

**Exhibition:** *Playing with Fire: Paintings by Carlos Almaraz*

**On View:** August 6–December 3, 2017

**Location:** BCAM, Level 2



Image captions on page 7

(Los Angeles, CA, July 5, 2017)—The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) presents the first major survey of paintings by Carlos Almaraz (1941–1989). *Playing with Fire: Paintings by Carlos Almaraz* features 65 works, including mostly paintings and several drawings from the artist's studio practice. Almaraz was legendary during his lifetime, initially as a political activist and a cofounder of Los Four—among the first Chicano artist collectives to emerge in Southern California in the 1970s—and ultimately as a visionary studio artist whose compelling images convey a deep psychological impact. Almaraz first became an activist through his work with the United Farm Workers, painting banners for union rallies. Among his most visible works from this period were a number of public murals in East Los Angeles that depicted the Chicano civil rights struggle. By the end of the decade, however, Almaraz felt constrained by his role as a cultural worker within the movement and turned his creative aspirations to asserting a far more personal form of expression. *Playing with Fire: Paintings by Carlos Almaraz* explores this personal and artistic transformation.

A highlight of the exhibition is the 24-foot-wide *Echo Park Lake nos. 1–4* (1982), a four-paneled painting reminiscent of Claude Monet's Impressionistic renderings of lily ponds and Parisian parks. This exhibition marks the first time that the four panels have been reunited since 1987. Other highlights include: Almaraz's studio-based art featuring idyllic scenes of Hawaii (where Almaraz and his family maintained a second home); fiery freeway car crashes richly imbued with saturated colors; self-portraits; contemplative scenes of domestic life; and surreal dreamscapes.

*Playing with Fire* is presented as part of the Getty's Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA initiative and is curated by Howard N. Fox, LACMA emeritus curator of contemporary art. The exhibition is accompanied by the first full-length monograph of Carlos Almaraz, co-published with DelMonico Books • Prestel.

“Carlos Almaraz is a key figure in Los Angeles’s cultural history,” said Michael Govan, LACMA CEO and Wallis Annenberg Director. “Almaraz’s first show at LACMA was the 1974 exhibition *Los Four: Almaraz/de la Rocha/Luján/Romero*, which presented the work of this important Chicano artist collective co-founded by Almaraz. *Playing with Fire: Paintings by Carlos Almaraz* is an opportunity to acknowledge Almaraz as a solo artist. We are excited to reconsider the artist’s accomplishments in a broader context and offer a new and comprehensive appreciation of the artist’s engagement with complex issues.”

Howard N. Fox commented, “While there were small surveys of his art during and soon after his lifetime, and accompanying exhibition catalogues with brief but thoughtful essays, there has been no sustained exploration of his oeuvre.” Nearly three decades following Carlos Almaraz’s untimely death at age 48, now is a propitious time to reexamine his too-brief but always compelling artistic achievements. His life was contradictory and often conflicted, and he reveled in and avidly celebrated the complexities and contradictions of his identity and experiences. Fox added, “These connections and slippages, these crossovers and disconnects, these harmonies and dissonances constitute the enduring essence of Almaraz’s art.”

### **Exhibition Organization and Highlights**

The exhibition is organized in five loosely defined thematic sections and includes the following highlights:

In **Los Angeles, Delirious and Edenic**, Almaraz painted the city as a place of surging visual energy and human activity. Almaraz’s Los Angeles is an alluring, beckoning, and audacious place. Renderings such as *Love Makes the City Crumble (1983)* are visually jarring and disorderly—fantastical visions of a densely built-up high-rise city. Almaraz’s skyscrapers are hardly the stolid, flat-topped stone, steel, and glass edifices that populate the streets of Los Angeles; his spires bend, twist, and dance with a rapture evoking unbridled bodily abandon. Almaraz’s many pictures of Echo Park stand in dramatic contrast to his rowdy cityscapes. To the artist, Echo Park was a kind of Eden, an urban paradise exemplified in the majestic four-panel vista *Echo Park Lake (1982)*, a tour de force of color and texture. Echo Park is not truly pastoral or rustic at all, but Almaraz treated it throughout his work with an appealing simplicity and charm in a manner that extends the European tradition of the idyll to include his many renditions of this urban greenspace, from golden glowing morning to broadly hued midday to enchanting moonlit nocturnes.

