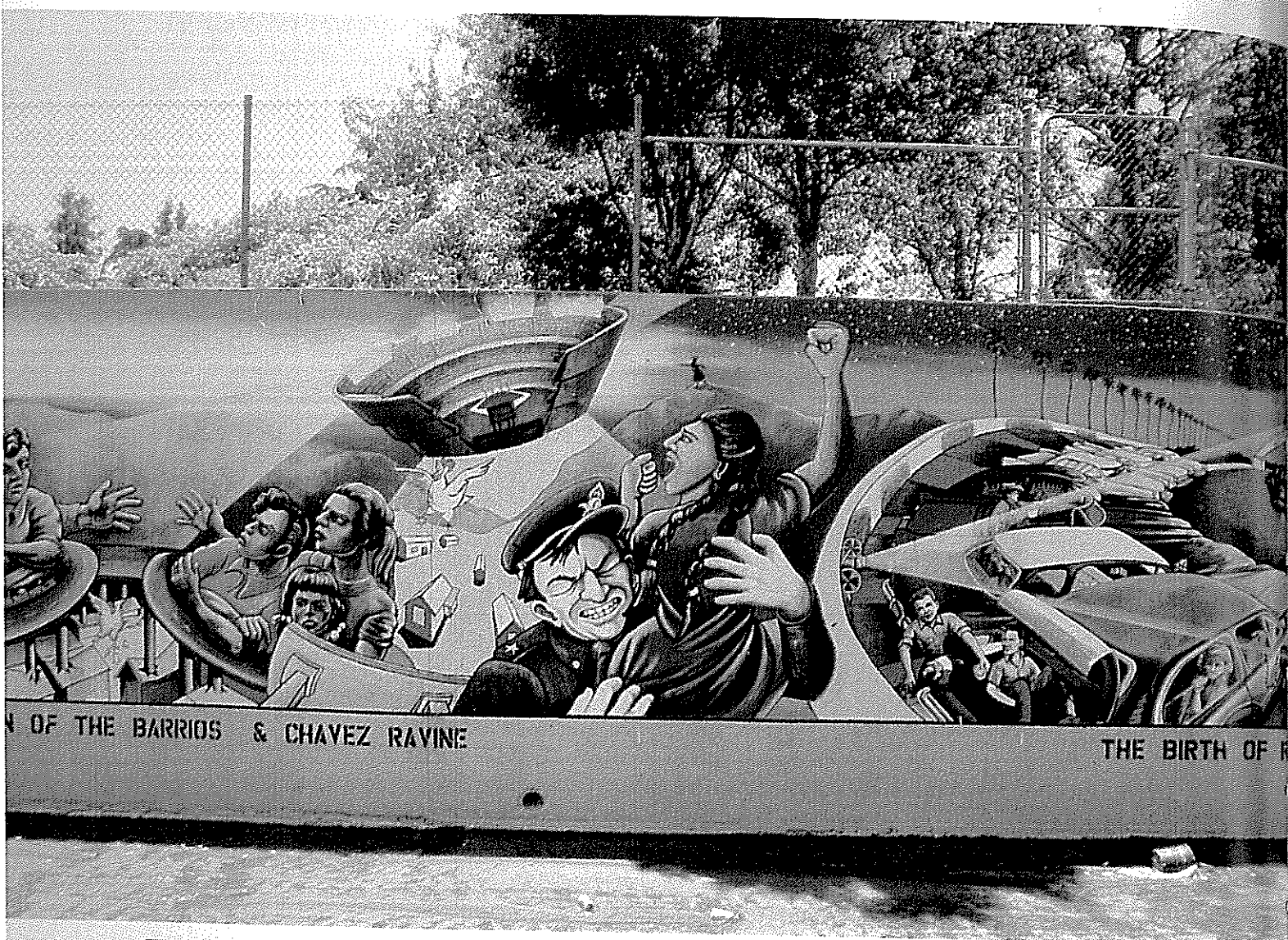




"Division of the Barrios and Chavez Ravine" from the *GREAT WALL OF LOS ANGELES*
1983

