

EMISFÉRICA

Chicana Art: The Politics of Spiritual and Aesthetic Altarities. By Laura E. Pérez.
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While studying and analyzing Chicana visual cultures, Laura E. Pérez noted a predominant tendency among the artists, one which she describes as “a gesture of yearning and *ofrenda*, or offering, toward greater personal integrity, empowerment, and social justice” (2). *Chicana Art: The Politics of Spiritual and Aesthetic Altarities* honors and extends this tradition, itself a dazzling *ofrenda* to both artists and scholars alike. Pérez lays out a much-needed archive of the post-1960s work of Chicana visual artists. At the heart of the book, however, are the diverse and hybrid spiritualities that sustain and guide not only aesthetic, but also critical dimensions of the work of Chicana visual artists. *Chicana Art* is a significant work both for its form and content, as well as its imaginative and sensitive scope, which pushes disciplinary borders in order to illustrate the insights of this canon of art for a wide variety of intellectual inquiries.

Pérez’s primary aim is to open up a space for sustained conversations engaging the crucial intersections of Chicana spirituality and visual culture. This intervention forges a language, both written and visual, for engaging the nebulous and often suspiciously viewed spiritual elements within an adamantly secular scholarly tradition. The spiritual, Pérez argues, comprises “another terrain upon which to challenge the cultural blind spots in mainstream values, in our assumptions and dismissals, in our pretensions to the universality and superiority of our beliefs, and in our anti-religiosity or religious dogmatism” (3). This vision of the spiritual originates in the artwork itself. In drawing out these claims, Pérez relies upon Chicana feminist and feminist-of-color intellectual traditions and theories alongside European poststructuralist thought, a blend well reflected in her extensive bibliography. She refuses to glorify one scholarly mode over the other, choosing instead to privilege the art itself and the intellectual trajectories it draws upon. Crucial to the archive constructed in the pages of *Chicana Art* are the stunning images that accompany the prose. The high-quality, full-color illustrations take up entire pages, arranged to best suit each piece. There are instances of multiple works by a single artist as well as a wide collection of works by a range of artists. This archive of images, collected carefully by Pérez, is one of the greatest strengths of this work.

Chicana Art operates as a venue that makes the work of the featured artists available to a wide readership.

Chicana Art stands out by placing works of art in conversation with each other outside the context of any one specific art show. Though she references many influential gallery shows, Pérez gracefully curates her own collection, which allows her to draw upon a wide range of artists, both the famous and the lesser-known, working in a variety of media, from painting and printmaking, to installation, video, and theatrical performance. Ruminating on the form of the book in her introduction, Pérez highlights the purposefully altar-like structure of her volume, which is organized around predominant themes of

Chicana feminist art. Guided conceptually by pairings such as “altar, alter,” “*tierra*, land,” and “face, heart,” Pérez allows the reader to move through the book according to their own vision. This altar-like form offers a culturally specific performative of the argument itself, reiterating the importance of these spiritual dimensions. While the sections create a coherent whole by drawing upon one another, each chapter is a self-contained exploration of one of these predominant themes, allowing the book to operate as both an intellectual journey along Pérez’s specific argumentation as well as a reference collection that is encyclopedic in its scope.

An invaluable contribution, *Chicana Art* provides an extensive new archive while creating an original discourse that considers the spiritual within both academic and artistic practices. In Pérez’s book, her innovative thinking and detailed and careful research open up the work of Chicana visual artists and Chicana feminist critique in an accessible manner. Above all, the work that is the centerpiece of the book is deeply honored through rigorous analysis that invites future scholarship to take up any number of the artists discussed without dismissing the critiques and aesthetics offered through a consideration of the spiritual.