



## Review: With its 25th Emerging Latinx Artists exhibition, Mexic-Arte keeps an open line to the current times


*For this iteration of the annual exhibition, Mexic-Arte features new work by 13 previous participants*

By **Lauren Moya Ford** - October 1, 2020



*A mural on Mexic-Arte Museum by Austin artists Sadé Lawson and Niz is a part of the exhibiton "ELA 25: Intersección: Choque & Alivio / Intersection: Shock and Relief" mwhiich arks the museum's 25th year spotlighting emerging Latinx artists. Photo by Andrew Anderson*

This year, you can see part of Mexic-Arte's annual "ELA (Emerging Latinx Artists)" exhibition without entering the museum.

And even if you don't go looking for art on the corner of Congress Avenue and Fifth Street, it's hard to miss the vibrant new mural by Austin artists Niz and Sadé Lawson of two Black women holding "VOTE" and "BLACK LIVES MATTER!" signs, towering over human-sized, raised fists. 

The message is clear: in these times of social and political turmoil, Austin's longest-running Latinx art museum is keeping an open line to the streets.

Formerly known as the "YLA," or "Young Latinx Artists" exhibition series, "[ELA 25: Intersección: Choque & Alivio / Intersection: Shock and Relief](#)" marks the museum's 25th year spotlighting emerging Latinx artists. For this edition, Mexic-Arte curator George Vargas invited 13 Texas-based, former participants to return to the museum with new work.

The "ELA 25" artists are [Christin Apodaca](#), (El Paso), [Jellyfish Collective](#), (El Paso), [Hatziel Flores](#), (Dallas), [Yareth Fernández](#), (Austin), [Michael Anthony García](#), (Austin), [Suzy González](#), (San Antonio), [Sadé Lawson](#), (Austin), [Alejandro Macias](#), (Brownsville), [Michael Menchaca](#), (San Antonio), [Ashley Mireles](#), (San Antonio), [Hope Mora](#), (Pecos), [Niz](#), (Austin), and [Jose Villalobos](#), (San Antonio).

The exhibition's best works bring what's been happening in the streets to the museum walls. In Michael Menchaca's *20XX\_1* and *201XX\_2* (both 2020), animal-headed figures carry protest signs reading "No justice, no peace," "BLM," "I can't breathe," and others, grip their phones, and tumble and bleed when blocks of riot police charge.





Michael Menchaca, "20XX\_1," mixed media on canvas, 25" X 30." 2020

Menchaca is a master of melding the old with the new. His surprising pictures – which are made up of digitally-printed stickers arranged on painted canvas – fuse the visuals of ancient Mesoamerican codices with Japanese video games. His cartoony, almost-cutesy depiction of recent racially-charged, state-inflicted violence re-presents our world as a disconcertingly dystopian place, like some sort of game where good and evil don't matter as much as blind chance.

Across the gallery, words appear again, this time in a more playful mode. Michael Anthony García's "A Güey With Words" (2020) culls English and Spanish words and phrases from found t-shirts and remixes them into quirky quasi-haikus. "Studmuffin starts with views from the precious commodities," reads one; "Who cares about deductible madness," reads another.





Michael Anthony García, "A Güey With Words," 2020, Sourced Clothing, wood, hardware, oil cloth, and poetry, 108" x 84" x 3." Image courtesy the artist and Mexic-Arte Museum



The proximity of García and Menchaca's works opens an unexpected dialog. After all, isn't a t-shirt a declaration, and a sort of bodily protest sign? As curator Vargas told me in a recent phone interview, "language is power and a picture is worth a thousand words, so between visual art and language, the message is conveyed in one way or another."

García's curious questions about clothing continue in his 2018 digital video "Star Crossed." Decked out in a motley mix of patterned garments, including a striped mask that completely covers his face, the artist slowly swings a rainbow-colored divining rod over the earth like some kind of cryptic *curandero*, or folk healer. In his artist statement, García says that he seeks to "embody ... emotional positivity." So even though "Star Crossed" was made two years ago, one can easily reimagine the video as a sort of blessing for the world, or a creative break from quarantine boredom.



Work by Jose Villalobos "Chinga Tu Machismo. Soy Joto y ¿qué?" Image courtesy the artist and Mexic-Arte Museum

A different kind of performance takes place in Jose Villalobos's work. Boots, belts, and cowboy hats are at the center of the artist's gripping videos, installations, and performances.

Villalobos subverts not only the borderland *macho*'s uniform, but also his supposed mastery of the land and of himself through rough, ritualistic acts. Falling somewhere between self-flagellation and self-consecration,

the digital video “El Amor y su Entierro” (2020) shows Villalobos nailing a prickly pear to an aloe leaf over his (sacred) heart. The artist mines *machismo* and unravels it, queering and complicating what it means to be a man. ^

In another piece, “Chinga Tu Machismo. Soy Joto y ¿qué?” (2020), a canopy of fringed cowboy hats emblazoned with the artwork’s title is strapped to a mannequin’s back. It’s a reminder that the work and its message are mobile, and meant to be seen in the streets.

The streets are the setting of Hope Mora’s thoughtful photographs. Mora’s pictures are structured by the sun soaked flatness of her hometown, Pecos, Texas. Most of her portraits are taken outdoors, where *escaramuzas*, *quince* girls, teens in t-shirts, and uncles in sports jerseys pose between dusty gravel pavements and wide blue skies.



Hope Mora's photographs. Mora's pictures are structured by the sun soaked flatness of her hometown, Pecos, Texas

While it's true that Mora inevitably captures a kind of performance in her pictures — her sitters' poses, clothes, and expressions all signal individual identities — her subjects' comfortable confidence and the landscape's quiet stillness are a balm to the ways that POC have been portrayed in mass media in recent months. As hostility escalates across the country in the face of the upcoming election, there's an ease in these images that offers refuge. Mora's work is a rare example of the second half of the exhibition's title: *alivio*, or relief. ^

"Although maybe Austin has stepped away from the heyday of Chicano art ... we're still here," says Vargas. "Every four years, they knock on our doors. They eat our tacos, they talk about Cinco de Mayo. That's the only thing they do. They don't really advance our cause and deal with the social issues that are still very prevalent."

However, nearly all of the artworks that Vargas selected for *ELA 25* were made this year, and nearly all speak directly about how our tumultuous reality is impacting the Latinx community and beyond.

As the woman's sign in the mural says, VOTE.

*"ELA 25: Intersección: Choque & Alivio / Intersection: Shock and Relief" through Nov. 22. [mexic-artemuseum.org](http://mexic-artemuseum.org)*



**Lauren Moya Ford**