Judith F. Baca

Tujunga Wash Drainage Canal, San Fernando Valley, Los Angeles
total mural over 1/2 mile long, this detail approx. 13' x 35'

If there's a source of pain, I do not avoid it. I think rage and the transformation of it into positive action is one of the great sources of productivity for me. Rage at injustice or at the spiritual disharmony with the earth, with what is female is a starting point from which to develop alternatives. In the subsequent problem solving one thing leads to another. I am part of that process. I really believe that sometimes I'm carried by this great wave of what happens when I put people together.

From Baca's earliest work of organizing youth gangs to do mural work, to the *Great Wall*, to her current traveling piece *The World Wall* (on societal transformation to peace), the artist has been concerned with public space, community empowerment, and creating relationships between discordant people.

One does an analysis of a site and it doesn't matter whether it's East Los Angeles or whether it's Skid Row or whether it's a migrant farm worker's town. In each case you begin with an analysis of that site. And you begin to find out what are the social as well as the physical elements of a particular place...primary, is to really look at the social situation even before the physical side because if the social situation dictates that it is an important site to work at, then even if the physical site is difficult or almost impossible, I may still chance it.

The community participatory process Baca developed, which involves input from historians, cultural informants, storytellers, community residents and young artists, has become an important model for collective murals. The collective process was based on the need to create murals by Chicanos for Chicanos. Consequently, models of community involvement were essential ingredients in allowing the histories and ideas of the murals to reach their intended audience.

Although the collective process draws in many diverse influences, it is Baca's well developed filmic narrative using connecting images that lends the unique quality to works such as the *Great Wall*. She describes its metaphoric quality as follows:

In the case of the Great Wall the metaphor really is the bridge. It's about the interrelationship between ethnic and racial groups, the development of interracial harmony. The product — there are really two products — the mural and another product which is invisible, the interracial harmony between the people who have been involved.

In the long history of California's communities of color conflicts between racial groups are a historic reality. Judith Baca's work serves to bind together disparate histories and adversarial constituencies. In particular, the individual junctures of her life have intersected with the historical moment of the Chicano, Feminist, and Public Art movements. In this respect her life history has encompassed multiple cultural realities. Yet there is a common thread of social

indignation, resistance and struggle for justice that permeates her murals. Through her work she has forged a new definition of the urban artist:

I consider myself an urban artist, that is, I'm particularly tuned into an urban environment which could be the barrio that I grew up in. I believe that as an urban artist I have to be responsive to the urban environment. I'm interested in the transformation of the physical environment as well and the creation of a space that in itself reflects the people who live there. I see myself as an instrument to give voices to the the general sentiment.

■ CONCLUSION

The parallels between the identity development of Patricia Rodríguez and Judith Baca are not surprising when they are viewed in the context of their generation, their region, and their historical epoch. The forces of migration, extended family, racism, and sexism were encountered in a historic period of massive social change for countless other Chicanas of their age. The manner of transformation available to the artist has allowed them to use what was personal and individual in service of their group. Like other Chicanas under similar circumstances of migration and change, the grandmother served as a sanctuary of culture and a bridge to memories and heritage, serving both as content and model for their murals. In the same fashion, the folk ceremonies and healing and religious artifacts of their families formed a spirituality and sense of continuity critical to their development.

The crisis of adolescence, as well as the discrepancy between the accepted norms of Anglo America and their own experiences propelled these women into the development of their talent, their only avenue of self esteem. Most important is the continuous struggle to resolve the role of woman as artist. Beset by the gender-bound image of a white male artist, both Judith Baca and Patricia Rodríguez redefined, in their individual manner, the artist as female. Forgoing marriage and children, the journey of the self has been marked by the creative expression of cultural belief.

