



How Curator E. Carmen Ramos is Representing Us in the Art World

As a teenager, she spent weekends in New York City museums. Today she's big-time in her field. E. Carmen Ramos talks candidly about feeling unwelcome in her first museum job to challenging the art establishment to include more Latino artists in the country's biggest art institutions.

Alicia Menendez:

When I saw that the National Gallery of Art named E Carmen Ramos their chief curatorial and conservation officer, I let out an audible gasp, just imagining the power that she's going to have to shape what is considered American art and who is considered an American artist. She spent 11 years at the Smithsonian American Art Museum as the acting chief curator and curator of Latinx art. Before that, she was assisting curator at the Newark Museum of Art in my beloved New Jersey.

We're going to get into a lot of what happens beyond the gallery walls, the ways Carmen was made to feel she didn't belong, that the communities she was trying to spotlight weren't worthy, how she kept showing up so that we could all see ourselves and the places we come from on the walls of some of the most prestigious museums in America.

Carmen, thank you so much for doing this.

E Carmen Ramos:

Oh, my pleasure.

Menendez:

I want you to tell me about the first art you were ever exposed to.

Ramos:

That's a good question. I was a New York City kid and I was really fortunate to be able to have teachers that utilized the resources of New York City museums as part of my learning, and in high school I had a really great history teacher and we were learning European history and he gave us this very long assignment where we had to go to the Metropolitan over several weekends, so it wasn't just one day, to look at art from the historical periods that we were studying in class and... And, that was my first experience at the Metropolitan and I remember initially I went with a friend of mine and we went together and then I started going by myself. And, I just loved it. I just fell in love with the experience of looking at art, just using my imagination and my eyes to sort of think.

Ramos:

And, it wasn't a way that I was accustomed to learning, right? At school, you sort of... You know, you learn facts and, you know, and rote learning and all of that. But this was like very

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different. It tapped into a different part of me and I really enjoyed it. There are several works of art that I remember from that period and one work is by this American artist, his name is Marsden Hartley, who was working in the first half of the 20th century. He lived in Europe, which is one of the reasons why we studied him, even though he was an American artist. And, he was there during World War One. Later, we found out that he was gay and he did a whole series of paintings on German officers and he was having a relationship with a German officer. That was part of the inspiration for the body of work.

Menendez: Hmm.

Ramos: The painting intrigued me and perplexed me. I sort of didn't know what it was, right? Because it was Portrait of a German Officer. I think that's the title. It was a series of shapes and insignias, but there was no human represented. It wasn't a representational work. So, it was semi-abstract, right? I mean, there were kind of symbols, so there were stars and things that I could recognize. So, they were all these things that might have been on someone's uniform, right? Or, this German officer's uniform. And, that just painting just completely perplexed me. I didn't know... I mean, I had this great high school experience. I didn't know what an art historian was in high school. I just knew that I liked going to museums.

And then, when I went to NYU, which has a wonderful art history program... I was very fortunate to... You know, to go to that school. And, there as well my professors utilized the resources of the city. Living in New York, living in one of the major cultural capitals of the world, super fortunate. Practically anything that I studied outside of the Renaissance to some extent, you could find in New York. Some manifestation. So, every class, it was always like, you know, go to this gallery, go this museum. You know, you want to study Kandinsky? You have to go to the Guggenheim. You know? There's... Oh, go, look there's an exhibition on Jacob Lawrence at the Brooklyn Museum. So, it was kind of... Museums were my classroom.

Menendez: Yeah.

Ramos: From the very beginning. I always saw myself in the space of a museum.

Menendez: Which is particularly powerful to me because I was watching a promotional video that you did. I think it was while you were at the Smithsonian.

Ramos: Mm-hmm

Menendez: And, you're sort of walking through the museum and I got emotional about it because I realized that very often for people come from immigrant communities, from communities of color...

Ramos: Mm-hmm

Menendez: We may not have the experience of seeing ourselves in museums, both of seeing ourselves on the walls of those museums, being celebrated, captured in museums, but also sometimes you look around at the constituency of the museum and it doesn't feel like your people.

Ramos: Absolutely. I had both of those experiences. You know, I fell in love with art history. I mean, that whole way of learning and visuality, that totally grabbed me. And then, when I was at NYU, I took a class in Latin American art and it was the first time in my entire life that I saw myself represented on the screen or anything relating to myself.

Menendez: Mm-hmm

Ramos: It was like... And, like a mind explosion. I think I was, like, 20 when I took that class. I was like, why is it that I have to be 20 years old to first find out about this? Like, there's something wrong with this equation. I was excited by what I was seeing. I was energized by it. But I was also angered by the fact that I had not been exposed to it, that, you know, on all of these trips that I was going to these museums, very few had anything to do with Latinx or Latin American artists. Right? With the exception of culturally specific institutions like El Museo del Barrio and the The Studio Museum in Harlem. It had to be like in this separate institution. It wasn't at the Met, necessarily, right? It wasn't at the Guggenheim. I had to go someplace else to see that. So, there was something wrong with that as well. I mean, those institutions are really important. I completely advocate. I support them. I think they need to continue to be in existence. But our art needs to be represented in multiple places because it's part of so many different histories and it was very important to change those spaces both in terms of the art that's represented but also who's framing those stories, right? Who's organizing the exhibitions. You know, who's writing the labels. And, I think that that's what I learned as I moved through my career, is that I wanted to be in a position where I had the power to determine what those stories were.

