

PST: LA/LA

¡Murales Rebeldes! Bares the Plight of L.A.'s Murals

Cynthia Rebolledo | September 20, 2017

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Ceramic tiles are all that's left of Yreina Cervántez and Alma López' Huntington Beach mural, '*La Historia de Adentro/La Historia de Afuera*,' (The History from Within/The History from Without 1995) — an insulting and painful reminder of the murals complete whitewashing. In an interview for the new tome "¡Murales Rebeldes! L.A. Chicana/o Murals under Siege," Cervántez relates to the authors that "local arts professionals did not see her work as worthy of protection and the public images of people of color were not a priority for them when it came to preserving Huntington Beach's historical heritage." The imagery represented the diverse cultures in Orange County, depicting contemporary beach life and cultural experiences of African Americans, Asian Americans and Latinos both old and newly arrived, giving the community a greater understanding and appreciation of other people's experiences and heritages. Sadly, Cervántez and López' mural is not listed or acknowledged on the official city website of Huntington Beach's public art collection page.

This is only one of eight stories told in "¡Murales Rebeldes!," an exhibition and companion publication produced by the California Historical Society, in partnership with LA Plaza de Cultura y Artes. The exhibit runs from September 23, 2017 until February 27, 2018. The book was written by Erin M. Curtis, Jessica Hough and Guisela Latorre with foreword and afterword by Gustavo Arellano (Editor of OC Weekly and author of the nationally syndicated column "¡Ask a Mexican!" and "Taco USA: How Mexican Food Conquered America").

"¡Murales Rebeldes!," explores the way Chicana/o murals in the greater Los Angeles area have been whitewashed, censored, neglected, and even destroyed. The book and the exhibition delve into murals by artists Barbara Carrasco, Sergio O'Cadiz Moctezuma, Yreina Cervántez and Alma López, Roberto Chavez, Willie Herrón III, East Los Streetscapers and Ernesto de la Loza — whose works of art have endured lack of recognition as acts of personal expression, and as voices with social, historical and political relevance.

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The project was initiated by Jessica Hough, co-curator and director of exhibitions at California Historical Society. Hough had approached LA Plaza to do an exhibition on the stories of murals that had met similar dismal fates and how these Chicanx muralists have contributed to the region's history and public art. Each curator became responsible for researching individual artists who were imperiled in some way or that had some negative backlash starting with murals that had been whitewashed, destroyed or censored. "An early example that we looked at was Barbara Carrasco's mural, 'L.A. History: A Mexican Perspective (1981),' " says Curtis. A portable mural that was censored by the Community Redevelopment Agency for its content around the time of the city's bi-centennial of the Olympics. "Carrasco refused to take any of the images out of the mural." The CRA protested the artist's inclusion of an image of a little Japanese girl getting ready to be interned — controversial aspects of the city's history, particularly regarding its minority populations. In an oral history, Carrasco recalls going to the Japanese National Coalition for Redress and Reparations and inviting them to see the mural, "They said that the image of the little girl getting ready to be interned was so important, and is such an important part of their history and also part of L.A. history because it's something that should never have taken place ever in the first place."



Barbara Carrasco with panels of "L.A. History" in storage, 2016. The 43 wood and Masonite panels are currently stored in a Pasadena facility, unseen by the public. California Historical Society/LA Plaza de Cultura y Artes | Oscar Castillo

Carrasco's battle with the CRA was not only controversial, but the most public of them all, and stereotypical perceptions of her were printed in the Los Angeles Times, calling her an "angry young woman." "This happened to a lot of Chicana artists that resisted any form of control or oppression when they spoke back to power — they got branded," says co-curator/associate professor of women's gender and sexuality studies at Ohio State University, Guisela Latorre. "Even within the Latina/o communities and the Chicano movement, when women spoke out against sexism, a lot of times they were called traitors because to speak against sexism was feminist and being a feminist meant that you were white. So you had derogatory names like *vendida* (meaning sell out in Spanish) being thrown at women who were speaking up for themselves," she says.

