



Smithsonian American Art Museum

LATINO ART & CULTURE

FROM THE SERIES

AMERICA PAST AND PRESENT

Making a New Life in the United States

Making a New Life in the United States

Although Latinos or their forebears come from almost every country in Central and South America, the largest groups of people of Latin-American heritage living in the United States today can trace their ancestral roots back to Mexico, Puerto Rico, or Cuba. Latinos from the Dominican Republic and Central and South America began arriving in the United States in significant numbers in the late 1970s and 1980s. Political unrest and economic crises drove Dominicans and Colombians to the United States, while civil wars precipitated the emigration of Nicaraguans and Salvadorans. The stream of émigrés from the Dominican Republic and Central and South America into the United States continues to this day, with most of these Latinos settling in communities established by Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Cuban Americans.

Just like everyone living in our country today, Latinos have stories to tell about making new lives for themselves in the United States.

Whether those experiences are recent and personal or are from the past as told by friends or family, each person brings a unique

cultural heritage and social experience to life here. Personal stories and works by Mexican-American, Puerto Rican, and Cuban-American artists express diverse aspects of what has at some point been a universal experience for us all.

MEXICAN AMERICANS

Numbering more than twelve million, Mexican Americans make up the largest Latino group in the United States today. Mexicans became American citizens in large numbers with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. The Mexican Revolution of 1910 sent Mexicans fleeing to the United States. Many of these immigrants worked as agricultural laborers in the rural Southwest and California and as miners, loggers, cowboys, and construction workers on railroads. During and after World War II, some Mexican Americans moved northward, pri-

OBJECTIVES

1
To discuss historical factors affecting migration and immigration patterns to the United States by peoples of Latin-American heritage

2
To describe how Latinos have adapted to new environments from the perspective of Mexican-American, Puerto Rican, and Cuban-American artists



fig. 17. Carmen Lomas Garza, *Camas para Sueños (Beds for Dreams)*, 1985, gouache on paper, 58.4 x 44.5 cm (23 x 17 1/2 in.). Museum purchase in part through the Smithsonian Collections Acquisition Program

marily to urban areas of the Midwest, Maryland, and Pennsylvania, where they found jobs in steel factories, meat-packing and automobile manufacturing plants, utility companies, construction, and other industries. They also labored on farms or worked on railroads and in the mines of the Midwest. Mexicans were also lured to California by the promise of good jobs in manufacturing, agriculture, and on the railroads.

Throughout history, the immigration policy of the United States has been one of fluctuation, from halting Mexican immigration during the Great Depression to recruiting Mexican workers by American employers faced with shortages of labor during World War II. In 1942, Mexico and the U.S. established the Bracero Program, which allowed employers to recruit temporary Mexican workers, known as *braceros*, until the program was dissolved in 1964. After World War II, undocumented workers began crossing illegally into the U.S. Between 1947 and 1955, more than 4.3 million of these workers were detained and sent back to Mexico. In 1968, a ceiling was placed on immigration in the Western Hemisphere, limiting the number of Mexicans who have been allowed to immigrate to the United States. Most Mexican immigrants settle in the large Mexican-American communities in California, Texas, New Mexico, Illinois, Arizona, and Colorado.

LOOKING AT THE OBJECT

Carmen Lomas Garza is a Chicana artist who now lives in San Francisco but grew up in Kingsville, a medium-size town in southern Texas. Her family history in the Americas dates back to the 1520s when Spanish ancestors on her father's side first came to Mexico from Spain. Her father was born in Nuevo Laredo just before his parents fled from the hardships of the Mexican Revolution by crossing the Rio Grande into Texas. Lomas Garza's mother's family had worked for generations in Texas as ranch hands or *vaqueros* (cowboys) and on the railroad. A great-grandfather on her mother's side walked from Michoacán, Mexico, to Kingsville to work as a chuckwagon cook on the King Ranch.

