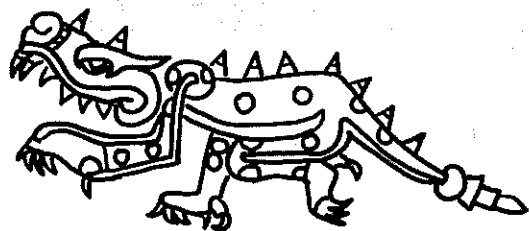


SIGNS FROM THE HEART:

California Chicano Murals



**Edited with an introduction by
Eva Sperling Cockcroft and Holly Barnet-Sánchez**

**Social and Public Art Resource Center, Venice, California
University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque**

© Social and Public Art Resource Center, 1990. University of New Mexico Press paperback edition published 1993 in association with Social and Public Art Resource Center. All rights reserved.

11 10 09 08 07 06 05 04

5 6 7 8 9 10

Book design by Cynthia Anderson and Christienne de Tournay

Funded in part by: Ahmanson Foundation, ARCO Foundation, California Community Foundation, California Council on the Humanities, McDonnell-Douglas, Lear Siegler Foundation, Pacific Bell Corporation, National Endowment for the Arts, Visual Arts, and University of California at Irvine, Fine Arts Department.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Signs from the heart: California Chicano murals / edited with an introduction by Eva Sperling Cockcroft and Holly Barnet-Sánchez.

p. cm.

Originally published: Venice, Calif.: Social and Public Art Resource Center, 1990.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8263-1448-1

1. Street art—California. 2. Mural painting—20th century—California.

3. Mexican Americans—California—Politics and government—Pictorial works.

I. Cockcroft, Eva Sperling. II. Barnet-Sánchez, Holly. III. Social and Public Arts Resource Center (Venice, Los Angeles, Calif.)

ND2635.C2S56 1993

751.7'3'08968720794—dc20

93-17526

CIP



"Zoot Suit Riots", detail, *GREAT WALL OF LOS ANGELES*
1981
Judith F. Baca
Tujunga Wash Drainage Canal, San Fernando Valley, Los Angeles
total mural over 1/2 mile long, this detail approx. 13' x 8'

p. 69-101

Amalia Mesa-Bains



**Quest for
Identity:
Profile of
Two Chicana
Muralists
Based on
Interviews with
Judith F. Baca
and Patricia
Rodríguez**

The Chicano Movement can be seen as a coming of age, a self-definition rooted in a critical period of development both individual and social. Concerns with improved education, labor conditions, bilingual support, land retrieval, and community empowerment were bound together within the encompassing challenge of identity. For the artist, this self-definition by virtue of its historical placement was the impulse for both personal and collective expression.

In a historical sense, the Chicano Movement could be interpreted as collective action toward cultural, political, social, economic, or educational change. Viewed privately through the self of the singular artist, the Movement was a struggle with past heritage, societal rejection, adolescent contradiction, and inevitably, the need for purposeful ethical enlistment. This need to blend a historical and personal identity as Chicano was a driving force in the social activism of *el movimiento*.

Those individual artists whose developing self was indelibly marked by this experience reflect the larger and more massive quest for identity of their group. According to Erik Erikson in his groundbreaking book, *Life History and the Historical Moment*:

A historical period may present a singular chance for a collective renewal which opens up unlimited identities for those who, by a combination of unruliness, giftedness, and competence, represent a new leadership, a new elite, and new types rising to dominance in a new people.¹

1. Erik Erikson, *Life History and the Historical Moment* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1975), p. 21.

The Chicano mural movement was a major effort in the expressive arts which expanded these concerns of identity through a public discourse. Murals served as a larger than life visual voice linking communities, narrating missing histories, presenting cultural themes, reappropriating neighborhood space, and creating a new imagery of the Chicano. As a function of identity development, murals provided idealized portraits which celebrated family and cultural practices. Their themes often outlined political demands and spiritual beliefs significant to the larger Chicano community.

Within this mural movement collectives and brigades which sought to develop collaborative models and structures provided important leadership. This leadership was marked by the active presence of women muralists. As women they brought gender perspective to the issues of identity and community; as artists they affirmed a public expression that incorporated both historic and personal narrative. Patricia Rodríguez formerly of the 1970s mural collective, Mujeres Muralistas, is a significant figure in Chicano cultural activity within the movement. Judith F. Baca, creator of the *Great Wall of Los Angeles* continues to be a moving force in mural activities internationally. In looking at the development of these two leading muralists as women, artists, and participants in the Chicano Movement we can perhaps begin to understand the relationship between social and individual identity. Their journey is of an individual and personal nature, yet like a mirror it reflects the life history of a community.