In **Bad News**, this section explores the artist’s depiction of danger, disaster, and mortality. Almaraz is perhaps best known for his series of fiery car crashes—scenes of

colliding automobiles, car explosions, and vehicles careening over the guardrails of elevated Southern California freeways, such as *Crash in Phthalo Green (1984)*, the first Almaraz painting to enter LACMA's collection. His car crash paintings have darkly comic, even sardonic overtones: their improbable fusion of terrible human disaster with a slyly seductive visual command seems to relegate human suffering to an invisible afterthought. The car crashes join other compelling scenarios, such as runaway trains, houses on fire, and shootouts, reflecting aspects of real troubles plaguing Southern California during a time of turbulent social change. *Suburban Nightmare (1983)*, for example, shows a row of three identical tract houses, each with an identical car parked in front. The middle house is consumed by fire, the flames lighting up the night sky in a cataclysmic rage of color.

Some of the warmest visions that Almaraz presents are scenes of home as seen in the next section **Domesticity**. A highlight is *The Red Chair (1980)*, a simple picture of an unoccupied room in a old bungalow showing only a dilapidated, overstuffed red velvet easy chair and an end table with a lamp; it is a domestic still life as banal as they come, but simultaneously so saturated with a richness of colors that the room becomes animate with implicit life and spirit. The spatial vacancy is haunted by a narrative of untold possibilities: comings and goings, quiet sojourns, noisy altercation, tranquility, anxiety. In the background the artist's wife holds their baby. This painting is the loving reflection of a husband and father on the fulfillments of his daily life at home.

In **Sexuality and the Erotic**, sexuality figures into many of Almaraz's works, sometimes symbolically or suggestively, and sometimes openly and explicitly. His ink drawing *The Muffing Mask (1972)* presents a devil-masked male figure performing oral sex on a female figure. It is likely the artist intended this work not as titillating but rather as a matter-of-fact depiction of sexual activity, albeit with a dash of Rabelasian wit in the devil mask. *Siesta (1972)*, another ink drawing, features two men resting in bed, presumably after sex. *The Struggle of Mankind (1984)* presents a pair of naked male wrestlers in an image highly suggestive of homoerotic engagement. These works of Almaraz's evince his openness, starting in the early 1970s, to explore sexual themes and sexual fluidity at a time when doing so was both rather daring while also becoming a sociocultural inevitability. Almaraz's depictions of sex anticipated a time when such imagery would no longer cause a public or political uproar.

Shadowy humanoids and mythic figures—often depicted on stage or an ambiguous dream space—populate many of Almaraz's most enigmatic and haunted paintings. In **Dreams and Allegories** a number of these works depict the artist variously as a fool, a clown, a

jester, or a trickster. The jaguar-man is another frequent figure that functions as an analogue to the masked figures, one more of the many shapeshifters and mischief-makers in Almaraz's art. The jaguar, with its natural stealth, strength, and predatory skills, was viewed in some traditional Mesoamerican cultures as a creature that could cross the spiritual and physical realms. In 1987, after learning he had AIDS, Almaraz reprised many of the themes he had previously dealt with in his work, but with a more nuanced and contemplative air. These later paintings are generally marked by a quiet, elegiac mood in their explorations of the iconography of death: skulls, prone bodies, angels and devils, all yoked with imagery of passage and departure. The central image in *Tree of Life (1987)*, for example, is a blue tree surrounded by an array of figures, including a woman serving a goblet of wine, a man wearing only a hat and briefs, and a harlequin figure. At the very bottom of the picture, almost as if it were a visual rivet tying everything together, is a death's head. The composition is a joyous declaration of lively existence, with a *memento mori*—a reminder of death—at its root.

### **Exhibition catalogue**

*Playing with Fire: Paintings by Carlos Almaraz* is the first full-length monograph devoted to this artist. The catalogue includes a principal essay by Howard N. Fox, exhibition curator; a biographical portrait of the artist authored by his wife, Elsa Flores Almaraz, with Jeffrey J. Rangel; an anthology of personal reminiscences by friends, colleagues, art dealers, and collectors who knew Almaraz, compiled by independent researcher Marielos Kluck; and selections of never-before-published excerpts from Almaraz's journals. The book features more than 60 color-illustrated works, mostly from the late 1970s through 1989, as well as numerous comparative images and historic snapshots of the artist, friends, and family.

### **About the Artist**

Carlos David Almaraz was born in 1941 in Mexico City, shortly before the Almaraz family moved to Chicago, where he spent much of his childhood. In 1951, the family moved to Southern California, eventually settling in East Los Angeles. Almaraz studied at Loyola University of Los Angeles, California State College, Los Angeles, the Otis Art Institute, and the University of California, Los Angeles. Throughout the 1960s Almaraz spent time in New York City but permanently returned to Los Angeles in 1970. Around this time, he engaged for the first time with the political and cultural issues of the Chicano movement in Southern California. By 1972 Almaraz was active with the farmworkers' cause, led by union activist Cesar Chavez, painting banners for rallies and creating backdrops for playwright-director Luis Valdez's Teatro Campesino (Farmworkers' Theater). By switching the venue for his creative output from New York City to the farmlands of Central California, Almaraz found himself crafting visual manifestos for a

social revolution, helping to expose the near slave-like conditions endured by migrant agricultural laborers in tandem with his political activism.

In 1973, Almaraz cofounded Los Four, one of the first Chicano artist collectives of its kind, with Gilbert “Magú” Luján, Frank Romero, and Roberto “Beto” de la Rocha. Los Four were frequent collaborators, sharing an interest in both muralism and graffiti and adapting techniques of street art for their own artistic projects. Their first mural, was spray-painted in a single afternoon outdoors on the campus of University of California, Irvine, in 1973. The group’s first public exhibition was held at the university that same year, followed by an expanded version of this exhibition held at LACMA in 1974. *Los Four: Almaraz/de la Rocha/Luján/Romero* was the first exhibition of Chicano artists presented by a major museum.

The radical social engagement of the Mexican muralist tradition was both a political and artistic inspiration for Almaraz. His first mural outside Los Four was *No Compre Vino Gallo* (Boycott Gallo Wine), painted in 1974 in solidarity with the migrant laborers striking against Northern California’s grape growers to protest the poor working conditions and wages. In 1979, Almaraz designed an above-marquee mural for Luis Valdez’s play *Zoot Suit* after it moved from the Mark Taper Forum in downtown Los Angeles to Hollywood’s Aquarius Theatre. Los Four disbanded in 1979.

From this juncture, Almaraz essentially began a second artistic career—the one for which he remains more lastingly known—as a studio artist making paintings, pastels, prints, and innumerable sketches in his notebooks. Removed from the public art milieu, Almaraz soon attained notable commercial and critical success as a solo artist through exhibitions at prestigious galleries in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York. His art became more complex in its inspirations and sources, heavily influenced by both his Eurocentric art training and a deep and abiding interest in ancient Mesoamerican cultures as well as his own mandate to depict contemporary urban life and popular culture. By the early 1980s his art became so personal as to be aptly described as utterly singular.

On October 8, 1981, three days after his 40th birthday, Carlos Almaraz married Elsa Flores in Cancún, Mexico. About a year and a half later their daughter, Maya, was born. Prior to his marriage he had been in relationships with both men and women. While his bisexuality was known to those in his inner circle, Almaraz’s public persona and his personal reality can be seen as constituting a kind of double life. In 1987, Almaraz learned he had contracted HIV. From that time onward, his art reflected the gamut of emotions and hopes and fears of a highly expressive painter working at the top of his form

as he faced his mortality. Among Almaraz's last paintings is *Deer Dancer* (1989). The main figure in the painting is likely a final self-portrait. Almaraz died in 1989, at age 48.

### **LACMA App**

Spanish translations of exhibition wall text are available for viewing on the LACMA App. Download the app for free from the App Store or Google Play, or visit [mobile.lacma.org](https://mobile.lacma.org).

### **Exhibition Programming**

August 6 | 1 pm | Bing Theater  
Howard Fox in Conversation with Elsa Flores  
Free and open to the public

Howard Fox, curator of *Playing with Fire: Paintings by Carlos Almaraz* appears in conversation with Elsa Flores, the artist's widow. Flores, a noted Chicana activist and photographer, collaborated with her husband on the famous mural, "California Dreamscape" in downtown Los Angeles. She will speak with the curator regarding their marriage and his remarkable career.

