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## The Chicano Mural Movement of the Southwest: Populist Public Art and Chicano Political Activism

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The Chicano Mural Movement of the Southwest:  
Populist Public Art and Chicano Political Activism

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy  
in  
Urban Studies

by

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B.A. University of New Orleans 1997  
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## Dedication

This work is dedicated to my wife, Edna Marian Kenny  
who, for the sixty years of our relationship has cleared  
my path and made things like this possible.

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## Abstract

This work examines an art movement that was a direct outgrowth of a populist civil rights movement of the late 1960's in the Southwest United States. This art, the Chicano Murals created as part of *el Movimiento* in San Diego, California was intended primarily as a didactic communication medium to reach into the *barrios* and marginalized neighborhoods for the primary purpose of carrying a resistance message to the semiliterate *mestizo* population within. Its secondary purpose was to bring a message from within these minority neighborhoods outward to the privileged elite, both Anglo and Hispanic, that within the confines of the barrio there exists a culture and heritage that has value. The Chicano Murals were ubiquitous throughout the southwest United States with concentration of the art in those areas adjacent to the Mexican border. This work examines some of the murals, and the politics associated with their creation principally in San Diego, California, and some activities in Los Angeles, and Santa Fe, New Mexico.

This dissertation posits that it has been well established that art in public space is often a contentious matter and when it also carries a contra message, as did the Chicano murals, it may be considered intrusive and abrasive. The social environment into which these murals were insinuated—the public sphere, the intellectual territory of high art and the elite system of private and government cultural patronage, are examined in the context of their effect upon the mural content and conversely, the effects of these murals upon diversity in the high art and museology of the United States.

Keywords: art of the people, *barrio*, Chicano, Chicano mural, *el Movimiento*, *mestizo*, populist art, public sphere, public art

## Preface

Although San Diego contained the second largest Mexican-American community in the western United States, known as Logan Heights, and carried a history that extended well back into the eighteenth century, the struggles for survival that went on in that neighborhood, or *barrio*, received little publicity in the metropolitan newspapers during the 1960s. In the later part of that decade most of the news from the *barrio* had to do with the construction of the San Diego Coronado Bridge that was to span San Diego bay and connect to its barrier island, Coronado. The San Diego terminus of the bridge bisected the Logan Heights community and the planned interconnection of that terminus and major freeways did not bode well for the neighborhood survival. The City Council of San Diego had promised to dedicate a parcel of land under the maze of bridge entrances and support pylons to the Logan Heights community Association for use as a community park. Within the Mexican-American cohort, planning was underway for manifestation of the *barrio* dream—Chicano Park. The project of moving from this point to their realization was an arduous trail through the public realm and this dissertation will address its details, many of the social and also the artistic hurdles.

That chronological point was also an historic personal one. At the time that this first meaningful Chicano civil rights movement in San Diego began in the late 1960s, I was a fine art student at the newly opened University of California at San Diego and lived within sight of the bridge. I was excited about not only the concept and audacity of the artistic scope of the Chicano Park plan, but my own fortuitousness at being a witness to the unfolding of a magnificent social leap and its unique oeuvre of world-class art.

## Chapter One

### A Deadly Art, the Santa Fe Shootout

Many things were not working well in the Chicano neighborhoods of Santa Fe, New Mexico at the end of the 1960s. Educational opportunities were substandard, police methods in the poor neighborhoods were considered as abusive and oppressive by the residents. Drug usage was rampant despite the methadone maintenance program, El Vico. A seemingly unstoppable flow of cheap barbiturates was available and the death rate from overdose was high. According to the political hegemony this is the way things were, had been, and there seemed little possibility of change.

Samuel Leyba, a painter, born, raised and educated in Santa Fe into the *mestizo*<sup>1</sup> heritage, was caught in this marginalization. With his talent and drive, he could have left at any time but was held by his roots—love of this place and family. The 1960s were a time of change and in his naiveté, change looked easy. To Samuel and some of his neighbors, the worst element of poverty in their *barrio* was the lack of medical facilities; they answered that need with a community project, *La Clinica de La Gente* (The Peoples Clinic) with free services for those unable to pay. What happened at the end of that project set him on course to three decades of muralism and populist art, *art of the people*.

The clinic was staffed and operating, the interior walls of the old building had been covered with murals and the crew was just “hanging out” in the lobby. The new director came into the lobby and said, “O.K. boys, your job is finished, we know what to do here and we don’t need you to watch, move on to something else.” And they did. Samuel and his brothers moved on to form Artes Guadalupanos de Aztlán, a group



dedicated to the production of Chicano ethnic murals. That change had a life-altering effect upon the Leybas. There were four Leyba brothers: Samuel, Albert, Carlos and George. It was a close-to-home tragedy that finally impelled the Leyba brothers into organizing Los Artes de Guadalupanos. Their first project was a children's mural in memory of their youngest brother, George.

Their mural work was good. It presented the Chicano situation, their heritage, their aesthetic in a manner that was confrontational but not offensive to a prudent person. Leyba, speaking for himself, argues that the primary purpose of his painting murals was to educate the people of the *barrio* about who they were, particularly that they were Americans with rights and the entitlements of every citizen. Samuel's goal, and he feels that he attained that, was to make his neighbors aware. Asked if one of your reasons in painting these murals was to shake up the Santa Fe elite, his response was an unequivocal, no, that wasn't one of his goals, but if it happened, all the better.

For years the city and its surrounds had promoted themselves as a cultural center of the southwest, home of the "southwest style" and what has become known as "Santa Fe" art. Canyon Road had developed as one of the key locales for the production of this genre of art. When a Chicano mural turned up on that road, the community reacted as though it had been violated.

I would tag this whole incident as the battle of the Salazar Tool Shed. It began when a local coalition from the *barrio* formed a ticket to run in the upcoming local elections as independents. Several of the candidates had been instrumental in supporting programs aimed at improving minority neighborhoods in Santa Fe, so when they asked for help from the mural makers and had funds to sponsor the art, the Guadalupanos went

to work. The candidate for mayor owned a small building on Canyon Road, little more than a storage shed, and it became the site of an Chicano Ethnic Mural. Pressure to shut down the muralists came in every constitutional manner, followed in 1973 by the application of pressure that I posit was reminiscent of a western action movie, and hardly constitutional.

What followed next was told from a different perspective by Geronimo Garduño, a very angry young man at the time of his interview by the authors of *Toward a Peoples Art: The Contemporary Mural Movement*. Mr. Garduño has since passed away. The Guadalupanos and other Chicanos having addressed the provision of medical services in the *barrio*, turned to education. They wanted schooling that supported the inclusion of their heritage. In June of 1973 the movement opened its school, *La Escuela Colegio Tonantrin* to fill that void. Several months later, still smarting over the Canyon Road matter, using probable cause that I have been unable to determine, a large cadre of police attacked the school building, which was occupied at the time by men, women, and teenagers. One young lady, Linda Montoya, was killed outright and several others wounded. The building and all the contents were destroyed and several of the estimated 100 law enforcement officers were wounded.

Trial was set for four Chicanos on charges of intent to commit murder. Considering the intensity of feelings against the Chicanos throughout the local government, it was generally expected that the trial would almost be perfunctory. It did not work out that way. The defendants managed to obtain a change of venue to a less emotionally-charged area and the trial proceeded. Evidence presented, both testimony and actual video taken by bystanders during the raid, convinced the jury that the only

guns present were those of the police officers and that they were on an assigned mission to destroy the contents of the school and all the Guadalupanos murals within. Observers speculate that the attack was planned to damage the school beyond repair, destroy the Guadalupanos murals, that the police accidentally killed Linda Montoya and wounded several other citizens. There was some evidence that the police shot each other. The Chicano defendants were found not guilty on all counts. No police were charged or publically reprimanded.

### **Public art and its Audience**

Fortunately, not all publics respond in such a dramatic manner, but when art with a contra social or political message is inserted into a public area, a response can be expected. The question is usually *from whom?* As contemporary art evolved, the role of the public in public art became increasingly important. The search for a firm definition has been treated theoretically in recent critical literature and more pragmatically in the public art community but the results continue to be protean. As Lacy (1995:55-59) states, visual artists of diverse backgrounds and perspectives have, for the past several decades, worked in a manner that could only be reasonably described as political intervention and social action, but is distinguishable as art by its aesthetic sensibility. Attacking boundaries placed by traditional public art, these artists have realized that without sensitivity to audience, without attention to community voice and a social strategy, the potential benefit from public art to community and society as a whole, will be vitiating. Unfortunately, this position is not held consistently by all artists, particularly the avant-garde and administrators throughout the field. (Lyotard 1967) Lyotard argued,

controversially, that the avant-garde manages to utterly neglect its cultural responsibility for unifying taste and providing a sense of communal identity by means of visual symbols.

Art's autonomy and disciplinary attitude is not new. According to Burger, paraphrased by Jochen Schute-Sasse, the development of autonomy of art in the eighteenth century to the aesthetics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is simply an intensification of art's separation from bourgeois society. This attitude departs radically from the history of the avant-garde as perceived in the United States. He argues that the tendency in raising art's autonomous status drove the individual and the arts institution to increasingly make extreme declarations of their autonomy. Further, the *apartness* from the praxis of life has always constituted the institutional status of art in the bourgeois society, severing any linkage to social responsibility and substituting the artistic process as the content of the work-*l'art pour l'art* (Burger 1984:35).

Public art in our democracy has been a magnet and a focal point for resistance and expressions of societal discontent. Even the construction of our most famous monument honoring George Washington, the 555-foot obelisk on the Washington, D.C. mall, generated long lived controversy. It was first authorized in 1783, finally begun in 1848 and completed in 1885 after having been politicized into a one hundred vitriolic, political venture with few lessons learned. (Savage 1992 :5- 21). If a memorial for our most venerated national figure engenders that much resistance, it does not bode well for consensus on any major project.

Even the name, public art, is a matter of controversy and in an effort to avoid the social inferences of old histories, now considered incorrect and continually being

adjusted. It has, in recent years, been called Urban Art, Art in the Public Sphere, New Genre Public art, Art of the Left, and finally, Art of the People. In this work, we add another name “Populist Public Art.”

Especially meaningful, today, is the word *public*. The arts industry, and its sponsors, such as the National Endowment for the Arts and corporate America, have looked upon and made their policy decisions based upon a *public* or *audience* definable by a single stereotyped individual with cohorting according to age and economic status. This problem of public and audience is finally being vigorously investigated. Lacy (2000:20) points out that this work has generated some significant question about *public*. Is *public* a qualifying descriptor of place, ownership, or access? Is it a subject, or a characteristic of the particular intended audience? Does it contribute to an explanation of the intentions of the artist or the interests of the audience? The well-known West Coast Hispanic muralist, now professor, Judith Baca, asks the trenchant question for the new generation: “Who is the public now that it has changed color?”

Contentiousness between aestheticians, dealing with public art, and social scientists working in urban studies, begins at the most elemental level. When the art theorist says *public* the rejoinder from the social scientist is, more often than not, *which public?* It is a valid question and typical of the communication discontinuities between the disciplines. The artist, the arts administrator, the museologist, and the vast bureaucratic organization of art funders tend to think of the *public* as *audience* and have developed a stereotypical model based upon that assumption.<sup>2</sup>

Ethnic minorities have challenged the assumptions of Western culture which have been premised upon the work of European, white, male artists and is deeply steeped in

patterns of dominance. That the quest for a framework within which these differences can be accommodated, without censorship of the art, is problematical and indicates the need for more interdisciplinary cooperation.

Postmodernist Mitchell (1990:29-48) holds the term *public* in yet another context. He points out that violent events such as the erection and destruction of the *Goddess of Liberty in Tiananmen Square*, the destruction of the Berlin Wall with its unauthorized murals, the ritual demolition of the Marxist-Leninist public art in East Germany, the Maoist statuary in China, the most recent denigration and destruction of the public art of Iraq, although each occurred in a distinct cultural space, there is no denying the fact that their juxtaposition in historical time and in the experiential spaces of mass audiences is significant. He argues that these events were among the most salient facts of international visual culture in our time and that the proximity, importance and impact of these events has reignited some of the most basic questions and controversies about art in the public sphere. Mitchell, within his postmodern framework, sees the pulling down of public art as important to its function as putting it up and points out that the association of public art with violence is nothing new. The fall of every Chinese dynasty since antiquity has been accompanied by the destruction of its public monuments, and the long history of political and religious strife in the West could almost be rewritten as a history of iconoclasm (Mitchell 1990:32-33). The symbolic, ritual destruction of the Saddam Hussein's statuary and the overt damage inflicted on Afghanistan's 1600-year-old Bamiyan Buddhas by the Taliban that recently filled TV screens world wide, bolsters his theory.

## The Public Sphere

What is *public* for art, or anything else? Is there such a thing as a public sphere in late capitalism? Mitchell posits that public art, whether a hero on a horse or an abstract ornament in the corporate urban plaza, may well be a historical anomaly or a contradiction in terms. As anomaly, it manifests a utopian ideal, what Jurgen Habermas identified as *the bourgeois public sphere*, an all-inclusive site of uncoerced discussion and opinion formation, a place that transcends politics, commerce, private interests and even state control. The space that Rosler felt was missing in the New York City Tilted Arc debacle, where a political dialogue and decision making process could have taken place, was the public realm. That mystical place, the public realm, which Habermas conceived as a safe place for political dialog and discourse, has been the subject of serious reconsideration in the past several decades. It is a place whose very existence has raised serious doubt, a place that has been ridiculed as mutually exclusive with democracy, impugned as an invention to further subjugate feminism by exclusion. And finally, a space under attack by political forces diametrically opposed to each other but unified by their animus toward, and fear of an uncontrolled, *undisneyfied* public space harboring strangers rather than audience.<sup>3</sup> It is a space that is under most virulent attack, not by evil forces but by the wondrous advances of technology that have encouraged our public to forego the use of public spaces and seek a hermetic privatism in their homes. Many writers, including Michael Sorkin and Rosalyn Deutsche, see the battle for the control of these traditional spaces, the streets, the squares, the courtyards and parks as a key to the exercise of free speech rights. In fact, they see the effort to reclaim the city as the struggle of democracy itself and now with the advent of the Patriot Act, that reclamation seems even more problematical. There are no political, or

social, demonstrations in Disneyland. Even a mildly untoward gathering in the Mall of the Americas would engender an instantaneous response by corporate police who monitor the space with an electronic shield that would cause George Orwell to shudder. A cursory inventory of the places formerly considered as *public* that are now controlled by an economic, political elite, can be surprising. This is not an ahistorical development. Control of the public space has been a concern of the ruling class and later of the well-to-do bourgeois. Scholars have argued for generations about the underlying motivation in eighteenth century urban design. One consistent argument offered was that the layout of the streets in both Wren's London and Baron von Haussman's Paris was primarily about protecting the power and economic elite from intrusion by the rabble.

The private realm was not well developed until very recently and was materially impacted by the industrial revolution. Leisure and the division of labor accelerated the growth of the home as other than a place to sleep and procreate. Nevertheless, despite the growth of the private realm we know that, recently as the *fin de siècle*, American and European culture generally embraced the public space—it was critical for societal *interface* and communication. What does this mystical space look like today? Is it still available, or as some suspect, has it dissolved? I am hopeful and posit that it is alive, not too well at this time, little understood by either the media or government at all levels, but despite these adverse symptoms, with a favorable prognosis because of the critical need for it if our society is to have a twenty-first century democracy and enjoy a truly expressive *art of the people*.