As women of a movement dominated by men, they have provided their own reparations for the pain of personal conflict, societal racism and the limitations of gender roles. In the largest sense the women's models of collectivity, inclusiveness, spatial retrieval, and historic and personal memory have become shared elements in the development of mural narratives among Chicanos. In each, life history has encountered historical moment in a juncture where only women of their "unruliness, giftedness and competence" could have risen to leadership. The exploration of individual identity has become a reflection of a greater cultural identity among Chicanos. In this period of historic redefinition the role of these leading women muralists provides a study of intention and belief common to Chicanos of their generation.



"Pickers" from *GUADALUPE MURAL*

1990

Judith F. Baca

Leroy Park, Guadalupe

acrylic on plywood

total mural (4 panels), 8' x 28'8", this panel 8' x 7'2".



ORALE RAZA

1974

Frank Fierro

Estrada Courts Housing Project, East Los Angeles

approx. 20' x 30'

**Marcos
Sánchez-Tranquilino**



**Murales del
Movimiento:
Chicano
Murals
and the
Discourses
of Art and
American-
ization**

*A Chicano is a Mexican American who does
not have an Anglo image of himself.*

— Rubén Salazar, 1970

“ORALE RAZA!,” the textual focus of Frank Fierro’s colorful 1974 mural at the Estrada Courts Housing Project in East Los Angeles, is an exuberant greeting to all Chicanos. The literal English translation of this greeting is awkward, meaning “Right On! Mexican American People.” However, the idiomatic Chicano translation would be closer to “Right on! my People,” or even “my Community.” The greeting immediately establishes a cultural recognition between the Chicano muralist and the Chicano viewer, acknowledging both as be-

longing to the national Chicano community. The murals as well as the other arts of this community played a seminal role in the establishment of this important intra-cultural bridge, the effects of which ultimately had significant implications for United States society in general and Chicanos in particular. As with the majority of Chicano murals of its period, “Orale Raza!” articulated a cultural representation of both regional and national political agendas for *el movimiento*, the Chicano civil rights movement which began in the mid-1960s and continued through various transformations into the late 1970s and beyond.

Chicanos (men) and Chicanas (women) representing this new cultural/political identity emerged from the long established U.S. Mexican (or Mexican American) community, and sought to redress their plight through a series of organized political efforts designed to recover their civil rights as American citizens. Towards its goal to effect substantial change, this new community enlisted the assistance of Chicanos on all fronts, i.e. from labor, education, and politics, as well as from the visual and performing arts. The response from everyone was

overwhelming, including that of the artistic community, due in part to its particular exclusion from meaningful participation within the mainstream art world.

The call to artists to actively participate in this movement coincided with their personal and political needs for individual self-fulfillment and the opportunity to demonstrate their capacity to create legitimate forms and practices equal to those of Anglo culture. There was no Chicano art produced before 1965; it came into existence with the Movement. What is called Mexican American art fits a category of art production in which both the works and the artists represent various degrees of assimilation.¹ Unlike Chicano art which was considered an integral component of Chicano liberation, Mexican American art was mainly concerned with formal and artistic resolutions. Chicano art represented the artistic output of men and women who: identified themselves as being in alliance with the means and ends of *el movimiento*; believed that art was never for its own sake; survived Americanization and sought to reclaim their Mexican heritage as necessary to their current U.S. identities.

For Chicanos, "American history" has not been a fair retelling of their histories. It has instead meant the imposition of a white Anglo-Saxon protestant cultural trajectory over time and space as the United States increased its political borders in the 19th century to include Texas, Arizona, California, New Mexico, Utah, Nevada, parts of Wyoming and Colorado, that is the territories and peoples of what is now called the Southwest. Those populations represented a regionally diverse development of Mexican cultures in the United States who had to be "Americanized" under the mandate of Manifest Destiny, the prevailing expansionist philosophy of the times.