■ PATRICIA RODRIGUEZ

For Patricia Rodríguez the earliest childhood sense of boundaries was of solidity and protection from her own community as well as of exclusion and alienation from an Anglo society. She was born in Texas to a Chicana single parent of the Zoot suit era and was raised by her grandmother while her mother worked. Her earliest recollections were of a racially tense separation between Mexicans and Anglos:

We knew that there were certain territories we didn't go into, especially in Texas. It was very close-knit, we had our own barrios and our own districts. In school we got called names and things like that.

Despite the restrictiveness of the community setting, Patricia Rodríguez' grandmother was able to provide an optimistic model, clearly becoming a source of strength. Her caretaking played a major role in the early development of a feminine identification.

She had a lot of strength and energy. She brought me up until the age of seven, so I was molded after her pretty much instead of my mother. She was very productive, very creative... She enjoyed everything about life. She was never bitter, never depressed.



FANTASY WORLD FOR CHILDREN

1975

Patricia Rodríguez, Graciela Carillo, and Irene Pérez

Ralph Maradiaga Mini-Park, 24th and Bryant Sts., Mission District, San Francisco
approx. 30' x 15'

It was in this setting of community culture that Rodríguez experienced those sources that have continued to play a part in her creative identity. The interplay of family gatherings and *barrio* festivities provided an acceptable method of feminine creativity. Through cultural and communal traditions the artist developed a sense of productivity:

When I was growing up in the little Texas town, we used to have lots of jamaycas, which are festive days — church celebrations, Mother's day, or something like that — and everybody works toward that day. It's very festive... Women produce a lot of pillow cases, embroidery, knitting, pot holders or aprons or doilies. All that was very colorful, it was a big event. It had a lot of effect on me. I was very excited about what my grandmother was showing and the neighbor was showing.

This sense of shared expression provided by the nurturing setting of her grandmother's support stirred her first explorations in art making:

I can remember being creative ever since I was a child... the earliest thing I can remember is being at a neighbor's house when I still lived with my grandmother in Texas and creating a dress and trying to sew it. Actually, I didn't sew it because when the lady tried to put the dress on the doll, it came apart. But, it was a dress that had two parts to it which was very interesting to her. She was amazed that I could do that.

The move to California in her childhood allowed Patricia Rodríguez to negotiate a new sense of openness about cultural boundaries. It also provided a conflictual situation as she struggled with the loss of her grandmother, the emergence of a new stepfather and a new community:

I came from a very repressive type of background where you just didn't hang out with Anglos — unless they were very poor and they came from the same neighborhoods we came from. In California the division wasn't as blatant. We all hung out together.. It was not easy in the beginning because I didn't know if I should trust them, or whether it was the right thing to do, or if I would get into trouble.

Adolescent struggles gave way to the opportunity for self-expression under these new influences. During this period, Rodríguez began to formulate a sense of herself as an artist. This ambition was influenced by recognition from others:

When I was in junior high I had a wonderful art teacher who was gay and very creative ...He kept encouraging me. He said, "You're going to be an artist. You've got to go to college." And I said, "Well, I've always wanted to be an artist."

The interaction with a caring adult outside the family served as a bridge to greater aspirations. As for so many adolescents, the interest and concern of a significant teacher provided



LATINOAMÉRICA

1974

Las Mujeres Muralistas

(Patricia Rodríguez, Graciela Carillo, Consuelo Méndez, Irene Pérez)

Mission Street between 25th and 26th Sts., Mission District, San Francisco

approx. 25' x 70'

the motivation for independence. While the Anglo environment was at times isolating, Rodríguez' artistic aptitude was essential to her self-esteem and competency.

With this widening sense of identity her artistic impulses flourished and she began to envision her future as an artist. For Rodríguez as for many Chicanos of her generation, the limitations imposed by social attitudes were an obstacle in developing her sense of future. Yet Patricia Rodríguez relied on her growing sense of endurance and perseverance, encouraged by the model of her mother:

I was very impressed with her because she was also very enduring and hardworking. She had a positive attitude about everything and didn't let anything get in her way. She always thought that I should strive for the best, I should strive for the highest possible, whether it be in high school or to get a job.

During this struggle for independence and future, she was for a time married to an Anglo. After her marriage ended in divorce, she began realizing her potential as an artist. The collective force of the political change for Chicanos began to sweep her along as she joined the Movement. The turning point was that I was, for the first time, in the environment of the Chicano Movement.

