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**Museum Culture and Identity Ownership: The shifting role of
museums and their exhibitions in the 21st century**

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**Museum Culture and Identity Ownership: The shifting role of museums and their
exhibitions in the 21st century**

by

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to my family and my fellow members of Our Community Inc.

D.C.I.

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Abstract

Museum Culture and Identity Ownership: The shifting role of museums and their exhibitions in the 21st century

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This project examines, critiques and develops the role museums play in shaping and maintaining consciousness and identity within US and Mexican society. Key to this investigation are the ideals of what traditionally constitutes a museum and who determines what messages are conveyed and who has the opportunity to experience and receive the messages. Ultimately museums have an incredible impact on and responsibility towards the communities they serve and their role as communicators of social and cultural messages cannot be ignored. Museums are the spaces in which communal consciousness is not only created but also preserved. The museum should educate, engage and enlighten as well as connect communities. The development of a new progressive museum model is necessary to achieve and uphold these tenants. This project conducts a comparative analysis of Museos Comunitarios (Community Museums) in Oaxaca, Mexico and the Museo Alameda in the United States, focusing on the mission

and founding principals as well as exhibition choice and institutional operating mechanisms. This analysis will forecast how these institutions and exhibitions impact the trajectory of the communities they encounter and outline the new role of the museum in the 21st century.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

As a child in a private catholic institution, field trips were always the highlight of the year. The Butter Crust Bakery factory, the zoo, the botanical gardens, the state capitol; all of these locations prove memorable to students for different reasons. At the local art or history museums in particular the sections dedicated to pre-Colombian history or contemporary Latin American art drew the most attention. The mere fact that I could walk into a place that was often reserved only for school field trips or individuals of a specific class or academic level and see myself or people who looked like me, was enough to keep me intrigued for a life time. For many Latinos in the United States, seeing an individual on the big screen, reading about a heroine or even viewing art, the presence of Latinos are scarce. Dr. Ernesto Nieto, president and founder of the National Hispanic Institute wrote, “This was the way the family histories were passed on to the next generation. Books were unnecessary. All that was required was a crowd of wide-eyed, attentive kids listening to stories told by the people who lived them.”¹ Dr. Nieto co-founded the NHI in 1979 as a space dedicated to the development and advancement of youth around the country and the world. His specific interest lies in crafting new and progressive realities for the 21st century Latino Community, in regards to this discussion, Dr. Nieto can be viewed as an individual who created a space for Latinos to express and own their identity through the creation of his leadership institute. His recognition of the

¹ Dr. Ernesto Nieto, *Third Reality Crafting a 21st Century Latino Agenda*. (Maxwell: Third Reality Publications, 2004).

importance of passing identity from generation to generation whether orally or otherwise contributes to the discussion of museums roles and functions and social entities. This chronicling of his own history is key to unlocking the role and potential of museums in the United States. The reason a young Latina could not find herself within mainstream culture or why we had to tell our own stories about our history, was not due to oppression or segregation, but to the cultural norms that have been set forth by the mainstream community. The continuation of history and culture is important and at the heart of the values and traditions of the Latino community. The museum offers a location for history and stories such as these to not only be sustained, but to be shared with the world.

The museum as a prominent cultural institution has evolved over time serving as both a civilizing agent for those viewed as barbaric and savage by their governments², and a forum for discussion and analysis of cultures and the ‘other’³. This idea of the other contributes greatly toward the current discussion of the role of museums in the 21st century as now more than ever an “us versus them” concept proves moot for today’s society. This comes not from the disappearance of this point of view, but rather from the fact that the groups who are often considered the “other” have now begun to create spaces directly geared towards their wants and needs as groups. Examples of these spaces are scene in the creation of museums in the United States and México that highlight and exonerate these ‘other’ groups. Bennet’s words outline for the world the role and expectation of the museum as a cultural and historical institution. For the

² Tony Bennet. *The Birth of the Museum History, theory, politics*. (New York: Routledge, 1995).

purpose of this investigation, the role of the museum in terms of his latter statement, that of a forum, creates the foundation for crucial questions, in particular the question of the paradigmatic shift from that which explores the other to that which explores oneself. Important to this analysis are key questions of ownership, identity and social politics. “What guidelines or standards exist to determine the value and worth of exhibitions?” “What role do institutions currently play within societies around the world, specifically in terms of identity creation and identity sustainability?” and finally, “What relevance does a detailed analysis of museum politics provide and contribute to the everyday areas of culture, society and identity?”

At the root of these discussions is the immense power and stake holding capabilities that museums hold on influencing the masses and impacting the collective consciousness of a society. The project will deconstruct the specified elements of ownership, identity and portrayal through a comparative analysis of three major contributing sectors of museum structures. First, the museum as an institution, examining day-to-day approaches and activities as well as various exhibitions. The Museo Alameda, in San Antonio, Texas provides a strong case for examination. Utilizing two major exhibitions of the Museo Alameda and a brief analysis of the Museos Comunitarios of Oaxaca, México as points of research, the analysis will compare the histories, visions, missions and objectives of the exhibitions and institutions specifically investigating involvement and connection with the community in which it resides. This investigation will develop a clear understanding

³ Steven Lavine. “Museums and Multiculturalism” in *Exhibiting Cultures The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine. (Washington: Smithsonian Institute Press 1990).

of the growth and development of the museum over time as well as propose alternative and progressive models for adoption.

Chapter 2: Museos Comunitarios (The Community Museum)

“El museo comunitario es parte de la vida de un pueblo, donde dejamos plasmado nuestro pasado y así dejar huella a las futuras generaciones como patrimonio. Es para conocer lo que fuimos y comprender lo que somos.” (The community museum is part of the life of the town where we leave footprints to the future generations like heritage. Its to know what we were and understand what we are.)⁴

Ideas of community and sustainability are found throughout México and Latin America in general. Not only sustainability in a material sense, that of crops and goods and services, but also in the sense of cultural sustainability. That which preserves and conserves the histories that belong to the community. México is home to prominent and prestigious national museums such as the Museo Nacional de Antropología (National Museum of Anthropology) in the Distrito Federal and the Museo de Santo Domingo (Museum of Santo Domingo) in Oaxaca City as well as famous archeological zones such as Monte Alban outside of Oaxaca and Palenque in Chiapas. In order to enter these museums and sacred archeological sites, a payment of thirty pesos or more is necessary. Many of the artifacts that are found inside the walls of the National Museums have been exhumed from various communities in México. These sacred spaces and artifacts contribute heavily toward forging a Mexican National Identity and contribute directly to the ideals of a México Profundo⁵.