When one speaks of the public sphere, the thoughts of Jurgen Habermas are essential. His statement of the concept is concise and lucid: the bourgeois public sphere



may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public. In developing and honing that concept, Habermas (1966:28-56) traced the history and prehistory of *public* through its etymological and political development from medieval sovereignty to Marxian theory. In treating the social aspects of his hypothesis he drew freely from the work of Hannah Arendt (1958: 22-78), even though the theme of her work could hardly be classified as Marxian, but today, nearly fifty years after its publication, her book *The Human Condition* is still relevant and predictive. As on point as studies of the public sphere can be with sociology and politics, their relevance to the study of public art has been a stretch beyond the limit of the argument. Lyn Lofland's *The Public Realm: Exploring the City's Quintessential Social Territory* lays out a map of the realm that offers a matrix which can include public art, perhaps explicate where it can fit naturally and possibly ameliorate some of the unneutralized vitriol amongst the players. We will follow Lofland into the *Regio Incognita* of the *public sphere*, a social space for *strangers*.

According to Lofland, *the public realm is constituted of those urban settlements in which individuals in copresence tend to be personally unknown or only categorically known to one another*. It is only in the city where we find the social-psychological environment supportive of the fecund space necessary to nurture a public realm. To maintain that environment on a permanent basis, only a city can provide collections of persons who are personally unknown to one another or composed importantly of strangers. As the city develops, so too the discrete public realm. Leaving safe private space, the domicile, and venturing into the public realm, the street, is to experience a world of many unknown *others* who do not share the same values, history or perspective.

Following the work of Albert Hunter (1985:20-242), Lofland (1998) uses a trichotomous distinction between the realms in society, rather than the dichotomous categorization used by many other authors in the field. She divides social space into three distinct parts: *the private realm*, characterized by ties of intimacy among primary groups including members located within households and personal networks; *the parochial realm* is where members are associated by community, neighbors, acquaintance, workplace, or mutual interest. And finally, *the public realm*, the space of strangers or at best casual



**Figure 1 - A Public Realm?**

Photo E.Amoroso

acquaintances, the street, a place for discussion, a non exclusive space, a safe place for decision, or the practice of democracy.

Now that we know what each of these realms should contain, where are they? This answer is not

quite so straightforward, because realms are not geographically or physically rooted pieces of space—they are social and they are fluid. So, might not one expect that a public park would be a public realm at all times? No, not so. Whether a space contains any realm at all and which of the three types it is, remains changeable depending upon the proportions and densities of relationship types present and those proportions and densities are fluid. Cultural or legal designations notwithstanding, it is always a matter of the social

relationships present. Rosalyn Deutsche (1998: 276-77) offers a fine example of this fluidity in her essay on *Agoraphobia*. Jackson Square Park, a small triangular park in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of New York City was a public space, dating back to the nineteenth century, used by local residents from nearby upper-middle-class apartment houses and by a substantial number of local residents sans apartments, the homeless. The park was a public space by designation and fulfilled the *public realm* requirement by being occupied by strangers most of the time. After a \$1.2-million reconstruction of the park, a neighborhood group, The Friends of Jackson Park, decided to lock the newly installed gates at night. The City Department of Parks welcomed the assistance in protecting public *space*, a defense they equated with evicting homeless people from the city park. The New York Times and other media strongly supported the action, consistently mistaking a parochial group for the *public*. In the context of public space, what transpired was that a designated public park had been *appropriated* by a parochial group under auspices of the city government, and by denying use of the park to certain “undesirables,” the homeless, the strangers, created an exclusive, gentrified, parochial, “better” space. This is not an action unique in New York City and is considered as an appropriate, legal and socially responsible action to deny access to these *intruders* (Amoroso 2001).

Similar exclusions are present, to mixed reviews, throughout the newly renovated parks dotting the city. Aesthetically, there is no argument that order and *pleasantness* are improved and regular confrontation with the city’s social failure to handle the homeless problem is minimized, but legal targeting has not reduced the homeless problem and

there is no evidence that conversion of public space to exclusive parochial space will palliate it.

Increasingly we find that conservative urbanists, either ignore or misunderstand the spatial politics of the public realm with its inherent, conflictual terrain, and are supporting the transformation of public space into proprietary or parochial space. In most cases the stated intention is improving the domestic tranquility but, in fact, their attitude tends to obscure social disharmony. So, must the urban planner be a social worker? I do not argue for that, but Deutsche (1988) does and suggests a need for increased awareness, amongst professionals, of the impact of the planning act upon the social fabric.

As Doss (1995:44) points out, this utopian public sphere, this arbitrary merging place of like thinking citizens, is not intended to create an idealistic, problem free space of consensus, essentially the model preferred by the NEA. That is, contemporary arts organizations seem to prefer a culture in which audiences form, or appear to form, a democratic unity and in which political and social disparities can be ignored. Mitchell (1990: 886) supports Doss in this and phrases the concept succinctly when he says that art sponsors, particularly government, and corporate, are partial to calm spaces:

where disinterested citizens may contemplate a transparent emblem of their own inclusiveness and solidarity, and deliberate on the general good, free of coercion, violence or private interests.

When the complex variable of American consensus viability is factored into this calm space, the concept is overwhelmed. Potential audiences are real people found in real places. Bearing witness to an identifiable person or group challenges the monolithic image of the audience that has been enshrined in the value systems of late modern art. If

the audience is no longer a given, neither is it singular. Lacy (2000:36) suggests that artists are beginning to conceive of complex and multiple audiences as distinct, heterogeneous groups without specialized elitist training.

According to Jacob (1995) the mainstream contemporary art world focuses upon the production of commodity (works of art) and distribution (museums and galleries). Mediation between the work of art and the audience is under the control of professionals. Any inability on part of the audience to comprehend or appreciate the work, is attributed to a lack of knowledge on the part of the viewer or lack of appropriate didacticism on part of the museum, or finally as a last resort, lack of visual language capability on the part of the artist.

The public, in responding to abstract works, without the tutorial assistance of the museum telling them what they are looking at, usually follows a direct approach to make sense of what they are seeing. This metaphorical process is a necessary and usual method in both life and art. The primary difference between public art and museum viewing is the context in which the gaze takes place. In a museum or gallery, a voluntary audience places the art in a context related to a known body of work, through knowledge or tutorial assist. On the other hand, the involuntary audience in a public place has daily life as its primary frame of reference. Without an art context usually provided to an informed audience, Senie (1992:240) posits that a general audience must rely upon literal comparison with experience, expressed as, “it looks like,” or using typologization, “it’s art” or “it’s abstract art.” Without an accompanying art education component, the audience for public art is generally excluded from the art experience ostensibly intended for them.

When public art remains a foreign object on familiar turf it is a natural transition into an object of easy attack, ridicule, or danger. Seeing public art as dangerous can be an acknowledgement of its power. It can be perceived as dangerous because it represents *the powers that be*. If a work of art is not framed or tamed by being placed within a familiar context, a sense of unease persists, even to the point where the work is seemed as threatening. The sense of threat, verging on paranoia, seems to pervade sculpture installed in the vicinity of US government buildings. Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*, a massive steel abstract, was compared to the Berlin Wall by Judge Re of the Court of International Law. Charles Ginnever's *Protagoras* was described by security specialists as a potential machine gun nest. George Sugarman's *Baltimore Federal* was criticized because it could be utilized for speaking or hurling objects by dissident groups (Kenny 2001).

As Rosler (1987: 246) states, the crisis in acceptance in Public Art of Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* is the best example in which the passing audience refuses to constitute itself as the public, the body implicated in its discourse. Certainly, in the absence of a political public, or even the conception of that space in which political dialogue and decision-making takes place, government sponsored art can only be seen as government imposed art. Since it doesn't have a "public," since there can hardly be said to be a public, this art cannot be accepted as work even when chosen by a designated government commission that purportedly stands for, or represents the public, the elusive public-at-large.

Richard Serra's abstract sculpture entitled *Tilted Arc* is perhaps the most written about sculpture that was produced in the last century. It may also have been the most

litigated and controversial piece of steel that has ever been installed in New York City. Its fame should in no way be construed as a function of its aesthetic value or artistic significance, although Serra is famous for his creation of sculpture from massive steel plates that is out of contextual scale with humanity, he is simultaneously notable and controversial for his arrogance and disregard for the site of that public sculpture..

In 1979 Richard Serra was commissioned by the General Services Administration (GSA), a Federal Procurement Agency, to design a sculpture for the east plaza of the Federal Building in lower Manhattan. This Plaza faces Foley Square, New York's civic center, which is circled by various courts, administrative and legal offices. The complex is the largest federal office outside of Washington D.C. As Crimp (2000:67) said, it was a highly visible site in the government culture. Regardless of the aesthetic opinions involved in the *Tilted Arc*, including the artist's, their importance pales in the face of the political, social and judicial maelstrom that resulted in its ultimate destruction. From the onset, Serra's intentions were clearly stated. In his own words he aimed:

to dislocate or alter the decorative function of the plaza and actively bring people into the sculptures context

With regard to audience sensitivity and multicultural expansion, Serra's feelings were no less straightforward:

trying to attract a bigger audience has nothing to do with the making of art. It has to do with making yourself into a product only to be consumed by people. Working this way allows society to determine the terms and concept of the art the artist must then fulfill these terms. I find the idea of pluralism art-defeating.

After the interview that produced the foregoing statements in 1984, art historian Harriet Senie remarked, " he is scornful of the need to take the public's wishes into consideration." Following his manifesto and insisting on *Tilted Arc's* site-specific

sanctity as an aesthetic object and ideological tool, Serra ignored the complicated issue of discourse between Public Art and the public, and how that discourse shapes democratic expression in the public sphere. This rather narrow frame of reference apparently blinded him to the oppositional political and social forces that were gathering (Doss 1995:32-33).

*Tilted Arc* was installed in the Federal Plaza in 1981. Serra was paid in full, \$175,000 dollars, which according to him, yielded little or no personal profit.

It had an instant enemy of some import. According to Finkelpearl (2000:61), almost immediately, Judge Edward Re of the Court of International Law, which was housed in the federal building, initiated a letter writing campaign urging the removal of the work. He thought it was completely inappropriate, desecrated federal property, and it angered him. The campaign was not successful under the Democratic regime of Jimmy Carter. However, soon after the inauguration of Ronald Reagan and the installation of a conservative Republican bureaucracy, Judge Re found a sympathetic ear in the sculpture's sponsor, the General Services Administration (GSA), now under its new regional administrator, William Diamond. Together, they were able to leverage the system to have public hearings to consider the removal of the offending piece.

While the art world was used to the work of Serra, many considering him *an establishment artist*, the workers at the federal building did not. They were astonished by it, seeing its enormity and attitude as threatening. The workers, however, were not the only ones involved. Federal Plaza is also in Tribeca, the mixed residential/commercial south of Soho that became popular in the 1970s as an artist community. Additionally, the audience has another component that has been ignored completely—the thousand of people per work day that come to the federal complex to do business. True they are not



part of the permanent community of Foley Plaza, but should they not be entitled to consideration as part of Public Art audience?

During the period of the sculpture's placement on the Plaza, excluding the efforts of Judge Re, there had been few complaints. Despite this, Mr. Diamond convened hearings to determine if Serra's sculpture should be "relocated" to "increase public use of the plaza." The hearings lasted three days during which 180 interested people gave testimony. Of the presentations to the GSA board, 122 were in favor of keeping the sculpture on site, 58 in favor of moving it. The hearing panel, exercising its discretionary powers, disregarded the preponderance of support for leaving the *Tilted Arc* on site and voted for removal of the work in a textbook demonstration of *authoritarian populism: the mobilization of democratic discourses to sanction, indeed to pioneer shifts toward authoritarianism*. Demonstrating the height of political aplomb, Mr. Diamond announced to the press: "The people have spoken, and they have been listened to by their government."

If anyone had really listened to the people speaking and the government response, they would have realized that they were in the presence of master linguistic prestidigitation. Those speaking for Serra, were for the most part speaking in the vernacular of art historians. Take for instance the remarks of Museum of Modern Art curator, William Rubin:

Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* is a powerful work of great artistic merit . . . truly challenging works of art requires a period of time before their artistic language can be understood by a broader public.

In response to this professional point of view, and many more of similar genre, that came from the fine art community, the workers and users of the plaza notched up their vehemence, resentment and the anger. Peter Hirsch replied:

The public is saying we don't like it, and we aren't stupid, and we are not Philistines. We don't need art historians and curators to tell us what we will like. We don't like it.

Shirley Paris, another worker from the building was equally succinct:

This gigantic strip of rust is, in my opinion, an arrogant, nose thumbing gesture at the government and those who serve the government . . . It is bad enough for the government and civil servants to be perennial targets of the public and press alike, but for us to be degraded by an artist as well is, to say the least, compounding the insult.

While Serra insists that he built the sculpture for users of the plaza, many public viewers, mostly government workers read an anti-government message they thought it contained and took the work as a personal insult. As Finkelppearl (2000:64-65) says, Government workers are used to being demonized, and the piece was installed as the United States was entering a period of intense antigovernment sentiment.

For the art world and the government, the hearings were confrontational,



**Fig 2 The Tilted Arc**

depressing and but instructive. The artists and the art elite had expected that their opinions to count as they do in their aesthetic environment. They did not.

The outcome was politically preordained; the decision was made beforehand. It was a hard, classic public demonstration of communicative action and the effectiveness of power and misinformation

(Lauria and Soll 1996:23). Rice (1992:234-235) states

that the demise of the *Tilted Arc* can be ascribed to first, the failure of communication between the practitioners and experts of the art world and the diverse publics in the urban environment, and secondly, the active, unstudied role of the press in mythifying and representing so called public opinion. Other writers in the field, although they give

credence to these factors as causal, indicate that primary causation may be more closely related to the pressure from conservative politicians in the 1980s attempting to erode the due process established in the 1970s for the facilitation of Public Art.

On 15 March 1989 *Tilted Arc* was destroyed by the United States government, exercising property rights confirmed by The United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit. The path from the statement of Mr. Diamond through the judicial process to the day of destruction was not made possible by anyone's benevolence or some granting of American justice. Mr. Serra, unlike the stereotypical artist, could afford to engage the government. In the fray, which Mr. Serra lost, the full panoply of artists "rights" including copyright, *le droit moral*,<sup>4</sup> the Constitutional amendments, and property rights were scrutinized

If the area surrounding government buildings was thought of as a potential battleground prior to 2001, the attack of 9/11 has crystallized those closely held fears into a paranoid National Security threat and sent the designers of the 9/11 monument back to the drawing board for the fourth time. At some time in the future, I argue that close analysis of the 9/11 memorial project unfolding for the past five years, particularly the vitriolic discourse in the public sphere regarding *what is the purpose of this memorial, who and what are we memorializing, and who should control its content* will yield data enabling future creators of public art to move forward on firmer ground. Aesthetic control and social conscience aside, it is obvious that landlord's income will be a premier decision criterion, along with politics and an expanding list of publics with vested interests. As the list grows so does the cost estimate, now being discussed with the suffix, billion.

## **Introduction to the Chicano Mural**

To understand this mural art is to consider and submerge oneself in spiritual, social, political, philosophical and historical problems of our time. If ever a subject begged for interdisciplinary analysis it is this juncture of aesthetics, sociology, and politics.

