

ART

Shades of an artistic ghetto in 'Expresiones Hispanas'

What is a ghetto? Is it only a physical, geographical place — a neighborhood where people of one ethnic background are forced to live?

Or is there such a thing as an artistic ghetto? A region of art, perhaps, where the members of a minority are considered as a group, rather than as individuals; where they can show together and compete with each other, but from which they are not expected to emerge into the cultural mainstream.

These are the questions which

On Art

Charles Desmarais



haunt any attempt to survey the art of a particular cultural group, particularly one with so despicable a history of exclusion as Hispanics in the United States.

They are the questions one is forced to consider in viewing "Expresiones Hispanas," an exhibition of 50 works by Hispanic artists, which opened last week at the Southwest Museum in Los Angeles.

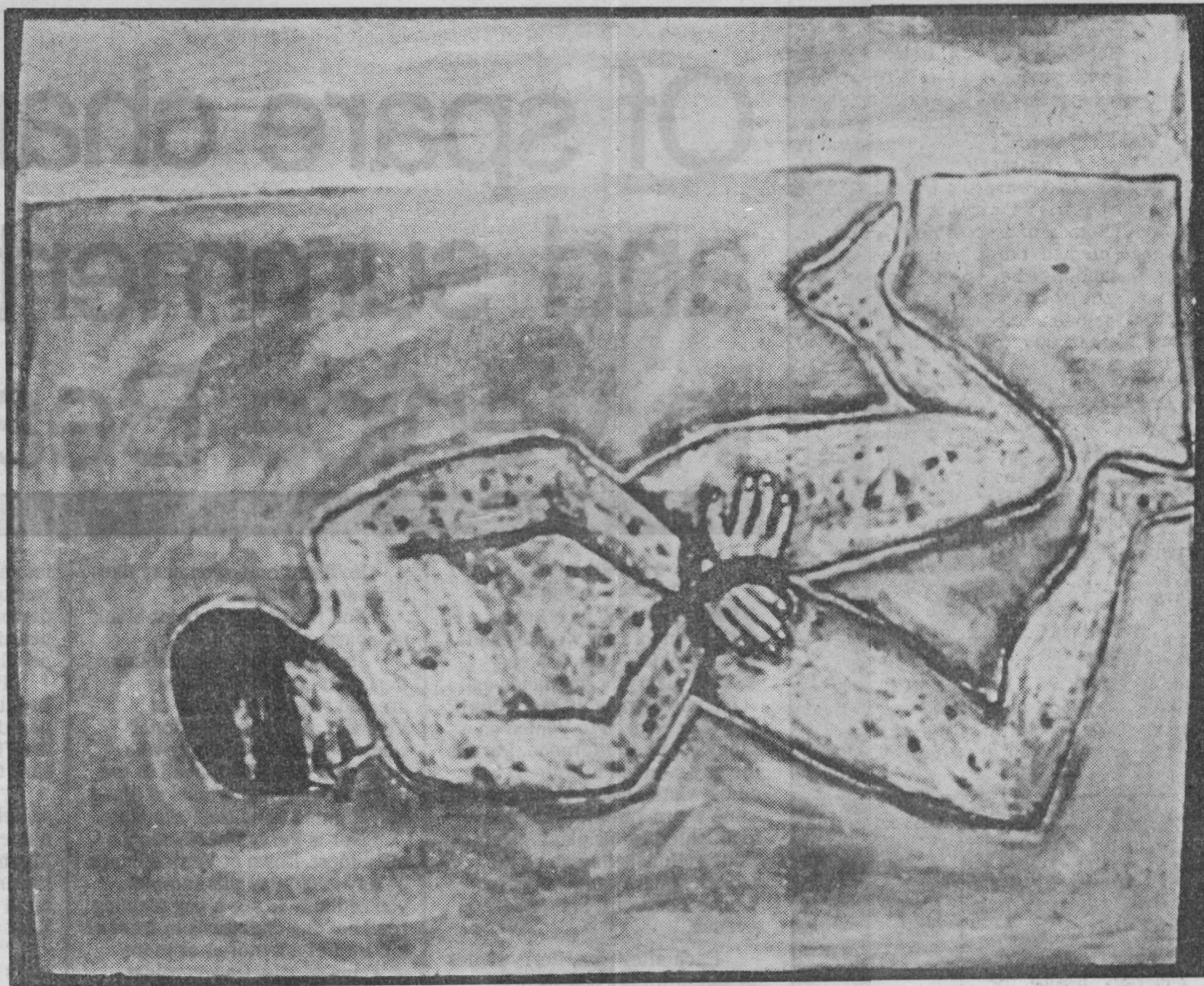
The exhibition is a juried show, and like every juried exhibition it has inherent problems.

