

Galería de la Raza, a birthplace of Chicano art, finds respite from exile

 datebook.sfchronicle.com/art-exhibits/galeria-de-la-raza-a-birthplace-of-chicano-art-embraces-its-exile

Ryan Kost

Word of a growing Chicano art movement had spread to Europe by the mid-1980s. Art students, mostly from France, began to fly to the United States to see the places of its birth. “They would always make their first pilgrimage to Galería de la Raza,” says artist Amalia Mesa-Bains.

The San Francisco gallery was one of the “earliest, earliest” and most influential Chicano art spaces then, she says, as it is now. Mesa-Bains was there, making art and working on the Galería’s board of directors, as the students turned up at 24th and Bryant streets in the Mission District. Almost always, she says, they were surprised at what they found: a storefront, a simple mosaic of tiles just below the windows and a gallery that felt a bit like a family room, with couches to sit on and children playing as their parents created a movement.

They’d traveled across an ocean and a continent expecting a “much bigger institution because it had so much impact,” she says.

There’s some comfort in this story now, in knowing the Galería has always been so much bigger than the space that held it.

Negotiations with its landlord over a sudden and crippling 100 percent rent increase have officially fallen apart; Galería de la Raza must leave its home of nearly 50 years by the end of this month. But the Galería will survive, first for a couple years on Valencia Street, just between 25th and 26th streets, and later — hopefully permanently — in a space still being developed on 16th Street.

This is hardly the first time the Galería has dealt with uncertainty, but it is the first time it has reached an impasse. For now, Executive Director Ani Rivera says, they must “go back to the values our elders and ancestors have taught us. We migrate. ...

“The Galería is not just this corner. The Galería is a movement.”



Executive Director Ani Rivera says negotiations with the landlord over a dramatic rent increase have failed. Photo: Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle

For decades, Galería de la Raza — Gallery of the People — has anchored the culture of 24th Street. Generations of Latino and Chicano artists have grown up there, and though there are long-term plans for the Galería to continue to exist in the Mission, there's a deep sadness and anger that it should have to move at all.

"I remember my first experience going into the Galería and seeing work there that I had never seen before," says Judy Baca, director of SPARC, a sister organization in Los Angeles. "They were an affirmation of my own culture. ... What I just find completely egregious is that these spaces that provided a hub — these spaces that helped create the identity of that community — could even be considered to be removed."

More than a dozen Chicano artists brought the Galería into being in 1970. They spent two years in a place on Valencia Street before settling into the storefront on 24th Street, \$75 a month for a gallery full of squatters with walls full of holes. The artists made their own space when they found no room for Chicano art, Chicano culture, Chicano ideas on the tall white walls of so many art institutions. Before his death earlier this year, René Yañez, the space's first artistic director, spoke about how the Galería and the movement came from the community's deep need "to create our own symbols, our own iconography."



René Yañez, who passed away earlier this year, was a founder of the Galería. Photo: Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle

These artists were not alone in this work. The Galería was joined by several other Chicano organizations — in Sacramento, in Los Angeles, in San Diego and beyond. Together they formed a community of support.

“It was a very fluid exchange, almost like family,” says Lorraine García-Nakata, an artist, a curator and a member of the Sacramento-based Royal Chicano Air Force. “When I moved (to San Francisco) in 1985 with my young daughter, I already had a support system at the Galería. It was sort of like coming to your aunt’s house in some ways.”

Many of the organizations remain — El Centro Cultural de la Raza in San Diego, SPARC in Los Angeles, the Air Force in Sacramento — and each with its own legacy. If one were to boil down the Galería’s specific legacy, it’s that it has always been ahead of its time.

“The Galería, as tiny as it is, has been able to keep up with the pace of cultural change,” Mesa-Bains says. “There is no place like it in the world. And I’m not exaggerating. To this day, nothing compares to the Galería.”

Galería de la Raza was initially envisioned as a place to grow Chicano art, but it quickly opened up to a much wider community, to those cut off but “desperate to express themselves,” Yañez said.

Female artists made their presence felt in the Galería's second show, claiming their place on the walls. The space stood in solidarity with people from all of Latin America. Throughout the decades, the Galería's billboard on Bryant Street — one of the most difficult losses in all of this — stood in solidarity with black South Africans, Muslims and queer people.

In many ways, Rivera reflects the Galería's history. She's a queer Chicana who grew up on the California border, splitting her time between San Diego and Tijuana. At 38 years old, with her shock-pink hair, she is younger than the Galería itself. She'd first heard about the Galería nearly three decades ago, and even then its story called to her.

