

BOOK REVIEW

The 1970s Royal Chicano Air Force: Art History and Perspectives

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Flying Under the Radar with the Royal Chicano Air Force: Mapping a Chicano/a Art History. By Ella Maria Diaz. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017. Pp. 336. \$29.95 (paper).

In Flying Under the Radar with the Royal Chicano Air Force: Mapping a Chicano/a Art History, Ella Maria Diaz, scholar and assistant professor in English and Latina/os Studies at Cornell University (New York), provides readers with the first full-length scholarly study of the art and member biographies of the Royal Chicano Air Force (RCAF). Previously known as the Rebel Chicano Art Front, the RCAF was an art group created by students and teachers at California State University, Sacramento, in 1969, and became established between 1970 and 1972. Having come from predominantly farm-working families, as well as having served in the US Armed Forces, the members used art to embrace the Chicano political and intellectual mentality that sought to reconnect and recover Mexican history and strengthen and decolonize the Chicano/a identity emphasizing the recreation of the nation of *Aztlán*. The members wanted to create a visual vessel that would help them communicate information to an audience usually excluded from US society by using specific artistic methods and Chicano/a vocabulary.

Having changed their name to prevent their audience from confusing them with the Royal Canadian Air Force, their new name served as an inspiration of survival, visibility, and inspiration for the Chicano community during

the Chicano civil rights movement. By becoming the “agents of change” during their educational training, RCAF members passed along their learned art techniques to their community members (the youth, elderly, and the incarcerated) and sought to reconfigure their barrio space and feed the Chicano consciousness through mural paintings. Their larger goal was to make art accessible, educational, and occupational for their communities by using established artistic methods, specific colors and symbols, and the Chicano/a vocabulary.

Prior to this full-length scholarly study of the RCAF, the group was briefly and specifically mentioned only within the context of the Chicano Movement and the United Farm Workers (UFW) Union. Rather than focus on offering a chronological account of the coursework of the RCAF, Diaz opens her study by presenting a mapping paradigm of the founding and name change of the group for the reader to fully understand the inspiration, origins, and educational and social goals of the RCAF. She also traces the transformation of the group’s collective soul when it began to accept artists and community members. Most important, Diaz demonstrates how studying the art of the RCAF reflects the multiple coalitions of the cultural and political messages put in place by the diverse members and how their messages moved between university campuses, Chicano/a neighborhoods, and other commercial and public places. As such, the author not only focuses on the message displayed by the art but also underscores the events that shaped the artist and how these messages were delivered. This study is presented through the use of personal interviews, public and personal archives, scholarly work focusing on Chicano/a art, documentaries, and a variety of RCAF artwork, including poems, silk prints, posters, and murals.

Two specific chapters of the book contribute heavily to the uniqueness of this study. Chapter two focuses on how the RCAF failed to embrace the

contribution of their *mujeres*. Diaz boldly argues that, like the Chicano Movement, the RCAF was at fault for being a patriarchal group. Therefore, it is appreciated that she devotes an entire chapter to the contributions of the RCAF women. Diaz seeks to prove how the women of RCAF were “central to the circulation of decolonial ideas performed and produced by the collective” (Diaz 2017, 88) by interviewing female members and documenting their push to be heard within the group through their art. Chapter five focuses on how the RCAF art is interpreted in the twenty-first century and discusses the relevance of the artistic messages today. Further, Diaz explains how the online accessibility of the RCAF art collection helps feed virtual Chicano/a art culture and allows the art to reach more people than it originally did in previous decades. This accessibility allows the art to live and continue expanding the Chicano/a consciousness.

Overall, Diaz’s book contributes much to the Chicano/a Studies art field as it actively demonstrates the impact of the RCAF’s art on the community and on today’s youth by studying the historical context of the art group, recounting the biographies of some of the members, and unpacking the symbols incorporated in specific pieces of art chosen for her chapters. Her text would be instrumental if used as both a required classroom text or as a personal read if interest lies in understanding how personal experiences shape the artistic message.

References

- Diaz, Ella Maria. 2017. *Flying Under the Radar with the Royal Chicano Air Force: Mapping a Chicano/a Art History*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