Lomas Garza has many stories to tell about her family's rich heritage, about her memories of growing up in south Texas, and about how supportive her parents were of her desire to become an artist. In fact, *Camas para Sueños (Beds for Dreams)* [fig. 17] is dedicated to her mother, who also wanted to be an artist:

I have a very vivid memory of what people were doing, where they were, what they were wearing, the time of day, the colors of the atmosphere, and so when I recall something, I have the whole picture in my mind. So when I'm getting ready to do a certain painting, I rely on what I already have in my mind, and then I do move some things around. I do have poetic license to make the picture be able to tell the whole story with all its details. . . . That actually is me and my sister Margie up on the roof. We could get up on the roof by climbing up on the front porch. . . . That's . . . my bedroom, actually it's



the girls' bedroom. . . . My sister and I would hide there [on the roof] and . . . we also talked a lot about what it would be like to be an artist in the future because both of us wanted to be [artists]. And I dedicated this painting to my mother because she also wanted to be an artist. And she is an artist, she's a florist now, so her medium is flowers. . . . She gave us that vision of being an artist. . . . That's her making up the bed for us.

Carmen Lomas Garza, from an interview with Andrew Connors, May 1995, at National Museum of American Art.

The self-defining purpose behind Lomas Garza's art is to make it as easy, simple, and direct as possible. She wants the Mexican-American population to see themselves in her work, recognize that fact, and celebrate their rich cultural heritage as a result. It is Lomas Garza's hope that, in this process, others will

see similarities to their own cultures or differences that are interesting to them and that they are curious about. She also wants her work to educate others as to who the Mexican Americans are as a people.

MAKING CULTURAL CONNECTIONS

The Chicano artist **Jesse Treviño** came from Monterrey, Mexico, to the United States as a child with his family. While a student at the Art Students League in New York City, Treviño was drafted into the U.S. Armed Forces and sent to Vietnam. He was seriously injured, losing his right arm when his platoon was hit by sniper fire.

fig. 18. Jesse Treviño, *Mis Hermanos (My Brothers)*, 1976, acrylic on canvas, 121.2 x 175.6 cm (48 1/2 x 70 1/2 in.). Gift of Lionel Sosa, Ernest Bromley, Adolfo Aguilar of Sosa, Bromley, Aguilar and Associates, San Antonio

Treviño spent two years in hospitals recovering from his injuries and learning to paint with his left hand. Subjects for Treviño's striking paintings usually include contemporary street scenes, buildings, and people from the Mexican-American *barrios* (neighborhoods) of San Antonio, as is the case with *Mis Hermanos* (*My Brothers*) [fig. 18]. In essence, his paintings, rendered in a style described as both realistic and photo-realistic, are like snapshots, capturing the experience of community life for Mexican Americans today:

The Chicano community is an integral part of the family structure and a social organization providing a point of reference for my work. The images are a natural outgrowth of interrelating my environment with the family structure. These very personal portraits are also visual representations of the diverse aspects of the Chicano culture.

Jesse Treviño, quoted in "The Canadian Club Hispanic Tour" (exh. cat., El Museo del Barrio, 1984, n.p.).

PUERTO RICANS

The second-largest group of Latinos, the Puerto Ricans, first came to the mainland of the United States after residents of the island of Puerto Rico were granted U.S. citizenship in 1917 with the passage of the Jones Act. They began to settle on the mainland in significant numbers after World War II, in search of jobs that were plentiful in the cities. Most Puerto Ricans moved to the Northeast, particularly to New York City. Later generations gravitated to the thriving Puerto

Rican community in Manhattan as well as to other towns and cities of the Northeast, Chicago, Texas, and Florida. Nearly half of the 2.3 million Puerto Ricans on the U.S. mainland reside in New York City; four million Puerto Ricans live on the island. Today, Puerto Ricans move to the mainland in smaller numbers than before, and many commute back and forth.

LOOKING AT THE OBJECT

Pepón Osorio is a sculptor of Afro-Caribbean descent. He came to New York City from Puerto Rico in 1975 to continue his studies and construct a new life in the United States. Osorio describes his childhood on the island of Puerto Rico:

We grew up together. . . . We knew everyone's secrets. We lived open lives, and in that sense, everybody knew about everything and everybody. . . . I grew up in a place where community was [more than] a word. Community was basically the place where you lived, and people shared common experiences.