⁴ Juan Garcia Martinez. President of the General Committee of the Ba laa Xtee Guech Gulal Museum in Teotitlan del Valle. Taken from a plaque located at the entrance of the museum.

⁵ “Mesoamerican civilization is the starting point and indeed the most profound aspect of our country.” Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, *Mexico Profundo: reclaiming a civilization* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 3.

The main goal of a museum is to teach something to the people who come to visit all the while knowing that the types of people who will see these exhibits are constantly changing.⁶ The two models of museums, traditional and community based, serve the purpose of teaching and allowing its visitors to learn, but are established upon different principals. National museums emit a distant almost disconnected feeling to the viewer, this sentiment is supported by Bennet's description of museums as public spaces intended to separate and restrict. On the other hand, the Museos Comunitarios (Community Museums) invite people to take part in the exhibits.⁷ This sense of familiarity that is found in the Museos Comunitarios (Community Museums) is what separates them from any other museum and what provides a progressive model for consideration in the United States.

Santa Ana del Valle and Teotitlán del Valle are two cases of active Museo Comunitarios (Community Museums) and are examined for the purpose of this investigation. Both are Zapotec communities located about forty-five minutes outside of Oaxaca City. Santa Ana del Valle is home to famous archeological artifacts, has a long tradition of ancient dances and held an important place in Mexican revolutionary history. Teotitlán del Valle hosts an archeological site as well as various artifacts and is well known for its tradition of weaving. The two Museos Comunitarios (Community Museums) selected are the Museo Shan-Dany (Bajo del Cerro: Museum Under the Hill)

⁶ Benjamin Maldonado, 06 Dec 2004. Information taken from a discussion held between Benjamin and I about the purpose of museums in general.

⁷ Note: In the Museo Balaa Xtee Guech Gulal in Teotitlán del Valle there were interactive exhibits, but the curator of the museum, had no problem touching the artifacts, something you would never see in a national museum.

in Santa Ana del Valle and the Museo Ba laa Xtee Guech Gulal (Hogar de Pueblo Antiguo: Museum of the home of the old town) in Teotitlán del Valle.

Sources utilized to supplement the Museos Comunitarios (Community Museums) analysis come predominantly from Mexican literature and points of view on the topic. Sources include but are not limited to, pamphlets, books, bulletins, interviews and observations based off of visits made to the Museos Comunitarios (Community Museums) outlined above in 2005⁸.

The amount of information that is located on the topic of Museos Comunitarios (Community Museums) is scarce but the idea is new, seeing as the first museum created, in Santa Ana del Valle, was established in 1986.⁹ The act of collecting data did not prove to be a difficult task. The best mode of attaining information came through the observations taken at the actual museum sites. Witnessing the day-to-day function of each museum, and in some cases partaking in the actual exhibitions proved a most beneficial form of attaining information for this project because in a museum, the exhibitions create the experience and allow the person to feel what the community is and was. Any biases that were brought into this investigation can be found in preconceived notions and beliefs on museums as institutions that have been imposed on society for years. The notion of how these museums should be structured as well as the role they

⁸ Anita Fernández, *El Orgullo de la Pertenencia* community museums and the pride of identity ownership in México and the United States (2006).

⁹ “Museo Shan Dany 18 años de identidad comunitaria 1986-2004”. Santa Ana del Valle Tlaxiaco Oaxaca México. Date taken from an information pamphlet put out by the Museo Comunitario Comité of Santa Ana del Valle.

should play within the community; as an inherently passive institution providing the chance for self-education through observation and interpretation.

Chapter 3: Fundamental Elements of Ownership

For the people of these communities in Mexico and also for communities in the United States, the battle ensuing today is conserving and preserving the fundamental elements of ownership, identity, elders and ancestors. UNESCO defines cultural identity “as ‘the correspondence between a community (national, ethnic, linguistic, etc.) and its cultural life, as well as the right of each community to its own culture’.”¹⁰ The connection that exists between ancestors, elders and identity are for centuries have corresponded solely through means of oral traditions. As Dr. Ernesto Nieto stated, oral traditions were the main form of passing down history from family to family for Latinos. This tradition also exists in Mexico and the Museos Comunitarios (Community Museums) are a perfect mechanism to turn these stories into tangible and visible realities not only for the community members, but also for the world. Language and history play crucial roles in the development and use of Museos Comunitarios around Mexico. “La mayoría de este comunidad hablan Zapoteco y Español y algunos hablan ingles también.” (The majority of this community speaks Zapotec and Spanish and some speak English as well.)¹¹ This is a perfect example of how language is used to preserve the history of the people there. Teotitlán del Valle is a town dating back to Pre-Hispanic times along with the Zapotec language. “El historiador Francisco de Burgoa (1600-1681), recogió una leyenda que conisdera a Teotitlán del Valle el primer asentamiento zapoteca en el Valle de Oaxaca. Ahí existió el centro ceremonial más importante en la region, dedicado a

¹⁰ Peter Davis, “Place Exploration: museums, identity, community” in *Museums and their Communities*, ed. Sheila Watson, 54 (New York: Routledge, 2007).

¹¹ Mauricio Gonzalez Perez, 01 Dec 2004.

Quetzalcóatl.”(The historian Francisco de Burgoa (1600-1681), recorded a legend that considers Teotitlán del Valle the first Zapotec settlement in the Oaxaca Valley. Here there existed the most important ceremonial center of the region, dedicated to the god Quetzalcóatl.)¹² Historical elements such as this one are what give identity to the community of Teotitlán del Valle. Although it is important to understand that much of what the people believe today is a mixture of Pre-Hispanic and Colonial histories. “Teotitecos still return to the site of xiabets today. They make an annual pilgrimage on the first day of May to the site of the sun god, but instead celebrate a Catholic holiday. Many Catholic rituals celebrated in Teotitlán contain elements that seem to be tied to Pre-Hispanic beliefs.”¹³ The belief in the god Quetzacóatl stems from the worshipping of the plumed serpent that existed among the Pre-Hispanic Zapotecs and then was changed into the image of a man as is represented in the traditional Danza de la Pluma (Dance of the feather)¹⁴. The identity of the community of Teotitlán has grown from many different elements, but everything that they utilize in their creation of identity is relevant to their own beliefs and practices. The community today still speaks Zapotec and the members of the community know that this was the language of their ancestors and thus will continue to teach their children the language along with other traditions and values.