The Americanization of Mexicans in this country can be seen as a history of both resistance and affirmation in their struggle to survive not as an alien resident underclass, but rather as a multiplicity of citizen classes contributing to the American social whole. Unfortunately, their history also has until very recently been circumscribed by social assignment on the part of the dominant class. Although classified as an American minority, U.S. Mexicans nevertheless found little acceptance unless they would assimilate. This meant that acceptance was predicated upon the expressed display of a preference for Anglo culture — especially the use of English — over Mexican culture. While some members of this group could and would assimilate, others were not willing or able.

1. For further discussion of Mexican American art see also: Jacinto Quirarte, *Mexican American Artists* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1973), and Shifra M. Goldman and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, *Arte Chicano: A Comprehensive Annotated Bibliography of Chicano Art, 1965-1981* (Berkeley: Chicano Studies Library Publications Unit, University of California, Berkeley, 1985), p. 26-29.

The myriad responses to assimilation, in addition to the absence of documented U.S. Mexican contributions to "American history," made it impossible for Mexicans in the United States to develop as a politically cohesive nationally recognized group before the late 1960s, although many regional attempts at organizing had occurred earlier. Thus, they had little, if any, voice in the manner in which they were acknowledged or understood by the larger society. In the realm of the arts, Mexican and Mexican American arts continued to be practiced in isolation in the *barrios*.² They were not allowed to participate in the national discourse of fine art but confined regionally at the level of folk arts. This lack of cultural-political representation supported uninformed popular notions that U.S. Mexicans not only lacked culture but were incapable of creating it. While there existed imagery of Mexicans living in Mexico done by praiseworthy Mexican artists, Mexicans on this side of the border were unrecognized within the categories of art produced in this country.

Although not completely missing from American popular imagery, Mexicans and Mexican Americans were, however, relegated to representation by derogatory stereotypes. Prior to the Chicano Movement, the creation of historically or artistically correct imagery of U.S. Mexicans by other Americans or themselves would have constituted a visual contradiction to this country's insistence on itself as a "cultural melting pot."

Since this country's declaration of independence from England in the 18th Century, its nationhood has been predicated on its ability to present itself as a unified sovereign entity. American nationalism, like all unifying strategies, depended upon the actual (or symbolic) co-habitation of this country's diverse ethnic populations. Therefore, the mainstreaming effect of the concept of America as a "cultural melting pot" could only be achieved as long as ethnic difference was subsumed by a supposed national cultural unity. Whatever social pitfalls were inherently included with this proposition, they quickly became gaping holes whenever its practice attempted to follow theory. Insistence on the pluralist myth, a homogeneous yet pluralistic "American" society veiled a structure of class privilege and ethnic exclusion. It is important to note that the emerging Chicano culture also engaged in nationalist strategies in its struggle for survival.

Prior to the Movement, the national image of the Chicano community (often ethnically misrecognized as only brown-skinned people) had been primarily defined by non-

2. Antonio Ríos-Bustamante and Pedro Castillo, *An Illustrated History of Mexican Los Angeles, 1781-1985* (Los Angeles: Chicano Studies Research Center Publications, University of California, Los Angeles, 1986), p. 122-127. The authors cite class segregation, alienation, and isolation in Los Angeles and encouraging Mexican arts to stay within the *barrios* as means of "cultural self-defense."

Chicanos within the public arena. As a result, the image of that community was reduced to exotic and romantic portrayals. On the one hand, U.S. Mexicans were perceived as reliable unskilled laborers, family centered, religious, festive, courteous and humble; on the other hand they were seen as representative of the least desirable elements of society, including Mexican Revolution era *bandidos* (thieves) and *cholos* or greasers, the poorest, shabbiest itinerant laborers (with 19th century connotations that they were bums, and in late 20th century terms, destructive urban youth "gang" members). Of course, neither of these caricatured sets of images would allow U.S. Mexicans to be recognized as a community integral to "American" life and culture. This sad assessment was due, in part, to the historical developments of Anglo conquest (Mexican-American War of 1846-1848) and *barrioization* (ghettoization through displacement and disempowerment) of that community by the vested interests of the Anglo culture, aided and abetted by the national media. In addition, the Americanization process had left U.S. Mexicans who would not assimilate without a viable identity that would acknowledge their own particular desire to be both American and Mexican without either identity using its nationalist stance at the expense of its cultural integrity.

