

DIRECTIONS

# CARMEN LOMAS GARZA

NOVEMBER 18, 1995–FEBRUARY 18, 1996



*Heaven and Hell II*, 1991, alkyd and oil on canvas, 36 x 48 in. (91.4 x 121.9 cm). Anna Chávez and Richard Finos, San Francisco.

THIS EXHIBITION INCLUDES IMAGES BY Carmen Lomas Garza of her Tejana (Texan Mexican) childhood as well as several current narrative works. The following text is edited from a discussion that took place at the Hirshhorn Museum in May 1995 between Lomas Garza and Anne-Louise Marquis, curator of the exhibition.

ALM: You've said that at age thirteen you knew you wanted to become an artist. Why at that age?

CLG: The first time I saw an artist working was when I watched my mother, who is self-taught, paint *lotería tablas* [cards for a game similar to bingo]. She was copying old handpainted *tablas*. My parents were members of the American GI Forum, a World War II veterans' organization, and they were doing a lot of fund-raising activities in the fifties—the *lotería* was one and the cake-walk another. The Forum used the money to fund civil rights court cases and to send Mexican Americans to college on scholarships. When I saw my mother doing the artwork, I thought it was magic. I liked to draw, so a few years later, at thirteen, the age when you start thinking about what you're going to do, I decided to become a professional artist.

ALM: At home you could emulate your mother's narrative style. When you got to college, were you encouraged to produce abstract work?

CLG: I went to my hometown university [Texas Arts and Industry, Kingsville, now called Texas A & M] because that's all we could afford. I studied traditional Western European art: Renaissance, Modern, and of course Pop, and complied with all the requirements. I was one of the top students and understood the elements of design, but I found it boring. During my senior year, I was going through a difficult time trying to decide what to do, even though I was getting a degree in Art Education, which my parents wanted as something for me to fall back on. The Chicano movement helped clarify issues for me. I was involved in discussions about the discrimination and racism we had experienced in public schools, how we had been affected, and how art could be used to help correct the situation.

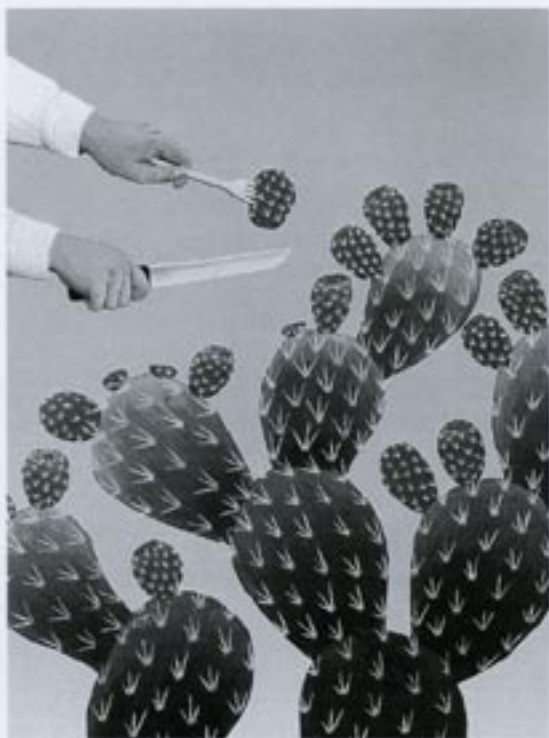
ALM: How had racism affected you?

CLG: When I graduated from high school, I was confused, introverted, and angry. I had experienced really ugly name-calling and other incidents—white kids did not want to sit next to me, and Mexican Americans were punished for speaking Spanish. But the most disturbing event took place during my senior year in college, when I was a student teacher in a South Texas town. There were no Mexican American teachers in the school, but the student body was predominantly Mexican

American. They were paddled if they spoke Spanish. In the art room, we were not allowed to listen to Tejano music—only to country-western. The Mexican American kids finally staged a walkout, but a few days into it, the boys who were eighteen years old were drafted and sent to Vietnam. The superintendent kicked me out of the school for speaking to the protestors. I was furious at the unfair treatment of the young Chicanos and I decided to dedicate my artwork to helping my people. That's been my goal since 1971.

ALM: Art associated with the Chicano movement is often strongly political, but during your last semester in college you turned to the traditional folk style of the *monitos* [the little figures].