"As a queer woman of color, being born and raised in a border town," she says, "we were always looking to the dialogue that was happening here."



An August 2017 exhibition at the Galería de la Raza. Photo: Santiago Mejia / The Chronicle

Rivera moved to San Francisco in the late '90s, \$50 in her pocket and no community to lean on. The Galería was looking for a business manager, and she applied.

"I think they were kind of like, 'Who the heck are you?'" she says. But she felt — and she was right — that the Galería would be her home, her "safe haven, that refuge."

When the story of the organization moving is told again, 10 or 20 years from now, Rivera hopes to be remembered as the director who gave the Galería de la Raza a permanent home. Yes, she'll also be known as the director who made the call to leave 24th Street, but

she asks history to understand. Negotiations were stalling, she says, and the rent increase would have turned Galería's home into a coffin.

"I think we're being bold in saying, actually, this is our last chance. If we want the Galería in the city, in San Francisco, in the Bay Area, this is what it's going to take," she says. "It means leaving, but it doesn't mean we disappear."



Sidewalk art next to the Galería de la Raza, which will be leaving its home of nearly 50 years. Photo: Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle

And still, for so many, there is real energy in these walls, full of late nights and long conversations, the work of so many ancestors.

This was the place where Yañez reintroduced California, if not much of the country, to Frida Kahlo. This was the place where he and Ralph Maradiaga wove Dia de los Muertos into the artistic identity of the Mission District. ("We got a table, we put a tablecloth on it, a picture, the Virgen de Guadalupe, a candle, some flowers," he said. "Very simple. But when people saw it it was like they were looking at the Mona Lisa. It hit a chord.")

This was the place where Lydia Mendoza, the famous Tejano singer and guitarist, came and played for the opening of a show called "Mal Hombre," a sort of artistic treatise against men who are bad to women. (She wore a beaded, sequined cape with hand-painted high heels as

she performed in a window. Someone walking down 24th spotted her and went running down the street, shouting, “Dios mio, Lydia Mendoza is in the window!”)

This was the place where, for so long, for so many, everything happened. Memories like these will grow along with the Galería wherever it goes, but people will walk by the 24th Street storefront in the years to come and never know these ghosts exist.

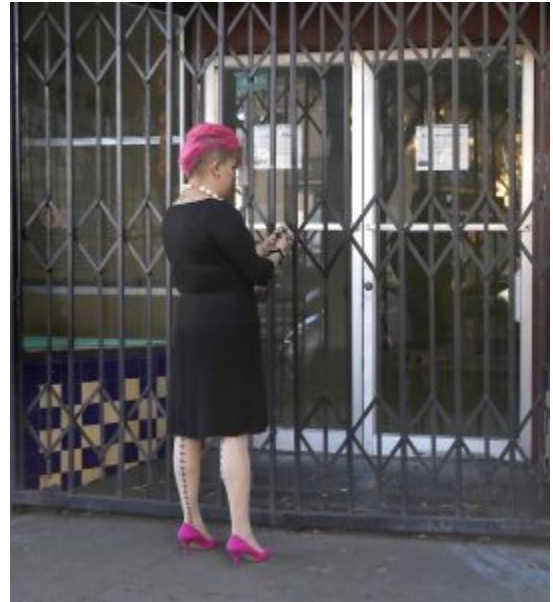
In the weeks before the decision was made to leave 24th Street, Rivera sat alone in the Galería. The last exhibit the space would ever host, titled “Comida es Medicina,” was still hanging. Soon the pieces would come down, leaving the gallery entirely empty — aside from a single quote from Ralph Maradiaga, one of the Galería’s founders, printed above the entrance:

“The images I used in my work are a reflection of our culture, its people and its tradition. As artists we must all share customs, lifestyles and imagery with one another. It is only through artistic, social and political ideologies that we ascertain and retain a place in history and document it for our children.”

Rivera looked up at the words. She was exhausted and losing her voice; she spoke quietly and haltingly. But the quote helped. It was a reminder that even with this home lost, the Galería was more than a single space.

“We all have to make painful decisions,” she says. “Galería is a beacon of cultural resistance, of education. It’s a beacon of hope. It’s not just the brick and mortar.”

Editor’s note: *This story has been updated to reflect that Galería de la Raza secured a temporary lease for a location on Valencia Street late Thursday, Dec. 20. It will reopen at 1470 Valencia St. early next year, though a specific date has not yet been set.*



Executive Director Ani Rivera of Galería de la Raza. Photo: Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle