CLOSE-UP

Orifice Baroque

JULIA BRYAN-WILSON ON ASCO’S ASSHOLE MURAL, 1975

FOUR STYLISHLY DRESSED FIGURES stand around the gaping mouth of a storm drain. Core members of the East Los Angeles Chicano collective Asco—Patsi Valdez, Gronk (Glugio Nicandro), Willie F. Herrón III, and Harry Gamboa Jr.—they face the camera with unsmiling, cool expressions. The men have tucked their hands into the pockets of their natty suits, while Valdez, clad in beige slacks and a floral buster, leans back casually against a concrete barrier as if posing for a fashion spread. The picture’s title, Asshole Mural, turns a scatological joke into a high-concept variation on muralism, which in the early 1970s was perceived as the dominant mode of Chicano art.

This photograph was conceived by Gamboa in 1975 during a series of performances in which the group nominated themselves as ersatz municipal employees of East Los Angeles, an unincorporated territory within LA that served as the locus of Chicano civil rights and social-justice organizing during the late ’60s and early ’70s. In impeccably curated outfits, they toured various locations in and around the city, designating overlooked sites such as drainpipes urban monuments and landmarks. In vivid detail, the color picture picks up the blue of Gamboa’s pants, as well as the reddish brown that trickles from the dark hole that dominates the center of the frame. As art historian and Asco scholar C. Ondine Chavoya states, the work “reverses the symbolic axis of the city’s system of spatial purification and organization by memorializing its object, orificial source.” Like Robert Smithson’s photographic series “Monuments of Passaic,” 1967, it utilizes the power of designation to focus on the underbelly of urban infrastructures. Unlike Smithson, however, the members of Asco place themselves squarely in the image, aware of their own uneasy status as marginalized “refuse” (for instance, in the early 1970s, a museum curator told Gamboa that Chicanos do not make advanced art, but produce only folk art or are in gangs).

The group’s name (which means “disgust” or “nausea” in Spanish) is sometimes misprinted in all caps, as if it were an acronym or a shout. Founded in 1971 by a cohort of artists in East LA who had known one another since their teenage years, Asco morphed into a somewhat loose network of affiliates, expanding and contracting in various configurations until 1987. Its members were active in the 1968 Garfield High School student walkouts—part of a series of protests known as the East LA Blowouts—to oppose unequal educational conditions and the disproportionate number of Chicano casualties during the Vietnam War. Gamboa was especially prominent during these campaigns, serving as the vice president of the Blowout Committee. This political activism went on to shape the potent voice that became a hallmark of Asco’s collective practice.

What is striking about works such as Asshole Mural is the way in which those radical politics articulate themselves along aesthetic lines. The act of appropriation that discursively transforms an anonymous sewage opening into an artistically rendered “mural” is embellished by Asco’s formal choices, which include the team’s clothes, their self-conscious stances, and, most important, their use of performance-based photography as a specifically hybrid medium. Asshole Mural is part of what ASCO refers to as a “No Movie,” 1973–78—a category of works that consists of mock frames from movies that did not exist, or, rather, that existed conceptually only in that form. Many works in the “No Movie” series explicitly parody Hollywood film culture and capture climactic scenes. In The Gores, 1974, for instance, a man cowers in a corner holding an outsize camera as characters clad in glittery costumes and platform heels menace him with a shiny ax. But in Asshole Mural there is no suggestion of a cinematic mise-en-scène. Instead, we are given a moment of composed stasis, with figures spread along the picture plane like a frieze.

The piece embodies the dialectical play that courses through Asco’s work. Its dynamism is generated not by overt narrative but by the tension between the glamorous and the excremental, and the clash of the ostensibly bureaucratic with the theatrical: What city worker surveys her terrain wearing a strapless top? In another contradiction, Asshole Mural simultaneously inserts Asco within the tradition of Chicano muralism and revamps, consciously perverts, or even pollutes its sometimes stereotypical imagery. Asco often mimed the language of murals in its early years, as in Instant Mural, 1974, in which Gronk temporarily affixed Valdez and sometime Asco participant Humberto Sandoval to a wall facing Arizona Street using lengths of thick white tape. Putting live bodies in the place of images, the performance takes the imperative to provide “authentic” Chicano representation to an absurdly literal end point. Who or what is the asshole here? Is it the round pipe that dumps out waste, or are Asco granting themselves asshole status, winking referring to their provocations, such as Spray Paint LACMA, 1972, in which Gamboa, Gronk, and Herrón spray-painted their names on the Los Angeles County Museum of Art? The term asshole is not necessarily derogatory; it also, of course, has a sexual charge (importantly, Amelia Jones has recently explored the queer aspect of Asco’s work).

After decades of art-historical neglect, Asshole Mural has become one of Asco’s most widely known works, for good reason: It summarizes the group’s incisive blend of Conceptualism, public art, humor, and political awareness. Asshole Mural not only sanctifies that which is perceived as object (including Chicano style and culture) but makes it unavoidable, confronting the viewer head-on. The black circle in the middle of the photo is an empty cavity, but it is also an eye, one that mirrors the camera’s own aperture. It captures us gazing and stares right back.

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