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Ford, Mellon Foundations Team Up for \$5 M. Initiative Focused on U.S. Latinx Artists

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Coco Fusco, *Eu Sou Um Consumidor/ I Am a Consumer*, 2014.
COURTESY THE ARTIST

Two of the country's largest philanthropic organizations have joined forces for a new initiative that aims to bring visibility to Latinx art in the United States.

The **Ford Foundation** and the **Mellon Foundation**, together

with the **U.S. Latinx Art Forum** (USLAF), have created the Latinx Artist Fellowship. Over the next five years, the foundations will put \$5 million toward the fellowship program, with \$3.75 million going to 75 artists in the form of \$50,000 unrestricted grants and the remainder going to USLAF.

The inaugural cohort of 15 artists selected for 2021 represents a mix of artists from different generations (five are emerging, five are mid-career, and five are established). They hail from across the country—from New York to Los Angeles to Texas to Massachusetts—and represent a spectrum of diversity within the Latinx community.

Those 15 artists are Elia Alba, Celia Álvarez Muñoz, Carolina Caycedo, Adriana Corral, rafa esparza, Christina Fernández, Coco Fusco, Yolanda López, Miguel Luciano, Guadalupe Maravilla, Carlos Martiel, Michael Menchaca, Delilah Montoya, Vick Quezada, and Juan Sánchez.

“Giving each of the fellows \$50,000 to do their work for a year will support them first and foremost, but with the power of the Mellon and the Ford foundations, this will bring visibility to this kind of initiative and we hope to encourage museums to get on board,” Adriana Zavala, an art historian at Tufts University and the director of USLAF, said in an interview. “We wanted to create a deliberate and intentional jury process so that the full diversity of the very complicated Latinx community could be represented from gender, gender identity, ethno-racial, class, geographic, and disability. This is how you build a sustained legacy by supporting artists at all phases of their career.”

To assemble the inaugural cohort, USLAF solicited dozens of experts in contemporary Latinx art to submit nominations for the grants. That process yielded some 200 names that were given to a jury of curators from the initiative’s six museum partners—Rita Gonzalez at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Marcela Guerrero at the Whitney Museum in New York, Mari Carmen Ramírez at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Cesáreo Moreno at the National Museum of Mexican Art in Chicago, Rodrigo Moura at El Museo del Barrio in New York, and Sylvia Orozco at Mexic-Arte Museum in Austin—plus one independent curator, the art historian Yasmin Ramirez.

The partnering institutions are a mix of three mainstream art museums and three contemporary art museums founded by Latinx people for their local communities. “The combination acknowledges the importance of community-based grassroots context for these artists, but it also insists that the mainstream needs to be listening,” Zavala said.

Traditionally, the Ford and Mellon foundations have not given grants directly to artists, but the pandemic changed that. Though the Latinx Artist Fellowship isn’t specifically Covid-related, it is part of an effort “to get money into the hands of artists, especially these generally under-resourced and highly overlooked artists that are commensurate with 20 percent of a population demographic,” Deborah Cullen-Morales, a program officer at the Mellon Foundation, said. “I see this as field-wide effort to draw the attention of others in philanthropy.”

The initiative is in part meant to rectify a larger inequity found in the philanthropic world. Rocío Aranda-Alvarado, a program officer at the Ford Foundation, said that, while designing this initiative, the foundations found that only around 2 percent of overall

philanthropic giving goes to Latinx-focused organizations. (Nearly 20 percent of the U.S. population identifies as Latino/Latina/Latinx or Hispanic, and that number is expected to grow in the coming years.) In fact, funding for Latinx organizations in arts and culture has been decreasing since 2013, dropping from a high of \$40.2 million that year to \$13.2 million in 2019 (per the latest available figures), according to Hispanics in Philanthropy’s Latinx Funders data sets.

“We hope that other foundations join us in this effort, especially those that focus on arts and culture and in regions of the country that have large Latinx populations, to come along with us and think about how they can also be supportive of these really important issues,” Aranda-Alvarado said.

The Latinx Artist Fellowship announced today is the first of three parts in a program known as the **Latinx Art Visibility Initiative**. The other two parts, which will focus on supporting museums and academics, are still in development. For the museum-focused funding, Cullen-Morales and Aranda-Alvarado said the foundations hope to learn from the institutional partners that served on the jury for the artists fellowships and that it could include funding to support entry-level and mid-career positions focused on Latinx art as well as money for acquisition budgets for work by Latinx artists.

“We want to dig more deeply into what is needed to promote and ensure that Latinx artists are part of the DNA of our museums both on the community-rooted level and on the national-encyclopedic level,” Cullen-Morales said. “All museums that deal with U.S. art in this nation should be thinking about Latinx artists as part of their work.”

As part of the overall initiative, USLAF has also received funds to hire two full-time employees to administer the initiative: Mary Thomas, who will serve as director of programs, and Michelle Ruiz, who will be project coordinator for the Latinx Art Visibility Initiative. (Since its founding in 2015, USLAF has been an all-volunteer organization.) Over the course of the next year, USLAF will host programming with the six partnering museums to highlight the work of the 15 artists receiving grants.

Though Latinx artists are increasingly being included in major group exhibitions and biennials, Zavala said that progress is still slow in terms of institutional acquisitions and major solo surveys. “Mainstream institutions need to do the data research to understand how much how much of the collection is or is not representative of the diversity of the United States. That needs to be a crucial piece of this conversation.”

Zavala continued, “My sincere hope is that this initiative builds momentum and that others recognize the impact that this can have on building equity in the art world. That’s really what this is about. This initiative is an opportunity to educate.”