



Suburban Nightmare
1982
UCI Institute and Museum of California Art

Carlos Almaraz

For a candy-colored view of the streets of Los Angeles, look no further than Carlos Almaraz. Born in Mexico, Almaraz arrived at age 9 in LA, a place, he said, that seemed like a dream. The feeling stayed with him. Almaraz went to UCLA and earned an MFA from the Otis College of Art and Design in 1974, and was one of the founding members of the influential Chicano art collective Los Four. He spent several years in New York, reveling in 80s art culture. After a brush with death there—during which he was given the last rites—Almaraz dedicated his work to Chicano causes, working with both César Chávez and Luis Valdez' Teatro Campesino. It was Valdez who told him it was time to focus on his own work. Like Roger Kuntz and Ed Ruscha, Almaraz found an important subject in the streets.



Almaraz has a beautiful, painterly hand, and uses juicy, bright colors that balance cool and warm in a stunning display. In their formal excitement, his works entice us. But these luscious works depict a world of car crashes, shoot-outs, freeway wrecks, trash burning on the beach—the dark, dangerous side of paradise. But unlike the human disasters painted by an artist like Francisco Goya, Almaraz' scenes tease and confuse us. Why no human pain for us to feel? Why are they so beautiful?

An image like *Suburban Nightmare* is filled with mystery. The burning ranch house reminds us how easily a dream can turn into a nightmare—if the dream even came true in the first place. But is the nightmare the house on fire, or the suburban rigidity of identical houses, identical cars, the geometry of lawns and streets, the small people who look on, dispassionate? In later, darker toned works, inspired by the velvet paintings sold on the US-Mexico border, Almaraz moves the nightmare to a more personal level, highlighting the loneliness of the AIDS sufferer.

But always, Almaraz gives us a stunning display of painterly genius. His four-panel *Echo Park* of 1982 calls Monet to mind, both his expansive *Waterlilies*, and the series of cathedrals of Rouen that change according to the time of day. But Echo Park, Almaraz' home at the time, was a place of gay-bashing and gang warfare, where spent hypodermic needles could be found under the leaves. And yet—Monet comes to mind.

Almaraz died in 1989, but his technicolor vision lives on in the work of the many Chicano artists who have been influenced by his powerful art.

To Learn More:

Carlos Almaraz: Playing with Fire, video directed by Elsa Flores Almaraz, Richard Montoya, 2018

Playing with Fire: Paintings of Carlos Almaraz, Howard Fox, Prestel, 2017

To See More:

LACMA, Cheech Marin Center for Chicano Art and Culture, UCI Museum and Institute for California Art, Crocker Museum, Whitney Museum, Smithsonian