There were a lot of things going on, a lot of demonstrations, a lot of exciting moments. I decided if I can do all these things and be a woman who can work for the rights of Chicanos to be at the University, work for the rights of women, work for the rights of workers, then I should be able to work for my own rights, to make my dreams come true. It was the ideal of trying to be liberated and trying to be feminist, of trying to work for something you could never achieve otherwise because society wouldn't let you. I just worked toward that.

Making use of an art scholarship, she went to art school, however she found it to be isolating and chaotic. The formality and structure she expected to find there was based on a romanticized perception that proved to be untrue.

I thought art school was going to be like the Hollywood movies of the 1940s where you have to wear a smock and a beret. The only role models I had were television and maybe Hollywood movies where some middle-class girl went to Paris to art school.

In the ferment of new ideas and potentialities generated by *el movimiento* she joined other Chicanos committed to fighting for their right to higher education. In the context of this momentum, a new consciousness was formed and earlier identifications of strength and perseverance became layers in the development of her self concept as an artist. What she was unable to find in support in the majority institutions she discovered in her *barrio* activities. But even this collective work was restricted by the political expectations of her male counterparts:

They responded with "well, it's cute but it doesn't say very much." And I said, "well, not everything has to be political." There's other things that one can say, especially as an artist, I mean it's in an artist's creed to express how they feel...I never believed that you had to be so dogmatic, in fact, I resented it. But I went along with it because I was very much involved with the group.

She began studying the work of the Mexican muralists and was inspired to join other women artists in a group called Mujeres Muralistas. The development of the women's painting group allowed her access to new ideas and expressions on a public level.

The fact that I was painting, that I was doing large-scale figures, that I was working with massive scale and I was out in public, made it a lot more exciting.

As her community attachment deepened, the artist relied more on the cultural sources of her own experiences as content and model in her murals. In particular, the consistent patterns of celebration, kinship, and community from her childhood became part of the muralist's themes and imagery that were translated through the collective vision of the Mujeres Muralistas.

A lot of the rituals and the richness of the culture, the combinations of cultural beliefs that the family has and of the particular groups I've been with are the influences I have now. But they all go back to my grandmother, or to my early childhood. They derive from my early stages of development.

Joining with the collective mural movement she continued to maintain an ideal sense of artistic identity, a role imbued with a larger mission. This sense of mission, despite the changes in her art alliances and in the Movement, is expressed by her perseverance:

My philosophy is that an artist should be dedicated. Sometimes it is very difficult. Some people say, "husband and wife and kids first, and if there's time, there's art." And I say, "no." I say, "art first. Art first, everything else second." It takes work and means some sacrifices in your life...if you call yourself an artist, you have to put out. You have to work hard. You have to produce work.

The inspirations, sources and contradictions that provoked change for Patricia Rodríguez solidified a commitment and sense of self inextricably tied to both her identity as a Chicana and as an artist. In a collective sense the Chicano adolescence provided a major impetus to *el movimiento*. The awareness of injustice that is intensified for every adolescent was doubly intense for minority youth. Like other adolescents, Patricia Rodríguez relied on her own growing artistic competency as an escape from the sense of frustration and limitation encountered in school where tracking and discrimination were everyday events.

You understood what discrimination was about... I felt that I had a responsibility, I had a duty as part of this younger generation with this kind of consciousness to try and correct some of those things. It was like enlisting in the army. If I had to have art become part of that duty for x amount of time, then it would, because it was simply something that I would have felt terrible if I had not done.

Personal development propelled Patricia Rodríguez toward her own artistic needs and the Chicano collectivity provided a context for social change. Mujeres Muralistas was formed out of a need for women to work together in a supportive way. Like earlier familial models, the Mujeres Muralistas included only women: Irene Pérez (Guatemalan), Graciela Carrillo (Chicano), Consuelo Méndez (Venezuelan), and Patricia Rodríguez. In many ways, the group was also a prototype for the development of movement values which reinforced publicly accessible, anti-elite work of a collective nature. The images of their murals, *Latinoamérica* and *Pacos Tacos*, expressed a pan-American aesthetic where highly visible images of women and emphasis on ceremony, celebration, caretaking, harvest and a continental terrain worked toward the creation of a new mythology. The power of the murals relied on precisely that widely held memory of the everyday which allowed the work of the Mujeres Muralistas to provide a recollective function for a broad community during a historic period of time.

■ JUDITH F. BACA

In the period of the Chicano Movement life paths crossed the historic trajectory of the group. Making sense out of this juncture requires us to reflect on the key elements, personal histories, memories, and recollections that marked this experience. For Judith Baca, perhaps it was the story of her own families migration to California shortly before her birth that first made her aware of the oppression and resistance of women. She was reared in a matriarchal family. As for many Chicanos of her generation, her grandmother offered a constant nurturing while her single mother made a living.

