

Carlos and Elsa

October 26 – December 16, 2023

Ortuzar Projects is pleased to present “**Carlos and Elsa,**” an exhibition of works by **Carlos Almaraz** (1941–1989) and **Elsa Flores** (b. 1955), exploring the husband and wife’s respective practices during the final decade of Almaraz’s life. Curated by Rafael Barrientos Martínez, the works roughly correspond to the eight years of the couple’s marriage, charting an artistic dialogue across a moment of intense transformation in the lives and careers of two artists.

When they met in 1974, Almaraz—who was fourteen years Flores’ senior—had already established himself among the country’s leading Chicano artists. Lending his support to causes such as César Chávez’s United Farm Workers, he created social realist works that pushed forward the politics of the Chicano Civil Rights movement, often called *El Movimiento*. That same year—with Roberto “Beto” de la Rocha, Gilbert “Magu” Luján and Frank Romero—Almaraz co-founded the East Los Angeles-based artist collective *Los Four*. The group exhibited their work in *Los Four: Almaraz / de la Rocha / Lujan / Romero* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, followed by venues throughout California, the first time any Chicano/a artist would receive such institutional recognition. By this time, Almaraz had developed a Neo-Expressionistic mode of image making that integrated symbols from everyday life into a visual language inspired by the streets, his Mexican and Catholic heritage, and modern art movements. These works often reflected signs of his struggles as a bisexual man, as well as his substance abuse, sparked by shame surrounding his sexuality, historical personal traumas, and his search to find himself artistically through coded cyphers.

By 1980 Almaraz and Flores began dating, quickly moving in together and sharing a studio. A musician and photographer, Flores would for the first time since art school return to painting. To build up the impasto surfaces of her works, Flores experimented with thick daubs of paint to create a three dimensionality to her images, eventually finding success with a mixture of oil paint, wax, and, at times, sand. Her early works were filled with iconography depicted in somber palettes, inflected by an overall sense of angst and anxiety—such as *The Healing* (1986), a pieta scene created in the wake of her mother’s passing.

As their shared life flourished, with their elopement in 1981 and the birth of their daughter Maya in 1983, Almaraz began to explore subjects that would become some of his most successful, such as scenes of car crashes set against brilliant sun-drenched landscapes, from which flurries of brushstrokes erupt. For the artist, these depictions of mangled heaps of metal and rubber engulfed in flames, such as *Solo Crash* (1981), are metaphors for the clash of the New and Old World, man and technology, and the failed promise of the American Dream. Working in close proximity to Flores’ material experimentation, Almaraz would soon introduce impasto surfaces into his paintings as well, adding sand and sometimes gauze to his canvases, transforming them into three dimensional landscapes filled with jesters, devils, and sensual nudes surrounded by flora and fauna as in the monumental work *The Tempest* (1984).

While both artists’ stars would continue to rise throughout the decade, in 1987 Almaraz learned of his AIDS diagnosis, setting off a remarkable whirlwind of creativity for the reeling couple. Confronted with his impending mortality, Almaraz would often insert himself into his paintings as a fool performing for a watchful audience, his nightmarish narratives embedded with memento mori and scenes of religious guilt and salvation, such as in *Buffo’s Lament* (1986) and *The Citadel* (1989). Adopting a gestural brushwork and raw tonality akin to that of her partner, Flores would create works filled with sorrow and fury, such as *Death Surge - Final Passage* (1989), which depicts her dying partner’s head floating amidst vibrant colors, evocative of Gustave Moreau’s *The Apparition (Salome)* (1874-1876). Carlos would succumb to AIDS related complications that same year, leaving his wife to raise their daughter and manage his legacy. In the years to follow, Flores would go on to create works such as *The Journey Home* (1990) and *Spiritual Fisherman* (1995) that, though

suggesting personal narratives of loss and mourning, simultaneously reflect a sense of spirituality that taps into larger explorations of the human condition.