Justino Fernandez (Tibol, 1979: 27).

The production of murals in public places has a long and peregrinatic history, not only widely spaced in geography, but also chronologically. The art form can be traced from the early beginnings of human settlements in Paleolithic times, appearing in nearly all historical periods up to the twenty-first century. The Chicano Art and Mural movement of the Southwest United States, *el arte de la raza* (the art of the people of Aztlán), is a part of that history. It burst onto the chaotic American social and political scenes of the 1960s, reached its apogee in the early 1970s and came whimpering asymptotically into the twenty-first Century, alive but not well.

In its most recent manifestation, this artform occurs at a unique intersection of resistance politics, visual art, and social communication between some of society's most diverse strata. To truly appreciate the movement's uniqueness, it is imperative to critically define the political miasma from which it came, what this ability to communicate contributed to the Chicano and Tejan socially marginalized communities, the art world into which Chicano and Tejan art was born, its rejection as an important art form by the elite American cultural and art hegemony, and finally what sets it apart from other public art of that period and today.

The social aspects of art, particularly public art, have been rigorously studied both in the United States and Europe as an aesthetic field and as an instrument of political

communication (Adorno 1970, Barzun 1989, Berger 1974, Horkheimer 1973, Lyotard 1967, Tolstoy 1995 and Weber 1973). Little of this work had the benefit of examination of an art genre that actually grew directly out of a social resistance movement as its vehicle. In this case it was an important communication element used to unify a semi-literate population and served as an energy engine for the Chicano civil rights movement, *el Movimiento*.

The moral and legal basis for the Chicano claims to ownership of the lands of the Southwestern United States, a plank element of that movement, was based upon perceived inequities resulting from nineteenth century treaty and purchase agreements. The only persons who might reasonably exercise such claims would be those direct descendants of the Mexican land grant holders and residents present at the time of US acquisition of those lands under the treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo of 1848, the Gadsen Purchase in 1854, the Texas Constitution of 1836 and. The Guadalupe-Hidalgo Treaty ended the US-Mexican War and resulted in ceding of New Mexico, Arizona, California, and portions of Nevada, Utah and Colorado. The Gadsen Purchase resulted in ceding of lands between the Gila and Rio Bravo Rivers to the United States and attached some economically key territories to the Arizona Territory and Texas.

Even a cursory review of regional demographics will indicate that these “Americans by decree,” these citizens of Mexico, who were trapped on these ceded lands originally numbered less than 100,000 souls. When counted through direct lineage, they form only a small sector of the burgeoning Hispanic American population of today. Most of that twenty-eight million are nineteenth and twentieth century immigrants—legal and illegal—or their direct descendants. So what was the source of discontent? Why should

the United States have waves of immigrants coming to the country from Europe and Asia with the fervent desire of becoming “Americanized,” and simultaneously have thousands of immigrants coming across our borders in the south or even more fortuitously, have the gift of American citizenship available to them without emigrating from their homes, and reject that opportunity? There were many reasons, but when examined in the context of twenty-first century social context, three are obvious. First, these Mexican citizens did not see the Americans as liberators but as foreign occupiers speaking a foreign tongue, usurping their wealth and culture, a situation with which they had vast experience in the preceding century. Second, the new laws of the Texicans, the independent republic, and subsequently, the United States federal system put them at a distinct disadvantage in proving up their property rights. Thirdly the prejudicial hubris of the Anglo settlers placed them in the position of “second-class citizenship,” not unlike that of the pre-revolt days of the peon society, and they were afforded little legal or social recourse. This fire had been smoldering for a century.

The Chicano mural movement was ubiquitous in the Southwest United States, the most acerbic art being produced in those locations that were originally Mexican lands, those locations that still stand close to the sovereign territories of Mexico, the borderlands of the United States. The artistic phalanx of el Movimiento, used a content of pride in Mesoamerican heritage and the value of their native culture presented as descendant from a long line of highly developed Olmec, Aztec, Mayan civilizations and a mythical common origin in Aztlán as inducements. It drew heavily upon cohorts of marginalized society and originally attracted many members of a striving middle class Hispanic population, all of whom had long endured the taxonomy of “second class” citizens with

its associated social and cultural isolation. Denise Chavez, an elegant Chicana author and playwright expressed that isolation poignantly and simply in her 1994 work *Face of An Angel* when she wrote:

In our family, men usually came first. Then God and Country. Country was last. Should be last. When you grow up in the Southwest, your state is your country. There exists no other country outside which you know. Likewise neighborhood is a country. As your family is country. As your house is country. As you are country.

It is not difficult to envision a resistance movement being nurtured in that fecund social ground of being as a more viable alternative to bathing in the bathos of victimhood. A casual glance at the bibliography of this work demonstrates the vast effort that has gone into describing the art, artists, and history of the Chicano Mural movement. Generally, art murals produced by and in support of *el Movimiento* fall under the general classification of public art. I take issue with that current typology being applied to this art. One of the problems endemic in public art has been relating it to the social environment into which it is inserted.

When I say “inserted,” it is in the age old context of architectural “site specificity” that has been problematical since the first architect, or patron, added art to his project for aesthetic or political effect—some entity, committee, or patron decided what would be added. The ‘public’ was then called upon to appreciate it, in some instances even if they did not understand or respond to it (Kenny 2001:6).

The Chicano Mural movement offers an exciting opportunity to examine a body of art created for the public sphere in a different mode, purposive art sourced from a segment of society that had established a cultural base to support it, the inherent talent to create it, the cultural capacity to explain it and, most importantly, to communicate its message inwardly to cement community cultural ties and outwardly to the general



**Fig 3 - Mexican Heritage Mural**

population. Succinctly, it was intended to be didactic and inclusive, and it succeeded. The mural in Figure 3 is part of the Texas display. At the apogee of its proliferation there were few urban areas west of the Mississippi River having even a small population of Mexican Americans that did not also have a Chicano mural somewhere in its public space. Many of these murals were created by itinerant groups of Chicano artists working for local communities for little more than

sustenance and supplies. As might be expected, the most intense concentration of *el Movimiento* activity took place in Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and Southern California. This work will examine the action around and in San Diego, California. The criteria for its selection were specific: first, the murals were some of the first initiated in the Chicano movement and the defining of the public sphere and the acquisition of the lands necessary for the Chicano Park required aggressive community adhesion and commitment. The



initial actions of the local government were egregiously non-supportive and threatening to the future existence, not only of the park, but of the actual community and its residential areas. Subsequent to the start of the murals, it was obvious that they clearly reflected both or national grievances, Chicano heritage and were clearly identifiable as part of the movement. Further, the murals were created in public space forming part of a minority neighborhood or *barrio* and the political message was always clearly discernable without proposing unlawful or morally objectionable acts.

## **Los Angeles County Murals**

There is a plethora of world-class murals just north of San Diego in the greater Los Angeles area, some related to *el Movimiento* and many other civil rights movements. They are not included in this work because the majority of them, including the magnificent work along the mile long work in the Los Angeles River channel were supported by the local government and reflect art that was monitored and subject to the approval the local political system. Control of the content was affected by legislation requiring permitting by civil authority and allowing destruction of all other murals as “illegal signs.” As the mural projects gained importance and became meaningful budgetary items, they became political, financial and power bearing vehicles under control of the local administration.

However, it would be unconscionable to speak of the murals of the Southwest without considering the magnificent mural works accomplished in Los Angeles, principally through the dynamic artist and administrator, now professor, Judith Baca. Organized originally under the aegis of the park and recreation department the mural

movement, her combination of hands-on teaching, direction and foresight, resulted in a city beautified by world-class art honoring every constituent minority in the metropolitan area. The projects were a highly successful social venture in addition to providing an alternative, creative, educational experience for minority young people. In order to grasp the magnitude of that social value, it is necessary to look at some of the Los Angeles social tensions extant in the late 1960s.

First, social stratification by race was endemic throughout the southwest United States but was particularly pernicious in Southern California and most heavily reported in the Los Angeles metropolitan area. It manifested itself most poignantly in the large Hispanic cohorts which had organized themselves territorially into tribal-like feudal enclaves clearly delineated by coded graffiti markings. Having suffered for generations with unfavorable, prejudicial press and police pressure. The social geography was reminiscent of a conglomeration of defensive feudal redoubts, each under a “homeboy” chieftain and a draconian code of behavior. A unifying element was sorely needed.

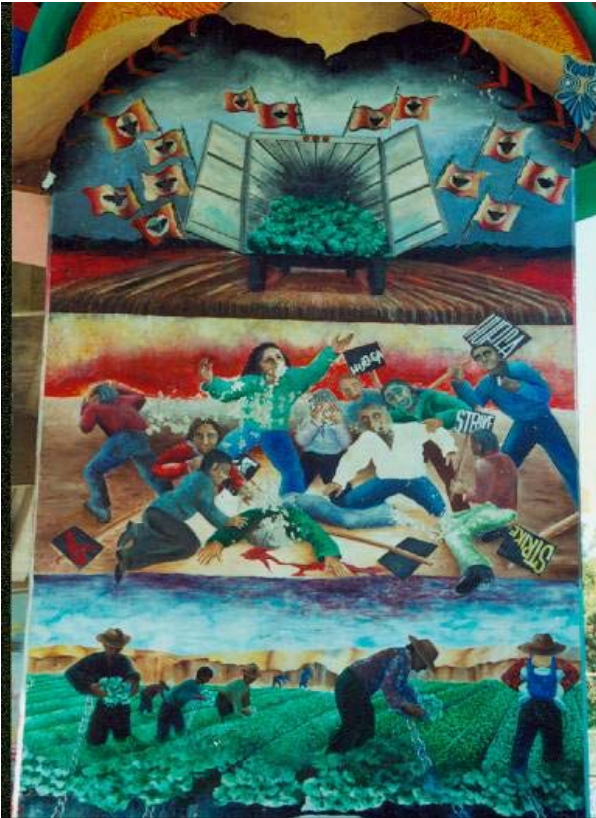
As Ms. Baca has said, she had the color, she spoke the language, she had more than enough talent, a teaching job in the parks department. Starting in her own town, Pacoima, she enlisted young Mexican Americans in painting murals about themselves and their lives. Moving from park to park, Judith, known as the “Art Lady,” was able to become the catalysis, and in many cases the passport, to allow the Mexican-American youth to move safely across those sharply drawn borders separating homeboy from homeboy. From this humble start with the mural *Mi Abuelita* (My Grandmother) in Hollenbeck Park, the program grew to one of the world’s greatest collection of historical and minority heritage public murals painted by both professional artists and minority

youth under creative direction. They tell the history of the Los Angeles area from a slightly different point of view than the standard social science textbook. As the number and communicative effectiveness of the mural program became obvious, its value as a target of opportunity increased and the program was in need of a contra-force to the legislative control wielded by the local government. The result was the formation of Friends of the Citywide Mural Program and subsequently the formation of SPARC, The Social and Public Art Resource Center, which has since developed a life of its own. Some researchers say that, at inception, its specific purpose was to bring the services of attorneys and managers into the service of the program specifically to defend it from untoward municipal threats and administrative sieges.



**Fig 4- Early Los Angeles Ethnic Mural**

## Chapter Two



**Fig 5 Farm Workers Plight**

### **Seeds of *el Movimiento***

Reading *The Politics of Chicano Liberation* (1977) in the third millennium is much akin to teleportation into an impressionist's Paris coffeehouse scene circa the fin de siècle—quaint, unconnected with the twenty-first century zeitgeist, definitely a cultural non sequitur, the bones of bad ideas and their subsequent failed manifestations bleaching in the light from the success of the Chicano *el Movimiento*. Taken in the context of 1960s civil rights extreme

politics it is an instrument to measure the discontent of the Chicano population with their miserable lot in a supposedly democratic society, their use of the unions as a tool of equalization, and the catalysis contribution of the revolutionary spirit to overcome the inertia of the Mexican-Americans mired in the status quo, the book has value. It also should not be undervalued as a route map between the Marxist Revolutionary Movement, a Marxist History of *el Raza*, the work of César Chavez in development of the farm

workers unions, the development of the post World War II Community Service Organizations, and the revolutionary conferences of la Raza (the people) in the late 1960s that provide the political underpinning of the Gente de Aztlán (the people of Aztlán) and lent spirit and direction to *el Movimiento*.

César Chavez and the symbol of his Farm Workers Association, a black eagle resting on a field of red, are well recorded in both the academic literature and the popular media. A thorn in the side of the corporate agribusiness with his demands for better wages, living conditions, and health care, he was no less a problem to the Marxist liberation cohorts who were attempting to radicalize the Chicano movement. Chavez, a pacifist by action and declaration, but firmly committed to the worker's welfare, operated within the systems, both economic and political, using the *huelga* (strike) and boycott as his principal elements of force. Always dedicated to the farm worker's welfare, he came to their union cause from leadership of the CSO because of the reluctance that conservative organization to concentrate on migratory workers problems. The CSO at that time was an amalgamation of scores of local groups started by veterans returning from World War II with the goal of improving the Hispanic status in the United States. Their interest was to gain a modicum of power through political action, not the improvement of living conditions for migratory farm workers. Meanwhile, back at the ranch, literally, radical action was underway to shake the master's house to its very foundation. The treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, signed in 1848, was very specific in protecting the property rights of the *mestizo* citizens who chose to stay in the southwest territory. Not unlike the treatment of other indigenous people, those rights were stolen by

legislation, regulation, and sometimes, outright fraud, resulting in transfer of those land grants to Anglos.

Reies López Tijerina, a radical Chicano, researched those grants and the documentation describing how they were manipulated. An organization, The Alianza Federal de Mercedes (Federal Alliance of Land Grants) was formed with intent to change this situation by radical public action. Part of the plan, to demonstrate and take over control of some Forest Service lands resulted in the federal government invoking troops to end the sit-in and provided the legal *just cause* to use judicial action that ended in



**Fig 6 - Multicultural Mural, San Diego**

prison terms for several of the leaders. The mural, (Fig 6) painted on the outside of the cultural center describes the Chicano/Indian common plight.

Trying another tactic they organized politically under the name the People's Constitutional Party, and ran Mr. Tijerina for the governorship of New Mexico. That too failed, despite the majority Hispanic population on the state. It was obvious, even at this point in time, that the entire Hispanic population would not support extreme radicalism; they wanted change, not revolution. It also demonstrated to the Chicano population that as the Anglo/Mexican-American social structure was clearly stratified and the stratification within the Latino community was no less pernicious. The Chicano learned many things from these initial experiences, but two stand out, first, that extreme radicalism at this time would just provide justification for radical response and be met with more extreme force, and of equal importance, the social adhesive that bound them together was not strong enough. The bond had to be centered on themselves, their heritage, culture, pride and commonality, something that affected all Hispanic social classes. This was also the period when the Chicano movement gained certainty that they must stand alone because although there was some commonality in the goals of the American Indian Movement (AIM), the Afro-American Movement all three were organized around their diverse heritage.