Pepón Osorio, from an interview with Andrew Connors, June 1995, in the artist's studio, New York City.

Osorio found what he was looking for in the United States. Settling in the South Bronx in New York City, where he lives today, Osorio discovered new people, new environments, and a different way of living as a Puerto Rican within a larger society. He also met other people of African descent who shared values and experiences like his own. Osorio paid homage to his cultural heritage by creating fantastic assemblages, such as *El Chandelier* [fig. 19], that represent the reality of Puerto Rican life in the mainland United States.

Chandeliers are particularly meaningful to Osorio because they can be found in almost every Puerto Rican apartment in even the poorest neighborhoods of Spanish Harlem and the South Bronx; thus, for Osorio, the chandelier becomes a cultural icon symbolizing the dreams, hopes, humor, and hardships of Puerto Ricans living in the *barrio*. Osorio's assemblage also draws on Latin-American folk art tradition, transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary by embellishing his lighting fixture with hundreds of mass-produced toys and miniatures. This predisposition for seeing "more as better" comes from Osorio's childhood memories on the island, from helping his mother decorate the elaborate cakes she baked for community celebrations to his fascination with the preponderance of jewelry worn by his sister. Swags of pearls, miniature Afro-Caribbean saints, toy cars, dominoes, soccer balls, black and white babies, palm trees, giraffes, and monkeys are just a few of the objects made of plastic that Osorio chose as visual metaphors for the immigrant popular culture of the 1950s and 1960s, when the majority of islanders now living in New York migrated.

CUBAN AMERICANS

The third-largest Latino group, the Cubans, first immigrated to the United States in small numbers during the nineteenth century, settling mainly in New York and Florida, where they were largely responsible for the phenomenal growth of the tobacco industry in Key West and Tampa. When Fidel Castro seized control of Cuba in 1959 and launched his Marxist revolution,

Cubans began fleeing to the United States by the thousands. Between 1966 and 1973, the United States airlifted 250,000 Cubans before Castro halted the operation. In 1980, Castro permitted boats filled with Cubans to leave Mariel Bay for the United States. These immigrants are called Marielitos. From the 1980s and continuing into the 1990s, Cubans have continued to flee the Castro regime.

fig. 19. Pepón Osorio, *El Chandelier*, 1988, chandelier with mixed-media ornament, 154.5 cm high x 106.6 cm diameter (60 7/8 x 42 in.). Museum purchase in part through the Smithsonian Collections Acquisition Program