Carlos Almaraz (b. 1941, Mexico City; d. 1989, Los Angeles) moved to the United States from Mexico with his family in 1942, eventually settling in Los Angeles. He received his MFA from Otis Art Institute (today Otis College of Art and Design), Los Angeles, in 1974. Recent institutional solo exhibitions include “Playing with Fire: Paintings by Carlos Almaraz,” Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles (2017) and “Carlos Almaraz: A Life Recalled,” Vincent Price Art Museum, Los Angeles (2012). He has been included in institutional surveys including the touring “Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano L.A.,” organized by Museum of Contemporary Art and ONE Gallery, Los Angeles (2017–2022); “Chicano Visions: American Painters on the Verge” (2002–2008) organized by the Cheech Marin Collection; “Our America: The Latino Presence in American Art,” Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. (2013–2014); “Mapping Another L.A.: The Chicano Art Movement,” Fowler Museum at University of California, Los Angeles (2011–2012); “Arte Latino: Treasures from the Smithsonian American Art Museum,” Oakland Museum of California, Oakland, California (2002); “Made in California: Art, Image, and Identity,” 1900–2000, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles (2001); “Latin American Artists of the Twentieth Century,” The Museum of Modern Art, New York (1993); “Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation,” Wight Art Gallery, UCLA, Los Angeles (1990–1993); “Le Démon des Anges,” Centre d’arts Santa Mònica, Barcelona (1989); and “Hispanic Art in the United States,” organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas and the Corcoran Gallery, Washington, D.C. (1987). Almaraz’s works are in the public collections of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles; The Cheech Marin Center for Chicano Art & Culture, Riverside Art Museum, Riverside, California; UCI Jack and Shanaz Langson Institute and Museum of California Art, Irvine, California; the Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, Texas; and The Lucas Museum of Narrative Art, Los Angeles, among others. Almaraz’s life and work was chronicled in the 2019 documentary *Carlos Almaraz: Playing With Fire* directed by Elsa Flores and Richard Montoya.

Elsa Flores (b. 1955, Las Vegas, Nevada) was raised in Los Angeles. In the 1970s Flores began to develop her multi-disciplinary approach to art making as a Chicana activist, muralist, painter, photographer, performer, and musician. After studying photography at California State University, Los Angeles she would go on to attend Art Center College of Design, Los Angeles. Solo exhibitions of her work include “Iluminada,” Fremont Gallery, South Pasadena, California (2010); “Hawaiian Homegirl,” Patricia Corêa Gallery, Los Angeles (2004); and “Heavenly Bodies,” The Contemporary Museum of Art, Honolulu (1997). She has been included in institutional surveys including “Unbreakable: Feminist Visions from the Gilberto Cadenas and Dolores Garcia Collection,” Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, Texas (2023); “L.A. Memo: Chicana/o Art from 1972–1989,” LA Plaza de Cultura y Arte, Los Angeles (2022); “Envisioning Futurity: The Aesthetics of Chicana Resistance and Resilience,” Johnson Museum of Art, Ithaca, New York; “Figure in Nature,” Palm Springs Art Museum, Palm Springs, California (2019); the touring “Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano L.A.,” organized by Museum of Contemporary Art and ONE Gallery, Los Angeles (2017–2022); “Chicanitas, Small Paintings from the Cheech Marin Collection,” organized by the Cheech Marin Collection (2011–2016); “East of the River,” Santa Monica Art Museum, Santa Monica, California (2000); “Raging at the Visible: AIDS in the City of Angels,” Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, Los Angeles (1990); “Hispanic Works on Paper,” Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles (1989); “A Decade of En Foco,” Bronx Museum of, Bronx, New York (1986); and “Salon of Invited Photographers,” Museo Bellas Artes, Mexico City (1979). Her works are in the public collections of the Laguna Art Museum, Laguna Beach, California; The McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, Texas; and the Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, Texas. Flores lives and works in Los Angeles and Kauai, Hawaii.