Menendez: Carmen, can you give me an example of how something that you have curated might have been different had it not been done by someone with your lived experience?

Ramos: I think there's an exhibition that I organized in 2017. It was called Down These Mean Streets: Community and Place in Urban Photography. And, it's a show that I really loved in part because it was an urban exhibition. Really, a lot of the work that I've done has been about contesting exclusion, right? It's... You know, many of these artists have not been included in exhibitions. They have not been included in the history of art, in the narrative of American art, in the narrative of specific mediums. Right? Like the history of photography. On so many levels, they've been largely left out and a lot of my work has been about

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challenging that exclusion and... And, I call that exhibition out because I was able to do a couple of things, right?

I was able to say, well, these artists were working at this time. Right? And, they made significant work about the urban experience, right? But I was also able to nuance the way that we understand what they were doing. So, it's not only that they were working, right? But that they were working to critique the ways in which urban communities were being treated in the seventies and eighties. These were very difficult times for places like, you know, New York, Los Angeles, Detroit, you know, Newark. All these, you know, major urban environments. So, I was able to show how they were critiquing that at the same time that they were acknowledging the beauty, really, of communities that existed there and to show that... That kind of dichotomy.

And, I think part of that was, you know, really looking at their work, also learning from my own experience, like, having lived in those kinds of environments. That was really important to understanding their perspective. In many ways, I share their perspective.

Menendez: You have to advocate in some way for others, right? You have to explain why others deserve a literal spot on the wall.

Ramos: Mm-hmm

Menendez: Can you tell me about a time where you needed to explain or push through resistance to that inclusion?

Ramos: That's been the history of my career, even in graduate school. I mean, I remember everything from the foundations of art history are perceived to be German, though some of the first art historians were German in, you know, the history of art. So, as art historians, we're required to... If you go to the Ph.D. level, you have to learn to read German and... So, there are all these, like, hierarchies about, you know, which languages are valid. So, Spanish and Portuguese are not included in that and I was just like, why is that? You know, why are these languages not valid? And, I had to... I didn't win that fight, mind you, but I fought against it and I said, these languages should be considered valid, you know, within the context.

Like, no one who speaks Portuguese or Spanish has written important art history? We know that that's not true. I remember professors, you know, telling me you have to prove that this artist is valid, is worthy of you writing a paper, you know, on... You know, on their work. And, these are artists that are, like, acknowledged today as important artists. And, that is... You know, every job that I've had, I've encountered that. My first job as a curator, there was so much resistance against me being there that I was not even allowed to sit with the curatorial department. I had to be... I had to sit in another part of the museum.

I tell everybody I was treated like Rosa Parks, like, go sit in the back of the bus. And, it was horrible. It was really... It was really demoralizing and eventually I was moved because there was a community advisory committee and they put pressure on the leadership. They

were like, "She needs to, you know, be with the curators, you know?". And, eventually it happened. But it was, again, pressure.

Menendez: But let me ask you about that because part of what I'm hearing from you is that it wasn't just individual pressure. It wasn't just pressure from you.

Ramos: Mm-hmm

Menendez: It was building a universe around you that could collectively pressure.

Ramos: My experience at the Smithsonian American Art Museum was different. I felt much more a part of a team and I was working with a lot of other colleagues and there was a lot of overlap with the work that we were doing, so I think that there was support in that way. I've always had to take what I call an educational approach to communication where I have to really explain things and in great detail, in a way that I think a lot of other curators don't because a lot of what they're talking about, the artists that they're advocating for, are much more well-known. But a lot of the artists that I'm advocating for, people don't know them at all. There are few. People know Ana Mendieta. People know Félix González-Torres. They know the sort of the major artists.

But, you know, do they know Scherezade Garcia? Do they know, you know, Freddy Rodriguez? Do they know Juana Valdes? I mean, there are a lot of artists that they don't know. And, I've been actually thinking about this a lot because I'm leaving the Smithsonian, I'm starting this new job at the National Gallery, and I've been cleaning out my office and, you know, just looking at notes, all the work that I did, all the talking that I did. There's a lot of talking. A lot of talking. A lot of explaining of who this is and why they're important and how this relates to multiple histories, you know, how their work relates to the sort of established art history that you know and then this other story that... That you may not know about.

So, it was a lot of work and I've often had to get support from outside the institution. It's very important to have a support system.

Menendez: Absolutely.

Ramos: Both on the mentorship level but also on the peer level, to be able to kind of go for that advice at the higher level but also speak to other people that are at your level and that are experiencing similar challenges, I think, because you can really learn from each other and provide that support.