It was evident to Chicanos in the early stages of the Movement (mid-1960s) that national self-definition was a primary tool of their efforts towards liberating the U.S. Mexican community from *de facto* internal colonization. The politicized segment of U.S. Mexican society leading this struggle chose "Chicano" as the self-designating term for themselves and the Movement. The term was adopted from the community's *pachuco* (1940s U.S. Mexican zootsuit youth culture) patois.³ Calling oneself "Chicano" was more than a defiant act directed against older assimilationist generations of Mexican Americans and the dominant Anglo society, it was also a proud assertion of self identity. This seemingly innocuous act had tremendous repercussions within the context of mainstream Americanization practices. The implications of the term "Chicano" as representing a new American identity were not apparent to outsiders. Instead the separatist implications of the term (not Anglo and yet also not Mexican) caused concern for social stability because it further "undermined" the "cultural melting pot" concept of American society.⁴ To call oneself Chicano became a political act within the national arena; to publicly greet other Chicanos by exclaiming "Orale Raza!" asserted this act with a cultural pride previously denied to that community in its own country.

3. George Carpenter Barker, "Pachuco: An American-Spanish Argot and its Social Functions in Tucson, Arizona," *Social Science Bulletin* (University of Arizona) no. 18, reissued December 1958, p. 19.

4. While the term "Chicano" can be read to signify a separatist stance—and indeed, such an interpretation was encouraged by Chicanos at the time—it can be interpreted simultaneously as a synthesis; as an identity of survival emerging from the meshing of two historically antagonistic cultures.



READ BETWEEN THE LINES

1975

David Rivas Botello

Ford and Olympic Blvds., East Los Angeles

10' x 20'

The subsequent recognition by U.S. Mexicans of themselves and their community as "Chicano," was a major prerequisite for achieving social integration into American life on their own terms. The Movement sought change through peaceful interventions; however, its sometimes militant profile was put forth when necessary as the appropriate response to an aggressive Anglo-dominated society.

Like the Black civil rights movement which began in the 1950s, the Chicano Movement beginning in 1965 sought to reclaim the civil rights of Chicanos which had been historically and systematically denied them since the Mexican American War. The denial of civil rights for more than a century to U.S. Mexicans had relegated them to second-class citizenship. By the mid-1960s Chicanos saw themselves as a colonized group disenfranchised from civic, political, and economic opportunity by American social structures. They had become a resource pool for unskilled labor needs as well as draftees and recruits for the Vietnam War.⁵

Through inter-regional networking of urban and rural activists including poets, artists, students, academicians, and others, the Chicano community deployed a nation-wide conceptual structure or Chicano "world view" known as *chicanismo* in order to facilitate the movement towards collective political self-fulfillment. *Planes* or manifestos, such as the Plan Espiritual de Aztlán, were collectively created to set forth the broad philosophical premises for the understanding as well as the practice of *chicanismo*.

In effect, *chicanismo* was a complex of nationalist strategies by which Chicano origins and histories, as well as present and future identities, were constructed and legitimized. Furthermore, it provided a context for historical reclamation of the self through the affirmation of Chicano cultural narratives while resisting Anglo models of assimilation. The renaming of the American Southwest as Aztlán within the national Chicano community was an important initial step in reclaiming the land-base upon which further development of this Chicano world view could take place.

The name Aztlán was borrowed by Chicanos from the 16th century Aztecs who settled in central Mexico. Their seat of power was located in what is known today as Mexico City. For them, Aztlán designated the geographical area of their origin. In their Nahuatl language Aztlán meant "land to the north" among other related interpretations.⁶ Chicanos considered this

5. Rodolfo F. Acuña, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos*, 2d ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), p. 366-367. The percentage of Chicano war casualties at 19.4 of total soldiers killed from the Southwest between January 1961 and February 1967 outnumbered their national representation for the same area of 10-12%.

