

Chicano Aesthetics

# Rasquachismo





# Documents of 20th-century Latin American and Latino Art

A DIGITAL ARCHIVE AND PUBLICATIONS PROJECT AT THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, HOUSTON

**ICAA Record ID:** 845510

**Access Date:** 2017-05-25

**Bibliographic Citation:**

Ybarra-Frausto, Tomás. "Rasquachismo: a Chicano sensibility." In *Chicano aesthetics : Rasquachismo*, 5-8. Exh. cat., Phenix, Ariz. : MARS, Movimiento Artístico del Rio Salado, 1989.

WARNING: This document is protected by copyright. All rights reserved. Reproduction or downloading for personal use or inclusion of any portion of this document in another work intended for commercial purpose will require permission from the copyright owner(s).

ADVERTENCIA: Este documento está protegido bajo la ley de derechos de autor. Se reservan todos los derechos. Su reproducción o descarga para uso personal o la inclusión de cualquier parte de este documento en otra obra con propósitos comerciales requerirá permiso de quien(es) detenta(n) dichos derechos.

Please note that the layout of certain documents on this website may have been modified for readability purposes. In such cases, please refer to the first page of the document for its original design.

Por favor, tenga en cuenta que el diseño de ciertos documentos en este sitio web pueden haber sido modificados para mejorar su legibilidad. En estos casos, consulte la primera página del documento para ver el diseño original.

**Synopsis:**

Mexican-American scholar Tomás Ybarra-Frausto defines the Mexican concept of *rasquache* [crummy] for both Chicano and non-Mexican readers and presents it (with some humor) for the conceptualization of a Chicano artistic sensibility. Defined as the perspective of the "underdog," an important element of this theory is Ybarra-Frausto's positioning of *rasquachismo* as also a form of resistance incorporating strategies of appropriation, reversal, and inversion. For Ybarra-Frausto, *rasquachismo* codifies all Chicano cultural production, including theatre, literature, and visual art. In addition, Ybarra-Frausto declares that while Mexican vernacular *rasquache* traditions may inform Chicano art, the *rasquachismo* that has evolved in the United States is a "bicultural sensibility." It is a theory that reflects his training as a scholar and Stanford professor of literature, along with his early and longstanding interest in visual arts. Currently, he lives in San Antonio, Texas.

# RASQUACHISMO: A CHICANO SENSIBILITY

Tomás Ybarra-Frausto

One is never *rasquache*, it is always someone else of a lower status who is judged outside the demarcators of approved taste and decorum. Propriety and keeping up appearances — “*el que diran*” — are the codes shattered by the attitude of *rasquachismo*. This outsider viewpoint stems from a funky, irreverent stance that debunks convention and spoofs protocol. To be *rasquache* is to posit a bawdy, spunky consciousness seeking to subvert and turn ruling paradigms upside down — a witty, irreverent and impertinent posture that recodes and moves outside established boundaries.

*Rasquachismo* is neither an idea nor a style but more of an attitude or a taste. Taste cannot be codified as a system with comparative proof. As Susan Sontag affirms:

*There is something like a logic of taste. The consistent sensibility which underlines and gives rise to a certain taste. A sensibility is almost, but not quite, ineffable. Any sensibility which can be crammed into the mold of a system or handled with the rough tools of proof, is no longer a sensibility at all. It has hardened into an idea....<sup>1</sup>*

The stance of *rasquachismo* is alive within Chicano communities but it is something of an insider private code. To name this sensibility, to draw its contours and suggest its historical continuity is risking its betrayal.

*Rasquachismo* is a visceral response to lived reality, not an

intellectual cognition. To encapsulate a sensibility into words is already a short circuit of its dynamism. What follows then is a non-linear, exploratory and unsolemn attempt at tracking this irrepressible spirit manifested in the art and life of the Chicano community.

***Rasquachismo* is neither an idea nor a style but more of an attitude or a taste.**

1. Very generally, *rasquachismo* is an underdog perspective — a view from *los de abajo*. An attitude rooted in resourcefulness and adaptability yet mindful of stance and style.

2. *Rasquachismo* presupposes the world view of the have-not, but is also a quality exemplified in objects and places (a *rasquache* car or restaurant), and in social comportment (a person can be or act *rasquache*).

3. Mexican vernacular traditions form the base of *rasquachismo*, but it has evolved as a bicultural sensibility among Mexican Americans. On both sides of the border, it retains an underclass perspective.

Both in Mexico and the United States *rasquachismo* retains connotations of vulgarity and bad taste, a sense of being *cursi*. Such a view emanating from those in control proclaims and enforces their own aesthetic norms as standard and universal. Social class is a definite demarcator of being *rasquache* — it is a working-class sensibility (a lived reality), only recently appropriated as an aesthetic

program of the professional class (e.g., the film *Born in East L.A.*). *Rasquachismo* is brash and hybrid, sending shudders through the ranks of the elite who seek solace in less exuberant, more muted and “purer” traditions.