CLG: I decided to present positive scenes of everyday events in the community through accessible imagery. I had intended to do a modern version of the *lotería tablas*, but my mother wouldn't let me. She explained the tradition: The seventy-five numbers each have a *monito* and



*Prickly Pear/A Little Piece of My Heart*, 1991, oil and alkyd on canvas, 32 x 24 in. (81.3 x 61 cm). Courtesy of the artist.

each figure has a name. The caller of the numbers tells riddles and rhymes related to each image. He knows all this from memory, so a new set of figures would require a lot more memorization. My mother convinced me to copy the old *tablas* she had instead. Five *monitos* were missing, but when I complained about this, my mother looked at me in total disbelief and said, "You're an artist, make up your own!" I realized that despite the tradition, there's room for innovation, improvement, and creativity. After making that first edition of *monitos*, I started to do scenes from memory.

ALM: Are your works also influenced by images from *calendarios* [calendars] or *retablos* [altarpieces], or are they related only to memory and the *monitos*?

CLG: I read that Picasso said he wished he could draw like a child, and I studied a lot of children's art because I was in Art Education. Children's art is very simple and direct. If you want to see a message, it's right there. That's what I wanted—to be direct, simple, easy to read. I wanted to make the point that the aspects of Chicano culture that we take so much for granted are beautiful and worthy of depiction in fine art.

ALM: So your message is a way of validating the personal domain of Mexican American life.

CLG: Yes. Also, part of the process of making the paintings is a way of healing the wounds of discrimination and racism, for myself and for *la raza* [Mexican Americans]. My main audience has been *la raza*, but others see my work and are enlightened by it or see similarities to their own cultures. I paint to give a better understanding of who we are as a people.

ALM: A prime example are your images of *curanderismo*—healing—a word often falsely translated as "quackery" but really a respected means of traditional health care used in conjunction with contemporary medicine.

CLG: The *curanderos* that I grew up with in Texas were spiritual and herbal or physical healers. Don Pedrito Jaramillo [1829–1907] was an important healer from near my hometown. When he dealt with psychological problems, part of his *remedios* [remedies] required people to contemplate their actions. And he did a lot of healing with drinking water. In South Texas it gets very hot and humid, so if you don't drink enough water you become sick.

ALM: Most of your images are based on real figures such as Don Pedrito Jaramillo, historical incidents, or events from your life. Your recent "Heaven and Hell" series is allegorical.

CLG: "Heaven and Hell" is the series of my desires and my fears. I love to dance, so I desire that heaven be a perpetual social dance. Everybody dances to a

*charanga* (brass) band, floating above the floor. And they all have twenty-two-carat gold-leaf hearts! In the lower part of the paintings is hell, where I show my fears. Those people have no souls, just a little black hole in their chests. I fear being unproductive, so those condemned for being lazy are doing meaningless work, carrying rocks in backpacks from one place to another. I also fear being greedy, so I show the greedy burdened by gold rocks attached to their neck and limbs. And I fear being unloving. The unloving person is represented with a wire-mesh covering that has thorns sticking out of it, so he can never be touched or touch anyone.

ALM: Certain images appear again and again in your paintings: the prickly pears, the watermelons, the horned toad lizards. Do these have personal significance?

CLG: Yes, they do. During the summer the lizards cling to the outsides of the window screens, especially in the evening, waiting for mosquitos, flies, or moths. To me the lizards symbolize a calmness and peacefulness, which is why I use them a lot. The cactus is important because my grandfather would take the family out in the early spring to cut *nopalitos*, fresh cactus pads. That tradition goes all the way back to the Coahuiltecas Indians—the Cactus Eaters. From them we get the name Texas. They relied on the *nopalitos* when winter food supplies started running out. In the painting *Abuelitos Piscando Nopalitos* [Grandparents Harvesting Cacti, 1980], I show us learning the tradition from my grandfather. I gave it that title because *piscar* [harvests] is the term used by migrant workers, still often Indians. And the word *piscando* comes from a Nahuatl [an Aztec language] word: *pixcat*. So many words in the Mexican Spanish language are Nahuatl or from other indigenous languages.

ALM: How does this tradition relate to your overall interest in Pre-Columbian life?

CLG: As a Chicana, I have always felt strongly that we need to learn more about our indigenous history. We are *mestizos*, which means mixture, a combination of Spanish and Indian, and some African and Asian. In the public schools, we were taught about the Egyptian pyramids but not about the ancient Mexican city Teotihuacán.

ALM: Part of that history is the importance of paper and its uses in ancient Mexico. How do your paper and steel cutouts tie into that?