6. Luis Valdez and Stan Steiner, eds., *Aztlán: An Anthology of Mexican American Literature* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), p. 401.

northern land to be the American Southwest, and thus the borders of the Chicano Aztlán were perceived to be the same as those of the Aztecs' original homeland. While Aztlán served as the location of the origins for the Aztecs, it now also signified the roots of a 20th century Chicano "archaeology," that is socially identified structures for historical reconstruction and cultural reclamation.

Because U.S. Mexicans had systematically been denied a fair and legitimate role in "American history," they were forced to look outside their U.S. home for one. Due to their ancestral ties they were able to look without any hesitation to Mexico to provide a historical and cultural continuity. In this way, Chicanos were able to establish their own history which was indeed traceable in part through Mexico but more importantly, and ironically, had its beginnings within the borders of what is now the American Southwest. Aztlán mapped out the conceptual and physical territories by which Chicanos could affirm cultural and historical genealogies legitimized by the ancient Mexican past. Besides laying claim to an Aztec patrimony, they were able to claim the culturally advanced civilizations of the Olmecs and the Maya. In the arts, Aztlán fostered the inclusion of infinite philosophical, literal, and figurative references to this pre-European heritage.⁷

Traditionally in this country, U.S. Mexicans involved in the arts could only attain a measure of success by working within the parameters of the "cultural melting pot" fallacy. They, like all artists, were expected to follow, perpetuate and even establish new trends within the confines of what was known as the International (Euro-American) art world, while suppressing any potential references to or acknowledgments of ethnicity in their work.⁸ In addition to suppressing ethnicity for fine art purposes, U.S. Mexican artists also had to avoid or deny ethnic imagery whose meaning had been debased through negative association with derogatory stereotypes of Mexicans — on both sides of the border. These negative images had obtained a wide currency, and ironically a measure of legitimacy on all levels of American culture.

These various forms of cultural suppression, coupled with the fact that Mexicans living in the United States predominantly belonged to an economic class which could not easily afford the luxury of considering art as a profession, served to help validate the popular notion that U.S.

7. To some critics like Juan Gómez-Quirón it served to immerse the Chicano community into an uncritical romanticized acceptance of the historical past. See Juan Gómez-Quirón, *Mexican Students por la Raza: The Chicano Student Movement in Southern California 1967-1977* (Santa Barbara, CA: Editorial La Causa, 1978). In the service of projecting a unified national Chicano image, some combinations of historically antagonistic elements such as Spanish conquistadors and Aztec nobles together constituted a deliberate suppression of racial, ethnic, gender, and class difference or even conflict.

8. Quirarte, Preface. Beyond the issues concerning "universal" and "international" art, are the additional ones which identify ethnic art as political. As such it is considered to have less stature and value than so-called "non-political," "non-propagandistic" "universal" art. Further discussion of art and value follows in the text. See also note no. 9.

