

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

# Vincent Price Art Museum Presents

## *Ofelia Esparza: A Retrospective*

*Celebrating the artistic and cultural contributions  
of the prolific Chicana artist and altarista*

On View: Oct. 18, 2025 – Apr. 18, 2026

Opening Reception: Saturday, Oct. 18, 5 to 8 p.m.



Caption: Ofelia Esparza in front of *Mictlan Sur* (2000), an altar at Self Help Graphics & Art. Image courtesy of the artist.

MONTEREY PARK, Calif. – Opening Oct. 18, 2025, the [Vincent Price Art Museum \(VPAM\)](#) at **East Los Angeles College (ELAC)** proudly presents *Ofelia Esparza: A Retrospective*, the first-ever museum survey exhibition of the Chicana artist, altarista, and educator.

Widely recognized as one of California's most revered folk artists with a cultural impact spanning more than seven decades, Esparza helped bring the cherished traditions of Mexican altar-making and Día de los Muertos into the American mainstream, beginning in the 1970s, through her work with community arts center **Self Help Graphics & Art** in Boyle Heights. The new exhibition recreates a selection of Esparza's iconic altars, accompanied by a major survey of her prolific artistic output, spanning from 1945 to the present day.

"We are honored to organize this retrospective of Ofelia Esparza's multi-disciplinary and multi-dimensional art practice," said **exhibition curators Joseph Valencia and Sybil Venegas**. "For decades, Ofelia has been a cherished member of the Eastside community, sharing her wisdom with artists, educators, students, and community members. Her work embodies the power of art to sustain memory and culture, empower communities, and expand the possibilities of Chicanx and American art. We look forward to highlighting the full breadth of her practice and her enduring influence locally and internationally."



Image captions, from left to right: Ofelia Esparza, *Untitled* (1945), Graphite on paper; *Untitled* (1945), Graphite on paper; and *Benny* (1959), Graphite on paper. All artworks courtesy of the artist, photos by Paul Salvesson.

While principally known for her altar-making, the new retrospective brings overdue attention to Esparza's wide-ranging artistic practice, which includes drawing, painting, and printmaking. The 85 artworks presented reflect a lifelong commitment to creative experimentation, many intersecting with the social and political movements of her time, including the Chicano Movement, the United Farm Workers Movement, and broader struggles for social and environmental justice. Through original artworks, installations, and archival materials, the exhibition traces Esparza's evolution as an artist and cultural matriarch whose vision and influence have profoundly shaped the trajectory of American art and culture.

"This exhibition at the Vincent Price Art Museum at East Los Angeles College, my alma mater, is the highest honor for me as an artist," said Esparza. "My whole art practice is inspired by my community here in East L.A., and now to be recognized by that same community fills me with deep gratitude."

In 1999, at age 67, Esparza retired from more than twenty-five years of service as an art teacher in the Los Angeles Unified School District to pursue studio art full-time. Following her retirement, Esparza produced hundreds of monotypes, an astounding output of printmaking throughout the late 1990s and 2000s that reflected her political activism, cultural interests, and desire to experiment creatively. Most of her printmaking practice has not been studied or exhibited, representing a critical area of Esparza's work that has yet to be properly included within the canon of American art history.

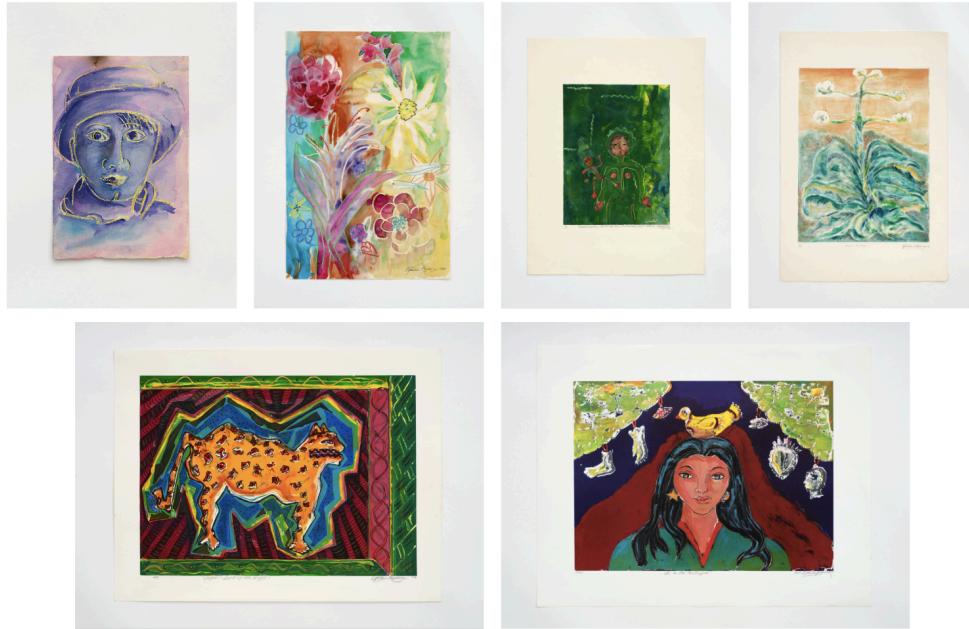


Image captions, from clockwise from top left: Ofelia Esparza, *Untitled* (date unknown), Watercolor and crayon resist; *Summer Blooms Study* (1988), Watercolor and crayon resist; *Sometimes letting go is loving you* (2002), Monotype; *La de los Milagros* (2009), Monotype; *Arbol de Vida* (1994), Monotype; and *Jaguar, Lord of the Night* (2002), Monotype. All artworks courtesy of the artist, photos by Paul Salveson.