The ancianos (elders) of these communities were donating their time and knowledge of their community, to the community. “Todo que nosotros sabemos es oral de nuestros

¹² “Teotitlán del Valle”. Comité Museo Comunitario (Community Museum Committee). Gobierno Constitucional del Estado de Oaxaca Secretaría de desarrollo Turístico. This information is taken from a pamphlet put out by the Mexican government on Teotitlán del Valle.

¹³ Lynn Stephen, *Zapotec Women* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991) 82.

padres.” (Everything that we know is oral, that we have learned from our parents.)¹⁵ This is important to the preservation of identity and the conservation of what history has left for these communities. The importance of preserving and sustaining the history of a community is echoed thousands of miles away across the border in the United States. Teotitlán del Valle community members believe that they are the oldest Zapotec community in the area, while Santa Ana del Valle members might attest to holding the same status. For each community, their own identities and histories are most important to them and the way that they create these histories is memorialized in the Museos Comunitarios; the arena where their voice can tell their history.

The Museos Comunitarios (Community Museums) are a way to document the histories and events that are integral to the every day life of the people. The principles of which the museums are based glorify the immense amounts of knowledge that the elders within the communities possess. In the Museo Balaa Xtee Guech Gulal, there is an exhibit on weaving that expresses the sentiments of the community towards the elders.

“Los jóvenes de ahorita todos aprenden trabajando desde chicos, porque así les enseñan sus padres. Aquí se trabaja muy unido. Yo también aprendí la artesanía de mis padres desde muy pequeño. Se elaboraba todo desde un principio. Yo desde los 8 años empecé a cardar y al mismo tiempo iba yo a la escuela y de regreso ayudaba a mis padres a hilar. Desde los 13 años tejía.” (The youth have learned [weaving] since they were children, this is how their parents taught them. Here we work together. I also learned the art form from my parents when I was very young. I have been producing since the beginning. When I was 8 years old I began to comb [part of the weaving process] and at the same time I

¹⁴ Benjamin Maldonado, 06 Dec 2004. Information taken from a discussion held between Benjamin and I about the representation of history.

¹⁵ Mauricio Gonzalez Perez, 01 Dec 2004.

went to school and then came back to help my parents weave. Since I was
13 I have been weaving.)¹⁶

The quote expresses the fact that the elders within Teotitlán del Valle are viewed and valued because of their knowledge not only of history and culture but of life skills as well. Through exhibits such as this, the communities are able to preserve the memory of their ancestors and ancient practices.

¹⁶ “Aprender a tejer”. An exhibit in the Balaa Xtee Guech Gulal Museum in Teotitlán del Valle.

Chapter 4: The Museos Comunitarios (Community Museums): A Sense of Ownership

Questions of ancestry, history and culture can be answered through a visit to a Museo Comunitario (Community Museum). A people can collectively maintain their identity through the creation of a space like a museum that showcases and honors their own history in their own ways. In an article written about the Museos Comunitarios (Community Museums) in Oaxaca, the idea of these museums is presented as a form of resistance and revolution¹⁷. In this sense, the Museos Comunitarios (Community Museums) serve the purpose of resisting the tendency to move into the future without acknowledging the past. The museums serve as a mechanism to preserve and maintain what rightfully belongs to the communities in an ideological and physical sense.

Members of the community run Santa Ana del Valle and Teotitlán del Valle's museums and the museums are composed of committees who watch over the museum and take part in workshops to help better maintain the museums. The committee of Santa Ana del Valle is made up of seven members all serving in different capacities such as president or treasurer. The men and women take alternate watching over the museum and the committee changes every year. To be a member of the committee you must be named by your fellow community members and everything that you do is a service.¹⁸ The actual process of creating a Museo Comunitario (Community Museum) is complicated and involves the community on all levels.

¹⁷ Patricia Pierce Erikson, *So My Children Can Stay in the Pueblo: Indigenous Community Museums in Oaxaca, Mexico*, (1996)

¹⁸ Donato Cruz, 29 Nov 2004

“Para poder instalar un museo comunitario, la autoridad municipal debe considerar la propuesta en asamblea general o en juntas por los barrios, dependiendo de la forma organizativa que tenga si se decide poner un museo, de acuerdo con la forma de gobierno y de elección en cada comunidad, se nombra un comité que se encarque de llevar acabo los trabajos y tenga la función de promover las actividades a realizar, con la finalidad de captar las inquietudes de la población al respecto...Por ello, tanto la decision de crear un museo, de lo que va a contener, así como la elección del comité y el carácter de su función, lo debe determinar la comunidad.” (To have the ability to install a museum, the authorities of the municipality must consider the request in a general assembly or in a neighborhood meeting, depending on how the town is organized they will decide whether or not to allow it. They name a committee that is in charge of finishing all the work that has to do with the museum and also must promote the activities of the museum. Finally gaining the respect of the community...For this, the majority of the decision to create a museum, what it is going to contain, the election of the committee, the character of the museums function, all of this is determined by the community.)¹⁹

In order for the museums to flourish, they must have the active participation and cooperation of the communities to which they belong.

“Community survival rarely conjures up images of cultural patrimony and collective identity, let alone museums.”²⁰ As this statement could very well prove true for the rest of the world, and the sentiments toward the idea of museums, for these communities in Oaxaca and the rest of Mexico cultural patrimony and identity are at the heart of its Museos Comunitarios (Community Museums). Community members are using their museums to keep their histories for themselves, allowing it to be shared on a national level, but on their own terms, and in their own ways. The museums serve to “conserver las piezas archeologicos aqui en la comunidad y guardarlas aqui en la comunidad también.” (To conserve the archeological pieces here in the community and to keep them

¹⁹ Gonzalo Vázquez Rojas, *Definición y Metodología en los museos comunitarios de Oaxaca*, (1991), 129.

here in the community as well.)²¹ The main focus of the Museos Comunitarios (Community Museums) is precisely this, to keep what the communities value within the heart of the community.