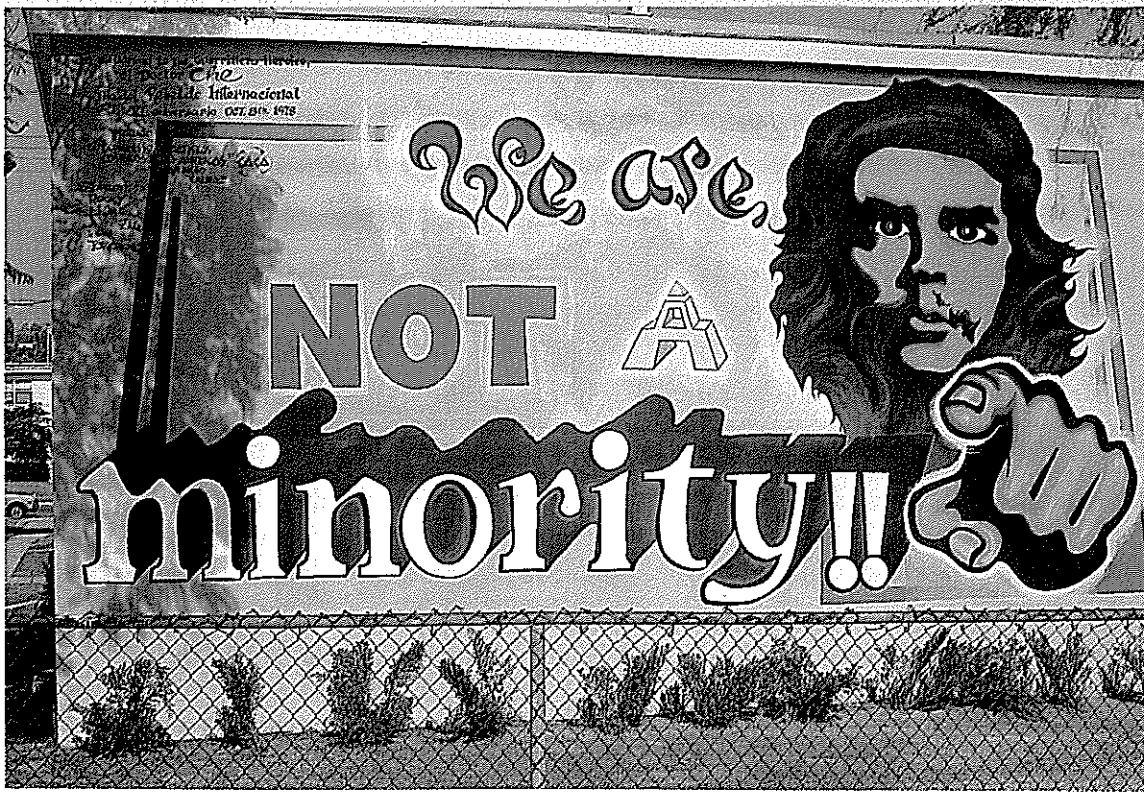
Mexicans (like other ethnic minorities in the United States) could not produce fine art or a fine art culture. That idea was further supported by the conscious exclusion of ethnic diversity as part of the mainstream process of producing the "market value of culture."⁹ The fixing of value in this system depends upon a hierarchical structuring which assigns a lower value to art which is not considered "fine" or "vanguard" while assigning a much greater value (and therefore greater social status) to art which is claimed to be of that lofty category. "Fine art" in America could only maintain such a high status if it suppressed any references to ethnicity which would otherwise surely lower its position on the art market value scale to that of "folk" art. Chicano art in general, and murals in particular, generating from a historically specific, community-based context went contrary to this mainstream-supported value hierarchy.

The mainstream media portrayed the Chicano mural movement primarily as one group's colorful attempt to reclaim the decaying American urbanscape. Murals were to be understood mostly as environmental change and not as art.¹⁰ The Anglo-dominated art community contributed to the suppression of Chicano murals as art because they were judged by criteria as defined by Euro-American art traditions in the market place, and supported by academic art historical studies. The art market and academia further contributed to this bias against U.S. Mexicans by virtually ignoring developments in Mexican and Latin American fine arts even within the context of "International" Modern Art.

Striving to meet the needs of the Chicano community through the visual articulation of its newly constructed political positions, the painting of virtually thousands of Chicano murals throughout the Southwest and Midwest were instrumental in the demystification of popularly held notions of Mexican Americans as politically passive and lacking history as well as culture. Much of the work to be done in this arena meant the supplanting of negative images of U.S. Mexicans by portrayals based on a more realistic and complete interpretation of a broader-based and ethnically diverse American history. Muralists became important educators as they painted Chicano contributions to American society not included in school textbooks. Through *chicanismo*, they also highlighted the ancient cultures of Mexico in order to show historical continuity and cultural legitimacy. Throughout, these artists inspired everyone with their sizable talents.