CLG: There's a long history of paper use for special purposes in ancient Mexico. Paper was made out of bark from wild mulberry trees and used for everything from books to ceremonial outfits. Later the Spanish imported cotton rag paper manufactured from Mexican cotton, and tissue paper from the Philippines. My paper and



*Ezrahe Treatment*, 1989, oil on canvas, 17 x 15 in. (43.2 x 38.1 cm).  
Courtesy of the artist.

steel cutouts are influenced by the *banderitas* [little banners], which are tissue-paper cutouts made by everyday folk in Mexico as decoration for celebrations. They just fold the paper and cut it with scissors.

ALM: Speaking of scissors, critic Tomás Ybarra-Frausto has written of the sinister quality of your paintings. You have painted disembodied hands holding knives and forks, and your father cutting into a blood-red, juicy watermelon. Do you agree with Ybarra-Frausto's analysis?

CLG: I do, sort of. The painting *Sandía/Pedacito de Mi Corazón* [Watermelon/A Little Piece of My Heart, 1986] has three meanings to it. One is that when you cut a watermelon, everybody wants a piece of the center, the sweetest part, called the heart. A second meaning is that in ancient Mexico the heart was the seat of the soul, so heart and blood were precious offerings to the gods. Also, my personal position is that by doing and showing this artwork, I am giving you a little piece of my heart.

ALM: Your work is extremely rich in detail. Sometimes you extract a single scene and make it the subject of a separate artwork, what you call a "zoom-in." You have done this with *Nopalitos Frescos* [Fresh Cacti, 1979]

and *Sandía/Pedacito de Mi Corazón*. I've also noticed that scenes within a painting tend to support the overall composition. In *Cakewalk*, 1987, for instance, much of the imagery is circular, echoing the shape of the cakewalk. In the same way, the actions of the cats and dogs in various vignettes seem to relate to the main drama. The cat in *Las Pachuca/Razor Blade 'do*, 1993, grooms herself, just as the girls do. Do you plan these relationships, or are these observations part of your memory?

CLG: Cats and dogs were always around, so they have to be included in the pictures. Sometimes I consciously put them in and sometimes it's unconscious. Either way, it feels natural that the animals should be there. A conscious choice was in *Pelco y Pelo, el Pleito* [Dust and Hair, The Fight, 1987], which shows two girls fighting in front of the nightclub. There's a dog barking, joining in the screaming and yelling. I do consciously decide to change the perspective to suit what I need to depict. To show things on a tabletop, I will tilt that tabletop, regardless of the correct perspective.

ALM: Such as in *Empanadas* [Turnovers, 1991], in which the viewpoint in the kitchen is from high above, looking down?

CLG: Yes. That's so you can see the trays of turnovers on the table, the chairs, and the countertops. I learned that technique from children's artwork, where perspective, at least linear perspective, is disregarded. "Correct perspective" was drilled into me in college at the same time that I was learning about children's art.

ALM: Linear perspective is a Renaissance invention that doesn't exist throughout the entire history of art. It's a tool to be used or not as one needs.

CLG: Yes, but the fact that you have that choice was not taught to us. We were taught, "This is it. You have to do this."

ALM: When you don't use linear perspective, you're considered untrained?

CLG: Yes. Or else you're considered ignorant and untrained. That's why it was so difficult for me to create during my senior year in college. I was making decisions about my purpose as an artist and accepting or rejecting conventional styles. Finally, I just went ahead and did what was in my heart.



*Cakewalk*, 1987, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 48 in. (91.4 x 121.9 cm). Paula Maciel-Benecke and Norbert Benecke, Aptos, California.

## BIOGRAPHY

Born in Kingsville, Texas, 1948. Received B.S. in Art Education and Texas Teaching Certificate from Texas Arts and Industry University, Kingsville (now Texas A & M, Kingsville), 1972. M.Ed. from Juarez-Lincoln/Artioch Graduate School, Austin, Texas, 1973; and M.A. from San Francisco State University, 1980. Awards and fellowships include VIDA Award, Arts category, 1995; California Arts Council Artist in Residence Grants, 1979, 1982, 1984, 1986; National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships for printmaking, 1981, and painting, 1987; and California Arts Council Fellowship, 1990, among others. Authored bilingual children's book, *Family Pictures/Cuadros de Familia*, 1990. Received commissions from the San Francisco Water Department, 1984, and the Federal Reserve Bank, Dallas, Texas, 1993. Currently lives and works in San Francisco.

## SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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- Lomas Garza, Carmen. "A Piece of My Heart/Pedacito de Mi Corazón," in *A Piece of My Heart/Pedacito de Mi Corazón: The Art of Carmen Lomas Garza* (New York: New Press in association with the Laguna Gloria Art Museum, Austin, 1991): 11-13.
- Lomas Garza, Carmen, with Harriot Rohmer. *Family Pictures/Cuadros de Familia* (San Francisco: Children's Book Press, 1990).
- Mesa-Bains, Amalia. "Chicano Chronicle and Cosmology: The Works of Carmen Lomas Garza," in *A Piece of My Heart*, 15-39.
- . "El Mundo Femenino: Chicana Artists of the Movement—A Commentary on Development and Production," in *C.A.R.A.—Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965-1985* (Los Angeles: Wight Art Gallery, University of California, 1991): 131-40.
- Ybarra-Frausto, Tomás. *Lo Real Maravilloso, The Miraculous/The Real* (San Francisco: Mexican Museum, 1987): 7-10.

## SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1995 Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, New York.  
"Los Primos del Rio Abajo." Millicent Rogers Museum, Taos, New Mexico.
- 1994 "Día de los Muertos/Ofrenda para Antonio Lomas." Honolulu Academy of Art, Hawaii.
- 1992 "Día de los Muertos Ofrenda para Tenochtitlán y Doña Martina (La Malinche)." Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts.
- 1991 "A Piece of My Heart/Pedacito de Mi Corazón." Laguna Gloria Art Museum, Austin, Texas.
- 1989 Galería sin Fronteras, Austin, Texas.
- 1987 "Lo Real Maravilloso, The Marvelous/The Real." The Mexican Museum, San Francisco.
- 1985 Galería Posada, Sacramento, California.
- 1981 Bon Marché Gallery, Eastern Washington University, Spokane.
- 1980 "Carmen Lomas Garza: Prints and Gouaches." San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.
- 1977 The Mexican Museum, San Francisco.
- 1972 "Monitos." Estudios Rio Gallery, Mission, Texas.

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1993 "La Frontera/The Border: Art about the Mexico/United States Border Experience." Centro Cultural de la Raza and the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego.  
"Art of the Other Mexico: Sources and Meanings." Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum, Chicago, Illinois.
- 1990 "C.A.R.A.—Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965-1985." Wight Art Gallery, University of California, Los Angeles.
- 1988 "Hispanic Art in the United States: Thirty Contemporary Painters and Sculptors." The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas, and the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
- 1986 "Lo del Corazón: Heartbeat of a Culture." The Mexican Museum, San Francisco.  
"Chicano Expressions." INTAR, Hispanic American Arts Center, New York.
- 1981 "Califas." Mary Porter Sesnon Art Gallery, Porter College, University of California, Santa Cruz.
- 1978 "Homage to Frida Kahlo, Day of the Dead." Galería de la Raza/Studio 24, San Francisco.

## CHECKLIST

Translations follow the artist's titles in parentheses. Height precedes width. Unless otherwise noted, works are courtesy of the artist. For their kind assistance during the preparation of this exhibition, the curator wishes to thank the artist; Vicente Martínez, Millicent Rogers Museum, Taos; and

Andrew Connors, National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

*Don Pedro Jaramillo*, 1976, oil on copper, 10 x 16 in. (25.4 x 40.6 cm).

*Nopálicos Frescos (Fresh Cacti)*, 1979, gouache on paper, 9 1/2 x 6 in. (23.2 x 15.2 cm). Private collection.

*Abuelitos Piscando Nopálicos (Grandparents Harvesting Cacti)*, 1980, gouache on paper, 11 x 14 in. (27.9 x 35.6 cm). Richard L. Bains and Anala Mesa-Bains, Monterey, California.

*Auto-retrato (Self-Portrait)*, 1980, gouache on paper, 8 1/2 x 7 1/2 in. (21.6 x 19.1 cm).

*Camas para Sueños (Beds for Dreams)*, 1985, gouache on Arches paper, 23 x 17 1/2 in. (58.4 x 44.5 cm).

*La Virgen de San Juan de los Lagos (The Virgin of Saint John of the Lakes)*, 1985, gouache on paper, 12 x 9 in. (30.5 x 22.9 cm). Peter Rodriguez, San Francisco.

*Barrido de Susto (Sweeping Away Fright)*, 1986, gouache on paper, 14 x 18 in. (35.6 x 45.7 cm). Private collection.

*Para la Cena (For Dinner)*, 1986, oil on linen mounted on wood, 24 x 32 in. (61 x 81.3 cm). El Paso Museum of Art, Texas; Robert U. and Mabel O. Lipscomb Foundation Endowment Purchase.