My Mother wasn't young when I was born, she was 23. They had been living in Colorado. The barrio was a very big, very old Mexican community. She had older brothers who completely controlled her life, a situation which she couldn't bear any more. She made the journey west. She was the pioneer in the family.

The struggle of this family of women became a model for the artist's later structures of feminist empowerment. Judith Baca was greatly influenced by the character and indigenous sensibility of her grandmother while her mother's working class perseverance in providing for a disabled sister, an elderly mother, a younger sister, and her daughter created a



UPRISING OF THE MUJERES, detail
1979
Judith F. Baca
portable, acrylic on wood
8' x 24'

model of service and dedication that inspired the young Judith Baca. In particular, her grandmother's beliefs and practices created a worldview for the artist that remains a potent force in her own philosophy regarding the environment, harmony and world relations:

My grandmother was a very spiritual, very Indian-looking woman. I remember walking down the street with her and holding her hand and knowing that somehow we were walking down the wrong streets in the wrong country and we were completely out of step with what was happening here. She gave me a tremendous spiritual force. I think she became the ideal of what love should be. I really find this the absolute foundation of my confidence. I know my sense of self was formed at that time.

Her mother's marriage to an Anglo proved to be a conflictual relationship for Baca. She responded to this sense of alienation by increasing her reliance on the extended family and asserting more and more control of herself through her art. An early marriage to an Anglo made possible some separation from family conflicts and provided a support for her art education. Her marriage ending in divorce, Baca found solace, consolation and a sense of power in her artistic abilities. Yet her early art lacked a sense of purpose. She remembers a moment after graduation when a simple inquiry by her grandmother called these issues into question:

I was the first woman in the family ever to graduate from college. There was a big party. Everyone came. I took my certificate to my grandmother the night of my graduation and said, "Look." I was very happy. She took me into the back bedroom of my little apartment and she said, "Show me what you do." So I took out what I could find that was realistic, some drawings, and showed them to her. She said just one thing, "What's it for?" I was devastated by that one little remark. I was going to say "To hang on your walls," but she was right. "What was it for?" Her question really guided me from that point on. I knew I had to use this particular skill I had, but that it had to be connected with something that had meaning or purpose beyond my self gratification and could speak to the people I cared most about, my family and community.

Baca turned more intensely to her work as an artist and teacher as she struggled to define her role. As a woman and a Chicana she did not seem to fit within the romantic image of the bohemian white male artist working in a garret:

I didn't think I had the right to call myself an artist, because the image of who an artist was didn't fit. I didn't know that I could make my own definition.

The role of the artist, the issue of definition, continued to be a problem as Judith Baca began to work within the collectivity of the Chicano Movement. She questioned whether

the communal nature of her work was valid as art. Yet, her collective work with youth gangs in the *barrio* was a breakthrough in her own self-definition, her own development:

When I worked with the kids the experience was so moving and so big. Imagine it, for the first time people were taking community action in art together. They were giving voices to the people who had not spoken, whose stories were largely not told and taking spaces that were largely owned by other people. I saw the men who were putting me down do what I did, follow my lead. I began to see that something was going on, how the people I was working with were being changed, how I was also changing and learning.

Her involvement with young people has been a continuing aspect of her work which is reflective of her own struggles and beliefs:

I'm very attached to young people because I identify with their rebellion, the struggle they're going through. I believe that they have a future, that they are the gauge of what the society is doing or not doing to nature — they are the barometer of racism. That's why I work with youth.

Moving from *barrio* community murals to the undertaking of the *Great Wall*, Baca moved into a period of greater productivity and involvement with issues of feminism. It was a movement not without some conflicts, but as her sense of identity as an artist grew, there was an acceptance of the unconventional path her life would take.

The constant is yourself. And the extension of yourself is your work. There are no role models to be a woman essentially alone and willing to do that —willing to put my work first in my life and deal with what that might mean. There is a conflict between familia and being a lone woman, its a conflict between not making the conventional family, and recreating the comfort and security of that without doing it the way it has been done in my history.

Yet even her new model of a feminist identity did not sever her link to cultural sources. She derived energy from the cultural beliefs and experiences of her community:

I struggle not to be lost from my culture because I think it is the very spirit of how I work. My work is informed by the connection. There's force in the connection. It is the base from which the work flows.

The pervasive element of resistance that colored the larger Chicano Movement also affected Chicano artists as assumptions about the private and elitist nature of artist and art-making were overturned. Even as a muralist involved with the construction of a public, collective movement in art, Judith Baca did not lose touch with the personal motivations which shaped her production: