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For Latino Artists in Sci-Fi Show, Everyone's an Alien

By JORI FINKEL AUG. 25, 2017



Beatriz Cortez with her hand-welded “Memory Insertion Capsule” at the University of California, Riverside. Credit Nathaniel Wood for The New York Times

RIVERSIDE, Calif. — The shiny steel space capsule, a 12-sided metal contraption, looked more like a theatrical prop than anything truly orbit-worthy.

And it was getting crowded inside. A heavy desk, bookshelf and fireplace — all made out of steel — lined one wall. Still to come was a metal trunk.

“If I had to go in a space capsule because I couldn’t live on earth anymore, I’d want it to feel like a home,” said the capsule’s creator, the El Salvador-born Los Angeles artist Beatriz Cortez, who spot-welded the futuristic spacecraft and its furniture, giving them unexpected texture.

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Details of Ms. Cortez’s welded steel panels, with bumps evoking the “repujado” metalwork of Spanish colonial artists and large lumps suggesting river rocks used by native cultures. Credit Nathaniel Wood for The New York Times

Her steel panels have visible bumps that evoke the repujado metalwork of Spanish colonial artists. Elsewhere she added steel lumps that resemble river rocks — a basic construction material used by native cultures.

“We always imagine indigenous people being part of our past,” she said, on a break from installation. “I wanted to imagine indigenous people as part of our future.”

Starting Sept. 16, Ms. Cortez’s “Memory Insertion Capsule” will greet visitors to [“Mundos Alternos: Art and Science Fiction in the Americas.”](#) an exhibition at the University of California, Riverside that shows Latin American and Latin-heritage artists mining the tropes of science fiction.



Adál's "Coconauts in Space," from 2016, at the University of California, Riverside. Credit Adál/UCR Artsblock

Some, like Ms. Cortez, have created startling objects that offer portals into alternative worlds or mimic time machines. Others use the imagery of extraterrestrials to express something of the immigrant's alienating experience. Most engage in the speculative thinking long associated with science-fiction literature and film to explore social issues.

"A Latino science-fiction art project allows us to imagine otherwise and escape the paralyzing borders and anti-immigrant sentiment in this country," said Robb Hernández, an English professor at the university who organized the show with two in-house curators. "Rather than being bound

to our punishing gravity and our horizontal understanding of border-crossing, these artists are looking upward to imagine new notions of citizenship, boundaries, who belongs and who doesn't."

"Remember, in space we are all essentially aliens," he added.

With \$350,000 in funding from the J. Paul Getty Trust, "Mundos Alternos" ("Alternate Worlds") is the most expensive and research-intensive show that U.C. Riverside's art center has produced to date.

It is also a good example of a show that might not exist without the Getty's underwriting of the sprawling transcultural arts initiative known as [Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA](#), short for Latin America/Los Angeles, opening next month. A way to support scholarship in underdeveloped fields, PST: LA/LA, as the project is known, began in 2011 with the Getty funding 50 museums in Southern California to develop shows about the region's art history from 1940 to 1985. With \$16 million in Getty financing, the new initiative on Latin American and Latino art involves about 70 nonprofit institutions in the area; nearly as many commercial art galleries will be offering self-funded shows on the theme.

This year's survey was inspired by the demographics of Los Angeles, where nearly half the population has Hispanic roots, making the area a cultural nexus. Nearby, in Riverside County, 47 percent of the population, and 29 percent of the university's students are Chicano or Latino.

Several museum curators took PST: LA/LA as a rare opportunity to integrate Latin American and Latin-diaspora artworks. Like "Mundos Alternos," the much-praised "[Home](#)," which opened in June at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the forthcoming "[Radical Women](#)" at the [Hammer](#) also mix artists from Latin American countries and the United States to explore economic, social or political transformations.



Laura Molina's "Amor Alien," from 2004. Credit Laura Molina/National Museum of Mexican Art, Chicago

E. Carmen Ramos, the Latino art curator and deputy chief curator at the [Smithsonian American Art Museum](#), called the rise of thematic shows noteworthy. "What's critically important about these group exhibitions is that they use a strong conceptual lens," unlike "the wave of general surveys we associate with the multicultural era," she said, where ethnicity itself was often the organizing rubric.

The Riverside curators decided to pursue a sci-fi theme to build on the university's large collection of science fiction and fantasy literature. They traveled to six countries and 11 American cities where they discovered a wide range of artworks, made mainly over the last 20 years, dealing with concerns including the politics of immigration and the dangers of military surveillance.

Laura Molina's 2004 painting "Amor Alien" playfully takes on the challenges of interracial romance with a beautiful, green-skinned woman draped across the lap of a dashing white man. She looks asleep but as Mr. Hernández points out, the man is even more disempowered — encased in a helmet that suggests he cannot breathe on his own while "the alien queen can survive on her own planet."

Ms. Molina's work was part of a project developed by another artist in the show, [Luis Valderas](#), called MeChicano Alliance of Space Artists, or MASA — a play on NASA. These artists used outer space to explore issues ranging from border control and xenophobia to social justice.



Guadalupe Maravilla (formerly Irvin Morazán) created a border headdress that fuses Mayan and futuristic imagery. Credit Nathaniel Wood for The New York Times

The show also features a towering, spiky headdress by the New York-based Salvadoran artist Guadalupe Maravilla (formerly known as Irvin Morazán), which fuses Mayan and futuristic imagery. He wore it during a performance walking across the Rio Grande in 2011, where the river separates the United States from Mexico. Tyler Stallings, one of the show's three curators, called the headdress an example of "techno-shamanism."

The Mexican collective [La Gravedad de los Asuntos](#) is represented with a joyous video called "[Supernova](#)," showing the artists floating during a zero-gravity airplane flight. They have an earnest but lighthearted cultural mission: trying to smash open a silver, star-shaped piñata,

releasing candy to all corners of the plane.

Also adding local color to images of outer space, the Nuyorican artist known as [Adál](#) has been altering photographs from the 1969 moon landing by inserting images from his native island — his own portrait or a Puerto Rican flag. He calls his alternate history "Coconauts in Space."

"In the tradition of the science fiction genre, the straight white male scientist becomes the hero and the alien race is often represented as primitive," Mr. Stallings said. Here, many immigrant or so-called alien artists cast themselves as cosmic pioneers or explorers.



Jillian Mayer's "Slumpie 7 (Arm Hole)," (foreground), with works by MASA (MeChicano Alliance of Space Artists). Credit Nathaniel Wood for The New York Times

Ms. Cortez's space capsule is a vehicle for sharing her archival research into California's often-invisible racist past and colonial history. Inside the capsule is a steel helmet that displays, on a smartphone, images relating to Paul Popenoe, who in the 1920s advocated the now-debunked theory of eugenics. The metal tent that tops her structure nods to the experience of homelessness and forced migration today.



Beatriz Cortez's memory helmet. Credit Nathaniel Wood for The New York Times

Over the last two years Ms. Cortez learned how to weld for this project and related pieces; she says such resourcefulness is par for the course for an immigrant. She recalled finding work translating math books into Braille when she first arrived in Arizona from El Salvador in 1989 — she knew no Braille and had to learn on the job. After getting her Ph.D. in literature and cultural studies, as well as an M.F.A., she is now a professor in the Central American Studies department at California State University, Northridge, as well as a working artist.

As Joanna Szupinska-Myers, the show's other curator, sees it, Ms. Cortez's work gets at "the vulnerability and bravery of the immigrant, making you think about someone who picks up and moves to another country with just a few things."

The curators at U.C. Riverside are thinking about how to reach potential visitors. "One of the biggest questions is how do we do more than just import objects to our museum," Mr. Hernández said. "What are our responsibilities to the artists and also the broader Latino and Latin American communities?"

They are preparing some bilingual wall texts and a weekly Spanish-language tour. Mr. Hernández, who specializes in queer theory, is teaching a fall course tied to the exhibition. He added that all the sci-fi research has inspired the topic of his next book: "trans-planetary performance art."