*Sandía/Pedacito de Mi Corazón (Watermelon/A Little Piece of My Heart)*, 1986, gouache on paper, 11 1/2 x 15 in. (29.2 x 38.1 cm). Jerry Avila Carpenter, San Francisco.

*Sandía/Watermelon*, 1986, gouache on paper, 20 x 28 in. (50.8 x 71.1 cm). Dudley D. Brooks, New York.

*Cakewalk*, 1987, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 48 in. (91.4 x 121.9 cm). Paula Maciel-Benecke and Norbert Benecke, Aptos, California.

*Conejos/Rabbit*, 1987, gouache on paper, 11 x 14 in. (27.9 x 35.6 cm). Stevan and Catalina Alvarado, Oakland, California.

*La Feria en Reynosa (The Fair in Reynosa)*, 1987, gouache on paper, 20 x 28 in. (50.8 x 71.1 cm). Teófila S. Dane, San Francisco.

*Hammerhead Shark on Padre Island*, 1987, oil on canvas, 36 x 48 in. (91.4 x 121.9 cm). Private collection.

*El Milagro (The Miracle)*, 1987, oil on canvas, 36 x 48 in. (91.4 x 121.9 cm). Nicolás and Cristina Hernández Truett Collection, Pasadena, California.

*Pelto y Pelo, el Pirito (Dust and Hair, The Fight)*, 1987, gouache on paper, 20 x 28 in. (50.8 x 71.1 cm). Pamela and Martin Krasney, Sausalito, California.

*Posada (Inn)*, 1987, gouache on paper, 20 x 28 in. (50.8 x 71.1 cm). Marina D. Alvarado and Gilbert Mercado, Jr., Los Angeles.

*Tamalulu (Making Tamales)*, 1987, gouache on paper, 20 x 27 in. (50.8 x 68.6 cm). Don Ramon's Restaurant, San Francisco.

*Cascarones (Easter Eggs)*, 1989, gouache on paper, 15 x 20 in. (38.1 x 50.8 cm). Gilberto Cárdenas, courtesy Galería sin Fronteras, Austin, Texas.

*Cumplimientos de Lala y Tudi (Lala's and Tudi's Birthday Party)*, 1989, oil on canvas, 36 x 48 in. (91.4 x 121.9 cm). Paula Maciel-Benecke and Norbert Benecke, Aptos, California.

*Curandera (Healer)*, 1989, oil on linen mounted on wood, 24 x 32 in. (61 x 81.3 cm). The Mexican Museum, San Francisco.

*Enache Treatment*, 1989, oil on canvas, 17 x 15 in. (43.2 x 38.1 cm).

*La Llorona (The Crying Woman)*, 1989, gouache on paper, 18 x 26 in. (45.7 x 66 cm). Sonia Saldívar-Hull, Ph.D., and Felix Hull, M.D., Austin, Texas.

*Empanadas (Turnovers)*, 1991, gouache on paper, 20 x 28 in. (50.8 x 71.1 cm). Dr. Romeo F. Montalvo, Jr., Brownsville, Texas.

*Heaven and Hell II*, 1991, alkyd and oil on canvas, 36 x 48 in. (91.4 x 121.9 cm). Anna Chávez and Richard Fineo, San Francisco.

*Prickly Pear/A Little Piece of My Heart*, 1991, oil and alkyd on canvas, 32 x 24 in. (81.3 x 61 cm).

*Barbacoa para Campesinos (Birthday Party Barbecue)*, 1993, alkyd on canvas, 36 x 48 in. (91.4 x 121.9 cm). Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas.

*La Bendición en el Día de la Boda (The Wedding Day Blessing)*, 1993, alkyd on canvas, 24 x 32 in. (61 x 81.3 cm). Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts.

*Las Pachuca/Razor Blade 'de*, 1993, alkyd on canvas, 24 x 32 in. (61 x 81.3 cm).

*Una Tarde (One Afternoon)*, 1993, alkyd on canvas, 24 x 32 in. (61 x 81.3 cm).

*Nopálicos (Cacti)*, 1994, 20-gauge laser-cut steel with fused powder coating, 32 x 26 1/2 in. (81.3 x 66.4 cm). Collection of the artist, courtesy Steinbaum Krauss Gallery, New York.

*Ofrenda para Antonio Lomas (Offering to Antonio Lomas)*, 1995, 20-gauge laser-cut steel with fused powder coating; 10 panels assembled, 58 1/2 x 99 in. (148.6 x 251.5 cm). Private collection, courtesy Steinbaum Krauss Gallery, New York.



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