Examining the role and relationship that the Museos Comunitarios (Community Museums) play in regards to the government presents an interesting dynamic that exists between the two. “Indigenous community museums of Oaxaca represent a challenge to the centralized, national ownership of pre-Columbian patrimony, a challenge thus far working itself through the establishment of community museums, as opposed to legislative reforms.”²² The communities of Santa Ana del Valle and Teotitlán del Valle took it upon themselves to create a space for their community, establishing a sense of autonomy. The museums are the community’s response to the removal by the government of their local history and identity. Ironically, the Museos Comunitarios (Community Museums) also work hand in hand with the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (National Institute of Anthropology and History), a government-funded organization. “El INAH trata a dar informacion a las comunidades [talleres, artículos, etc] y crear un enfoque en la unión al nivel estatal y nacional para realizar proyectos mas amplios.” (The INAH tries to give information to the communities [workshops, articles, etc] and create a focus on the state and national unions of

²⁰ Gonzalo Vázquez Rojas, *Definición y Metodología en los museos comunitarios de Oaxaca*, (1991), 37.

²¹ Ruben Bautista, 01 Dec 2004.

²² Patricia Pierce Erikson, *So My Children Can Stay in the Pueblo: Indigenous Community Museums and Self-determination in Oaxaca, Mexico*, (1996).

community museums in order to accomplish greater projects within the communities.)²³

Without this partnership between the INAH and the Museos Comunitarios (Community Museums) this dream would not have been attainable for the communities of Santa Ana del Valle and Teotitlán del Valle.

“La memoria colectiva, con toda su riqueza de imágenes y significados, es lo que permite reconstruirnos como sujetos. Por eso la labor de recuperación de la historia no es una tarea de menor importancia, y aún las comunidades materialmente pobres se movilizan en torno a ella. Saber lo que pasó, poseer los testimonios materiales, reconstruir las experiencias, vivencias y sentimientos del pasado, responde a necesidades profundas.” (The collective memory, with all of its richness of images and significance is what was permitted to reconstruct these subjects [within the museums]. This labor of recuperating the history does not have little importance among the community and even though the communities are poor in a material sense, they mobilize themselves for the museum. Knowing what happened, possessing the testaments, reconstructing the experiences, the sentiments of the past, a response to these profound necessities.)²⁴

Museos Comunitarios (Community Museums) focus on the history of a community and the sustainability of a collective and conscious identity. In the Santa Ana del Valle Museo Shan-Dany, there are exhibits which focus on the Pre-Hispanic history of the town, the role that the revolution had in the history of the town, a section dedicated to textiles, and a final section dedicated to the “Danza de la Pluma”(Dance of the feather). Not only are these museums focusing on historical aspects, but they are also being used as a place to preserve ancient traditions that have been passed down from generation to generation.

“En la mayoría de las veces el maestro de la Danza aprende a través de la transmisión oral recibido de su padre. Es el elemento clave ya que el logra

²³ Teresa Morales Lersch, 01 Dec 2004. This was a combined interview between the Comité of Santa Ana del Valle and Teresa Morales Lersch. The majority of the questions were answered by Ruben Bautista the president, but this question was deferred to Mrs. Morales Lersch as a representative of the INAH.

²⁴ Teresa Morales Lersch and Cuauhtémoc Camarena Ocampo, Los museos comunitarios y la memoria ante los procesos de globalización, (2004).

conjugar los elementos dramaticos, coreograficos y musicales, lo mismo con la indumentaria. Tiene la función de conservar la memoria de esta tradicion.”(Most of the times the teacher of the dance learned through the oral histories that he received from his father. This is the key element to combining and obtaining the dramatic, choreographic, and musical and costume elements. This has the function of conserving the memory of this tradition.)²⁵

The preservation of these traditions, for however long they have been taking place leads ultimately to the preservation of the people living there and their identities. When Mr. Donato Cruz was asked to elaborate on why these traditions took place within the communities he responded “porque es la costumbre” (because it is the tradition, the way).²⁶ The people of these communities have been performing these traditions and customs for years and see no need to stop, it is understood that this is how they will live their lives.

Museos comunitarios (Community Museums) exemplify how communities within México create and maintain their own identities in a world, which attempts to assimilate and lump many historical elements into one ethnic arena. The people of Teotitlán del Valle and Santa Ana del Valle have created a place for their identities to continue to grow and to be commended among the people of the community. “Crear centros cultruales en donde se incentivara la intervención comunitaria como generadora de conocimiento de acuerdo con sus propios intereses.” (To create cultural centers where the intervention of the community is encouraged as a generator of knowledge that reflects the specific

²⁵ Note: Taken from an exhibit in the Museo Shan-Dany in Santa Ana del Valle.

²⁶ Donato Cruz, 29 Nov 2004.

interests of the community.)²⁷ Against the grain of a traditional museum structure, the Museos Comunitarios (Community Museums) focus on the community as the curators of the experience. This approach places these museums as a forerunner of progressive museum models as it takes this new philosophy and practices it on a daily basis. The people within the communities are not only maintaining their cultures and traditions but they are also generating economic opportunity that will go straight into tending to the needs of the community.

The museums do not serve a single purpose, but are multipurpose spaces that allow for the communities to directly partake in creating the museums and in turn, their world. Examining the creation of the Museos Comunitarios (Community Museums) in Oaxaca provides insight into the new function that a museum can hold within a community and also how it can connect different communities.

The museums investigated and communities visited exemplify how identity creates and sustains itself as members grow and change. Although identity for the most part remains a constant, the forms of identification may change over the years, still maintaining the same sense of belonging that has existed all along. These museums have shown that it is possible to maintain an identity with many resources or no resources, living in the actual community or far away from the community. Location is pivotal to guaranteeing the involvement and participation of a community. Crossing the border to the United States, another version of a “Community Museum” exists.

²⁷ Gonzalo Vázquez Roja., *Definición y Metodología en los museos comunitarios de Oaxaca*, (1991) 177.