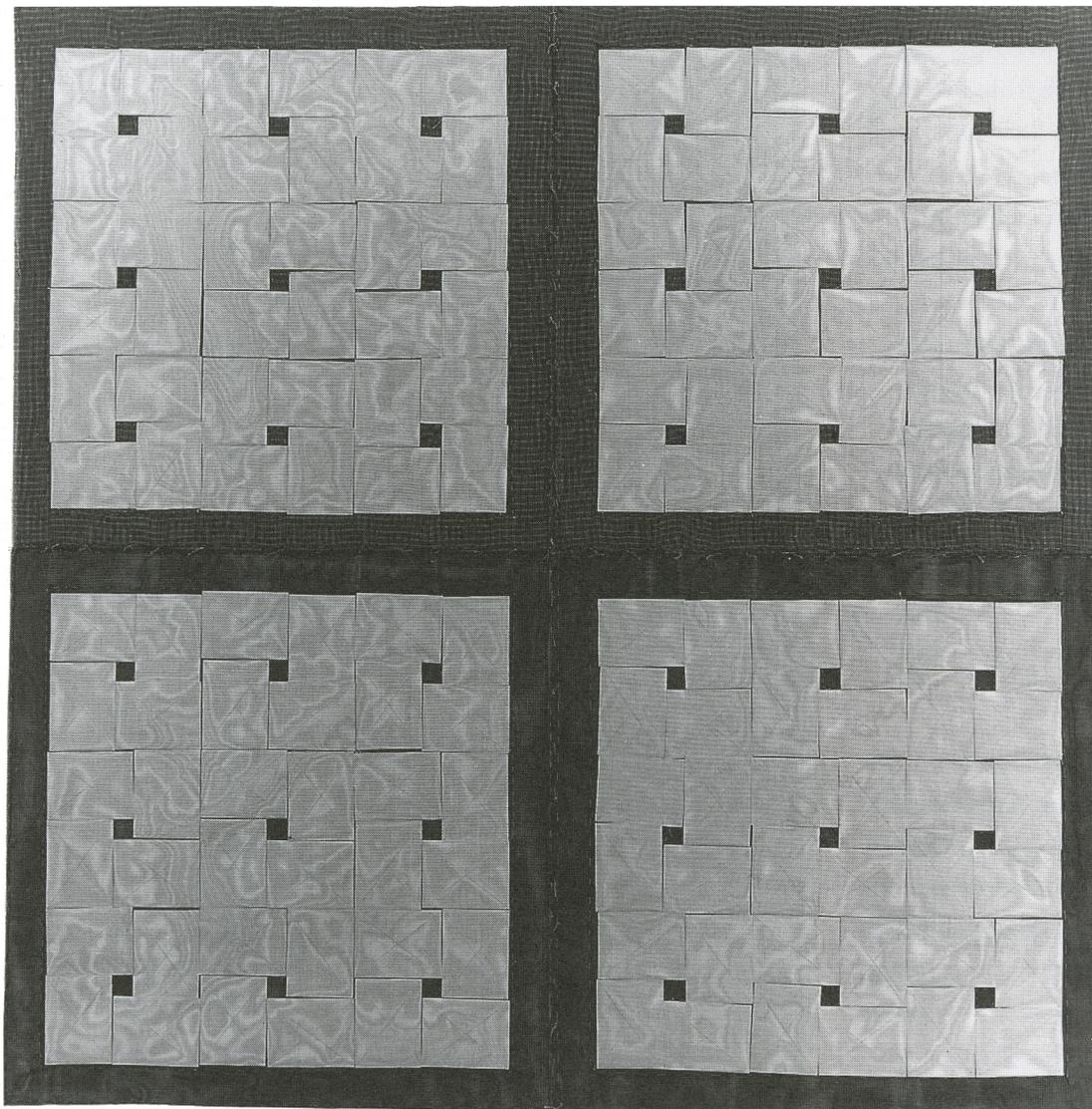
fig. 20. Maria Castagliola, *A Matter of Trust*, 1994, screen, yarn, paper envelopes, and string, 183 x 183 x .3 cm (72 x 72 x 1/8 in.). Gift of the artist

The most recent group of Cubans attempting to immigrate to the United States are known as rafters. Fleeing the island in makeshift boats and rafts, the largest number set out in the summer of 1994 and were admitted by the U.S. government. However, U.S. immigration policy toward Cubans has fluctuated, as it has toward Mexicans; the government has since warned that all Cubans attempting to enter the United States in the future will be turned back.

LOOKING AT THE OBJECT

Maria Castagliola came to the United States from Havana in 1961. Castagliola was one of many Cuban children sent here in the 1960s by their families who were reacting to rumors circulating in Cuba that Castro might enact new child custody laws that would remove children from their parents' authority. Even though most of these children were eventually reunited with their parents, who arrived in

the United States later, they all experienced the displacement of being political refugees at an early age: separated from their homes, families, and from the only language most of them had ever spoken or heard in their young lives. In Castagliola's case, the separation lasted only a few months, and the family eventually resettled in a Cuban community in Tampa where her father went to work as a cigar maker.



MAKING CULTURAL CONNECTIONS

Ana Mendieta and her sister were sent to the United States from Cuba in the 1960s under circumstances like those of Maria Castagliola. Mendieta's parents were unable to join their children, how-

fig. 21. Ana Mendieta, *Untitled*, from the *Siluetas* series, Oaxaca, 1980, black-and-white photo of carved clay bed, 101.2 x 132.7 cm (39 7/8 x 52 1/4 in.). Museum purchase in part through the Smithsonian Collections Acquisition Program



One of the ways Maria Castagliola maintains her Cuban heritage is through her art. Castagliola's memories of Cuba are primarily of small-town life where expectations for women were narrow: to grow up, marry, and have children. It was her impression that women had no cultural or family support to deal with aspects of their lives that made them unhappy. One of Castagliola's intentions in *A Matter of Trust* [fig. 21] is to provide a support mechanism, universally extended to include people of all cultures, regardless of age, race, or gender. The traditional quilt pattern is made from nontraditional materials—ordinary paper envelopes containing personal secrets written by friends, family, and acquaintances—sewn shut by the artist and sandwiched between sheets of fiberglass window screen. For Castagliola, collecting these secrets is a test of her own integrity:

The secrets piece is not so much about secrets as about intimacy and trust. People seldom have anyone whom they can trust completely. . . . There are very few relationships in which you can share everything and trust that there is going to be support and understanding.

Maria Castagliola, from an interview with Susan Valdés-Dapena on July 21, 1994, and later edited and compiled in *Maria Castagliola: Toré* (exh. cat., Miami: Miami-Dade Community College InterAmerican Art Gallery), p. 5.

ever, and the sisters were eventually sent to Iowa where they lived in a series of orphanages and foster homes. The forced isolation from Cuba and her family had a profound impact on Ana Mendieta, affecting the character of her earthworks such as the one seen here [fig. 21]. Considering herself an artist in exile, Mendieta sought to reestablish connections with her ancestors and ancestral land by

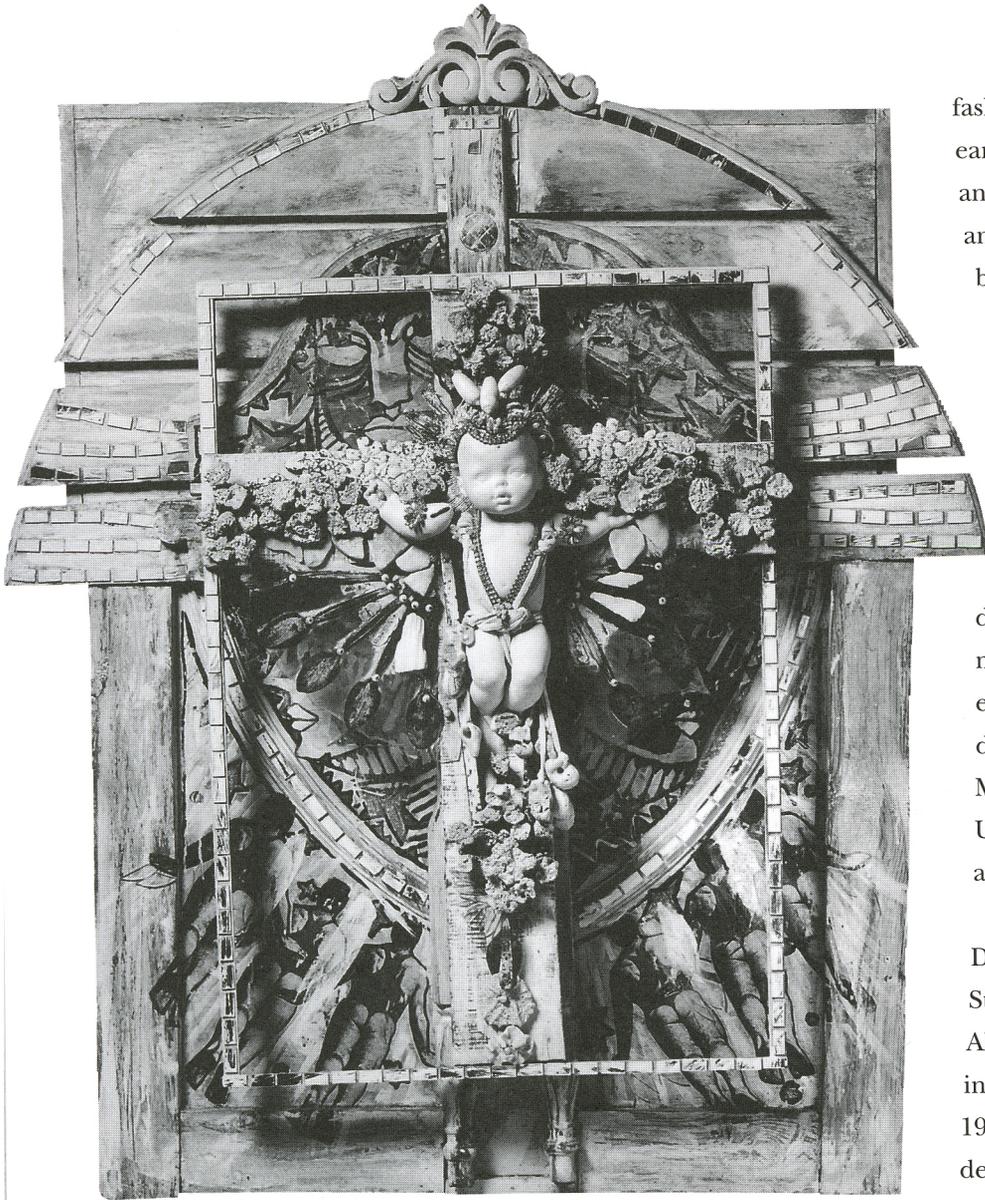


fig. 22. Humberto Dionisio, *Untitled (White Crucifix)*, 1986, painted wood, plastic doll, shells, etc., 147.3 x 109.2 x 20.3 cm (58 x 43 x 8 in.). Gift of Jim Kitchens in honor of Michael Ford

fashioning generalized female forms in the earth that recalled the earth goddesses of ancient cultures, in which women had place and power. The process of carving this earth-body sculpture from a clay bed served to provide Mendieta historical continuity with the past and a renewed sense of power in the present.

Humberto Dionisio graduated from the National School of Design in Havana and later studied industrial design, scene and lighting design, and cinematography. When Cuba temporarily eased emigration restrictions that led to the exodus of thousands of Cubans by boat from Mariel Bay in 1980, Dionisio came to the United States, and his work began to reflect a diversity of cultural influences.

Dionisio spent only seven years in the United States before he died of complications from AIDS. He left behind powerful work that includes a series of constructions begun in 1983 as personal preparation for his coming death. In these large assemblages, he combined baroque symbols of Christianity, using discarded wood, shells, construction-site rubble, costume jewelry, and other found objects. *Untitled* [fig. 22] presents a compelling yet disturbing image, with its doll nailed to a cross surrounded by repeated motifs of floating acrobats, spirit faces, and the refuse of society: contemporary icons to commemorate his personal loss and to link his death to more universal symbols.

ACTIVITIES

1. By the early nineteenth century, the United States had become a nation of immigrants, with five million entering the country between 1820 and 1860 alone. As a class project, find ways to research your community or family to determine their origins. Who are they? Where have they settled? What contributions have they made to the community? Report your findings to the class in an innovative way—perhaps as an oral documentary with interviews, an illustrated community newspaper, or a computer “chat line.”

2. The experience of trying food prepared in a manner different from what we know is a way of learning more about recent immigrants to the United States. Locate ethnic restaurants in your community that prepare dishes you don’t cook at home. Make an appointment with the manager to discover the origins of the food served at the restaurant. Select a dish from the restaurant that is prepared with an ingredient used in food you eat at home. Find out how the dish is prepared. Present an oral report comparing the new dish with the one you already know.

3. Compare the experiences of John Valadez growing up in the intense urban environment of East Los Angeles as recounted in the video with those described by Jesse Treviño and Carmen Lomas Garza. What are the similarities? Comment on the differences.

4. *Mi Familia* (My Family), *West Side Story*, and *The Mambo Kings* are three films that focus respectively on the Mexican-American, Puerto Rican, and Cuban-American experience in the United States. As you watch these films, write down culturally specific terms you hear or events you see. Are there references made to specific historical places, people, or events? Do you think they are accurately represented or are they stereotypes? Why? If you were the producer, what changes would you make? Defend your position.

5. Reflect on the immigration experiences of the Cuban-American artists Maria Brito (from the video), Maria Castagliola, and Ana Mendieta. Try to envision how you would feel and what your life would be like if something similar happened to you. Create a situation in your own mind. Imagine you have resettled in an unfamiliar place with strange customs, foods, and a language you don’t understand. Write a letter to a friend or family member back home that describes your feelings.

6. Pepón Osorio’s *El Chandelier* is an accumulation of real objects, revealing the immigration experiences of Puerto Ricans settling in the South Bronx neighborhood of New York City during the 1950s and 1960s. Transform an ordinary object into an artwork that has personal meaning for you by encrusting it with consumer-based objects of your choice.

BIOGRAPHIES OF ARTISTS

Maria Castagliola

Painter and conceptual artist, born in 1946 in Havana, Cuba. Castagliola came to the United States in 1961. She has B.A. (sociology), B.F.A., and M.F.A. degrees from the University of South Florida in Tampa and has taught art as an assistant professor at the university. Recent honors include a Fellowship Award from Art Matters, Inc., in New York and a residency at the Cambridge Center for Science and Art in North Carolina.

Humberto Dionisio (1950—1987)

Sculptor, born in Havana, Cuba. Dionisio graduated from Havana's National School of Design in 1974 and was class valedictorian. That year he exhibited his works for the first time and was honored with the Award of the Cuban Committee to UNESCO. In 1980, fleeing government censorship, he joined other Cubans leaving Mariel Bay by boat and came to the United States. He lived and worked as an artist in Miami until his untimely death in 1987.

Carmen Lomas Garza

Painter and printmaker, born in 1948 in Kingsville, Texas. While attending Texas Arts and Industry University (Texas A&I) in Kingsville, Lomas Garza joined the Chicano movement. In addition to earning a B.S. in art education and a Texas Teaching Certificate from Texas A&I (now Texas A&M, Kingsville), she holds an M.Ed. from Juárez-Lincoln/Antioch Graduate School, Austin, Texas, and an M.A. from San Francisco State University. Awards and fellowships include VIDA Award, Arts Category; several California Arts Council Artist-in-Residence Grants; National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships for Painting and Printmaking; and a California Arts Council Fellowship.

Ana Mendieta (1948—1985)

Sculptor, performance and conceptual artist, born in Havana, Cuba. Mendieta came to the United States in 1961 and spent her adolescence in Iowa. The trauma of dislocation from her family and homeland is a recurrent theme in her work. Mendieta died from injuries sustained in a tragic fall from a window in her New York City apartment building at the age of 37.

Pepón Osorio

Sculptor and installation artist, born in 1955 in San Juan, Puerto Rico. In 1975, Osorio moved to the South Bronx in New York City, where he enrolled at Lehman College and earned a degree in sociology. Following his graduation, he worked in the child abuse prevention unit of the Human Resources Administration, working primarily with the Latino community. Since 1985 Osorio has participated in visual arts projects that are testimonials to his immediate South Bronx community. He completed an M.A. degree at Columbia University in 1986 and has been the recipient of numerous awards, including grants and fellowships from the Rockefeller Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts, and the Lila Wallace Arts Partners International Artist Program.

Jesse Treviño

Painter, born in 1946 in Monterrey, Mexico. Treviño's family moved to San Antonio, Texas, in 1948. Treviño earned an A.A. from San Antonio Junior College, a B.A. in art from Our Lady of the Lake University in San Antonio, and an M.F.A. in painting from the University of Texas at San Antonio. In 1987 he was honored with the National Hispanic Heritage Award as Artist of the Year.