Hough says it was a long research period where they had to go out to the communities to understand the context of the murals, conditions of their commission, how they were executed and what was contested about them. "It wasn't easy; there was a lot of investigative journalism especially with the case of Sergio O'Cadiz. He's the only artist deceased in the group of muralists," she says. "Thanks to working with his family we were able to locate images, scrapbook pages, related work and drawings." Research also relied on the artists and having them go into their own archives and pulling out material. Along with photographs, playing an essential role to seeing how murals changed over time.

Roberto Chavez' mural "The Path to Knowledge and the False University" was another example of whitewashing by the administration at East Los Angeles College. It was something of a reprisal because of his affiliation with the Chicano studies department and the administration's nervousness about growing radical elements on campus at the time. The mural features large Cubist-inspired faces, surrealist pyramids, military tanks, weapons on campus at the time. The mural features large Cubist-inspired faces, surrealist pyramids, military tanks, weapons of war and loud symbols representing the struggles and oppression of college students.



Roberto Chavez "The Path to Knowledge and the False University," 1974 | Manuel Delgadillo.



A detail of Roberto Chavez's "The Path to Knowledge and the False University," 1974. This features a figure Chavez called "Our Mother." | UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

The authors carefully chose stories that cover the breadth of the situations that occurred within the Chicano mural movement. "We wanted to make this exhibition a call to action as much as a history or art history and make sure that people were aware of the different ways that murals can be threatened and have different examples to

show that,” says Curtis. “What came through over and over again in these stories is Chicana muralism is a way of taking up space and using space to communicate particular messages, whether they’re political messages about inequality that’s happening at the time or expression of mural histories that aren’t being told in other places.” There’s also an aspect in which painting a mural transforms space into place; it turns general space into a site where people can gather. Just this past year, Curtis says they’ve seen examples of this with Ernesto de la Loza’s mural, “Resurrection of the Green Planet” being used as a community gathering spot protesting police brutality in Boyle Heights.

This begs the question, “How will Chicana murals be protected in the decades to come?” Graffiti and natural elements aren’t the only dangers to murals, the absence of a bigger oversight agency or pathway to protecting and maintaining the murals proves to be an impediment. Unfortunately, there is no clear recourse. Chicana murals still exist in both preserved and decaying states, “Willie Herrón has had to apply for grant money himself and really fight to get the funding that he needs to do the upkeep and restoration of his murals,” says Curtis — which can take a physical and emotional toll on the artists.



Of the more than 45 murals, only 8 of Ernesto de la Loza's work remain. His "El Nuevo Mundo: Homage to the Worker" was painted over when the building it was painted on was sold to a new owner. | Courtesy of the artist

While one of the biggest threats to Chicana muralists is the destruction of murals, Latorre says the difficulty of creating murals on the other hand is a terrible loss. “I think the city of Los Angeles should have been proud that at one point it was the mural capital of the world and should be alarmed that they can no longer have that identity.”

“The elements and time remain the most obvious enemy, but a far more pernicious foe has emerged in the past fifteen years: indifference. Chicana murals are an indelible part of our history, public documents of time and place that is fast disappearing,” says Arellano. “It’s time we collectively care.”

The exhibition takes place September 23rd through February 27th, 2018 at LA Plaza and will highlight the artist’s contributions to Chicana mural history in Los Angeles. “Stories will come to life with a mix of photographs, photography is responsible for telling a lot of the story, concept art, concept sketches and related artwork,” says Curtis. “In the case of East Los Streetscapers, we have fragments that they saved from a mural that was destroyed.”

Top Image: A scene depicting a young Chicano's arrest by police dressed in riot gear led to a controversy with the Fountain Valley Police Department. During the dispute that followed, someone threw a bucket of white paint at the scene. O'Cadiz chose to keep the white paint on the mural as a permanent mark of opposition and evidence of the controversy. Sergio O'Cadiz, Mural detail, Fountain Valley Mural c. 1976 | Private collection of the O'Cadiz Family

All images are from the book, ¡Murales Rebeldes!: L.A. Chicana/Chicano Murals under Siege © 2017 by Erin M. Curtis, Jessica Hough, and Guisela Latorre. Published by LA Plaza de Cultura y Artes and the California Historical Society, distributed by Angel City Press. All rights reserved. Used with permission.

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