought for on our behalf. We are living their dreams. I am so grateful all the time.
In the future, I would like Latino art to just continue to be more and more porous with the rest of American art... I think it’d be nice if future Latino artgoers can walk into exhibitions that don’t have anything explicit in their curatorial framework about Latino identity, but still felt that sense of company in the presence of certain works. I don’t believe those two notions have to be at odds with each other.


On the X in LatinX:

I don’t know that I have an answer, not in the resolute sense. I’ve just been kind of listening to all of these very passionate opinions people have and have been kind of tickled. I mean, it didn’t seem that shocking to me the first time I encountered it. Other people’s loud reactions really took me by surprise. I think this is largely due to my graduate school training (on top of my own admittedly promiscuous sensibilities). I studied for years with the philosopher María Lugones, who frames resistance to the coloniality of being as a resistance to the “hushing of the manyness.” One strategy of decolonization is the cultivation of plurality and multiplicity and even contradiction. The X seems to have the potential to perform this work. I also enjoy a masculine self-identity, celebrate gender fluidity, am a feminist and a Tejano who speaks in a West Texan pocho vaquero millennial tongue. Because of these beliefs and positions, I found it easy to embrace the manyness that comes along with adding the X to the O and the A. Like I said, the vitriol and the line-drawing from all sides sort of shocked me. I am all for making more room for more ways of being. To do otherwise is to rehearse colonial violence on one another. No thank you.

I am also a scholar, and I was grateful for the invitation to speak on the X here, because it prompted me to delve into the collection at the Archives of American Art with this fascinating angle. My tactic was to search for visual examples of the X—the actual mark, whether as an alphabetic letter or otherwise—in the papers of Latino artists and to see how they functioned in various documents. Sometimes it eliminates a piece of art that a curator decided last minute not to put in an exhibition; in other instances, it marks the place in a performance score where the performer starts or ends; sometimes it’s a signoff in correspondence. It turned out to be a rich way to gather primary sources and get a fresh view on the history of US Latino art. It points us to actual art historical occurrences and the mark making that happened around them. I find it to be the most productive way I’ve been able to enter this question, because otherwise it just seems like a lot of polemics going back and forth which I’m not interested in. The noisy manyness of these documents is undeniable. They will not be hushed.

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