

ROBIN WINFIELD

Nuevo Amanecer, 2013

Fujiflex crystal archival print and acrylic, 16 x 20 in



COURTESY: THE ARTIST

RY COODER

A Real Mexican Street

The Chingasos

Uncle Betto's musty one-room gift shop on the north end of Olvera Street was called "Artisanas de México"—an uptown name for a strictly downtown joint—specializing in plaster saints, tin mirrors, and huarache sandals with soles cut from authentic Mexican automobile tires back when "Hecho en México" was la verdad. There was a heavy fragrance of perfumed wax from the candle shop next door, and of frying lard from the café across the way called "Mi Tierra," where the tourists were sent and which us kids referred to as "my dirt"—as in, cockroaches. Mexican kids were also regarded as authentic—up to age twelve.

As a teenager, I started to get blamed for a lot of things, like wearing high drape pants and breathing. If you want to grow up frightened, try being a poor, no-talent Mexican kid on the streets of Los Angeles—but I was good at music, so I had something of my own inside that protected me. And yes, I did a little time at the Atascadero Juvenile Farm up north; who didn't? It was nice to get out of the city for a while.

I grew, somehow, like a weed grows in the cracks. I formed a conjunto with cholos from the neighborhood. As "Johnny Dolor and the 5 Pains," we were hip for los años cincuenta, featuring el mambo, el swing, el boogie-woogie. I played a little saxophone, así como Big Jay McNeely; a little guitar, así como T-Bone Walker; and sang así como Johnnie Ray, who was very big in that moment. We were presented at the Club Rendezvous on Central, at La Bamba on East 1st in Boyle Heights, and at The Big Union in Vernon. Then I had the big idea to bring in a white chick singer—which was taboo, you dig—and we made a little money. (Risky outfits and dirty moves, things our girls would never do.) But when musicians make a little money, the scavengers always come around. A Filipino pusher got the 5 Pains on the hook and they started disagreeing about everything—tempos, keys, hairstyles—but it was the girl that broke up the band. Jealousy is death in a musical organization.

Then the Club Rendezvous was raided for dope, and I took the rap for the club owner. Uncle Betto required it; the man was a compadre, or some such old-timer bullshit. *Underage White Girl Held Captive by Pachuco Dope*