

by Thomas J. Wawzenek

## MIRA MUSEO DE LA RAZA AND JOSE

Since 1981, Mi Raza Arts Consortium (MIRA) has been the most active organization in promoting Latino art and culture in Chicago as well as the United States. MIRA was founded by Jose Gonzalez, a Pilsen neighborhood artist, who believed there was a need for an arts service organization for Latino arts. In the last few years MIRA has sponsored an impressive list of exhibits. MIRA does not limit itself strictly to Mexican/Chicano art, but encompasses Latino culture as a whole by working with various groups. As a regional organization, it networks with groups across the country and has cultural exchange programs with Mexico.

MIRA has co-sponsored: a traveling exhibit with the University of Houston, "Two Centuries of Hispanic Theatre in the USA"; brought Edward Olmos to Chicago with the film, "The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez"; featured the Ensemble Espanol; worked with Pedro Silva of Chile on a mosaic mural for Symonds YMCA; and has recently co-sponsoring a Mexican Relief Concert for the earthquake victims in Mexico. These are just a few of the events MIRA has been involved in during the last couple of years.

MIRA also has a quarterly newsletter, 'Mirarte', headed by Jose Gonzalez. The newsletter offers information for artists on exhibits, funding sources and other arts issues.

You would think Gonzalez would be satisfied enough with all of his accomplishments, but his long standing dream is to see the completion of Museo de la Raza, a Mexican/Chicano museum in the heart of the Pilsen neighborhood. Its home will be at 1807 S. Allport in the old Thalia Hall building. With four floors and 18,000 square feet, the museum will have adequate room for a gallery, theatre, office space and a library that will be called the Rudy Lozano Study Center. Gonzalez sees the theatre as being an integral part of the museum because it can be used for performances and be rented out for other activities that will help to generate revenue. Museo de la Raza will not only focus on the art and culture of Mexico, but also on the history and struggles of the Chicano movement in the United States.

Gonzalez believes that the museum will be educational for all people, not only for Mexican-Americans. "Many people think of Mexican art as just a pretty, decorative thing such as pottery and quilts, but it's more than that. I want this museum to serve as a pride for our culture." He also thinks that the museum's success will help the economic growth for the businesses in the Pilsen neighborhood.

In creating Museo de la Raza, Gonzalez has aimed to support his long-standing belief that an ethnic group must support its own art and culture. "Through Museo de la Raza, we are creating our own institution, we can't wait for a downtown museum to give our artists a fair showing. Besides, a museum such as this is perfect in Pilsen which has the largest concentration of the Mexican population in the city."

The museum will also act as a cultural exchange with Mexico and other Chicano art centers from the Southwest. Many of the pre-Columbian civilizations--the Aztecs, Mayans, Olmecs and Toltecs will also be showcased.

Gonzalez wants to motivate people to feel proud of their culture, particularly young people. "This can be a truly educational experience for the kids to come in touch with their culture and art. We hope to initiate more programs where kids can use their energy in a positive way such as in art and theatre."

He also hopes that the museum will not limit itself to only Mexican and Chicano artists. In the planning, is an exchange program with artists from other ethnic groups as well. He sees an exchange program as beneficial in breaking down barriers between ethnic groups, particularly in a city like Chicago that has a diverse ethnic makeup. The greatest obstacle facing Museo de la Raza is funding, but Gonzalez sees this as a hurdle he will eventually overcome.

Gonzalez is unique in the sense that he is not only a successful artist, but is also an effective administrator sensitive to social issues. It is this blend that has made him effective in bringing success to many of MIRA's projects. He sees a strong interrelation in his role as an artist and his concern for community affairs. He finds the two integrated in his life though he freely admits that he doesn't expect all artists to have the same social concerns.

There was a time when he felt content to lead his life as a commercial artist in advertising. But on a trip to San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, he studied the Mexican masters who made a deep impression upon him. It was this "first awakening" which eventually led him to quit his job in advertising and attend the Art Institute in order to return to his roots in fine art. He went on to graduate work at Notre Dame in 1971 and curated "The Chicanos Have Arrived", an exhibit of midwest Chicano artists. University officials took down the exhibit a day early to accommodate a visiting artist. In protest Gonzalez left Notre Dame, which is what he calls his "second awakening." "I realized at that point that we had to make known what we as a people achieved and contributed and I wanted to be part of that process."

Shortly afterwards in 1972 he founded Movimiento Artístico Chicano (MARCH) to promote the work of Mexican American artists and to bring Mexican art to the Midwest. MARCH was responsible for many successful exhibits throughout the 1970's.

Besides being the founder and curator of MIRA, Gonzalez is also busy with his own art, teaching, and is currently an appointee to Chicago Mayor Harold Washington's Commission on Cultural Affairs. Despite his many activities, he still finds time for Museo de la Raza and has strong hopes that it will be completed in the near future. "We have had a good response from the exhibits that MIRA has sponsored so I know the interest is there in Mexican/Chicano art and culture." Gonzalez firmly believes his dream is coming closer to a reality and that it will benefit people in the arts, education, and in the community.

*Thomas Wawzenek is a freelance writer in Chicago*