Chapter 5: The Museo Alameda, San Antonio, Texas

The Museo Alameda in San Antonio, Texas is one of 23 Smithsonian affiliate museums in the United States. Officially opening April 13, 2007, it serves as the first formal Smithsonian affiliate museum whose mission is to tell “Telling the story of the Latino experience in America through art, history and culture.”²⁸ The Museo Alameda is the first institution of its kind in the nation, in that its driving force is to highlight the experience of all Latinos, not just certain groups of this ever growing and immense population. In its mere two and a half years of existence it has showcased some of the most prominent and impacting shows that the world has seen with exhibits hailing from the United States and Latin America.²⁹ The Museo Alameda provides a strong case for examination of what the new and progressive museum model in the United States can and should be. Driving its inception was the need for a space to exist where the story described in its mission could be told. As Stephen Weil asserts,

“Identity and interests groups of every kind insist that the mainstream museum is neither empowered nor qualified to speak on their behalf. Increasingly, such groups are creating their own museums from which to speak in their own voices and address what they consider to be their own issues.”³⁰

The Museo Alameda was named the official Latino Museum of Texas by then Governor George Bush, and it has continued to speak the words of the exhibitions and communities that are represented within its walls.

²⁸ The Museo Alameda, “About Us”, <http://www.thealameda.org> (accessed June 1, 2009).

²⁹ Note: Refer to Appendix 1 for list of current and past exhibitions.

³⁰ Stephen Weil, “The Museum and the Public”, in *Museums and their Communities*, ed. Sheila Watson, 37 (New York: Routledge, 2007).

In order to articulate the unique and exceptional characteristics that classify the Museo Alameda as a progressive museum model, it is helpful to examine its exhibitions. As was seen in the example of the Museos Comunitarios (Community Museums) in Oaxaca, Méxcio, what is exhibited reflects immensely on the role and function that the museum plays in the community.

“Myth, Mortals and Immortality Works from Museo Soumaya de México”, is a traveling exhibition from Mexico and, “Phantom Sightings Art After the Chicano Movement”, a U.S. traveling exhibition. The choice of these exhibitions is three fold, first Mexico and the United States are home to some of the world’s most renowned museums and collections with the Museo Soumaya in Mexico City and the Smithsonian in Washington D.C. respectively; second, San Antonio, Texas is the location of the first ever Smithsonian affiliate museum in the United States solely dedicated to Latino cultures in the Americas, the Museo Alameda; and third both of these exhibitions explore different genres of art relating to Americans and Latin Americans alike and connect at a very important nexus; identity or the lack there of. In understanding the new role and responsibility of the museum it becomes apparent that much of the progressive outcome lay in the exhibition choice. As Weil notes, “Among the services a museum is able to offer to its community is this capacity to provide the individual visitor with an important degree of personal self-affirmation.”³¹ Both exhibitions provide clearly and deeply the chance for a viewer to identify and affirm.

³¹ Weil, Stephen, “The Museum and the Public”, in *Museums and their Communities*, ed. Sheila Watson, 41 (New York: Routledge, 2007).

“ Myth, Mortals and Immortality” defines itself as offering a glimpse into what it means to be Mexican through the paintings, artifacts and sculptures specifically chosen to manifest this show. The definition of “Mexican” expressed throughout the exhibition consists of several main facets such as religion, family, indigenous culture, activism and fantasy³². “Phantom Sightings Art After the Chicano Movement” showcases artists who “situate their work at the crossroads of local struggles over urban space, transnational flows of culture and global art practices.”³³ The exhibition in total highlights artists whose claim to an identity shifts from being present at one moment and slipping away at another. Both exhibitions combined through an analysis of their stipulated and perceived purpose, open up the dialogue on what ‘true’ identity is and who reserves the right to portray this sense of identity and to whom should it be portrayed. Through the exhibitions of the Museo Alameda and the Museos Comunitarios, this cultural identity³⁴ is laid out and experienced by patrons, tourists, and community members of all socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds. According to Lavine and Karp there are three main tracks for museums to being altering their roles within communities.

“The museum world needs movement in at least three arenas: (1) the strengthening of institutions that give populations a chance to exert control over the way they are presented in museums; (2) the expansion of the expertise of established museums in the presentation of non-Western cultures and minority cultures in the United States; and (3) experiments with exhibition design that will allow

³² Museo Soumaya’s Myth, Mortals and Immortality Catalog, (Mexico City: Fundación Carso, 2006).

³³ Phantom Sightings Art After The Chicano Movement Catalog, (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art and University of California Press, 2008), 13.

³⁴ Note: Reference to UNESCO definition of cultural identity outlined previously.

museums to offer multiple perspectives or to reveal the tendentiousness of the approach taken.”³⁵

The three areas for change that Lavine and Karp express above are crucial in understanding the case of the Museo Alameda and its exhibitions.

Moving beyond mere speculation or opinion of an avid museum goer, Carol Duncan argues “the museum is a complex experience involving architecture, programmed display of art objects, and highly rationalized installation practices...it also carries out broad, sometimes less obvious political and ideological tasks.”³⁶ This statement outlines the power, capability and responsibility that a museum has to not only its audience, but also toward the community in which it resides.

As Dubin asserts,

“Museums are important venues in which a society can define itself and present itself publicly. Museums and their exhibitions have become controversial sites in a number of respects over the past few years. They no longer merely provide a pleasant refuge from ordinary life, nor are they simply repositories of received wisdom. Museums today differ greatly from their predecessors.”³⁷

This differentiation between past and the present roles is what makes the Museo Alameda and its exhibitions strong cases for exploring how frameworks such as those of Karp, Levine and Dubin play out in real world scenarios.

³⁵ Steven Lavine, “Museums and Multiculturalism” in *Exhibiting Cultures The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine. (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press 1990), 6.

³⁶ Carol Duncan, “Museums and Citizenship” in *Exhibiting Cultures The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine. (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press 1990), 90.

³⁷ Steven Dubin, *Displays of Power Memory and Amnesia in the American Museum*, (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 3 and 5.

The Museo Alameda has moved forcefully toward educating and enticing the public on what it means to be Latino locally and abroad.³⁸ Examining its architecture and location, one can notice that this museum is one of a kind. First, the topic of its existence, Latinos, is one that has been ignored for centuries within “mainstream” museums throughout the United States.³⁹ Secondly, its hot pink façade accompanied by flashing light and music show (which is a permanent art piece of the Museo Alameda collection) provides for a view not normally associated with a traditional museum nor a Smithsonian affiliate. Finally, its commitment to opening its doors to all through occasional periods of free admission adds to the intriguing aura that is the Museo Alameda.

In addition to its architectural and operational components, the exhibitions that have graced the Alameda’s walls also contribute to its forward approach as a museum of the 21st century. “Myth, Mortals and Immortality Works from Museo Soumaya de Mexico” highlights over one hundred pieces from the vast collection of the Museo Soumaya in México and has traveled to only two locations in the United States; The Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. and the Museo Alameda in San Antonio, Texas. Soumaya Slim de Romero, Director of the Museo Soumaya in México city, describes the function of art, “As an ambassador, missionary, rambler or citizen, art shows the international feast of the depth and happy inventive of Mexican culture.”⁴⁰ Echoing her description, the exhibition itself serves as an ambassador of México to the United States

³⁸ The Museo Alameda, “About Us”, <http://www.thealameda.org> (accessed June 1, 2009).

³⁹ Note: In a discussion of the artists showcased within the Phantom Sightings exhibition it is noted that the artists “attempt to move the art from the margin to the museum, thereby introducing it to a mainstream public audience.” Phantom Sightings Catalog (2008), 18.

and the world, connecting the viewing audience to history, legacy and tradition that is México. According to curator Mónica López Valarde Estrada, this exhibition contains pieces of “Mexican modern art which expresses strong topics that evoke Mexican identity.”⁴¹ Each piece represented in this exhibition evokes Mexican identity and due to the nature and the structure of the exhibition, each piece “provide[s] testament to the wealth, diversity, and vibrancy of Mexican culture and an important insight into the society, visions and traditions of one of America’s closest and most important neighbors.”⁴² Through an exploration of some of the pieces, an interesting question emerges; how is Mexican identity determined, interpreted and measured and who ultimately holds the key to understanding and representing that identity?

The exhibition highlights twelve main areas of focus, The Mexican School of Painting, the pre-Hispanic universe, The Virgin of Guadalupe, The Legend of the Volcanoes, Portraiture, Self-Portraits, Family Portraits, Custom Portraits and Popular Types, The Far East: The Ship of China, The wonderful and the fantastic, Death, Still life and abundance, The Baroque and Lottery!⁴³ Each of these themes combines to both chronicle and express the essence that is Mexican identity over the centuries.

As the discussion of cultural identity enumerated by UNESCO states, the identity materializes through its cultural life. Keeping in mind the key facets of religion, family, indigenous culture, activism and fantasy as the key identifiers of cultural identity for this

⁴⁰ Museo Soumaya’s Myth, Mortals and Immortality Catalog, (Mexico City: Fundación Carso, 2006), 9.

⁴¹ Ibid. 36.

⁴² Ibid. 13.

⁴³ Ibid.

exhibition, the following analysis of 6 pieces illustrates how these pieces collectively spell out what it means to be Mexican.

Illustration 1. Hidalgo, Jesus de la Helguera, Mid-20th Century, Oil on Canvas⁴⁴



Jesus de la Helguera's *Hidalgo*, featured in the section La Virgen de Guadalupe explores the historic event crucial to the history of México and its independence, 'el grito de Guadalupe Hidalgo'.⁴⁵ Paintings such as this "are full symbols of the popular taste and the deep archetypes of Mexican history."⁴⁶ Represented in this scene in particular are the Virgen de Guadalupe on the flag, which symbolizes the religious element that plays largely into the creation of Mexican identity. The Mexican identity has for centuries been closely identified with popular Mexican heroes such as Father Hidalgo and images such as the Virgen and these archetypal references are seen throughout the exhibition.

⁴⁴ Museo Soumaya's Myth, Mortals and Immortality Catalog, (Mexico City: Fundación Carso, 2006), 65.

⁴⁵ The cry of Guadalupe Hidalgo is the historic event that marked Mexican independence from Spain.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 59.

Illustration 2. Siquieros, Por una cultura nuevohumanista de profundidad universal (For a new humanistic culture that is universally profound), 1956, Acrylic on Plaster⁴⁷



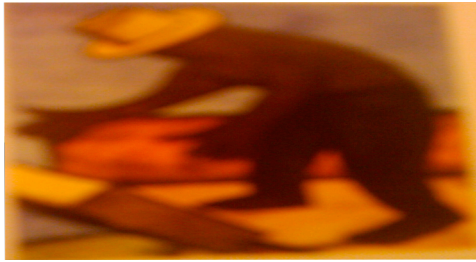
David Alfaro Siquieros' *Estudio de Perspectiva para la esculto-pintura del edificio de Rectoría en la Cuidad Mexico, El pueblo a la Universidad, la Universidad al pueblo.*

Por una cultura nuevohumanista de profundidad universal, approaches Mexican identity from both a social and political perspective. According to the exhibition, “the artist intended that the observer would become an active agent that may participate in Mexico’s social commitment.”⁴⁸ The image establishes the cultural and political struggle of the Mexican people connecting the intelligentsia with the everyday worker and exemplifying that together they would achieve a “new” Mexico, forging a new identity in the process. This particular works touches on the elements of activism and indigenous culture as much of the working class were of indigenous decent.

⁴⁷ Museo Soumaya’s Myth, Mortals and Immortality Catalog, (Mexico City: Fundación Carso, 2006), 65.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 59.

Illustration 3. Rivera, Diego, Albañil, 1930, Water Color on Paper⁴⁹



Diego Rivera's famous painting *Albañil* (*brick layer*) approaches identity from a similar angle as Siqueros, drawing attention to the working class and their contributions toward daily life in Mexico. Contrary to Siqueros, for Rivera the working Mexican was exonerated here as an element of Mexican identity that would not be ignored.

⁴⁹ Museo Soumaya's Myth, Mortals and Immortality Catalog, (Mexico City: Fundación Carso, 2006), 73.

Illustration 4. Posada, Jose Guadalupe, Remate de Calaveras alegres (Auction of Happy Skulls), 1913, Direct Typographic printing in black and white on paper⁵⁰



Jose Guadalupe Posada's *Remate de calaveras alegres (Auction of Happy Skulls)* communicates through its images and text the topic of death. In addition to directly dealing with death, the work also explores cultural themes such as religion family and history, which are unique and fundamental to Mexican identity. For Mexicans the topic of death was celebrated more than mourned. The means in which these themes are explored also provides an additional way for the exhibition itself to reach out to the viewer as the images are portrayed within a newspaper article. The art is explored through words and images and creates another outlet for Mexican identity to be conveyed.

⁵⁰ Museo Soumaya's Myth, Mortals and Immortality Catalog, (Mexico City: Fundación Carso, 2006),

Illustration 5. Carmona, Jorge Gonzalez, La Vendimia nacional (Bountiful Mexico), 1946, Oil on Canvas⁵¹



Jorge González Carmona's *La Vendimia nacional* ties the cultural, historical and political into a vibrant piece of art that draws the viewer into the superficial exploration of what and who is México. Fantasy is explored through the abundance of food and women portrayed. The work intends to showcase all that is gold in México, the one woman in the center of the painting, with her patriotic stance emulates the pride of what it meant to be Mexican at that time.

⁵¹ Museo Soumaya's Myth, Mortals and Immortality Catalog, (Mexico City: Fundación Carso, 2006), 82.

Illustration 6. Reconstrucción ideal de una ceremonia pre hispánica (Ideal Reconstruction of a Pre-Hispanic Ceremony), 1826-1836, Oil on Canvas⁵²



Finally, Waldek's *Reconstrucción* undoubtedly intends to characterize an 'ideal' representation. Waldek's work joins those of Alexander von Humboldt and other landscape painters of European descent who came to Mexico to explore and document the exotic landscape and culture that was to them, the other.⁵³ The scene is intended to depict daily life of pre-Hispanic civilization however the images portrayed are of savages conducting sacrifice under clear depictions of Egyptian pyramids and Asian gods. Although not always accurate, these works still contribute towards the creation and identification of Mexican identity.

Each of these artists defines what it means to be Mexican for Mexicans and the world. Referring back to the definition of cultural identity, the pieces allow for a dialogue to take place within oneself on what is identifiable at that time. The images definitely explore

⁵² Museo Soumaya's Myth, Mortals and Immortality Catalog, (Mexico City: Fundación Carso, 2006), 65.

key elements of Mexican cultural identity and also leave room for interpretation, i.e. Waldeck's "ideal reconstruction".

Although the depiction of *Myth, Mortals and Immortality* presents a concrete and solid approach to identity, it is quite complex and at times unclear. In order for an institution such as the Museo Alameda, to take a progressive leap forward in establishing its roles as a new museum, it needs to explore multiple facets of its themes, identity being one of the most controversial there is. *Phantom Sightings Art After the Chicano Movement* is an exhibition that in some instances sits at the opposite end of the identity spectrum from the previous analysis. The exhibition showcases art produced and created by artists of Latino descent who selectively choose the elements that constitute their identity, particularly the use of the identifying term "Chicano". According to the major curators and contributors of the exhibition, "we make no claims for them [selections] as being representative of something beyond our specific curatorial process...We would question such claims for an exhibition (here or elsewhere), since art necessarily exceeds the things it can be said to represent."⁵⁴ Evident within this exhibition is the outright desire to not represent a particular group or identity versus the approach taken in *Myth, Mortals and Immortality* of clearly and distinctly outlining a Mexican identity.

The title "Phantom Sighting" communicates to a community that "Within their own national culture, these artists are either phantoms or located on the extreme margin, and

⁵³ Museo Soumaya's *Myth, Mortals and Immortality* Catalog, (Mexico City: Fundación Carso, 2006), 29.

⁵⁴ *Phantom Sightings Art After The Chicano Movement* Catalog, (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art and University of California Press, 2008), 14.

in one way or another such positioning informs the art itself.”⁵⁵ The artists represented in this exhibition utilize the space of the museum to create and voice their own perceptions or misperceptions of identity. What separates this approach to identity from the approach taken by “Myth, Mortals and Immortality” is the fact that “the artists included in this show are aware that identity is situational rather than intrinsic and essential.”⁵⁶ The pieces do not attempt to dictate to the viewer characteristics, expectations or particular identifiers, on the contrary, they give birth to an identity that is owned and maneuvered by the viewer.

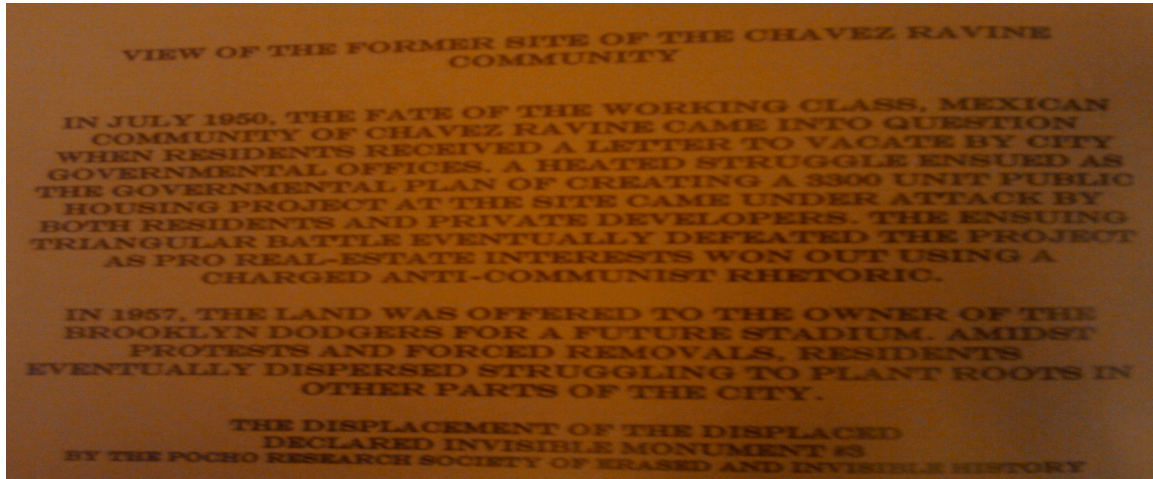
The artist’s work represented in “Phantom Sightings” is not as easily broken down or categorized as those of Myth, Mortals and Immortality. One artist featured in the exhibition, Sandra de la Loza’s, “self described guerilla art collective, Pocho Research Society [through their productions] intended to interpret a historical amnesia, trigger memory, and interrogate the present as part of a systematic investigation of discourses of place and displacement.”⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Phantom Sightings Art After The Chicano Movement Catalog, (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art and University of California Press, 2008),18.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 47.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 26.

Illustration 7. De la Loza, Sandra, The Displacement of the Displaced, 2002, silk screen on metal



Works created by Ruben Ortiz Torres “signal the class boundaries of art world access, suggesting that the museum or other cultural destinations are not readily ascertainable sites for new immigrants or even artists of color.”⁵⁸

Illustration 8. Ortiz, Torres Ruben, Maya Work in Progress, 2005, Digital Print



⁵⁸ Phantom Sightings Art After The Chicano Movement Catalog, (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art and University of California Press, 2008), 60.

Chapter 6: Alternate Approaches to Museum Culture

“What guidelines or standards exist to determine the value and worth of exhibitions?”

“What role do institutions currently play within societies around the world, specifically in terms of identity creation and identity sustainability?” and finally, “What relevance does a detailed analysis of museum politics provide and contribute to the everyday areas of culture, society and identity? The key research questions to this investigation still remain at the helm of driving museums toward a new role in the 21st century. In some cases, the community drives the value and determination of the institution itself, in other cases, boards and employees still ultimately make the decisions. Both case studies examined two ends of the museum spectrum but when the analysis and outcomes are combined will lead communities in a much more progressive direction than before.

The approaches taken by both the Museo Alameda in San Antonio, TX and the Museos Comunitarios of Oaxaca, Mexico offer insight into what tangible options can exist for museums all over the world. Both museums utilized the exhibition as the main weapon in their arsenal of change and both do not shy away from their responsibility of educating, mobilizing and fostering ownership within the communities where they reside. Although they take risks in leadership and what is represented within their walls, the Museos Comunitarios seem to be held back in areas of economics and politics, while the Museo Alameda in San Antonio faces the same obstacles. Neither example nor their exhibitions enumerate precisely the key to a complete paradigmatic shift for the museum, but both have shown interesting approaches and stances that can help drive an institution in that direction.

Through a combination of the various approaches mentioned above, the ideology of an alternative museum culture within the United States and around the world presents itself for further development and implementation. Revisiting the academic work that currently exists on museums and their roles, the Museo Alameda and Museos Comunitarios (Community Museums) respectively have made strides toward direct changes in altering the three arenas presented by Lavine and Karp. By merit of its structure, exhibition choice and administrative functions, both museum models serve as crucial examples of shifting from institutions of restriction and hierarchy as described by Bennet towards institutions that shape and potentially impact their communities. It can no longer be the role of specific individuals such as curators and board members, to dictate the experiences occurring inside and outside of museum walls. “The museum is simply an instrument. What really matters is in whose hands it is held and for what purposes it is intended to be used.”⁵⁹ Museum leadership can learn from the collaborative approach of the Museos Comunitarios (Community Museums) toward preserving and educating history, culture and traditions. For the Alameda, decision to host exhibitions with direct messages for the viewers open up wide Bennet’s idea of the museum as a forum of dialogue and change. In both these examples, it is the community contribution and involvement that prove critical to the shaping and molding of the institution. The Museo Alameda in its first year had 140,000 people come through its doors, 68% of those

⁵⁹ Weil, Stephen, “The Museum and the Public”, in *Museums and their Communities*, ed. Sheila Watson, 38 (New York: Routledge, 2007).

patrons identified as Hispanic or Latino.⁶⁰ For this museum to say that it did not offer its community the chance to see themselves through the art, history and culture would be a fallacy. On the contrary, the mission, exhibition choice and statistics combine to further support the assertion that museums must move beyond mere art on the walls and text in the guides, but to a space of education, immersion and identification. There are still many strides to be made in the area of museum development but the Museos Comunitarios of Oaxaca, Mexico and the Museo Alameda in San Antonio are strong examples of options and opportunities that exist when the right resources, individuals and communities are present. A museum that moves beyond its walls toward action in its responsibility to educate, enlighten and engage will help to transition the museum of today into the museum of the 21st century.

⁶⁰ Museo Alameda. 2007-2008 Demographics Report, (Museo Alameda, 2008).

Appendix

Appendix 1: List of Past and Current Exhibitions, Museo Alameda, San Antonio, Texas

Jesse Treviño: Mi Vida
October 22, 2009 - February 28, 2010

Frida Kahlo: Through the Lens of Nickolas Murray
July 29, 2009 - December 6, 2009

American Sabor: Latinos in U.S. Popular Music
June 12, 2009 - September 20th, 2009

Becoming American: Teenagers and Immigration, Photographs by Barbara Beirne
June 24, 2009 - August 30, 2009

Phantom Sightings: Art After the Chicano Movement
March 13, 2009 - June 14, 2009
cortez, Lo Bello and Proyectos Galleries

Caras Vemos, Corazones No Sabemos: The Human Landscape of Mexican Migration
March 5, 2009 - May 10, 2009

The African Presence in Mexico: From Yanga to the Present
November 12, 2008 - February 22, 2009

Dichos: Words to Live, Love and Laugh by in Latin America
December 17, 2008, 2009 - February 22, 2009

Myth, Mortals, and Immortality: Works from Museo Soumaya de México
June 25, 2008 - January 6, 2009

Escultura Social: A New Generation of Art from Mexico City
July 31, 2008 - October 26, 2008

Laura Aguilar: Life, the Body, Her Perspective
September 9, 2008 - October 19, 2008

Of Rage and Redemption: The Art of Guayasamín
June 19, 2008 - August 14, 2008

Latin American Posters: Public Aesthetics and Mass Politics
April 2, 2008 - June 29, 2008

Nosotras: Portraits of Latinas
February 6, 2008 - April 27, 2008

Hupilies: A Celebration
September 9, 2007 - January 20, 2008

San Anto: Pride of the Southside/En El Mero Hueso
December 12, 2007 - March 23, 2008

Azucar! The Life and Music of Celia Cruz
September 26, 2007 - April 27, 2009

Cape Paintings by Jerry Cabrera
June 27, 2007 - September 2, 2007

Cantos del Pueblo: Tejano Musical Landscape
April 14, 2007 - August 12, 2007

Conjunto
April 14, 2007 - September 30, 2007

Tremendo Manicure
April 14, 2007 - June 10, 2007

Palace of Dreams: The Golden Age of the Alameda Theater
April 14, 2007 - June 1, 2007

The Smithsonian in San Antonio
April 14, 2007 - August 26, 2007

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Vita

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