Designing an exhibition by committee (this show had four jurors) is a sure-fire way to avoid a coherent point of view, and any jury on which I've ever served has been a lesson in compromise and accommodation — not in art of quality.

Moreover, many of the best-known artists simply refuse to participate in competitive exhibitions.

Still, "Expresiones Hispanas" presents an uncommonly large percentage of strong work. I was moved by the sweet charm of Alfredo Ceibal's "Amor Eterno," a meticulously detailed story of love in middle age and the memory of youth.

Santiago Vaca's chilling canvas of a pale, naked body, bound and blindfolded and pocked with small, red wounds is a shocking discovery, crowded on a poorly lit wall of the museum's auditorium.



Santiago Vaca's "Missing," on exhibit at the Southwest Museum in Los Angeles.

Combined with Vaca's one-word title, "Missing," the work says as much about modern-day politics in some countries as a month of newspapers might.

Both Vaca and Ceibal might be said to produce "Hispanic" art: Vaca's subject is surely on the minds of many Latinos, some of whose countrymen — even families — are threatened daily by death squads and the possibility of disappearance. And Ceibal's painting depicts a room in an adobe house — clearly a Latin American house, from the style of the furnishings.

Other artists in the exhibit draw upon traditional forms in their cultures. Ramon Jose Lopez, whose "Nuestra Madre de la Luz" is a gessoed pine panel, painted and carved, reinterprets the *retablo*, a traditional Mexican religious icon.

Francisco Vidal paints in a flattened, detailed style reminiscent of the great Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, though the pleasant subject of his "Lover of Carnival" — an after-party embrace at the foot of a bed — is a long way from Kahlo's dark stories of physical and mental anguish.

But what of a painting like "Pacific Coast Highway with Cars II," by Southern Californian Margaret W. Gallegos? It's a confident, compelling picture, a dark sunset into which the taillights of unspecified cars recede, but one would be hard-pressed to ascribe "Hispanic" characteristics to its subject or style.

The eight abstract works in the show, including the first-place award winner, would hardly seem ethnic in any other context, and the same goes for at least a third of the rest of the work.

In a curated exhibition planned to

examine the shared roots of artists from the same culture, we might learn a great deal about the motivations and meanings of the art presented.

But a near-random sampling of pictures from across the United States, by artists born into families from a broad range of Latin countries — each with its own cultural distinctions — and, presumably, a broad range of economic and social backgrounds, cannot serve that purpose.

Though it may not have been planned that way, the only purpose a show like this does serve is to perpetuate the artistic ghetto.

"Expresiones Hispanas," Southwest Museum, through Sept. 4, in the Highland Park section of Los Angeles; take the Pasadena/110 Freeway to Avenue 43, follow signs to the museum.

• • •

Maybe it's the onset of summer, traditionally a slow time in the arts — or perhaps I was just in the wrong mood — but I didn't see much on last week's gallery foray that was exciting.

Gallery owner Dorothy Goldeen bucks the trend this month with a one-person show of work by Allee Willis. She needn't have bothered.

Willis is an L.A.-based songwriter and music-video stylist whose best-known songs include the Pet Shop Boys' "What Have I Done to Deserve This" (the title also used for the exhibition), the Pointer Sisters' "Neutron Dance."

I went to the Goldeen Gallery expecting the outrageous, having heard that Willis' collection of '50s and '60s kitsch is among the best, and that it informs her art. But she's not up to her material.

Her motorized reliefs feature strutting, multicolored figures sketched in a bland cartoon style and cut from foam-core. These are combined with old toys, car ornaments, mechanical and electrical detritus and campy snapshots in the most predictable of assemblages.

I'd rather look at the original scraps in a junk shop.

It's hard to imagine that work could be so silly without being funny, so excessive without being complex, so colorful and kinetic without commanding attention or having the least charm.

The Allee Willis exhibition is at the Dorothy Goldeen Gallery, 1547 Ninth St., Santa Monica, through Saturday.