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Art, Activism, Access: 40 Years of Ethnic Studies at UCLA. Fowler Museum, UCLA.

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**Art, Activism, Access: 40 Years of Ethnic Studies at UCLA.
Fowler Museum, UCLA.**

Marla C. Berns, director; Betsy Quick, director of Education; Sebastian Clough, director of Exhibitions. February 28, 2010-June 13, 2010.

The city of Los Angeles is known for its ethnically diverse population. Consequently, L.A. has often been a focal point for discussions regarding ethnicity. It seems appropriate, therefore, that the exhibit, *Art, Activism, Access: 40 Years of Ethnic Studies at UCLA* should detail the history – as the title suggests – of ethnic studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. The exhibit is part of the 2009-2010 celebration of forty years of ethnic studies at UCLA. The purpose of the exhibit is to present the history of ethnic studies at UCLA to a general audience of museum patrons.¹

The exhibit's history begins in 1969, when social tensions created by the Civil Rights Movement increased public demand for an ethnic studies program at UCLA. UCLA Chancellor Charles Young established the university's four ethnic studies centers in response to this demand. These were among the first ethnic studies programs in the United States. The four centers – the Asian American Studies Center, American Indian Studies Center, Bunche Center for African American Studies, and the Chicano Studies Research Center – were established in order to study issues facing ethnic minorities and to raise public awareness regarding these issues.

Art, Activism, Access: 40 Years of Ethnic Studies at UCLA is a collaborative effort between the four ethnic studies centers, the UCLA Institute of American Cultures, and the Fowler Museum at UCLA. The wide variety of artifacts and images on display in the exhibit are testaments to the depth of interdepartmental cooperation; each of the four ethnic studies centers' archives provided books, films, journals, murals, newspapers, photographs and many other materials for exhibition.

¹ Betsy Quick, interview by author, by phone, April 27, 2010.

Exhibit Reviews

The exhibit is situated in a spacious room adjacent to the museum courtyard. A room-sized display case in the center loosely divides the exhibit into four sections representing the ethnic studies centers. Immediately upon entering the exhibit, patrons will see a glass case containing newspaper articles detailing the founding of UCLA's ethnic studies program.

The exhibit uses such primary written materials to narrate its complex history. Interspersed throughout the exhibit are glass cases displaying newspaper articles, academic journals and books. One campus newspaper recounts UCLA students' reaction against the 1996-1997 state legislation curtailing affirmative action in California. Another article describes the American Indian Movement's (AIM) occupation of Alcatraz Island in 1969. The written materials are not presented in chronological order, but patrons who circle the room and read each exhibition will gain a broad idea of the exhibit's history. A limitation on some written materials is their relative inaccessibility. Many texts are closed and neatly shelved inside glass display cabinets, leaving patrons to infer content from book titles. Without accessibility, these particular texts do not contribute to the exhibit's history in a significant way.

Despite its reliance on primary written sources, the exhibit does not neglect other sources of media. In terms of visual media, the exhibit showcases a variety of material, including three large murals. Two fourteen-year-old students attending a summer session at UCLA painted one of these murals around 1970. This untitled mural depicts the ethnic pride and solidarity of a black community.

Exhibit Reviews



Untitled, 1971. Los Angeles, CA. Mural by Richard Wyatt and Guillermo Anderson. Photograph courtesy of Stacey Abarbanel.

The exhibit effectively uses its vibrant and evocative visual media to supplement its history. An example of this historical narration using visual media can be seen in the photo series, “Life in a Day in Black L.A.,” which documents the grim repercussions of the Los Angeles Riots in 1992 for L.A.’s black communities.

The exhibit also makes effective use of visual media using film. Most of the exhibit’s films are displayed in two media centers containing a total of seven televisions. Patrons are free to watch clips from films such as Marco Williams’ “In Search of Our Fathers,” Duane Kubo and Robert Nakamura’s “Hito Hata: Raise the Banner,” as well as other documentaries. The use of film is limited by the fact that only one pair of headphones is available per television. This discourages groups from watching the same film simultaneously. This is only a minor limitation; the films provide a human voice to the exhibit, even when viewed by one person at a time.

The exhibit’s overall presentation is exceptional; it balances artistic materials with written materials, thus patrons are exposed to both the cultural and academic accomplishments of the ethnic studies centers. The exhibit does not, however, leave patrons with a clear idea as to the impact of UCLA’s research. After forty years of ethnic study, what can UCLA tell Americans about where

ethnic minorities stand today? The answer is inconclusive, but the history presented at the exhibit suggests that progress has been made. UCLA's campus newspaper, *The Daily Bruin*, explains the exhibit's lack of closure in quoting Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, vice chancellor of the UCLA graduate division: "We need to be aware that the struggle is not complete. We all wish for a more just society ... This [the exhibit] represents to many of us the contributions we have made towards that end."²



Education Through Struggle, 1995. Los Angeles, CA. Mural by Darryl Mar and students. Photograph courtesy of Stacey Abarbanel.

UCLA's exhibit, *Art, Activism, Access: 40 Years of Ethnic Studies at UCLA*, accomplishes its stated goal; it successfully presents the history of ethnic studies at UCLA. The largest flaw in the exhibit is in the history it covers. UCLA's research on the political and social struggles of ethnic minorities is ongoing, thus the exhibit feels incomplete. In other words, the exhibit tells an unfinished story. Despite minor issues in presentation, the exhibit makes excellent use of its materials to tell this unfinished story.

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² Aly Holmes, "Exhibit Honors UCLA Ethnic Studies," *The Daily Bruin*, February 26, 2010, under "A&E," <http://www.dailybruin.com/articles/2010/2/26/exhibit-honors-ucla-ethnic-studies/> (accessed May 12, 2010).