

## **WE BEEN HERE**

William Camargo and the Art of Counterstories

By Joseph Daniel Valencia \*

Counterstories are narratives written from a “bottom-up” rather than a “top-down” perspective; that is, they offer a critical reflection on the lived experiences and histories of people of color by placing those lived experiences and histories at the center of the analysis.

—Michaela Mares-Tamayo, “Chicana/o Historical Counterstories” (2014) <sup>1</sup>

In what circumstances do people try to record and pass on knowledge about their ancestors to future generations? In what circumstances is such knowledge unimportant or not the subject of concern? When is it forgotten or suppressed?

— Janet Carsten, *Ghosts of Memory* (2007) <sup>2</sup>

The history of Orange County, California is often told through a series of distinct mythologies: Orange County as a land of *ranchos* and later a citrus paradise; a suburban sprawl of cities that share the same “All-American” values; the birthplace of Disneyland, the so-called Happiest Place on Earth; and coastal cities with beaches awaiting the indulgences of their residents. Collectively, these mythologies have long communicated a homogenous promise of paradise for those who live in the region. Yet, these stories are rather limiting, not accounting for the diversity and multiplicity of experiences of the many different people who call Orange County home. Many people of color with roots in the region know Orange County’s existence in the imaginary is inaccurate, and not inclusive to the contribution of our own histories of this land. There is power and violence to the erasure of histories unprioritized within the master narrative of the region.

In his exhibition *Origins & Displacements Vol. 1 & Vol. 2*, on view through exterior windows at art spaces in Anaheim’s MUZEO Museum & Cultural Center and Santa Ana’s Grand Central Art Center (GCAC), William Camargo presents a series of artworks that effectively rupture the picture-perfect landscape of Orange County through the use of thought-provoking counterstories. These works address specific and enduring legacies of racism, segregation, labor issues, police brutality, and gentrification experienced by Mexican, Chicana, and Latinx people in Camargo’s hometown of Anaheim and its neighboring city, Santa Ana, while also considering present and future possibilities in the region. The result is a dynamic exhibition that invites poignant exchanges around art, activism, racial injustices, and the role each of us play in shaping the type of world we want within our own cities and communities.

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\* This essay is published on the occasion of *William Camargo: Origins & Displacements, Vols. 1 & 2*, a multi-site exhibition organized by CSUF Begovich Gallery and presented in partnership with CSUF Grand Central Art Center and MUZEO Museum & Cultural Center. Support for the exhibition is made possible through the Art Alliance, Associated Students, Inc. Instructional Related Activities, the College of the Arts, and Department of Visual Arts.

<sup>1</sup> Michaela Mares-Tamayo, “Chicana/o Historical Counterstories: Documenting the Community Memory of Junipero Serra and Clark Street Schools,” (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2014), 33

<sup>2</sup> Janet Carsten, *Ghosts of Memory: Essays on Remembrance and Relatedness* (Malden: Blackwell Pub., 2007), 23.

## SIGNS FOR PROTEST, SIGNS TO REMEMBER

A majority of Camargo's two-volume exhibition consists of the artist's staged photographs with poster board signs. These signs are powerful and multivalent—they inform, proclaim, dispute, and commemorate. As a public art installation, they affirm or contest those who witness them. They also intervene in the public sphere to produce new and liberatory discourse.

Each photograph follows the same format: the artist stands in front of an area of importance to him holding a white poster board with text revealing hidden stories or information about the area. Camargo spent a significant amount of time examining historical newspapers, archives, and books from local libraries to create these works. Through the holding of these signs, Camargo uses his body to counteract the erasure and mischaracterization of Mexican, Chicana, and Latinx people within the historical record while also addressing the ongoing disempowerment faced by communities across the region.