### **The search for Aztlán, the Chicano homeland.**

The *sense of place* is not an affectation of modern society, nor is it an ethereal, abstract concept unable to survive deconstruction in our postmodern, *now* culture. It is well founded in serious thought and an understanding of the idea that the *safest way to take possession of a place on this earth* is to bury ones dead in it. And thus the perennial contention between anthropology, archaeology, and the legal system over

who owns those bones and whose land is that, was culturally solved millennia ago, the legal system is just now catching up. Prior to the idea that ownership of land could be claimed with a document, the wooden graveposts of forefathers indicated the ground of belonging and concomitantly, possession of place. The literature of antiquity abounds with references to the genealogical contract between the living and the dead establishing place by burying and leaving a sign of that process. Even the establishment of new cities by reburying ancestors, either physically or symbolically, at the new site was commonplace. Harrison points out that in Virgil's *The Aenid*, when Hector warns Aeneas of the fall of Troy and instructs him to flee across the sea *with the symbols of his ancestors* to establish a new safe place and by replanting his dead, he lays the ground for a new place. In this case, these re-burials were the basis for Rome's future claims to the territory. Today, several millennia forward, tribal societies of Southeast Asia, sub-



**Fig 7 Searching**

Saharan African and aboriginal societies of Australia still maintain similar beliefs and rites. The focus of this work is not, however, on funerary rites, beliefs, or ancestral genealogy, but rather what that simple device of unequivocal specificity, the burial marker, has metamorphosed into in our twenty-first century, how it is visually represented, and how it is retained in memory through succeeding generations. Without benefit of markers, myth, oral history, and

archeological ruins can be used to create a collective, or collected memory and thus a binding element for an acceptable cultural history.



The reappearance of the mystic, mythic, ancestral homeland in the Chicano, La Raza de Bronze, culture can be attributed to myriad causes but the most obvious was necessity (Luis Leal, 1981). The underlying generative force was powerful but not cohesive. The *cause* (*La causa*), or any of its alternative names: *el Movimiento*, *el plan espiritual*, or *el plan de Aztlán*. was christened in 1969 at the First Chicano Conference held in Denver, Colorado for the stated purpose of organizing the movement on a national basis with a dedicated purpose of righting some of the wrongs resulting from exploitation and racism over the previous century.<sup>5</sup>

Unifying the disparate elements of the *mestizo* society under a common symbol that related to Mexico's historic past, something that could be a modern common denominator, was problematic. That symbol would necessarily have traceable tendrils into a Placehood and origin that related to recorded history but still sufficiently mystical to require the inclusion of myth. Aztlán, the mystical, mythical paradisiacal home of the Aztecs where injustice, sickness, and evil did not exist, was the choice. For a group whose reality and history saw their lives as misery in the margins of an oppressive, occupying society, on land that they considered their birthright; what could be more appropriate? It was a thing of dreams and proved to be the ethereal adhesive that bound the Chicanos into a political entity. They were a group seeking self-knowledge, and roots in an historical past, that would lend themselves to manifestation in politics, art, and literature. As Michael Pina posits in *Aztlán* (1989 :17), to actually grasp how the myth of the Aztec homeland could live and thrive in a twentieth century society, the reader must be willing to suspend the worldview of scientific reasoning that remains phenomenologically "outside" of archaic mythology.

The story, myth, or history of the peregrination of the Aztec peoples has been told in oral history, preliterate pictographs, several sixteenth century histories written by missionary historians engaged in Christianizing the heathen barbarians of New Spain and in all, although differing in non-essential detail, generally agree on theme and content.

All sources of this story agree that the Aztec peoples came from the North and over a period of time migrated to the plains of central Mexico, learning many things along the way. Which instantly raises the question: If things were so good in the Aztec city-state of Aztlán, no sickness, poverty, no aging, why did they leave? Destiny.

As with all myths of creation, the story involves the interaction of man and deities. In this case they were directed and led by their god Huitzilopochtli to follow their destiny. Their arrival in the central plain of what we now call Mexico was well timed and coincident with the decline of the Tolteca society. When these newcomers established their first temple in Tenochtitlan circa 1325 AD, they had progressed from the status of *chichimecas* (sons of dogs *lit.*) to a knowledgeable civilization. We know then, where they went to, but whence they came is still an unanswered question.

As I said earlier, placehood is hardly a new concept. Where do we come from and where lie the bones of our ancestors? When the place is part of a myth, the questions multiply. Is my ancestral home part of the historical fact or invention? The search for the geography of Aztlán began in the reign of the Aztec leader Moctezuma Ilhuicamina (1440-1469) and it continued for several centuries thereafter. Nearly all the expeditions felt that they had, in fact, found it. There was however, some disparity in GPS coordinates. They placed it in diverse locations: the coast of Baja California, northern lakes in Mexico, Washington State, East-Central California. Nevertheless, Aztlán was

placed once and forever in February 1969 when *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* was created at the First Chicano National Conference held at Denver, Co and it proclaimed:

Before all our brothers in the bronze continent, we are a nation, we are a union of free pueblos, WE are AZTLÀN!

As Rudolfo Anaya points out in his paper, *Azatlán: A homeland Without Boundaries*, this ceremony or naming is one of the most important cohesive acts a community performs in its evolution as a tribe, state or nation. For La Raza, it was what was needed and wanted: a common ground to meld spiritual, political and social aspirations. It is the artists, with words, music and symbols, who like the shamans of other tribes, provide a human expression of the tribal identity and character.

### **The Spread of *el Movimiento***

Two of the unique aspects of el Movimiento was its rapid rate of diffusion throughout the Mexican—American community and the inclusivity of its content. Although this document deals primarily with the all-important communication visual aspects of the movement, that element represents only a single phase of a multifaceted cultural effort to conflate all things *mestizo* into the modern American cultural arena. Among the cultural aspects of the unveiling were theatre, literature, music, and a long awaited penetration of academia. Simply stated the movement was seeking a new and improved valorization of their culture within the mutated Western-based American cultural arena. In the language of the street, it was a quest for respect.

Regardless of the location of the barrio, Los Angeles San Diego, Santa Fe, or El Paso, one endemic malady in the Chicano community was substandard educational opportunities. Nearly a decade before the US Supreme Court Decision of *Brown v Board of Education*, the Chicano communities thought they had successfully addressed the problem of racial educational prejudice when they prevailed in the 1946 decision of *Mendez v Westminster School District*, which banned separate Chicano schools. It turned out to be a shallow victory, however, because without separate schools, bilingual education was an impossibility. They chose bilingual education and moved on. By 1960 when *el Movimiento* began to gather substance, educational statistics in California indicated that over twenty-five percent of all schools had at least a fifty percent Chicano enrollment.

Education at all levels has been a target of the movement. That effort has resulted in the recognition of the Hispanic culture as viable. The success of such offshoot organizations such as the United Mexican-American Students (UMAS) and Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MEChA) can be measured by the number of accredited universities that now include Chicano Studies in their curriculum.

The Chicano movement has been a primary source of a cultural renaissance in Hispanic art, theatre, and literature. One of the most well known contributions to upwelling this was the *el Teatro Campesino* (The Farm Workers Theatre) founded in 1965 as an adjunct to Cesar Chavez's United Farm Workers union. They produced a broad spectrum of skits and plays, sometimes bringing them directly to the migrant worker's camps. Simplicity of language and populist plot dealing with Anglo discrimination and Chicano resistance, often using simple placards around the actor's

necks to identify their role, made them an effective political tool. This *teatro* effort is still alive today, at a more professional level, and been the seed for numerous *barrio teatros* producing Chicano plays across the United States.

## Chapter Three



**Fig 8 Mural or Graffiti,?  
Does it matter?**

### Writing on the Walls

Man has gone to the walls and made his mark to invoke magic, to please the gods, to create an aesthetic experience, to register his complaints in public spaces, to assure that the future knows that he was here, to convince others of the rightness or righteousness of his belief system, and in the absence of any of else, to amuse himself. Nearly every ancient society

considered wall art as an integral part of their culture and, today we are considerably more adept at locating it than explaining its cultural significance. (Squires, 2006). So too with graffiti.

Although several current writers in the field of wall art have indicated that graffiti is a modern phenomena, one even proposing that it was invented in New York City and from there spread over most of the civilized world as a pandemic, I disagree with this even though I do agree that New York City is the current leader in quality, quantity and audacity of street graphics. Several factors have supported the ascendancy of this art,

form, including the introduction of a panoply of new technologies and relaxation of the anti-graffiti laws that once classified graffiti writers as criminals.

How and when does a viewer separate graffiti from art? And should it be separated? Is the coded message in the balloon or elongated lettering any less understandable to those not yet educated to the “secret” than the substance of an abstract painting to an untrained eye? It is a question that generates circular arguments and subjective, protean answers. But, as Sojin Kim (1995, 11) points out, it is problematical to draw a hard line between the adolescent “*Pedro loves Maria*” cohort and the most experienced spray-can artists, such as Peter Quezada, creator of hundreds of purposive wall murals with illustrative skill and containing simple, effective social and cultural communication. In the era of the apogee of the Chicano Mural (1965—1979) the muralists and the “writers” (the current term applied to new genre graffiti artists) demonstrated a unique respect for each others works, in fact, many of the early Chicano murals actually have content areas that had been previously inscribed graffiti. Many of the Chicano muralists had served their artistic apprenticeship within the cohort of writers on the walls, streets, and all movable objects that passed within the barrio boundaries.

Succinctly stated, wall painting, in all its forms, was an important part of the Chicano effort for cultural recognition, *el Movimiento*, and a resistance element to the engagement with the status quo, a battle to avoid disappearance of their aesthetic by subsumation into an Americanized, universal culture with a fixed, anglicized idea of beauty. Graffiti such as the work of Jean Michel Basquiat, that made its way into the avant garde studios and galleries was a personal statement, supported by many of the popular pop artists, and as such was granted a limited imprimatur of relevance to high art

by certain New York Modern art historians, especially those supporters of Warholism. Nevertheless, most graffiti made little contribution to the goals of *el Movimiento*, particularly in those *barrios* where it was used as a declaration of local gang territorial prerogative. While ordinarily discouraged, skillful graffiti, when added to a confrontational mural as critique or contra opinion, was usually left untouched. However, despite any aesthetic quality it might exhibit, barrio graffiti carried with it a stigma of its association with territorial marking for barrio gangs. Even today, some three decades after the peak of the Chicano era, we expect to see graffiti writers with shaven heads generously decorated with the deep blue skin art, normally emblematic of hard time prisons. Even though it can be seen as a part of the panoply of gangland culture, it is not necessarily so and only those in seclusion are unaware of the acceptance and valorization of skin art as a socially acceptable artform amongst the young generation.

### **Art in America, Post World War II to 1980**

This was a period of transition when United States began to see itself as world power and American art morphed “follow-the-Paris-leader” cultural classification to the apotheosis of New York City as the unquestioned center of modern art practice and theory. That process was a complex mechanism with a number of moving parts, many of them not home grown. It involved the emigration and acculturation of a major portion of the leading European plastic arts practitioners and theoreticians to the United States. They came during World War II to avoid persecution for being decadent artists in a fascist society, or espousing the wrong philosophy, or perhaps, just being Jewish. The growth of the new anti-figurative theory of art, energized by the critical writings of



Clement Greenberg,<sup>6</sup> which declared the era of Modern Art closed, the connection of content as narrative, decadent, and floated art as an *l'art pour l'art* discipline, properly unconnected to political or social concerns. His global theoretical gravitas was created by monumental financial support of these concepts and “abstract expressionism” by the Rockefeller Foundation using its philanthropy and political control of museum politics. Finally, the international pedigree of the movement was assured through support by the United States government with all of its post World War II neo-resources- good will, funding, grants, international aid programs, and foreign policy, both overt and covert. (Archer 1997: 40-46, 116, 216)

Political art, intended to instigate social change, was no longer *de rigueur*. Warholism, mass-produced, depersonalized, pop art reflecting the arrogance of our newfound leadership had become a commodity and contributed to the well being of the US market and economy. Anything that could potentially disrupt that zeitgeist became *outsider* art and was confronted with the establishment question: Can art communicate political and social function without a detrimental effect upon the aesthetic? Having already determined the answer using the Greenberg hypotheses, the walls surrounding the master’s house became several courses higher to non-establishment art.

Chicano murals and art carried a powerful counter-hegemonic message into the *barrio* where it fell upon receptive eyes, particularly since it was created within the *barrio*, not the master’s house. The communication transmitted was eminently clear even to the least educated, but simultaneously, the visual content was in a vernacular to *include*—Latino, Hispanic, or Chicano, although the Chicano plight was not considered a worthy political cause amongst many middle class Spanish descendants. Those who had

gained a foothold were reluctant to assume an attitude that would threaten their progress. Regardless of status within the cohort, believability and relativity was inherent, since the art was sourced from its principal audience, created by a talented part of that audience, sponsored and paid for, in most cases, by members of the local community. It was truly and unequivocally, *art of the people* and directly antithetical to both *l'art pour l'art* and *art for the people*.

## **The Twentieth Century History of Muralism in the US**

The closing days of the nineteenth century were historically a transitional period for American politics and art. Economic pressures placed upon our rural society, mostly traceable to an insidious growth of monopolies in banking and transportation, provided a fertile ground for resistance politics in the form of the Populist Party in the Midwest and the Socialist movement in the urban areas. Although the animosity toward the status quo of the populist movement had some correlation to the precepts of the Chicano movement a half century later, it produced no significant resistance mural art.

The Progressive Era, beginning with the *fin de siècle*, was a fertile period for murals. Unbelievably, many of the works of that period have only recently been uncovered, almost a century after their creation, discard, and in some cases, attempted destruction. The murals that were created in that period bore little relationship to the murals of the Chicano period. The new treasure trove of wall work that was accidentally uncovered in the Chicago School system, over 400 works, all professionally executed during the Progressive era and the early Roosevelt administration, were a serendipitous find. Their discovery took place in 1994 when a teacher, Flora Doody, saw an interesting

segment of painting exposed by peeling paint in a storeroom. She enlisted professional help from Barry Bauman and his conservation crew at the Chicago Conservation Center and the hunt was on. They uncovered and restored some 437 murals on walls, panels, and canvasses. These were paintings at a professional level by known artists of the period, not student projects (Becker, 2003). So the rhetorical question floats to the surface, How and why could so much art for the people be overpainted, hidden away, or subjected to so much abuse?

There is a story for almost each piece, most well documented in Heather Becker's recent book on the subject *Art for the People. The Rediscovery and Preservation of Progressive and WPA Mural in the Chicago Public Schools, 1904-1943*, and one story is particularly appropriate as a demonstration of the intensity of feelings involving purposive public art. The piece was titled *Outstanding American Women* painted at the Lucy Flower Vocational High School by Edward Millman, a professional artist who had studied with Diego Rivera. The content of the ten panel work included such politically active women as Jane Adams, Harriet Tubman and Susan B Anthony. Considered in the context of the zeitgeist of that period, purposive art of that content might be classified as confrontational and embarrassing for the progenitors. Using the excuse of "poor lighting," the school board ordered the confrontational work painted over. Actually, they did not wish to face the issues it raised – the oppression of blacks and women. It was pure irony that the overpainting actually preserved the brightness of the surface and under the skillful hands of Bauman's restoration team it came back to life at a time when these issues were being addressed. Millman's reputation suffered little and may even have been advanced amongst his colleagues, being the only American mural

artist to be publicly censored for shedding light upon what the school board called “misery laden” aspects of our society.

