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## Locos

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## Crazy Creative: The California Locos

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The California Locos. From left to right: John Van Hamersveld, Norton Wisdom, Dave Tourjé, Chaz Bojórquez, Gary Wong.

What makes a group of distinctly individual artists like Chaz Bojórquez, Dave Tourjé, John Van Hamersveld, Norton Wisdom and Gary Wong combine forces into a collective identity? The group affectionately called the California Locos is just that, and although we think of their artistic creativity as individual efforts, there is something special that has stemmed from their unusual union. Each of the varied artists, all raised in Southern California, came to this group on the back half of their careers after achieving individual reputations and distinctions in their respective circles. While their collective achievements are impressive, the impetus for the Locos' foundation is far more than a veneer. Becoming a Loco is not related to being crazy, according to Bojórquez, but to being crazy about life. Their mutual paths tie them together like a spider web, as their artistic and personal paths crisscrossed from school to the streets and from punk clubs to the gallery scene.

The scholar Howard Gruber found creativity to be a lifelong and purposeful development of one's unique perspective. The creative work of the Locos involves divergent, convergent, analytic and synthetic thinking. These processes are then combined with their own personalities, knowledge bases, emotions and networks. This mixture of enterprises, although overlapping in some cases, results in outputs that vary dramatically. From Van Hamersveld's cool and clean compositions to Wisdom's expressionistic brush strokes, each of the California Locos has been committed to the evolution of a distinctive artistic process, careful not to conform to a standardized model. While they collectively are grounded in the counterculture and various "lowbrow" art scenes, these contexts only paint part of the picture.

The initial catalyst for the formation of the Locos was an exhibit of Tourjé's in 2011. His experience is as someone born and raised in Los Angeles, as contrasted to the Getty Institute's Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. vision, which featured art between 1945 and 1980 and a number of artists from outside of L.A.



Dave Tourjé



An important aspect of creativity involves organizing resources, including the many experiences that are unique to a context. The varied neighborhoods of Southern California offer a wealth of experiences that have become important source materials for the Locos and their individual dispositions. From Highland Park to Malibu, each context distinctly shaped a worldview that allowed a new way of thinking to emerge in each of their artistic practices.

As part of the exhibit, Tourjé organized a panel of peers to address the many issues and influences of being a Los Angeles artist over the past three decades. While the members of the panel all knew each other, they were not a collective or group in any sense. The panel was the first opportunity for the group to reflect on these concepts, but their roots were much deeper. Moderator Mary Anna Pomonis, along with filmmakers of “L.A. Aboriginal,” Bayou Bennett and Daniel Lir, referred to the group as the “California Locos” — and the name stuck going forward.

Reflecting back on how the Locos crossed paths — being from various parts of Southern California — speaks to the tacit, extralinguistic and nonconceptual aspects of studio making that pull upon experiences and the environment. Every one of the Locos, after careful reflection, can recall moments where they interacted, often decades ago. These exchanges are early evidence of some of the influences for what it means to be an artist in Southern California.



John Van Hamersveld

Van Hamersveld is responsible for some of the most **iconic images of the 20th century**. His “Endless Summer” movie poster became an instant classic in 1964 and catapulted him into a series of influential positions as an art director and designer. Van Hamersveld moved to downtown Los Angeles in 1964 to continue his studies in school at the Chouinard Art Institute, which is an important touchstone for many of the Locos. Van Hamersveld’s work was reproduced thousands of times in the following years and, his being a few years older than the other members, ended up in many of the Locos’ homes in the form of posters, advertisements and album covers.

Van Hamersveld recalls originally meeting Wong (they are the two oldest members of the group): “We met in 1965 going to Chouinard Art Institute during its transformation into CalArts, and he was with my company and partners of Pinnacle Productions, putting on rock concerts at the Shrine Exposition Hall in L.A.” Wong, whose life has remained mostly private through the years, feels these early experiences at Chouinard propelled him to blur the borders between performance and object making. Wong recalls those early years at the college and its transition into CalArts, which prompted some of his political views: “We saw it as the death of Chouinard and the school’s unique approach to fine art.”