9. Raymond Williams, *Culture* (London: Fontana Paperbacks, 1981), p. 127. The term 'culture' in "the market value of culture" refers to the institutions and practices of music, literature, theater, film, and the visual arts.

10. See, "The Mural Message," *Time Magazine*, 7 April 1975, n.p. An article covering the Chicano murals in East Los Angeles appeared in the "environment" section while the "art" section featured painter Francis Bacon and his current work in New York City.



WE ARE NOT A MINORITY

1978

Congreso de Artistas Chicanos en Aztlán
(Mario Torero with Zapilote, Rocky, El Leon, Zade)
Estrada Courts Housing Project,
East Los Angeles
approx. 20' x 30'

Chicano murals, along with other artistic and political efforts of the Movement, attempted to radically change many of the misperceptions previously mentioned regarding Chicanos, their art, their artists, both within and without the community. Chicano murals go beyond signifying artistic accomplishment, they stand as a testament to the capacity of U.S. Mexicans to organize, plan and direct themselves toward the process of social change and the production of art, including the reconstruction of meaning of their exploited and abused ethnic pre-Chicano period imagery. In particular, the prolific creation of murals represented successful collective efforts on the part of the community toward national self-definition through political and cultural activism. As they put into effect the ideals of Chicano liberation through this organizing process, artists and members of the Mexican American communities served to educate each other, while also educating non-Chicanos.

Throughout the early mural-making period, individual as well as collective efforts at self-definition were given tentative validation by the emerging regional Chicano communities as activists and artists constantly returned to them for affirmation as well as for inspiration and support. The community was the beginning and the end in terms of the murals' articulation of the sources and goals of the Chicano Movement. Perhaps one reason that murals were so abundant so quickly was the all-important reciprocating relationship they enjoyed with the strong early political mobilizations towards the fulfillment of the Movement's immediate goals. On a personal level, it cannot be denied that the Chicano mural movement provided an attractive showcase as well as a training ground where the artists could gain basic and advanced technical expertise (for other art forms as well), while enjoying collective support from their community. Mural making represented the community's public efforts at self-definition in and through an artistic form which did not require validation by the academic, museum or gallery oriented art world. Furthermore, personal commitment to contemporary community-based politics could be affirmed through the organizing of *barrio* residents who participated in the design and execution of the murals. (Often murals could go up only because the artist and his/her crew were paid a nominal fee or donated their labor.) Chicano artists who "returned to the community" sought to experience the new found energy which was fueled by the political idealism of social change. In addition, as Chicano artists worked with their community, they "reclaimed" not only the repressed positive imagery of U.S. Mexicans but also the walls of the *barrios* which had previously served only to restrict them.¹¹

These early years of the Chicano mural movement were particularly exciting due to the experimentation continually called for by the emerging unique Chicano mural form. However, the prodigious success of the Chicano mural would not have been possible without the inclusion and participation of thousands of Chicano youth. A study on the making of early murals in East Los Angeles, in particular, has served to demonstrate the dependence on the pre-existing forms and practices of Chicano youth culture in assisting to organize the painting of murals in the Chicano *barrios*.¹² For many young muralists, the long established practice of *barrio*

11. Noted in conversation. John Tagg is a professor of art theory, criticism, and history at the State University of New York, Binghamton. He has published extensively on the development of state/social structures of empowerment.

12. Marcos Sánchez-Tranquilino, "*Mi Casa No Es Su Casa: Chicano Murals and Barrio Calligraphy as Systems of Signification at Estrada Courts*" (Masters' Thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 1990), n.p. Judy Baca, "Our People are the Internal Exiles," interview by Diane Neumaier in *Cultures in Contention*, ed. Douglas Kahn and Diane Neumaier (Seattle: The Real Comet Press, 1985), p. 65-68. See also, Joan W. Moore, *Homeboys: Gangs, Drugs, and Prisons in the Barrios of Los Angeles* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978). For further descriptions of youth participation see also: James Diego Vigil, *Barrio Gangs: Streetlife and Identity in Southern California* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988).