Several thousand public murals were created in the United States under government sponsorship during the New Deal period up to the onset of World War II. Under auspices of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Federal Art Project (FAP), the Treasury Department and other “put to work” programs of the Roosevelt administration, muralism developed throughout the country, a sizeable cadre of painters was trained, and Americans were exposed to good, if not always fine, art. It would be grossly inept to leave the impression that this work, this art for the people, even on the grand scale that it was executed, represented the totality of mural work executed in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century. As with all government sponsored art, there were strings attached. The underlying theme of these murals was supposed to be “feel good about America” and any overt alternate message, particularly with a socialist or communist tinge that indicated social layering and oppression of minorities, was considered beyond the pale and usually did not make it to the wall. The actual control of content was at a local level under a mandated agenda from Washington, DC, all reporting to Edward Bruce on the New Deal staff. The longest lived of the myriad mural programs, the Section of Painting and Sculpture, (1934-1943) was funded by the Treasury Department, specializing in decorating large government edifices. Its artists, unlike other groups were selected by juried competition (Lee, 1999: 129-130) and they considered themselves part of an elite group.

A cursory check of the roster of the WPA artists will show that it cut across the full spectrum of artistic talent and included novice, professional and even those destined

to be America's avant garde in the future. In the Great Depression the euphemism *starving artist* was a harsh reality. Except for the ultra-elite, there was no viable US art market. The center for modern art was Paris; the outlook for nascent American artists was bleak unless the artist went to Europe to study and gain reputation. But there is another side to this artistic miasma. There were better days ahead.

Aside from bread and butter, these programs provided benefits, still unmeasured, to both five thousand artists and their nationwide audience. One, which I consider invaluable, was that a very naïve American public was exposed to a broad range of artistic style. In her introduction to *Signs from the Heart: California Chicano Murals*, Cockroft posits that these murals were social realism akin to that practiced in the Soviet Union and correlated to totalitarian systems. I disagree and argue that hypothesis is biased, politically and artistically incorrect, demeaning of the artistic talent brought to bear upon the project. It smacks of the *l' art pour l' art* mentality. First, many of the artists working on the WPA had been well educated in the current trends in art, studied in Europe and were conversant with, and in some case practitioners of, the many schools of Modern Art. In addition to being art, these murals reverted to one of the original purposes of all art—communication. Careful examination of the content, composition and style of the New Deal murals, within the context of the near anarchist socio-political environment of the Great Depression era, will demonstrate that rather than relating to totalitarian regimes, they compare rather well to the early Mexican Mural Movement's works designed to tell the populace: "this is who you are."

The programs that supported the mural projects ended with the onset of World War II, when unemployment ceased to be a problem, the country generally united under common cause, and the artists were called to a different task—government propaganda.

### **Muralism and the Mexican revolution:**

Although Mexican murals carry the tag, *revolutionary art*, they had little to do with the revolt that took place in the first decades of the 1900s. True, many used content that related to the subsequent “civil war” that succeeded the revolt (1911-1920), but the underpinning theme was much more closely related to history, and in many cases Communism, than to the Mexican Revolution. Carefully analyzed, they were not works of art to incite or support a revolt. They were not art of the people. They were public art intended to legitimize the new regime and truly art of the government or *art for the people*. Without the “revolution” the fame of Muralism in Mexico is problematical, even though there was a cultural heritage of wall art extending back to the Olmec period.

The difference then between mural art of the Mexican Revolution and that of the other major mural period, the Quattrocento, is strictly a matter of the set of beliefs that were being proselytized. In the Quattrocento it was Christianity—in the 1920’s it was pure politics, the *mestizo* culture and Mesoamerican cultural history. Taken in the context of uprisings the Mexican revolution was unique“; it was actually an agrarian uprising rather than a phenomena initiated from ideals, truly a populist revolt meant to unseat an oppressive socioeconomic class system.

The dictator Porfirio Diaz had come to power in 1876 bound and determined to drag rural Mexico into the twentieth century. He gathered about him a band of Darwinist bureaucrats, known as the *Cientificos* (scientific thinkers), whose plan was to bring progress and order. Unfortunately, the progress they envisioned was for further aggrandizement of the existing political elite hegemony on the backs of the peons and the indigenous Indian population (Franco, 1971:66). The principal vehicle for this “progress” was to be foreign investment, the United States, of course, being one of the largest investors. Anyone who bases their idea of the “revolution” in Mexico upon the popular literature and swashbuckling tales of heroics has taken the wrong road. Specifically, Francisco Madero initiated the actual “revolution” in Chihuahua by convincing a conscript army that had been sent from Mexico City to arrest him, to join his cause. Shortly after, at the seat of power, Mexico City, Diaz resigned, ending his 30 year tyrannical rule and sailed from Veracruz to a comfortable exile in Europe. Madero marched out of hiding and led his “revolutionary” army south into central Mexico. Then the serious fighting began.

It was actually an internecine power struggle that lasted a decade, cost over a million Mexican lives, with a reenactment of Goyan cruelty beyond modern comprehension and with a long line of heroic leaders dying by assassination in a cyclical struggle for power. Madero was one of the assassination victims. During the next seven years, the presidency changed several times, the economy capsized and legal and illegal immigration to the United States increased almost tenfold (Tatum, 2001:3). Out of that miasma came a one party Mexican governing system with Alvaro Obregon as elected president, the elite church power base eviscerated, and the old pernicious social system,

debt peonage, decimated (Rochfort, 1993:5-15). Although the facts of the cultural changes are not difficult to uncover, to get a visceral understanding of the social nuances surrounding this society in transition, the reader should turn to the Mexican social writers such as Carlos Fuentes (1962), Nobel prize winning author of *The Death of Artemio Cruz*, who present a humanized social framework within which the Mexican Mural Movement and the populist revolt came into being.

The new government was not the originator of the idea for a Mexican mural program. Giving the devil his due, seeds of muralism had been sewn in pre-revolutionary period under the Diaz regime when the *Cientificos* made an effort to include culture in their forward push. Being irrevocably attached to Europe and western cultural values they had no concern for indigenous culture or people. Their plans, although progressive, were elitist and exclusionary. The quest for national, cultural and intellectual definition sorely needed a catalysis and a new agenda to make it bloom as a truly Mexican phenomenon.

Obregon's appointment of Jose Vasconcelos in 1921 as Secretary of State for Public Education was the crucial impetus to make the Mexican Mural Program a reality and should be considered as the beginning of the program. A Pythagorean scholar, steeped in philosophic idealism, his policy was seeded in the great painting of the Middle ages and the Quattrocento and New Spain. He proposed the use of Mexico's best artists to create an art saturated with primitive vigour, new subject matter, combining subtlety and the sacrifice of the exquisite to the great, perfection to invention. The tenure of Vasconcelos, although short, affected the mural program throughout its entire life. His basic concepts, although twisted and later bastardized represented what was needed and wanted but his image as an iconic figure didn't fare as well. His visual claim to posterity,



a mural image painted into a tempera mural in 1921 by Roberto Montenegro in the church of San Pedro y San Pablo, was short-lived. Upon the order of the succeeding Minister of Education, Narcisco Bassols, his image was painted out.

Unfortunately, the philosophical position that freedom of artistic expression trumped all other political causes did eventually lead to a movement in which the artists spurned his idealism for their own political bent and produced didactic art heavily flavored with communist ideology. Lee (1999) posits, and I agree, that it was a rather queer twist of fate that this man who truly believed in freedom and the purity of art would



**Fig 9 Early Diego Rivera Mural**

foster a cadre of principal artists, *Los Tres Grandes*, Orozco, Rivera, Siqueiros, all so different in style, temperament, and ideals, but all driven by the same political engine—communism. They produced a prodigious oeuvre of murals from the post revolutionary 1920s up to 1970. As time passed, their overt political messages became less strident, but never leveled themselves from their larboard list. A quote of a local art administrator of the WPA used several times by Anthony Lee in his eloquent *Painting on the Left* is humorous and incisive: “If a man in a mural had a shovel in this hand rather than breaking a bronco, he

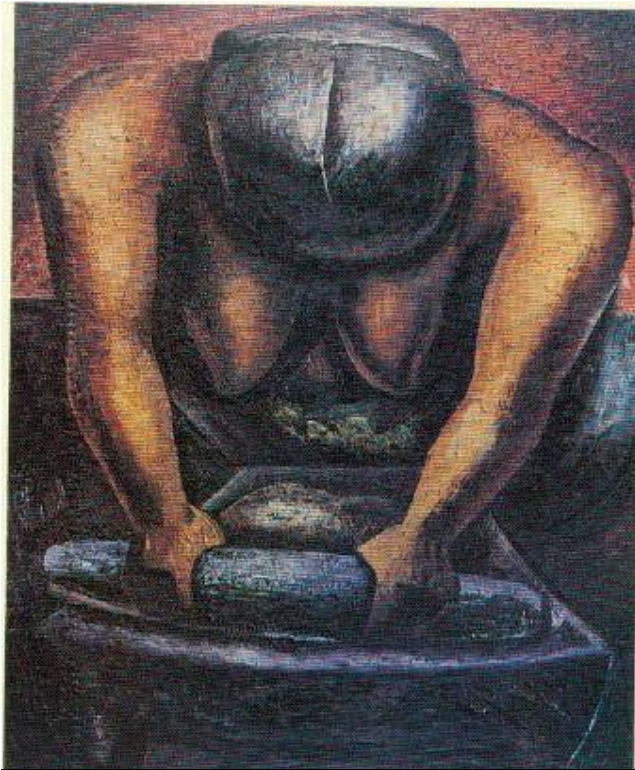
was dangerous and probably radical and probably coming from a communist lecture by Diego Rivera”

The progenitors of the Mexican Mural Movement were Dr. Atl (Gerardo Murillo), David Alfaro Siqueiros, Ramón Alva De Canal, José Clemente Orozco and Diego Rivera. Since the principal effects of those murals can be traced into both Muralism in the United States and even loosely relate to the Chicano movement, it is appropriate to look more closely at the character, art and politics of the principal players in that drama—Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros. But not too closely. The Chicano Mural Movement is not a direct descendant Mexican “revolutionary” art, but looked to it for inspiration and technology. The three artists were all engaged in the same project but were never a cohort, their commonality being the excellence of their work. Their diversity was resident in their aesthetic styles, their humanism, their character, their espoused brand of communism and demonstrated level of intellectual arrogance (Cruz 1987).

Rivera spent the years between 1907-1921, except for a short return in 1910, in Europe, and as Goldman (1977) states, he observed the activities far from the dangers of the Mexican battlefields. She posits that this lack of first hand experience of the horror and brutality of the struggles for a new Mexico may relate directly to the differences in style and content of the other two Tres Grandes. I would add, from my personal experience, that resentments harbored by combatants toward non-servers are deep seated, long lived and may have been an element at the core of life-long contention between Rivera and the other two grandes, particularly Siqueiros.

Soldier of the revolt or not, Diego was the most cosmopolitan of the three, a classical artist in every sense and a prodigy. His precocious career started at age 12 when he entered the Academia de San Carlos where he expanded his artistic virtuosity under a cadre of well known painters including Velasco and Favrès. Awarded a scholarship by the Diaz government, he moved on to Madrid to study under the well-known academic artist Eduardo Chicharro. Artemio Cruz (1987, 125) makes a very astute observation about this period in Rivera's artistic career. These were decisive years in the development of the artist and because he spent them polishing academic technique in Madrid where the culture was highly resistive to the new waves of twentieth century European culture, particularly, artistic trends, he followed few of the challenging paths open to him. The sample in Figure 9 could have been created at anytime in his career. Biographies of Diego Rivera are not scarce. With few exceptions, they can be graded by their degree of expurgation. His corpus is difficult to canonize although it is a continuing project in Mexican history. Succinctly stated, he was a person of opportunity in all aspects of his life—art, politics, personal relationships, and one might say that not unlike the tall trees, he bent with the wind—regardless of the direction from which it blew. This characteristic, I posit, was one of the principal contentions between Rivera and Siqueiros. Both were declared communists. Whereas Rivera gave it lip service and used it as a ticket to the avant-garde Siqueiros was dedicated to a point of being considered a Marxist “theologian” and an unwavering, ardent Stalinist throughout his life. It is well documented by his own hand that Rivera and his woman *au courant*, Frida Kahlo, both communists of convenience, disavowed their close friendship with the Trotsky's when that friendship became “inconvenient,” subsequent to the Russian trials when Stalin rose to follow the specter of Lenin. Siqueiros, on the other

hand, personally plotted and executed the murder of the anti-Stalinist Trotsky and his wife.



**Fig 10 Early Siqueiros style**

Siqueiros, a man of serious conviction and direction, commanded a battalion in the Spanish war of the 30s; Rivera timidly raised only his brush and voice in support of his political beliefs. One might say, Rivera was a man for whom the bell never tolled. All the forgoing are just facts, but they certainly describe a curious set of bedfellows to be enlisted in a national project.

The third member of the *los tres* had only one commonality with the other two—José Clemente

Orozco, was also an avowed communist but as his work, Fig 11, shows, always daring.

Comparing the three samples (Siqueiros above) of their work provided in this chapter is demonstrative of the artistic schism that was extant between the three over nearly all of their artistic careers. Over time, Orozco and Siqueiros developed new techniques and modified their aesthetic, Rivera on the other hand continued along the same trail.

Siqueiros was much more attuned to the early developments of modern art, and with his usual temerity, publicly declared that he was the heir of Cézanne and admirer of three Spaniards of genius—Picasso, Gris and Sunyer. Although the manifesto seems to suffer from a case of hubris, it was not very different from the European 1920s avant garde.

The most complex of *los tres* was Jose Clemente Orozco. Unlike Rivera, he was not a prodigy. Actually, as a young man he had trouble making up his mind. Studying engineering and architecture before starting his art career, he entered the art field with a broader and different background. His art, from the beginning, was purposeful and by nature populist. For six years, he drew political cartoons for a constitutionalist paper, *La Vanguardia*. Although in his murals he used an allegorical genre as his vehicle, his politics and message were never obscure. In my opinion, of all the muralists, Orozco was the most effective in putting Mexico's values upon the wall.

One of the basic underpinnings of the nascence of a post revolutionary Mexican art was that it should be public, available to the citizenry and above all not the province of a few wealthy collectors. The unfolding drama of changing from a semi-feudal society to a republic made this a feasible concept, one reason being the absence of a wealthy middle



**Fig 11 OROZCO  
ABSTRACT**

class to intervene or support an exclusionary market for the country's creative output. Despite a history of foreign intervention in the affairs of Mexico, the country had been remarkably successful in resisting the acculturation of European styles in their native art. The wealthy of the country, the landed gentry, was composed principally of European migrants, closely related to the Catholic Church hierarchy, who had brought their art,

culture and literature into this “primitive” country and considered the indigenous art, society, culture and population as barbarian or at least, boorish.