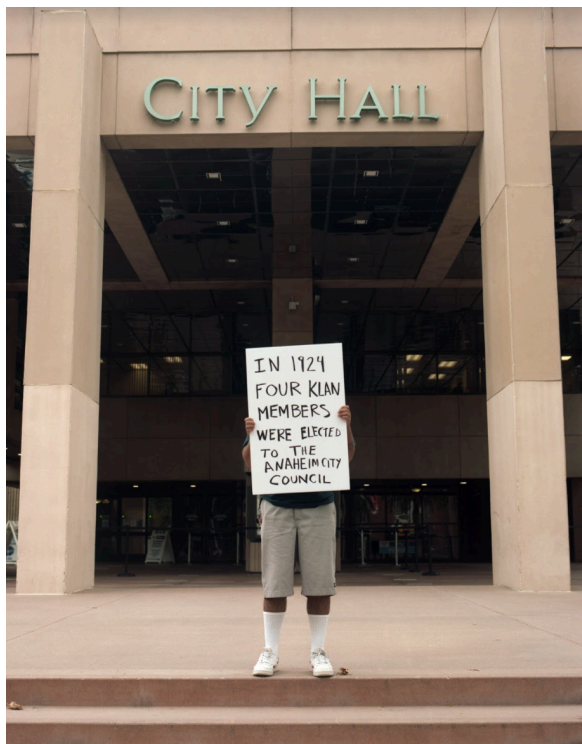


Caption: *Origins & Displacements Vol. 1*, Grand Central Art Center, Santa Ana, CA, photo by Jennifer Frias

In *Vol. 1*, on view at Grand Central Art Center in Santa Ana, Camargo crosses time and space, art and activism, to unravel the layered histories of violence and discrimination embedded within the city. Four photographs displayed in storefront windows protest racial profiling and state-sponsored violence experienced by Orange County's Mexican populations. These include the 1892 mob lynching of Francisco Torres in downtown Santa Ana to the countywide labor strike in 1936 that morphed into an outright war and suppression campaign to maintain the status quo. Camargo also acknowledges the violence of the present moment, citing Santa Ana's position of operating the 8th most violent police department in the entire country. The indirect violence (and irony) of the city's all-Mexican city council facilitating gentrification and the displacement of Mexican residents through its ongoing commercial development plans is also brought into attention. Camargo's photos are surrounded by a level of precarity—his brown body in protest highlights racial inequities and confronts the power structures that give way to them.

His works displayed in *Vol. 2* at MUZEO specifically uncover hyperlocal histories in Anaheim. The most evocative photograph in the exhibition reveals how four members of the Ku Klux Klan were elected to the Anaheim city council in 1924. This fact is one that the Anaheim elected government would surely hope to wish away, but for people of color across Orange County, it gives insight into the conservative ideology and systemic racism that has persisted since the early days of the county's founding.

Other works at MUZEO gesture into histories directly applied to Mexican, Chicanx, and Latinx people in Orange County. In the photograph, ***Damn I Can't Go On This Side of the Park?!*** (2020), Camargo holds a sign that states: THIS PARK USED TO BE SEGREGATED. In his research, the artist discovered that the local park he frequented as a child had once been racially segregated. Here, Camargo intervenes into the banal and quotidian setting of a public park to share a direct and matter-of-fact message about its past. Camargo not only teaches us that our parks were once segregated by race and ethnicity, but that this racism has been baked into the policies and practices that continue to haunt the region today.



Captions (L to R): *Damn, Four of Them Got Elected!?* (2020); *Damn I Can't Go On This Side of the Park?!* (2020)

In another work, Camargo stands in front of the Anaheim Packing District with a sign that reads: BROWN WOMEN USED TO PACK ORANGES HERE. The early 20th-century packing house that had once played an important role in the region's agricultural economy has since been converted into a commercial dining hall with over two dozen eateries. The artist commemorates Mexican female labor histories in Anaheim while criticizing the city's historic site which is now reduced to a mere prop for financial gain.





Caption: *Damn Ya'll Forgot Who Worked Here?! (2020)*



For those of us with Mexican roots in Orange County, Camargo's sign photographs are more than just educational tools or images of critique. They are moving reminders of the labor, activism, and contributions that our forebearers made to this region. His photographs remind me specifically of my own family histories in nearby El Modena, Orange, and Santa Ana. When my great-uncle Ralph joined the army at the height of the Second World War, my aunt Ruth had worked at a packing house in El Modena to provide for her family. During this time, racial segregation had touched my family. In 1946, my uncle and aunt's youngest daughter Janice was expelled from school on the basis of her ethnicity. While racial segregation was common in schools and in a number of public spaces, the blow of my cousin Janice's expulsion was compounded by the fact that this particular school had been built in part by her grandfather, Joaquin, who was a carpenter. These stories were passed down to me through oral history, but they come to life through Camargo's photographs. They impart a sense of responsibility for us to keep these stories alive and to actively consider how we can make today's Orange County a better place for our people.

