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Where Miles of Murals Preach a People's Gospel

By BARBARA TANNENBAUM



LOS ANGELES

IN a tree-shaded building at the University of California campus here, Judith F. Baca queues slides for undergraduate students in her seminar "Beyond the Mexican Mural." Ms. Baca, 56, a professor and muralist, is illustrating a lecture with examples of her own works, created over more than 30 years. Today she is focusing on "The Great Wall of Los Angeles," 1976-83, choosing it from among many other projects that range from "La Memoria de Nuestra Tierra," her recent commission by the Denver International Airport, to her "World Wall" panels that have toured the globe.

"Murals embody certain qualities of visual storytelling," says Ms. Baca, who grew up in Pacoima, a Los Angeles suburb. "First, there is the difference between public voice and private voice. Murals are pulpits: what you say in the pulpit is different from what you say to an intimate. Next, you must consider their scale. Scale is about amplifying the voice, about making it the voice of people who were excluded from history. This mural, 'The Great Wall of Los Angeles,' operates on a monumental scale."

Situated in the Tujunga Flood Control Channel in North Hollywood, "The Great Wall," more than 13 feet high and unspooling for almost a half-mile, is thought to be the longest mural in the world. It depicts a multiethnic history of Los Angeles, from prehistoric times through the post-World War II era. Commissioned by the Army Corp of Engineers, which also transformed the flood channel into a sylvan park with an adjoining pedestrian walkway, the mural is also considered by many to be the flagship for a vast collection of outdoor artworks that sprang up throughout the city beginning in the early 1970's.

Slides of "The Great Wall" reveal the social context in which the mural was created. It was begun in the summer of 1976, with 400 underprivileged teenagers executing the designs, and was completed seven summers later after hundreds of residents, academics and social activists were interviewed about the history of the city. Teams of artists, including Judy Chicago, Christina Schlesinger, Gary Tokumoto, Yreina Cervantez and Patssi Valdez, contributed ideas and images.

Ms. Baca's slides also show the extent to which "The Great Wall" has deteriorated. The color is not rich and vivid now. Exposure to sun, smog, car exhaust and flooding has produced bubbling and peeling in the oldest segments. The mural, like so many of its outdoor contemporaries, is in need of restoration, and it offers a good example of the problems Los Angeles faces in caring for its mural heritage. "To the extent that people outside of Southern California know about the

Howard Fox, the curator of modern and contemporary art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. "It is the largest, most ambitious and articulated of all the projects. It was conceived and produced in the spirit of public service and community celebration. It has an exalted status, and it has earned it."



Influenced by César Chávez and the social ferment of the early 70's, Ms. Baca and a number of predominantly Hispanic artists took up where Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros ÷ the three great Mexican muralists of the early 20th century ÷ left off. The renewed movement, which soon grew to include African-American, Asian and white muralists, has generated at least 3,000 murals on exterior surfaces throughout Los Angeles, the greatest creation of public art in an American city since the Work Progress Administration, earning the city a reputation as the mural capital of the world.

But murals are a fragile artform, and only a small number fall under the protection of government agencies or nonprofit organizations. The Social and Public Art Resource Center, which Ms. Baca helped found in Venice, Calif., in 1976, received money from the mayor's office and the Los Angeles Cultural Affairs Department between 1988 and 1996 and has commissioned 105 murals. In the early 80's, Mayor Tom Bradley commissioned 47 murals along the Los Angeles freeways for the 1984 Summer Olympics. These fall under the administration of CalTrans, the California State Department of Transportation. The city's Cultural Affairs Department is responsible for an additional 300 murals, a municipal collection that overlaps with the artwork produced by the Art Resource Center.

The practices by public agencies in the past "show that there's been no thought attached to what it means to take care of public art," said Bill Lasarow, who helped found the Mural Conservancy of Los Angeles in 1989.

"It has long been city policy to make the artists responsible for upkeep and maintenance of their murals," he added. "Now, how easy is that to do on the freeway with cars whizzing past? Or when CalTrans fights graffiti by throwing a coat of paint on the surface even if a mural happens to be underneath?"

Michael Miles, deputy director for maintenance at CalTrans, said: "We have had our zero-tolerance policy toward graffiti in effect since 1993. But we are working with headquarters to develop a new policy. Murals have cultural significance. As an agency we have to protect them. We've lobbied Governor Gray Davis to provide \$1.7 million to restore and conserve the freeway murals. However, we spent about \$17,000 per mural to commission them in 1984. I'm

getting estimates that conservation could cost well over \$400,000 for some of these pieces."

The state money, which Mr. Miles says would pay only for protective antigraffiti coating rather than restoration, is by no means certain and awaits a decision by the state legislature next month.



With a new general manager, Margie J. Reese, taking over the reins in the last year, the city's pre-eminent government arts agency, the Cultural Affairs Department, is also trying new approaches. The department, which has an annual budget of \$12 million from which to give grants, recently began a conservation program that restored 12 of the 300 city-sponsored murals.

"We got so many calls from council members offices saying these murals are disintegrating, what are you going to do about it?" said Felicia Filer, director of the public arts division of Cultural Affairs. "So we have taken our limited resources and redirected them from mural production to mural conservation. We are also educating the public and mural stakeholders on the best practices for mural production and copyright protection."

According to Robin Dunitz, vice president of the Mural Conservancy and the author of "Street Gallery: A Guide to Over 1,000 Los Angeles Murals," the conservancy has tried to establish a partnership model. It restored Frank Romero's freeway mural "Going to the Olympics" with a \$20,000 donation from the Amateur Athletic Foundation.

Ms. Baca's lobbying for "The Great Wall" led to a \$75,000 conservation grant from the city's general budget and \$25,000 more from the Cultural Affairs Department. Matching donations from public-works agencies have brought in another \$100,000. Ms. Baca says it will take another \$300,000 to complete the restoration.

Some conservationists say the money could be more readily found if only city officials would look past the peeling paint and grasp the artworks' stature and untapped potential for cultural tourism.

"I believe people are going to look back at Los Angeles in the period from the 1970's through the 1990's as having the equivalent importance for the Latino community as the Harlem Renaissance held for the African-American community," said Raymund Paredes, a former vice chancellor at U.C.L.A. and the current director of arts and culture at the Rockefeller Foundation. "Those murals were one of the most significant creations of that historical phenomenon. Coming to terms with the murals will be a test of whether Los Angeles has come to terms with itself; whether it can become a world-class city with a great sense of pride in itself and its heritage."



[View the entire Great Wall of Los Angeles](#)

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