The principles set forth for the new Mexican art, particularly the government supported program as envisioned by José Vasconcelos, were contra to that zeitgeist, politically and aesthetically. The rules of the new game were straightforward, much like their originator:

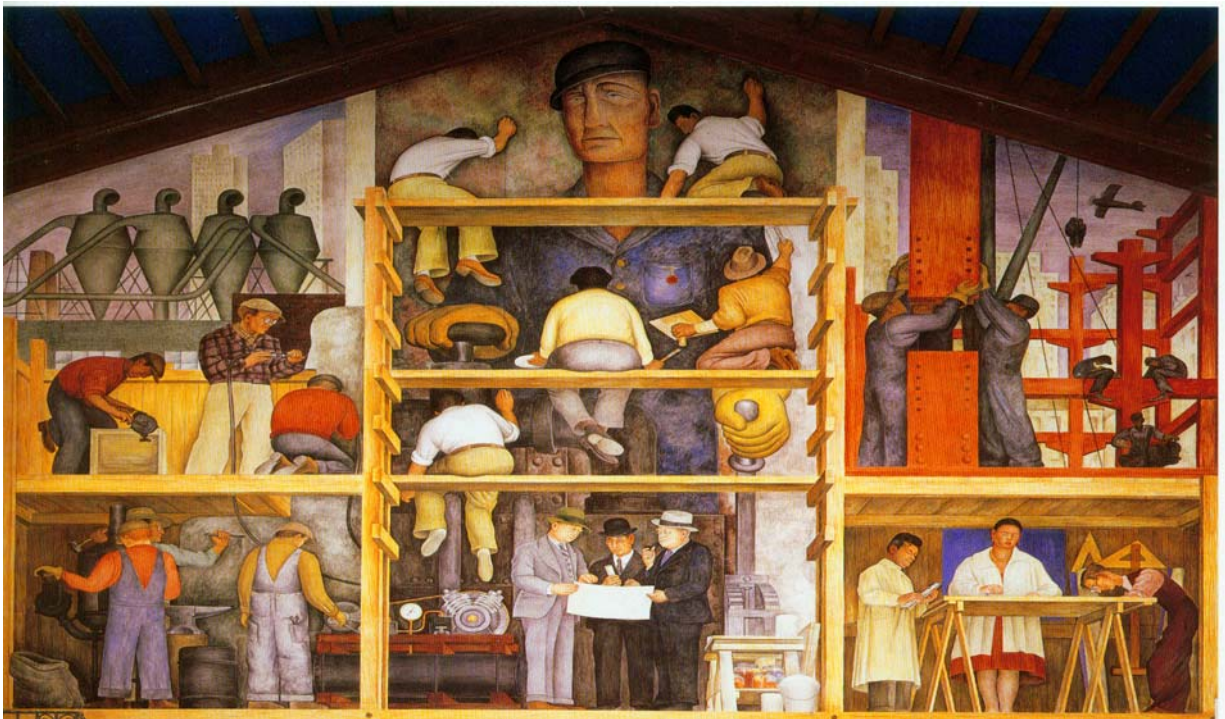
- The content would teach the ideals of the Revolution of 1910.
- The heritage of the indigents would be, the *meztizo*, and would be raised and glorified
- .The Mexican civilization was no longer to considered as Spanish but as an amalgam of Spanish and the indigenous people.

It is obvious that the intent of this art was purposeful and specifically aimed at providing a social cement and in support of the new regime. Today, a century after the promulgation of that plan, and despite an acute awareness of the global praxis of contemporary art, Mexican artists are still able to produce a world class aesthetic product that strongly reflects a *meztizo* heritage.

## **Immigration of the Mexican Mural**

Today on either side of the United States/Mexican border, despite attempts to harden it, hardly anyone is unaware of the porosity of that imaginary line. Culturally, that has been so since the since the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848 and the subsequent Gadsen Purchase and it would seem appropriate that Muralism and muralists would freely move back and forth over that line. American artists went south to study with the emerging cadre of fresco makers and Mexican artists came north to take advantage of the availability of new walls and dilettante support. One great impetus to the

migration of Mexican art into the United States was the one man show put on at NOMA in New York of the works of Diego Rivera. Interest in mural works had been gradually increasing since the Panama Pacific International Exposition of 1915 at San Francisco. The 35 murals presented at that year long show were monumental in size and a new experience for the American public. Even though the content was a calm presentation of allegorical classicism with the subjects all doing the “right thing” and the overall aesthetic effect “disneyfied” by restricting the palette to five designer colors to conform to the “theme,” it was an initial appearance of a new public art. In his eloquent work in *Painting on the Left*, Anthony Lee suggests that the question asked by many of today’s critics would be appropriate: “Which Public?” It was natural that los Tres Grandes would be invited to come north and spread some of their paint and ideas upon the barren walls of the US.



**Fig - 12 Making a Fresco, *Diego Rivera***

Considering his passion for publicity and his familiarity with American philanthropy one could reasonably expect that Rivera would be one of the first of the Mexican Muralists to be invited to demonstrate his talent. In this famous work, *Making a Fresco*, there are several minor things to note. First of all, it was part of the agreement that if he was to be supported in the US his use of communism as an underlying theme was to be avoided.

Actually his early work in the US was supported by several American industrialists and they were not about to feed their

enemies. Even though that codicil

was in place I would call to your

attention the red star on the central

workers chest, specifically

highlighted, indicating that he was a

member in good standing of the

worker's communist party Secondly,

although the composition has been

criticized for its confusion and

clumsiness, note that at the very

visual center one gets to view the

ample behind of Rivera. Was this a



**Fig 13 Cortez and the Aztecs, Orozco**

thinly disguised message to his American Industrialist patrons? This was the second

mural that Rivera painted in the San Francisco area of California. The first, at the Stock

Exchange, was an allegory of California and was considered one of his better works in

California. The major work on the previous page, although famous, done at the San



Francisco Art Institute, has been severely criticized for its mannequin-like figures and for its composition. Perhaps if the work had been done at a location other than an art institute, the critics may have been kinder. His one man show at the Museum of Modern Art (NOMA) was well received, most of the material being easel paintings that fit more easily into the New York art aesthetic.

Jose Clemente Orozco was most popular with the academic institutions and he had a unique ability to communicate the heritage and suffering of the mestizo people without bringing his politics into the foreground. He spent a considerable amount of time working in the United States, living in the US from 1927 to 1934 and finished his magnificent Prometheus mural at Pomona College in the early 1930s. The work shown in Fig 13, *American Civilization—Cortez and the Cross*, was done for the Baker Library at Dartmouth College, New Hampshire. It is an interesting and important choice of theme because this clash of culture between the indigenous people, shown at the feet of Cortez, and the Spanish *Conquistador*, sword in hand, represents the nascence of the *mestizo* society and everything that we call Mexican today. The overpowering of the Aztec culture and all that went before it, particularly the Olmec and Mayan heritage, was a great loss to Western Culture. Aztec culture had been seen in Europe by many scholars and artists, including Albrecht Druer, and appreciated as a different but advanced and valuable aesthetic. It was relegated to the status of barbarian and uncivilized because it was culturally associated with religious practice that involved human sacrifice. For centuries it was deprived of appropriate research funding or interest. The 2003 Exhibit of Olmec Art and Culture at the New York Guggenheim Museum was the first major effort by high

art to offer it a place on the dais. The arduous route of Mesoamerican culture into western acceptance is a corollary to that of African Art in the early twentieth century.

...



**Fig 14 - A populist mural at Dartmouth, *Orozco***

In the previous image we were confronted by the cruel power of Cortez, in this image, Fig 14, we face with the power and evil wrought by the Catholic Church hierarchy in the name of Christ and the Christian symbols. Orozco exercised the same critical, cynical

communicative ability in his later murals as he did in his early career as a political cartoonist. Notice the cross borne by the leading helmeted creature has been turned into a formidable weapon, resembling a pike. Every element in the detail, the horse's wild eye, the bastardized cross and the helmet of the second soldier wired so that he could not speak, all create an environment of fear, control and evil. This detail is also part of Orozco's Dartmouth College work. Unlike the other of the *grandes*, I know of no work of his that was whitewashed because it was deemed overly offensive.

Siqueiros demonstrated little interest in the potential of mural art in the United States and except for one unsuccessful sojourn to the United States. That trip resulted in a whitewashed mural in downtown Los Angeles. He had accepted a commission to paint a rather kitschy scene of Mexico with the usual stereotyped peon sleeping under his great sombrero but he changed the theme to a double crucified field worker. Painted in the center of the agricultural business, it was not received too well and lasted only for days before whitewashing. There are still efforts afoot to restore to original—and of course, equal contra efforts to make sure it never sees the light of day again.

He seemed quite content to continue his work in Mexico's major cities. He had been sentenced to a prison term for his participation in the murder of Trotsky and his wife. But, upon his release from prison he had made plans to come to the US from Chile where he had been given a mural commission through the influence of the Nobel Poet Laureate, Pablo Neruda, who was at the time serving as Chilean ambassador to Mexico. Unfortunately, a new US Federal Law was passed in the interim denying entry into the country for any member of the communist party. He had been issued a visa to enter that was subsequently voided. Upon his return to Mexico, he began a series of outstanding

works and culminating in his masterpiece, *The Polyform*. Considered his finest work, it



**Fig 15 The Polyforum, The epitome of site specific, Siqueiros**

was seminal for the Chicano Murals at San Diego. Present at the opening of the Polyform at Mexico City was Salvatore Torres, who within a few years would become one of the major planners and artists for Chicano Park Mural project. The Polyforum was more than just a unique building with creative, attractive murals painted on the outside. On the outside, each of the twelve sides received one of Siqueiros's modern murals with a specific theme.

Among them, *Art, Music, Destiny, Christ and Dance*, which was designed as a complete cultural center containing a theatre and exhibition hall was decorated with a 50,000 square foot mural, *The March of Humanity*.

It is one of the few places that I know where site specific art worked perfectly, principally because the public art was inseparable from the architecture. Its architectural purpose and its aesthetic purpose were perfectly correlated.

## Chapter Four

### Building a Public Sphere in San Diego

The diversity of the United States is obvious in South San Diego County,



**Figure 16 - A stroll through Chicano Park ,  
2003**

California particularly in the Mexican-American *barrio* of Logan Heights, known as the “East End.” In the 1880s it became the second largest *Mexican-American* community in the California with immigration into the area because of a poor Mexican economy and later, the Mexican Revolution.

Amongst the residents the area became known, not only as Logan Heights, but as *el ombligo* (the navel). By 1940 the Mexican American population in the area had grown to nearly 20,000 and gained the title of the second largest *barrio* in the United States.

The very existence of the neighborhood and the future building of Chicano Park shown above in the year 2003, became problematical in the 1950s and 1970s. Socio-political events associated with city redevelopment, that included political rezoning in 1950, splitting the neighborhood with a super freeway in 1963, encouragement of industrial and state facilities construction, and developing a spider-web of approaches to the new San Diego/Coronado Bridge in 1969. It did not bode well for its survival. Succinctly stated, a Mexican-American community, substantially impoverished, within a mile of downtown San Diego did not fit the overall plan for creating either a “tourist Mecca” or one of the nation’s finest retirement areas.

Logan Heights had always been a residential/small business community situated on the edge of a number of maritime installations, principally US Naval installations. Most of the military complex had been expanded during World War II to provide support for the Pacific Fleet, cutting off the *barrios*’ access to San Diego Bay. The original boundaries of the *barrio* extended to the bay but when the naval and support centers



**Fig 17 - Mild Revolt**

grew, Logan heights shrank to a land- bound island, with few alternatives except further shrinkage, both physically and economically. Planners and politicians had certainty that there was no alternative but the dissolution of the neighborhood and dispersion of the population. For many residents, however, this had been their home since the turn of the century and they were not to be moved that easily.

One of the most insidious factors directly effecting the potential of this area was the change in zoning to pure industrial. The changes permitted, in fact encouraged, the movement of auto wrecking yards into the area thus downgrading both the economics of property value and the desirability of the area as a residential neighborhood. Population estimates of the *barrio*'s residential population indicated that the residential count had shrunk from its peak of 20,000 to something just under 5,000.

For the first time in the modern history of the city, this minority community had enough, and keeping drama at a minimum, they were prepared to do something about it. Considered in the context of the third millennium in the United States, if the problem was in process today, twenty-first century changes in interpretation of the concept of eminent domain would have produced a different prognosis. It would not be outrageous to posit that these low income residents would have been sent packing as were the low income residents who lived in the path of a downtown baseball stadium a short distance away. City planning in San Diego for the last half century has been driven by a myopic business/commercial engine, recently under a public fraud investigation, using the banner of "America's Finest City." Logan Heights wanted to be included in the mix, not told to take themselves down the road. Initially, what was at stake was a several acre area under the approaches to the bridge. The community claimed the land as the public space that the city and state had promised, innumerable times, to cede to the *barrio* for use as a community park. Certain of their legal and power position, the State of California, ignoring the promises made, began their first project on the disputed ground, the construction of a State Police station and parking lot for 300 automobiles. It was not to be. Faced with rings of outraged citizens and students who locked hands and surrounded



the construction crews and their earth movers. Work stopped on the parking lot and serious negotiations began.

The details of those negotiations are as tedious as the negotiations themselves. Suffice it to say that there was no turning back the Chicanos. They felt that it was the linchpin for the survival of their community. The movement for the park was summed up very eloquently at the initial meeting by a young San Diego University Student who had been involved in stopping the progress of the parking lot when he addressed the meeting saying:

The word culture is used. To you (our) culture means Taco Bell and the funny Mexican with the funny songs. We gave you our culture of a thousand years. What have you given us? A social system that makes us beggars and police who make us afraid. We've got the land and we are going to work it. We are going to get that park. We longer talk about asking. We have the park.

The enabling legislation passed the California State Legislature on May 23, 1971. The birth-date of this public sphere is celebrated on April 22, the date the Chicano Movement took over the park. The first celebration brought out only local residents—one thousand of them. Today, three decades later it is a major celebration attracting both American and foreign nationals.

The original desires of those in the preplanning activity envisioned the Chicano



**Fig 18 - Frida Kahlo under the eyes of los Tres Grandes**

park including a broad swath of the land under the bridge approaches “all the way to the shore” of San Diego bay. The shoreline had already been designated as prime industrial sites and I posit that had the steering committee for the park insisted upon the inclusion of those lands, there would be no Chicano Park today. Fortunately, cooler heads prevailed and realizing that they already accomplished a Sisyphean task, opted to move forward, meet the terms of the contract and solidify their position. The land that the Chicanos were not able to acquire or access, the waterfront adjacent to the *barrio* had actually been in transition since the onset of World War II, when it had totally rezoned industrial for the 32<sup>nd</sup> Street Naval Base and various support facilities. Actually, the lease agreement for the park had a performance time window of eighteen months for completion of the initial phase of the park or the lands would revert to the state. So, they had much on their plate. Further, most of the land in question had been either committed to the planning process or was already in use, producing taxes, employment and profits. Succinctly, the beach was gone.

As with most major artistic endeavors, there is usually one individual at the apex of creation. In the San Diego Chicano Mural project the catalysis was a professional artist, Salvator Torres, a “homeboy” whose home in Logan Heights had gone the way of eminent domain but who, despite his residual anger from that event was able to envision a close correlation between the architecture of Siqueiros’s Polyforum (Figure 15) and the underpinning and supports for the Coronado Bridge. He had gone to Mexico City and studied the work and techniques of los Tres Grandes and had a good grasp of the technology, theme, and potential of both art for the people and populist art.

He was an ideal leader for the mural project. Because of his excellent background in art and unbounded enthusiasm for the mural project he was able to not only get the acquiescence of the Coronado Bridge Manager, H. Thysself, for the project but enlisted his active support by taking management's concerns and issues into his plan. The bridge managers had no desire to insinuate their aesthetic into the planning process and their concern was straightforward. Integrity of the support pylons for the bridge was directly related to the waterproofing of the pylon concrete surface and its ability to protect the internal rebar strength elements within. With the agreement of the Chicano artists not to penetrate the surface of the pylons, principal concerns were laid to rest and the construction engineers worked with the artists to assure that the artists would have a proper ground for painting. Unfortunately, "So let the games begin" seemed to be the cry. The pent-up energy flowing from years of frustration was about to release.