Those newly anointed into the emerging Chicano middle class are the first to deny connection with anything remotely *rasquache*. Hints of such association too readily evoke the rough and tumble, slapdash vitality of *barrio* lifestyles recently left behind in the quest for social mobility.

**To be *rasquache* is to be down but not out — *fregado pero no jodido*.**

To be *rasquache* is to be down but not out (*fregado pero no jodido*). Responding to a direct relationship with the material level of existence or subsistence is what engenders a *rasquache* attitude of survival and inventiveness.

In an environment always on the edge of coming apart (the car, the job, the toilet) things are held together with spit, grit and *movidas*. *Movidas* are whatever coping strategies you use to gain time, to make options to retain hope. *Rasquachismo* is a compendium of all the *movidas* deployed in immediate, day-to-day living. Resilience and resourcefulness spring from making do with what's at hand (*hacer rendir las cosas*). This utilization of available resources makes for hybridization, juxtapo-

sition and integration.

*Rasquachismo* is a sensibility attuned to mixtures and confluence. Communion is preferred over purity.

Pulling through and making do are not guarantors of security, so things that are *rasquache* possess an ephemeral quality, a sense of temporality and impermanence — here today and gone tomorrow. While things might be created *al troche y moche* (slapdash) using whatever is at hand, attention is always given to nuances and details.

In the realm of taste, to be *rasquache* is to be unfettered and unrestrained, to favor the elaborate over the simple, the flamboyant over the severe.

**Bright colors (*chillantes*) are preferred to somber, high intensity to low, the shimmering and sparkling over the muted and subdued.**

The *rasquache* inclination piles pattern on pattern filling all available space with bold display. Ornamentation and elaboration prevail, joined to a delight for texture and sensuous surface.

Paradoxically, while elaboration is preferred to understatement, high value is placed on making do — *hacer rendir las cosas*. Limited resources means mending, re-fixing and reusing everything. Things are not thrown away but saved and recycled, often in different context (e.g., automobile tires used as plant containers, plastic bleach bottles becoming garden ornaments or discarded coffee

cans re-elaborated as flower pots). This constant making do, the grit and obstinacy of survival played out against a relish for surface display and flash creates a florid milieu of admixtures and recombinations.

The visual distinctiveness of the *barrio* unites the improvisational attitude of “making do with what’s at hand” to a traditional and highly evolved decorative sense. In the *barrio* the environment is shaped and articulated in ways that express the community’s sense of itself, the aesthetic display projecting a sort of visual biculturalism.

In yards and porches, for example, traditional items like religious shrines (*capillas*) and pottery mingle with objects from mass culture such as pink plastic flamingos or plaster animal statuary. Throughout there is a profusion of textures, colors and a jumble of things weathering and discoloring. The visual interplay of all these accumulations evokes a “funky,” *rasquache* milieu.

## HISTORICAL CONTINUITY

While the attitude of *rasquachismo* is best exemplified in everyday life practices and forms of popular culture, the sensibility was codified in the novel by Daniel Villegas, *Las aventuras de Don Chipote, or cuando los pericos mamen*, published in Los Angeles in 1928.<sup>2</sup>

This early Chicano novel chronicles the trials and tribulations of a Mexican laborer as he maladapts to life in the United States. Entangled in economic and social predicaments of basic survival, Don Chipote fends for himself using his wits and a robust stoical humor as aids for

learning and living.

As an errant rogue (*picaro*), Don Chipote meets life head on, slipping and sliding out of travels and adventures. The loosely episodic narration of *Las aventuras de Don Chipote* is a rich compendium of the dialect, customs and worldview of the Chicano urban working class of the period.

In his attitudes, Don Chipote epitomizes a *rasquache* stance. His tenacity and adaptability are laced with a certain *locura*, a devil-may-care sense that is serious enough about life to delight in it, and frivolous enough to scoff at it.

During the 1930s and 1940s, popular forms of theater like the *carpa* (tent shows) and the *tandas de variedad* (vaudeville) became the standard bearers of the *rasquache* aesthetic. The raggle-taggle bands of itinerant actors traversing the Southwest presented bawdy sketches acted in a broad comedic style. Action was underscored by pratfalls and the robust dialogues were laced with sexual innuendo.

In ensemble, the *carpa* sketches are some of the earliest artistic projections of the *rasquache* sensibility. Through the characters of the *peladito* and *pelodita* (penniless urban roustabouts), one enters a lively picaresque world of ruffians who scamper through life by the seat of their pants. Always scheming and carousing, the *pelados* personify the archetypal Chicano everyman and everywoman who live out a life-on-the-margin sustained by laughter and a cosmic will to be.

In their grossness, the *peladitos* underscore elemental impulses such as eating, laughing and fornicating as primordial sources of vitality and power. As purveyors of a *rasquache*

sensibility, *peladitos* remind us to draw sustenance from fundamental life processes and to use them for surmounting adversity.

The Chicano movement of the 1960s re-invigorated the stance and style of *rasquachismo*. The very word CHICANO with its undertow of rough vitality became a cipher repudiating the whiteness of experience. If some deemed it a term of denigration and coarseness, many others gave it the authority of authenticity and self-referentiality.

**Turning inward to explore, decipher and interpret elements from the Chicano cultural matrix, artists and intellectuals found strength and recovered meaning sedimented in layers of everyday life practices.**

The very essence of a bicultural lived reality was scorned as un-American by the dominant culture. A necessary response was to disown imposed categories of culture and identity and to create a Chicano self-vision of wholeness and completion. Signs and symbols which those in power manipulated to signal unworthiness and deficiencies were mobilized and turned about as markers of pride and affirmation. *CUCARACHA PRESS, EL TEATRO DEL PIOJO, EL MALCRIADO* and many other titles and names of groups and organizations reflect this process of molding worthiness out of perceived deficiencies. *Rasquachismo* as

a sensibility of the downtrodden mirrored the social reality of the majority of Chicanos who were poor, disenfranchised and mired in elemental daily struggles for survival.

---

---

## RASQUACHISMO A RANDOM LIST

Mario Moreno Cantinflas  
The Royal Chicano Air Force  
The early *Actos* of El Teatro Campesino  
The "No Movies" of ASCO  
Paintings on velvet  
The Calaveras of  
Jose Guadalupe Posada  
*Born in East L.A.* (the movie),  
etc.

### *Medio (low) rasquache*

Tin-Tan  
Shopping at K-mart  
Pretending you're "Spanish"  
Tortillas de harina made with  
vegetable oil  
Chanclas

### *Muy (high) rasquache*

Cantinflas  
Shopping at J.C. Penney  
Being bilingual and speaking with  
an accent in both languages  
Tortillas de harina made with lard  
Chanclas

---

---

Luis Valdez and his Teatro Campesino were among the first to recognize and give universal significance to the multifaceted bittersweet experiences of *la plebe* (working class). Achingly beautiful theatrical *actos* captured the tragicomic spirit of *barrio* life. In a dialectical interplay of social fact and mythic-religious overtones, *actos* became scenarios of ethnic redemption and social resurrection. Articulating and validating the *rasquache* sensibility in dramatic form, El Teatro Campesino bared the Chicano soul and touched the hearts of international audiences.

Throughout the country in the '60s and '70s, sustained by a grassroots socio-political movement, an alternative circuit for the creation and dissemination of Chicano cultural production was articulated and maintained by Chicano cultural workers. Especially significant in the visual arts were the experiments with public art forms such as murals and posters.

The *rasquache* sensibility informed and gave impetus to diverse aspects of the Chicano cultural project articulated in poetry, music and the visual arts. The title of Zeta Acosta's novel, *The Revolt of the Cockroach People*, captures the mood exactly.<sup>3</sup> It was a lusty, eruptive coming to political consciousness of the dispossessed. The very titles of some Chicano art exhibitions — *Quemadas y Curadas, ¡Dale Gas!, Capirotada*, etc. — reflect the revindication of humble, everyday traditions as anchoring sources for artistic production.

This recuperation and re-contextualization of vernacular sensibilities and art forms extends to the present. A work of

art may be *rasquache* in multiple and complex ways. It can be sincere and pay homage to the sensibility by restating its premises (e.g., the *plebe* world view actualized in ideas and behavior in the dramatic presentation *Las carpa de los Rasquachis* by Luis Valdez).

Another strategy is for the artwork to evoke a *rasquache* sensibility through self-conscious manipulation of materials or iconography. One can think of the combination of found materials and the use of satiric wit in the sculptures of Ruben Trejo or the manipulation of *rasquache* artifacts, codes and sensibilities from both sides of the border in the performance pieces of Guillermo Gomez Peña. Many Chicano artists continue to investigate and interpret facets of *rasquachismo* as a conceptual lifestyle or aesthetic strategy.

*Rasquachismo* is a sensibility that is not elevated and serious but playful and elemental. It finds delight and refinement in what many consider banal and projects an alternative aesthetic — a sort of good taste of bad taste. It is witty and ironic but not mean-spirited (there is sincerity in its artifice).<sup>4</sup>

Apropos of this ongoing investigation, an artist recently remarked to the author, "Sometimes I think that all Chicanos are *rasquache* except you and me, and sometimes I wonder about you!"

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Veñegas, *Las aventuras de Don Chipote or cuando los pericos mamen*. México, D.F.: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1984.

<sup>3</sup> Oscar Zeta Acosta, *The Revolt of the Cockroach People*. San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1973.

<sup>4</sup> Many friends have helped me to focus and expand my understanding of the *rasquache* sensibility. Thanks to Peter Rodriguez, Miguel Mendez, Victoria Díaz, Armando Valdéz, Antonia Castañeda, Rudy Guglielmo, María Sandoval and Jose Antonio Burciaga.