Menendez: I love that you referenced Scherezade because I interviewed her at her house, which was a wild experience, because, you know, she was spray painting life rafts in the backyard and I was like, this is Alice in Wonderland.

Ramos: Right. Uh huh.

Menendez: This is a magical vortex that I have entered into. She is just... She is unbelievable.

Ramos: I know. I just visited with her last weekend, so she's been on my mind.

Menendez: I love her so much and when I look at her work... Of course, Scherezade is Dominican. I'm Cuban American.

Ramos: Mm-hmm

Menendez: And, the ethos of the Caribbean is very present in her work and I find myself, coming from a Caribbean heritage, very drawn to Caribbean art. And, I think part of what is interesting about someone who's trying to expand Latinx art in these spaces is that even within that, you're talking about an incredible range of artists and experiences.

Ramos: Mm-hmm

Menendez: I wonder if you can ever fully wrap your arms around the complexity in one medium representing such a diverse and vibrant community.

Ramos: No. It's just... It's never-ending. This is something I've been thinking about because I'm looking through all my files.

Menendez: No, I love that I'm finding you at this retrospective moment.

Ramos: Yeah. I'm definitely in a retrospective moment and I'm keeping some things because I'm also thinking about my archive. What is my legacy going to be? How could someone grow from the way that I approached my work? And so, one of the first things that I did when I got to SAM was I printed a list of everything that they had in the collection Latinx-related and I started color coding it. All the Cuban American artists are blue. These artists are yellow. These artists are pink. You know, had it filled with stickies and all sorts of things. I was counting and just kind of getting my hands around this complexity because I think that's something also that I knew from being from New York because there's so many communities even within New York. There's a Cuban American community. There's a Puerto Rican community. There's a Dominican community. There's, you know, all these people from Latin America who may not be part of a huge community but are present. So, someone like Alfredo Jaar, you know, has been living in, you know, New York since I think the late seventies or 1980.

So, I was very aware of our complexity and I wanted to make sure that the collection that we built reflected that. The bulk of the collection at SAM when I arrived was Mexican American, was Chicano, which is super important, but it's not all of it. And, I remember telling my colleagues, "You can't have a collection of Chicano art and call it Latinx. It has to represent the fullness of who we are." I was the curator who brought in the first works by Dominican American artists. There were no works in the collection when I arrived. So, works by Scherezade Garcia were really important in that regard, and to bring their work into the collection.

But also stylistic diversity. You know? One of the first artists that I advocated for was a Cuban American artist, Carmen Herrera. I mean, I knew of her work. I knew that she had been living in New York since, you know, the late thirties, and that when you looked her up in the Wikipedia page, it says she was a Cuban artist. And, yes, she is. I'm not saying that she's not. But she's a Cuban American, right? She's... She's been living here and has not... You know, is not part of American art collections. I remember when we finally acquired her work, I wrote a blog post saying, "Welcome Carmen Herrera, American artist." She is practically 100 years old and we're now welcoming her as an American artist.

So, it was really important to show this stylistic range. We need to embrace the complexity of who we are. I think many curators feel a great sense of inadequacy because the task is so daunting. We feel a great sense of responsibility to the artists that we believe in that have made huge contributions, through the impact of racism have not gotten their due.

Menendez: Next up, National Gallery. Are you excited? Are you scared? How are you feeling about it?

Ramos: I'm totally excited. I'm really excited about being at this very special museum that has this amazing national, international reputation, that it has both European and American art. I've traditionally worked for American art museums. That's been my... Kind of my focus, even though my studies have been, you know, broader than that. I'm really excited to work for an institution that has articulated this very ambitious mission of wanting to be a museum for the people and to think about that and lead a team of curators that is thinking about how to implement that, is really growing. So, part of it is acquisitions. You know, part of it is the exhibitions that we present. Part of it is the stories we tell, you know, the way we tell those stories, the partnerships that we build with communities. So, I'm totally excited about this new opportunity.

Menendez: And, I am excited to visit. I know that your mark is on the wall. Carmen, thank you so much for taking the time to do this.

Ramos: Yeah. Thank you. Thank you for having me. It was great talking to you.

Menendez: After this conversation, I don't know that I will ever experience an art museum in quite the same way. Will you? Because in the past, I'd look at what was on the walls without the same appreciation for how it ended up there and who pushed to have it there. I mean,

sure, I have noticed who is missing, the gaps in curation. But this conversation with Carmen gave me a stronger appreciation for the work that people like Carmen are doing to close those gaps and how that work, which I think can be replicated across a lot of different industries, can shift our fundamental understanding of who we are.

Hey, thank you so much for listening. *Latina to Latina* is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Sarah McClure is our senior producer. Our lead producer is Cedric Wilson. Kojin Tashiro is our associate sound designer. Stephen Colón mixed this episode. Jimmy Gutierrez is our managing editor. Manuela Bedoya is our social media editor and ad ops lead.

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