### **The Murals of Chicano Park**

Torres had plans for those pylons and expected to get started in an orderly manner. The paints were



laid out, several of the walls had been treated to assure good bonding and there was a cadre of working artists, members of Las Toltecas or El Congreso de Artistas Chicanos en Aztlán were on hand to set the plan into action. According to Torres, that day, it was not to be. Before the

**Fig 19 Imagery of Mexican History**

orderly process could start, the non-artist participants had to satisfy their exuberance and express their freedom by rolling on mega patches of color and writing graffiti. There were several hundred participants, each on a personal mission to replace the overpowering gray of concrete with a cacophony of color. It didn't take long for the fact that color was not process, and despite the popularity of abstract art, throwing paint on a wall did not produce instant Jackson Pollack. Most participants



**Fig 20 An Early Contra Placa**

were dismayed at how difficult it was to get paint where they wanted it and had to come to the conclusion that the project needed some professional guiding hands on process. Those novices that wanted to stay in the creative program were given the opportunity to join the mural artists and Torres' program was on its way, albeit in a much brighter environment than he had expected. Like all attempts to establish placehood, the initial phase of mural making involved the Chicano upright within sight. It took almost a year for the mural makers to attain a unified Chicano theme on their work. The first group of murals were ready for

the celebration of Chicano Park Day in 1974. There was no doubt at that celebration that Chicano Park was firmly based in San Diego and that the Chicano community had learned how to work within the system, to be included and that their unique culture and heritage had contributory potential. As the artist and the steering committee gained experience the art content became much

more sophisticated and the “sledgehammer” statements of early phase one gave way to nuance. It would be a lovely fairy tale ending to stop at this point and say that the Chicano organization and the San Diego City Council and planners saw the good in each other and Barrio Logan was accepted into the fold as a valued part of the community—unfortunately that is not so. First, it is



**Fig 21 Order and Beauty out of chaos**

appropriate to look at the area that surrounded the *barrio*. In the third millennium we tend to think of Metropolitan San Diego in its current form—a modern community of more than a million souls, a wonderful retirement and tourist location, including some of the greatest scientific research firms and

educational facilities on the west coast, an in-city modern airport, close on to La Jolla, the jewel of the coast and so on. That is not the way it was in the early seventies when Torres and the Royal Chicano Air Force undertook the task of declaring their presence and beautifying the area. San Diego had a permanent population of approximately 200,000. One of the mainstays of the local economy, the aircraft firms, were in a financial morass, the border town of Tijuana, sixteen miles to the south was poverty stricken, the military made up a large portion of the population, and there was still a residue of distrust and fear in the environment from the Pachuco and Zoot Suit riots that had taken place in Los Angeles two decades before. The tension between most of the City and the

Chicano enclave still exists and seems to be exacerbated with every success of the venture. For example, in 1980 Chicano Park was declared an historical site, specifically San Diego Historical Site number 143 of the National Historical Society. At the same time, the tourist board of San Diego was still claiming that the park was not considered an attraction and received little attention from them. When queried about the lack of interest by the Convention and Visitors Bureau in the park a representative of that organization classified the Chicano effort, one of the largest assemblages of populist public art in the United States, as a passive park, a place to relax, not a place of interest to tourists. Converted from marketing jargon, it was free and there was no place to spend money. Simultaneously, the project listed in European tourist guidebooks as one of the “must see” locations and as the finest collection of *art of the people* in the United States.

The principal art work for the completion of the mural program was completed by the early 1980s. After the first group of murals were in place in the early 1970s, the community became much more tightly organized and skillful. The changes of zoning that had nearly brought the community to its knees were ameliorated—the junkyards were either dispersed or cleaned up, residential building and a whole new influx of moderately priced condominiums appeared.

Coincident with the newfound skills in city politics the second phase of mural painting brought in other groups of Chicano painters who had become itinerant artists traveling to Chicano *barrios* across the country. This national networking made a measurable contribution to the success and visibility of *el Movimiento*. Simultaneously, the Chicano Park Steering Committee found that they could maintain the control and validity of their program by effectively democratizing the *art of the people* process and inviting non-Chicano artists to participate.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusions

#### Retrospect

How does one measure the success or failure of a unique social adventure such as *el Movimiento*? In this case it appears, on the surface, to be a simple matter. In San Diego, since the intent of the city government had been that Logan Heights should no longer exist, the brazen presence of this Chicano Park, over three decades after its nascence, leaves little room to deny its viability. The success of *el Movimiento* in all cultural areas such as politics, literature, theater, social welfare, and education has been the subject of a plethora of twentieth century historical literature and media coverage especially for the past two decades. Since this work addresses the Chicano Mural project of the Southwest, it is appropriate to look how closely it came to meeting its goals as an adjunct to the overall Chicano civil rights movement.

In order to clearly understand how that program fared in the turmoil of that populist movement, it would contribute to understanding to summarize the characteristics of the Chicano mural program that functionally both relates and separates it from the other two historical mural flowerings that have been seriously academically analyzed—the Mexican Revolution of the twentieth century murals and the pre-Renaissance murals produced between the thirteenth and sixteenth century.

Because of the similarities between the Mexican Revolution and the Chicano *el Movimiento* there has been a rush to classify them as closely correlated. The similarity between all three groups, Chicano, Mexican, and renaissance is twofold. Ignoring the changes in mural technology (see appendix I) which has had little effect upon content, those correlative elements are straightforward—they were all painted upon walls, they were all didactic, and all intended to communicate with persons who may not have been literate. How the Chicano murals differ from the other two groups is a nuance of elemental difference, basically preposition and that reduces to: *art for the people* and *art of the people*.

As discussed in Chapter 1, public *art for the people* has often been looked upon as government imposed art, and alternatively, if not government, it is often interpreted as elitist sourced and being imposed by someone with entirely different aesthetics than the viewer. It is true that in the third millennium that a new consciousness pervades the public art field, and new programs such as “percent for art” started in Philadelphia and now ubiquitous in the United States, have dramatically improved the control and relevance of new public art. Projects such as the 9/11 memorial in New York City may answer the question whether or not they go far enough.

When the public art was didactic, such as the religious mural art of the pre-Renaissance the art was intensely purposive and specific, designed to teach the Catholic dogma and visually, instead of literally, to put the fear of God into the hearts of the illiterate, particularly those possessing little or no independently developed aesthetic. In this period, the belief system being proselytized was religion and it continued successful for centuries, depending upon the cultural advancement of the people.



The art of the Mexican Revolution was not intended to cause rebellion or revolt, it used that agrarian rebellion as content. And thus my objection to tagging it revolutionary art. It was purely intended to didactically create belief in the new government, support nationalism, and as Jose Vasconcelos hoped, political loyalty within the *mestizo* society that would vote to keep them in office. The success of the Mexican Mural program exceeded all expectations, is still viable in the third Millennium and has been seminal for similar efforts throughout the western hemisphere, particularly in Latin American countries. In most cases it is still a government sponsored program with the whitewash brush controlling content. Its greatest achievement has been in bolstering nationalism, keeping alive and expanding the mural process, and enlightening people to the elitist spin on the democratic process. Although only related to *el Movimiento* by cultural ancestry it made viable contributions to the movement's success.

Its closest relative in the United States is the enormously successful Los Angeles mural program that has produced several thousand outstanding minority and heritage based works. This program is diverse and, most importantly inclusive, embodying and acknowledging the of presence all segments of Los Angeles's heterogeneous public. Because of its purposefulness, inclusivity and professional non- profit management it stands at the apogee of *art for the people* programs and its integrity has been assured by use of controls initiated by SPARC to prevent it from slipping into the mode of a propaganda machine or a vehicle for personal political purposes. The program continues to generate a continual stream of talented, well trained muralists and is at the forefront, through its academic affiliations, in the development of mural technology.

The principal subject of this dissertation was the Chicano Mural movement of the Southwest United States and particularly its manifestation as a meaningful element of the area culture, politics and social fabric. Although the gestation period for the civil right movement that had become known as *el Movimiento* in the 1960s had tendrils connecting it to the mid—nineteenth century and the Mexican American War, the Chicano mural movement had its birth in 1960, reached its apogee in the 1970s and its final phase in the early 1980s. Now three decades, or more than a generation later, it is not presumptive to draw some conclusions regarding its social contribution to *el movimiento* and its success as an art movement.

## **Social Aspects**

One of the accepted goals in every early meeting of the progenitors of the *el Movimiento* whether in Denver, Los Angeles or Santa Barbara was to obtain a firm position in the society of the twentieth century United States for Hispanic Americans that was devoid of the stigma of “second class citizen.” Faced with a stratification of social class within their own ranks, it was a bifurcated problem. Not only did the movement have to convince the *others* of their cultural, social value and deservedness of respect, but it must also establish the value of the natural bond between the various cohorts within the Hispanic heritage. Succinctly, there was a need to educate at several different levels.

There is no doubt that success in initiating cultural change is dependent upon several basic factors, one of the most important being timing. For this movement, it was propitious. The era of the 1960s through the 1990s was a time of cultural change and one of the keywords bandied about was multiculturalism. There was a window of time in

which it was de rigueur for the master's house to be accessible even to those without proper imprimatur (Gaspar de Alba 1998:22). It would be both simple and simplistic to say that this rising tide of equality hardened into a permanent status, nevertheless, there has been improvement. In terms of the social climate and condition within San Diego's Logan Heights, its geographical location prevents it from ever being at peace—It is prime real estate and as such is a redevelopment target for all time.

One of the permanent markers of the success of the program was the change in the field of academics. In every area that contains a viable Hispanic or Chicano community, Chicano Studies has become part of the expanded curriculum. Interest in those programs and the numbers of increasing Hispanic students pursuing these studies has burgeoned until several institutions in Texas are now offering advanced degrees in the field.

### **The Art and the Park**

Now, in 2006, the *barrio*, is a comfortable neighborhood community with refurbished homes, several new schools, surrounded by medium priced condominiums, contains first class restaurants, community center and a central organization that provides it with voice, both political and cultural.

Chicano park and its murals are now a world class exhibit of *art of the people* and as valid a demonstration of the *mestizo* culture as the *retablo*. It stands as an overwhelming successful demonstration of the intentional creation of a public realm in a time when the cultural current toward its antithesis, the *disneyfied* controlled space is strong and supported by both government and corporate mentality. The park and its

content is a perfect demonstration that with education and determination the people of the country can be heard. Since its inception as a 1.2 acre grassless plot of space under the Coronado Bridge it has grown into a 8-acre phantasmagoric relief from concrete edifice from which it was nurtured. It is a relatively safe, easily accessed, community maintained public space that I think would be appreciated by Jurgen Habermas.

The art, which has been subject to community care and conservation, has been widely praised by international expertise, but is still not appreciated by the City Government of San Diego. It is the clearest manifestation of purposeful art that can be seen in that corner of the United States and one of the few bodies of work that can be truly classified as *art of the people*.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> *Mestizo*(*meztizo*) refers to a cultural and racial blend of Spanish (European) and native Mexican tribes dating back to the arrival of Cortez on the Mexican mainland and now forming a majority of the current Mexican population.

<sup>2</sup> The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) is one of the major sources for government support of the arts in the United States, has demonstrated a remarkably myopic view in responding to diversity of audience, and their public policy of audience, or the *public* for art, continues to be addressed to their idea of a stereotypical public. A recent sponsored study by Peterson, Hull and Kern (2000) *Age and Arts Participation, Research Division Report #42* is typical of the narrow view that cripples understanding of the *public* of Public art.

<sup>3</sup> Walt Disney had long despised the rowdiness that up until then had defined amusement parks as, "dirty, phony places run by rough-looking people," as he characterized them. He wanted to build instead a beautiful, phony place run by nice-looking people: an alternative America that he could script and control down to the tiniest detail of its idyllic Main Street U.S.A. and whose sovereignty no citizen would or could challenge. In 2003, as Pixar drives hand-crafted animation out of the movies, it's that vision of a hermetically sealed simulation of democracy that is proving to be Walt's most lasting legacy. The original notion of Disneyland lives today not only in the first park, its satellites and its many imitators; its influence can be found in planned and gated communities, in Rouse-developed downtowns, in the carefully scripted "reality" programs of network television, in the faux-urban ambiance of a shopping mall near you. It lives in Celebration, Florida, the model suburban town that Disney built in 1994 and has tried to manage with theme park-like control.

<sup>4</sup> The term *le droit moral* has come into the American judiciary in its original language, because both the concept and its use is French. The meaning is complex, but the underpinning is that when an artist creates a piece of art it is more than a product. According to the French concept, the artist imbues the art with, through his creativity, part of himself and that gives him certain continuing rights, among them the right to have assurance that the work will be neither destroyed or modified without his permission. The concept is accepted throughout Europe and in some states in the United States. Because it

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is in direct opposition to the American concept of property rights, it cannot be invoked over property rights in federal litigation. It was the stumbling block that kept the United States from signing onto the Berne International Treaty on Patents and Copyright, for over a decade. For California application see Civil Code, State of California Sect.987, California Preservation Act.

<sup>5</sup> See *Documents of the Chicano Struggle*, 1971, Pathfinder Press, Inc

<sup>6</sup> Clement Greenberg published a set of essays and criticisms that, coincident with the acceptance of Abstract Expressionist painting in the US gained remarkable popularity within the high art community. It was his theory that painting as an artform should follow a linear trajectory from the work of Manet to contemporary painting, continually developing the flatness of the painting rather than the multidimensionality and figurative content then in vogue. His theory, supported by the New York Avant-Garde and the Rockefeller Foundation, gained international popularity. It was also applied to period sculpture, which, in my opinion, turned out to be its nemesis. The theory was insufficiently elastic to be stretched over the contemporary work in Minimalism.

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## APPENDIX I



**Fig A-1 The Trinity - a Quattrocento Fresco**

By Masaccio

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## WRITING AND DRAWING ON THE WALLS

Drawing figures upon the walls in Paleolithic caves and doing the same in the tombs of the Pharaohs, within Olmec temples or the magnificent Christian cathedrals differs only in their purpose and methodology. Methodology can range from incising the wall with a sharp instrument to the complex multilayer fresco developed after the first millennium—so we can postulate that methodology runs a straight course closely correlated with advancing civilization—not so for purpose. I would posit that no wall drawing or painting, by a human being, has ever been made without purpose whether it be in a secret cave at Lascaux with a simple burnt stick or in full spectrum color on a tenement in Brooklyn.

When we think of Early Renaissance painting, we invariably think of paintings done on walls or altar panels. How few examples of fifteenth century painting we would have in hand, had not the Early Renaissance painters chosen to make much of their work part of the structure, permanently bonded to the architecture of the period! Even with the ruggedness inherent in fresco, their survival has been tenuous. That they exist today, despite natural disasters, the wreaking of havoc upon them by poor guardianship, ignorant conservation, and half a millennium of changing aesthetic vogue; is a testament to the skill of the early master artists.