The exhibition is organized into thematic and chronological sections, including her Early Works and Family Life (1950s-1970s), Creative Experimentation and Teaching (1960s-1990s), Printmaking at Self Help Graphics (1980s-2010s), and Day of the Dead Altars and Public Art Installations (1990s-Present). The retrospective will be complemented by community-submitted materials, showcasing the vast and personal impact Esparza and her family have made on East Los Angeles and beyond.

It will also highlight the 93 year-old Esparza's national and international recognition, notably through invitations to create altars and installations across the United States, Mexico, and Europe; her continued work with Self Help Graphics on the annual Los Angeles County Community Altar and ceremony, Noche de Ofrenda at Grand Park; and the 2017 Disney/Pixar film, *Coco*, which took direct inspiration from her life and family stories.

On Sept. 18, the Vincent Price Art Museum Foundation will honor Ofelia Esparza as part of its 2025 Gala, [“Belonging: Art Connects Community.”](#) She will receive the Thomas Silliman Vanguard Award, which recognizes artists whose work engages deeply with contemporary social and cultural issues and embodies VPAM’s mission to uplift transformative cultural expression in local communities.

### **About the Artist**

**Ofelia Rivera Esparza** (b. 1932) is a Chicana artist, altarista, and educator from East Los Angeles, where she has lived since birth and raised nine children alongside her husband of forty years. A sixth-generation altar maker, Esparza began building public altars in 1979 at Self Help Graphics & Art, where she also became a printmaker under the tutelage of Sister Karen Boccalero. After retiring in 1999 following more than twenty-five years as an art teacher, Esparza turned her focus to her studio practice, creating hundreds of artworks that reflect her cultural roots, political activism, and creative experimentation. Her diverse practice honors womanhood, Indigenous spirituality rooted in nature, and the dignity of her community, deeply informed by her mother’s Purépecha traditions of ofrendas, nacimientos, and altars honoring Tonantzin (Our Lady of Guadalupe). She has received numerous honors, including an Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters from her alma mater, California State University, Los Angeles, and the National Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts.

### **Publication**

In 2026, a fully-illustrated scholarly publication will be published by VPAM. The catalog will elucidate the major themes and interests of Esparza’s practice, situating her life’s work within the contexts of American art history, Chicana/o and Latinx studies, folk and vernacular art traditions, and global transnational cultural exchange. It will include new scholarly essays and shorter entries by leading artists, writers, and community members to express the importance of her practice across disciplines and communities.

### **Public Programs**

During the exhibition’s run, a robust slate of intergenerational public programs will include artist workshops, exhibition walk-throughs, film screenings, and panel discussions, as well as ELAC student-centered programs. Details will be announced soon on the [VPAM website](#).

**The opening of *Ofelia Esparza: A Retrospective* will be celebrated with a reception on Saturday, Oct. 18, from 5 to 8 p.m. Admission is free, no reservations required. In preparation for the reception, the Museum will be closed during the day on Oct. 18.**

*Ofelia Esparza: A Retrospective is organized by the Vincent Price Art Museum at East Los Angeles College. The exhibition is curated by Joseph Valencia and Sybil Venegas with Gloria Ortega.*

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*All exhibitions and programs at the Vincent Price Art Museum are underwritten by the Vincent Price Art Museum Foundation and East Los Angeles College.*

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### **About Vincent Price Art Museum**

The Vincent Price Art Museum (VPAM) at East Los Angeles College serves as a unique educational resource for the diverse audiences of the college and the community through the exhibition, interpretation, collection, and preservation of works in all media of the visual arts. VPAM provides an environment to encounter a range of aesthetic expressions that illuminate the depth and diversity of artwork produced by people of the world, both contemporary and past. By presenting thoughtful, innovative, and culturally diverse exhibitions and by organizing cross-disciplinary programs on issues of historical, social, and cultural relevance, VPAM seeks to promote knowledge, inspire creative thinking, and deepen an understanding of and appreciation for the visual arts. Learn more about VPAM at [vincentpriceartmuseum.org](http://vincentpriceartmuseum.org).

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**About East Los Angeles College**

East Los Angeles College (ELAC) is the largest of nine two-year community colleges within the Los Angeles Community College District (LACCD). More information about ELAC is available online at [www.elac.edu](http://www.elac.edu). Follow ELAC on social media at Facebook [@EastLACollege](https://www.facebook.com/EastLACollege), X/Twitter [@EastLACollege](https://twitter.com/EastLACollege), and Instagram [@ELACHuskies](https://www.instagram.com/ELACHuskies).

For VPAM press inquiries, please contact Katie Dunham, Katie Dunham Communications, at [katie@katiedunham.net](mailto:katie@katiedunham.net).