## **BROWN CANONS**

William Camargo's practice intervenes into the history of art through reorienting, or browning, of the canon. Here, I use the term brown to refer to Mexican, Chicanx, and Latinx people, but I also use it to refer to the ways in which the predominately white historical record can be subverted through a recasting of new subjects and settings. Within his exhibition in Anaheim, Camargo notably features a range of portrait, landscape, and still life photography drawn from the contemporary brown life of his city. The artist's command of the history of art and photography is reinforced by his own experiences as an arts educator, steering him to produce a suite of works that redirect the standard forms of photographic practice and their very place in the artistic canon.

In a group portrait titled *About Half A Mile From Disneyland* (2019), four guys pose around a staircase in an apartment complex. They range in age and personal style, but one thing they all share is their direct gaze at the camera, confronting viewers to acknowledge their livelihoods. In another portrait, *Gloria* (2020), a woman stands in front of a wall, most likely another apartment building, holding her hands forward and also staring at the camera. Historically, when encountering portraits of people of color in the classroom, the photographer tends to be an outsider, someone whose anthropological gaze into a community forms the basis of their latest art project. But that is not the case in Camargo's images— these are individuals who live within the artist's own community. Camargo spends time with them and acknowledges them through his photographs as peers and residents of the same city with shared experiences navigating its histories, as well as its racialized, classed, and gendered systems of operation.

In a landscape photograph titled *After Stephen Shore but in Penquin City and Paisa* (2019), Camargo intervenes into the 1970s New Topographics movement with a vibrant image of a local Anaheim market. The artist injects a personal connection and cultural context for his photograph in opposition to the movement's often reduction of diverse landscapes to mere dots on a map. Camargo's *Chicanx Still Life #4* (2018) similarly turns the still life tradition on its head by focusing his camera not on something fabricated for artistic consideration, but by instead capturing the existing beauty of furnishings, religious symbols, and other *cositas* that form the everyday compositions of domestic life.



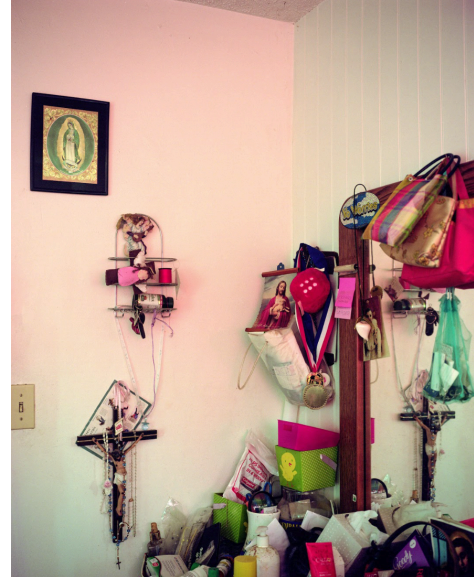
Caption: *About Half A Mile From Disneyland* (2019)





Caption: *Gloria* (2020)





Captions (L to R): *After Stephen Shore but in Penquin City and Paisa* (2019); *Chicanx Still Life #4* (2018)

Throughout my contemplation of Camargo's practice in relation to canons, I continue to return to the role these photographs play as educational tools. How does learning about the history and the elements of photography through the landscapes, still lifes, and portraits of people of color fundamentally change how we understand photography in ways we value and consume it? For people of color, this approach to art, and to teaching, has tremendous power. It allows us to learn and speak the language of art on our own terms, ultimately giving way to imagine ourselves as central agents in the shaping of history, culture, and society.

Considering the historic and ongoing issue of museum representation across the country, it is critical to acknowledge the importance of Anaheim residents having images of themselves, their homes, and their neighborhoods presented at a museum in their city. In a city whose imaginary is so closely linked to Disneyland, a place that has reflected and reinforced traditional American values and suburban whiteness, Camargo's photographs counter and subvert this hegemonic narrative. His photographs set forth a parallel narrative that is more representative and responsive to the city's population.

Camargo's work has strategically utilized counterstories to center the lived experiences of people of color, specifically Mexican, Chicanx, and Latinx communities. These communities' impact on art and history in Orange County might be undervalued or even forgotten, but it is far from non-existent. We been here— in all of our glory. With these relevant and everlasting images, Camargo takes mighty steps forward in addressing these concerns and making things right.

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\* *William Camargo: Origins & Displacements, Vols. 1 & 2* is on view October 3 – December 31, 2020 at Grand Central Art Center and MUZEO Museum & Cultural Center. All images in this essay are reproduced with permission. For more information please visit: [https://www.fullerton.edu/arts/art/begovich\\_gallery/william-camargo.php](https://www.fullerton.edu/arts/art/begovich_gallery/william-camargo.php)