Between 1300-1600 the art of fresco painting flourished in Northern Italy. It was a period when many of the factors necessary to undertake large and costly art projects were often coincidentally favorable. The choice of fresco was less expensive than stained glass or sculpture and suitable for a number of other reasons. Characteristically, while

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mosaics or stained glass windows either replaced or dissolved walls, thus *dematerializing form*, frescoes made it easier to emphasize solidity and the verisimilitudes created by the skilled Italian Quattrocento artists were didactically successful. Aesthetically, the hard durable plaster surface, properly laid, was a perfect ground and provided a highly reflective, luminous surface, easy to maintain and beautiful to see, and most importantly, ideal for the creation of the biblical *historia*.

The timing was propitious. It was a period of emergence of the Italian city-state with its innate competition between the various northern states. The schism over the papacy was nearly ended and the period produced the growth of the mendicant orders, the Franciscans and merchant. Families, willing and able to pay the price of being an art sponsor to aggrandize the family name and their political leverage were commonplace. And additionally, since indulgences were a common reward for good Christian deeds, they believed they could minimize their time in Purgatory or even save their everlasting souls from the wrath of hell. Simony was the order of the day.

According to Baxandall, one active employer of artists was the Florentine, Giovanni Rucellai, who had works of Veneziano, Ucello, Fillipo Lippi, Verrochio, Pollaiuolo and Castagno in his home. He speaks of his great satisfaction of owning the works of these masters, of his large expenditures in building and decorating churches and houses. According to him, that satisfaction stemmed from several motives--owning what is obviously good, serving the greater glory of God, the honor of the city and the commemoration of himself.

The changing local political and economic scene was materially affecting the manner in which art commissions were created. Whereas the more normal art patronage



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had been through either the local government, powerful trade guild organizations, or the mendicant orders, the shift to personal or family patronage, provided a wider field of aesthetic liberty and contributed to the later growth of secular art. There were real factors that concurrently threatened the stability of the Tuscan and concomitantly, the orderly progress of art—outside politics, power machinations by its neighbors, war and pestilence. A formidable course of hurdles, but evidently not sufficient to impeded the progress of art.

To look at the Quattrocento in Italy and make sense of the art, and the culture that produced it, requires us to create a new matrix through which we can view the people, their ideas, their day-to-day life, their most recent history and their attitudes toward God and aesthetics. Actually, to make sense of that period at all, we must step back a little further, to the waning middle ages of 1100-1300. One of the questions we need to look at, albeit in a cursory manner is: What were the aesthetics at that time and specifically toward art, what was considered “beautiful”? For centuries, it was generally held by art historians that the middle ages were so engrossed in metaphysical concepts that they never developed an organic concept of the “beautiful.” That belief is problematical in the third millennium and those who profess it are often accused of simply not having looked deeply enough.

Aristotle had distinguished between the servile and the liberal arts and that idea of a rudimentary system of the arts came to the middle ages. It would be well into the quattrocento, however, before the servile arts, painting, sculpture and architecture, would begin to be considered as deserving placement in a category alongside those of literature, music and mathematics. Amongst the nay-sayers we find St. Thomas Aquinas (Summa, I,

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77 ad 7) who had said that we find artistic forms congenial, and thus can easily be encompassed in aesthetic experience. But, because they do not require us to comprehend and penetrate to the heart of the complexities of substance, artistic forms are empirical, superficial. Umberto Eco sums up the medieval concept of art very succinctly when he says (Eco, 2001:97):

Despite the fact that they connected the artistic with the aesthetic, the Medievals had only a scanty understanding of the specifically artistic. They lacked a theory of the fine arts. They had no sense of the arts in a modern sense, as the construction of objects whose primary function is to be enjoyed aesthetically, and which have the high status that this entails. They found it difficult to define and order the various kinds of productive activity, and this is why the attempt to construct a system of the arts underwent so many vicissitudes.

Any theory of fine art was overridden because of the servile/liberal controversy. The servile arts were raised to the level of liberal art when they were didactic, purveying the *truths* of faith or science through beauty. This definitely aristocratic/elitist idea was universally prevalent amongst the *ecclesiasti*. The Synod Of Arras said it very clearly:

Unlettered people who couldn't appreciate the truths of the faith through reading could grasp it in contemplation of pictures.

St Thomas Aquinas mentions, ever so lightly, art designed to give pleasure, but it would be well into the fifteenth century before art would be created simply for the purpose of pleasure.

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In the early years of the quattrocento, it was widely held that the functions of painting, sculpture, and architecture were:

Beautify the House of God.

Recall the lives of the Saints

Teach the illiterate laity.

When I say *widely* held, I do not intend for the reader to assume that the beautification of the House of God was a universally accepted concept, even among the *ecclesiasti*. In the other corner, we have Saint Bernard, who with vigorous erudition and equally intense asceticism says:

We who have turned aside from society, relinquishing for Christ's sake all the precious and beautiful things in the world, its wondrous light and colour, its sweet sounds and odours, the pleasure of taste and touch, for us all bodily delights are nothing but dung.

St Bernard was not standing alone in this controversy. Nearly all the ascetic orders were strongly against what was happening in many of the churches, monasteries and convents. What was being denounced was not the aesthetic qualities, but the use of the aesthetic for a purpose foreign to the religious dogma professed by the restrictive orders, for monetary valorization. Even amongst the mendicant orders, the quantity of gold and lapis lazuli in a didactic religious painting was beginning to be counted as important as its religious significance.

By the start of the fifteenth century, the word “beauty” was definitely in the Tuscan vernacular. The concept of “more beautiful than” appears regularly in artistic commission documentation in an effort to define quality. But what did that mean to the patron—more

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grandiose? more large than? more realistic than? more decorative than? Even at this late date, I do not have the temerity to make a selection from the myriad possibilities. For some in the field of art theory, “beauty” remains the holy grail of the aesthetic.

## **Fresco Painting Techniques Circa 1300-1400**

The permanence and luminance obtained with low technology, simple materials, is hard to conceive for today’s society whose artists have, for all practical purposes, abandoned the *bella practica*. In almost all cases, the ground upon which the fresco was begun was a rough masonry wall, sometimes even rusticated. The areas to be covered with the images were grand in scale, the content often complex and taxing. With only available natural light or minimal artificial light to enhance the viewing of the finished product, the use of color and chiarascuro had to be simple and masterful.



**Fig. A-2 The Tribute – Masaccio and Masolino**

The mixture when applied to wet plaster, yielding deep penetration and permanent binding. Success of this process was time dependent, *buon fresco* required wet plaster and thus the size of each work area, or *giornata*, was a function of the amount of detail,

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or color complexity, in the area under the artists hand and his speed of execution. The number of *giornata* varied greatly, depending principally on the speed and skill and of the team, the subject complexity, the weather, and luck. The fresco *The Tribute*, part of the Peterine cycle in the Brancacci Chapel, Fig. A-2, took twenty-six *giornata*, while *Guidoriccio da Fogliano*, Fig. A-3 below, a work of comparative size done about one hundred years earlier, took only six.



**Fig. A-3 Guidoriccio da Fogliano – attribution questionable**

Generally, frescos were large, and not uncommonly, painting and preliminary drawing was accomplished, in situ, some in areas of extreme physical difficulty. The first problem was access; the erection of scaffolding strong enough to provide safe working space for a crew of men and their tools. Fresco painting, unlike easel painting is not a solitary affair but is a cooperative effort of a group of “plasterers,” journeymen and apprentice artists, all under the direction of the master. The first step is the cleaning and treating the wall to receive the first coat of rough plaster, called the *arriccio*, which serves three functions—attachment of the fresco to the building, provide a regular flattened surface, and provide a solid, toothy surface for application of the actual fresco.

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If the surface was brick, each brick under the *arriccio* base required inspection to be sure that it would make a good bond. Those that were non-absorbent (usually black), were removed and replaced before the plastering started.

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At this point the artists, under the masters direct supervision, drew the elements of the fresco directly upon the dried *arriccio* using charcoal. Next, the necessary changes, alterations and sometimes major deletions or additions to the charcoal drawing were made by the master. Once satisfied with the general layout, the master did, or directed, the enhancement of the drawing with a more permanent wash, usually red ochre or oxide in water. This drawing, called the *sinopie* was now a permanent part of the process, but meant to be seen only by the working artists. The initial charcoal drawing was cleaned off and the next step of the process, application of the thin, smooth final plaster coat, the *intonaco*, which would hold most of the beautiful pigments, could begin. When a fresco has been damaged, pieces of the *intonaco*, the *sinopie*, or the under-drawing, become visible.

The direct charcoal drawing on the *arriccio* served the process well until the early Quattrocento. As the fresco techniques improved amongst the Tuscans, their ability to handle complex technical projects grew accordingly and the direct drawing upon the wall, which would be appreciated today as an important creative device, no longer served their needs. Thus began the cartoon, a full size, sectioned, detailed drawing made at the atelier, carried to the site and transferred directly to the wall. Sometimes incised, sometimes directly traced, and sometimes perforated along the lines and pumiced to show

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a dotted line on the *arriccio*. Recent repairs and conservation in the Brancacci Chapel revealed that all these techniques were in use by Masaccio and Masolino in 1425.

The next step was the application of the thin top layer plaster, the *intonaco*. Always beginning at the top, so as not to mar finished work below, the artist worked into patches of damp plaster. The size of the damp patch, or *giornata*, was usually dependent upon the complexity of the figure being painted. The interconnection of these painting patches was a major consideration of the artist. The wetness of the *giornata* affected the absorption of the pigmented lime-water solution the density and luminosity of the surface color, so it was imperative to have good planning, consistent plaster dampness, and control of the pigment intensity to avoid color tonality anomalies in large passages.

Mechanically, it is characteristic of fresco painting that the meeting of the *giornata* can be seen can be easily seen, particularly under a raking light. Even with the technique of overlapping the *giornata* edges, a seam remains. Like a light *impasto* on a fine oil painting, it is a simple statement that this is a product of a man's hand, even if the artist and the patron would have preferred it not to be there.

This marks the end of *buon* process, but few pieces were considered to be finished at this point. Many of the details could not be done in the broad technique and required fine detail painting. Some pigments and treatments, like gilding, did not lend themselves to application in the wet process and had to be applied to a dry surface, *a secco*. In the case of pigments, one of the primary significant colors in the ecclesiastical spectrum was blue. The finest blue was particularly expensive, made by grinding lapis lazuli, an imported gemstone. It did not perform well in the *buon* process. Many of the commission contracts specified the exact amount of gold, lapis, and other significantly costly material

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the work would embody. The application of gold leaf, when properly applied, has survived the centuries better than pigments *a secco*.

The *a secco* application of pigments and gilding has not withstood the tests of time nearly as well as the wet process. The general technique used was to use a binding medium with the pigment suspended in it. The general concept is sound, but surface chemistry is unforgiving and it is not uncommon to see large areas of pigment having flaked off. Cennini provided several formulas for suitable mediums, but the most successful were those based upon the egg yoke, which held the pigment well and underwent chemical changes after applied, forming a lustrous surface. Although this technique on prepared wooden board has proven to be quite satisfactory, its long-term qualities when used atop the fresco process left something to be desired.

In retrospect, I find that, with regard to permanence, attempting to apply a twenty-first century conservator's view to a renaissance artist's concepts may be completely improper. Taking into consideration the number of fresco's that were painted over, or altarpieces that were sawed apart, or monumental frescos that were turned to dust to make way for architectural alterations, the work of these artists, up until the time of Da Vinci were seldom treated with any care and certainly no reverence. The early pre-renaissance attitude toward these artists was that they were craftsmen. In moving from the trecento into the quattrocento their status improved somewhat but, it has, in fact, only been very recently that art historians and conservators, throughout the world, have considered the Pre and Early Renaissance Italian painters to be other than "primitives." As pointed out by Hoeniger, this hierarchical difference between the early Italian masters



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and the High Renaissance was influential in the application of poor, or even destructive, conservation practices to their images.

Giorgio Vasari, the sixteenth century artist/historian, can be found at the nascence of this biased attitude in both word and deed, as with many other sticky art history problems only recently solved. He was the original applicator of the metaphor *i primitivi* to the work of these masters and the artist that overpainted Masaccio's Trinity.

### **Modern Mural Techniques**

Artists have been looking for simpler ways to get their ideas up on the wall for centuries. Very early attempts to simplify the process, even for the highly skilled like Leonardo, were disastrous. Today, we have so much technology at hand that the artist is faced with the problem of choice of medium, material, method and technology. Chemistry has provided at least partial solutions many of the problems of outdoor painting and attachment of the paint to the surface by providing myriad grounds that can be rolled or sprayed upon the wall. Even with this new technology, it is appropriate to say that fading of color starts at the day of application. The only thing that is variable is the rate of fading and oxidation. Most murals from the period of *el Movimiento* have been repainted at least once and those in Chicano Park, even though they are for the most part, only exposed to partial direct sunlight, require continual maintenance. In 1933 Siqueiros began using many of the technical innovations available, such as a photographic projector to put his *sinopie*, or under-drawing, up on the wall and from what he learned from the North American automobile industry, the use of pyroxylin weatherproof paint and spray techniques for outdoor murals (Lucie-Smith, 1993:62). These techniques greatly

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facilitated the post World War II proliferation of ethnic murals throughout the minority communities in the United States. Paint that is available is in a phantasmagoric spectrum, simple to apply and generally holding tenaciously to the ground and though reducing the natural destructive power of the dazzling white light of the sun on any chromatic surface has been improved but still, as in centuries past, makes mosaic art still one of the few permanent, low maintenance mural systems. Widely used in the Byzantine and early middle ages, costs in later years became prohibitive. New materials technology combined with rising restoration costs of painted murals, has breathed new life into the old technique. Figure A-4 shows Sam Leyba in 2003, one of the original Chicano muralists of Santa Fe, New Mexico inspecting a mosaic mural prior to installation at a local high school.



**Fig. A-4 Muralist Sam Leyba with a Mosaic Mayan Calendar**

The choices for indoor projects have become even greater. Changes came about gradually. The 1925 John Singer Sargent Mural, *Orestes Pursued by The Furies*, is actually done on canvass and then attached to the wall with adhesive, greatly simplifying

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the mechanics of the creative process, and has been generally adopted as the principal process for indoor murals because of economy and versatility. In 1933 Siqueiros began using many of the technical innovations available, such as a photographic projector to put his *sinopie* upon the wall.

In the twenty-first century, technology has made possible such things as the portable mural, photo processing of content and computer controlled automatic painters capable of laying down all but the finest details. Once again in history, technology awaits hand of the artist.

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## Vita

John E. Kenny was born and raised in New York City and originally educated in physics and mathematics at the Polytechnic Institute of New York. His early work was in development of both airborne and underwater systems and instrumentation, gradually moving into management of a broad range of research and development projects in the oceanographic, nuclear, and military fields. His diverse assignments included the Atlas missile project, Sea Lab I and II, underground nuclear tests at Mercury, NV, and various Man in the Sea programs.

He served in the US Navy in World War II and the Korean War, is a combat veteran of Iwo Jima and Okinawa, and created an independent all-source intelligence operation during the Vietnam War period.

Art has always been a conjoined activity in his life. He studied fine art at the University of California and the University of New Orleans under several modern masters and has had one-man shows in New York and La Jolla. He considers art, mathematics, and social sciences as symbiotic disciplines. For the past several years he has been working on interdisciplinary communication, particularly expression of art theory in statistical values.