Gary Wong

Wong and Wisdom also connected while they were both students. Wisdom remembers: "I crossed paths with Gary through a mutual friend, Ivan Hosoi (father of skate legend Christian Hosoi) at Chouinard." While all the Locos (with the exception of Tourjé) attended Chouinard, they didn't necessarily all meet there. Bojórquez's experience was a bit more common: "I was one of the youngest at school, so I felt intimidated by these older artists." Wisdom, much like Bojórquez, also attended Chouinard but never interacted with most of these artists. It was much later that he connected with Van Hamersveld in Malibu. Wisdom spent years in the studio, but also worked as a lifeguard in Malibu, which he credits as contributing towards his minimalist painterly vision. It was later that Wisdom took on a more political stance in his work when he painted a large section of the Berlin Wall.

Tourjé and Wisdom both have roots in music and performance. Rather than in school, these two connected through the punk rock scene in the 1980s at a club called Cathay de Grande in central Hollywood, not far from where Bojórquez's graffiti stenciled the streets.

Tourjé, in contrast to the other Locos, initially learned much about the art world through his work as an art handler and installer for Security Pacific Bank's art collection. While he has some formal art education, it was through his job that he came in contact with the work of Emerson Woelffer, Ed Ruscha, and Billy Al Bengston, among many others, and "got soaked in this stuff." Confronting art in the real world, Tourjé reflected quite a bit about what makes a work powerful, along with the practical aspects of why it's valuable. Immediately drawing a kinship to these California artists, Tourjé would start to visually think about the work back in his studio.





Norton Wisdom

Wong also worked in a similar position to Tourjé — at a large shipping and handling company called Crate 88 — and ran into him several times. Wong speaks fondly of these early years. The way these works of art are packed and transported from studio to gallery to museum or home seems to be an apt metaphor for how Locos like Wong and Tourjé traversed paths through the years. The intersections of graffiti, punk, activism, art school and various lowbrow scenes became apparent as the future Locos brushed up against one another through the years.

Bojórquez and Tourjé grew up in the same area of Highland Park. A pioneer of graffiti culture, Bojórquez is well known for his Senior Suerte stencil that was inspired by Mexican folklore. In a time before street art became defined, Bojórquez's imagery could be found around the city, and the image became ubiquitous. Tourjé vividly recalls these stencils and the mystery associated with the artist. Wisdom adds: "I remember seeing them on the L.A. River when I was hanging out in Highland Park because there were punk clubs there."

As a student and graffiti artist, Bojórquez recalls some of his early impressions of the Locos: "I was very shy in the late '60s, and I remember John Van Hamersveld by his artwork; he was famous. I once saw a street billboard with a gigantic image of a smiling face done only in this beautiful black/white line work; his influence on me at an early age was to appear later in life in my own brushstrokes, in my graffiti artwork." Bojórquez and Van Hamersveld later connected through the late printmaker Richard Duardo and cemented their friendship. These connections were made over the years and represent a sampling of their interactions before the creation of the Chouinard Foundation.





Chaz Bojórquez

While Tourjé is the lone member who did not attend Chouinard, being 10 to 20 years younger than the other Locos, he was primary in the establishment of the Chouinard Foundation after purchasing the home of Nelbert Chouinard, and has become the school's unofficial historian. Although the Locos had crossed paths with one another through the years, events held by the Chouinard Foundation started to put them in touch with one another on a regular basis. Many artists were motivated to be involved in the foundation, and subsequent exhibits and films documenting its history followed. Wong recalls the excitement associated with Chouinard reunions, and although he was initially hesitant to attend, he went anyway, and it was something he enjoyed, as he was reunited with so many fine artists.

The California Locos today are a symbol of Los Angeles. The fragmented city and its many neighborhoods cannot possibly all be represented, but a cross section of these influences comes through their varied viewpoints. Being a member of this group is about recognizing this diversity and supporting one another by believing in one another's work. Much like Tourjé's artistic process of stacking and building, this process has contributed towards combining these unique personalities together and allowing these important connections to be made.

One could surmise that the Locos were formed a bit like a band. Many of the members have known each other since the 1960s, but it was that moment of reflection when they were all invited to participate in a panel that crystallized it. It was then that the ideas and concepts started to materialize and they realized what they had in common. From 2011 onward, a number of projects and exhibits featuring the group have been organized and celebrated. Being a member of this group establishes claims of common interests with very different experiences, but it has grown into something else entirely. Coming from the many multicultural neighborhoods of Los Angeles, these artists fed off a plethora of enterprises that contribute towards a complicated and layered understanding of Southern California. Going strong after decades of art production, the Locos are crazy creative and are continually reinterpreting what we know about the arts in Los Angeles.

*Exhibition "Somos Locos" opens on March 16 at the Manhattan Beach Art Center.*

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