This program was made possible in part by the Brotman Special Exhibitions Lecture Fund.

September 17 | 1 pm | Bing Theater  
¡Gaytino!  
Free; tickets required. Tickets available beginning August 1.

Dan Guerrero, lifelong friend of Carlos Almaraz, presents this performance of a remarkable life journey from 1950s East LA to New York in the 60s and 70s and back to Hollywood. The solo performance travels through decades of Mexican-American history and gay experience. Guerrero and Almaraz moved together to New York and 1961, and the two shared adventures that make their way into this one-of-a-kind performance.

This program was made possible in part by the Brotman Special Exhibitions Lecture Fund

### **Credit**

The exhibition was organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

*Playing with Fire: Paintings by Carlos Almaraz* is part of Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA, a far-reaching and ambitious exploration of Latin American and Latino art in dialogue with Los Angeles, taking place from September 2017 through January 2018 at more than 70 cultural institutions across Southern California. Pacific Standard Time is an initiative of the Getty. The presenting sponsor is Bank of America.



Lead support is provided through grants from the Getty Foundation.



Bank of America is the presenting sponsor of *Playing with Fire: Paintings by Carlos Almaraz*.



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### **About LACMA**

Since its inception in 1965, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) has been devoted to collecting works of art that span both history and geography, in addition to representing Los Angeles's uniquely diverse population. Today LACMA is the largest art museum in the western United States, with a collection that includes more than 130,000 objects dating from antiquity to the present, encompassing the geographic world and nearly the entire history of art. Among the museum's strengths are its holdings of Asian art; Latin American art, ranging from masterpieces from the Ancient Americas to works by leading modern and contemporary artists; and Islamic art, of which LACMA hosts one of the most significant collections in the world. A museum of international stature as well as a vital part of Southern California, LACMA shares its vast collections through exhibitions, public programs, and research facilities that attract over one million visitors annually, in addition to serving millions through digital initiatives such as online collections, scholarly catalogues, and interactive engagement. LACMA is located in Hancock Park, 30 acres situated at the center of Los Angeles, which also contains the La Brea Tar Pits and Museum and the forthcoming Academy Museum of Motion Pictures. Situated halfway between the ocean and downtown, LACMA is at the heart of Los Angeles.

**Location:** 5905 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA, 90036. [lacma.org](http://lacma.org)

### **Image captions**

(Left): Carlos Almaraz, *Suburban Nightmare*, 1983, the Buck Collection through the University of California, Irvine, © Carlos Almaraz Estate, photo by Bliss Photography

(Center Left): Carlos Almaraz, *Crash in Phthalo Green*, 1984, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of the 1992 Collectors Committee, © The Carlos Almaraz Estate, photo © Museum Associates/ LACMA

(Center Right): Carlos Almaraz, *Tree of Life*, 1987, the Buck Collection through the University of California, Irvine, © Carlos Almaraz Estate, photo by Bliss Photography

(Right): Carlos Almaraz, *Echo Park Bridge at Night*, 1989, the Buck Collection through the University of California, Irvine, © Carlos Almaraz Estate, photo by Isabella McGrath

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#### About Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA

Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA is a far-reaching and ambitious exploration of Latin American and Latino art in dialogue with Los Angeles taking place from September 2017 through January 2018. Led by the Getty, Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA is a collaboration of arts institutions across Southern California.

Through a series of thematically linked exhibitions and programs, Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA highlights different aspects of Latin American and Latino art from the ancient world to the present day. With topics such as luxury arts in the pre-Columbian Americas, 20th century Afro-Brazilian art, alternative spaces in Mexico City, and boundary-crossing practices of Latino artists, exhibitions range from monographic studies of individual artists to broad surveys that cut across numerous countries.

Supported by more than \$16 million in grants from the Getty Foundation, Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA involves more than 70 cultural institutions from Los Angeles to Palm Springs, and from San Diego to Santa Barbara. Pacific Standard Time is an initiative of the Getty. The presenting sponsor is Bank of America.