Chicano Murals and Me

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English 2

December 23, 2009
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“Art is one of the oldest forms of cultural expression” (Romo, 1992-1996, p.1). Muralism is a perfect example as a medium of cultural expression and is one of the oldest forms, which has been around for tens of thousands of years (Drescher, 1991). Most of these “‘outdoor museums…[or] large scale murals treat issues of identity, conflict, culture, and politics” (Romo, 1992-1996, p.125). These oversized paintings on walls have also served as an important medium of communication; specifically Chicano murals have surpassed geographical and cultural barriers across the world (Romo, 1992-1996). By reflecting issues that concern the people, Mexican murals have become popular, and the people have embraced them. Wide-spread acceptance has caused Mexican murals to cross over to the United States, beginning in the barrios, working their way into the suburbs and eventually they were everywhere. Even though these murals had crossed into the U.S., the same goal remained for Chicano muralists. This goal was to help to educate the people on “…ideals of the new society and the virtues and evils of the past” (Cockcroft & Sanchez, 1993, p.5). Through the use of specific symbols, Chicano muralists were able to use murals as an “organizing tool and a means for the reclamation of their specific cultural heritage” (Cockcroft & Sanchez, 1993, p.5).

I value artwork a lot and I enjoy doing it myself. I love to look at all different works of art and analyze them to find the message intended by the artist. I am currently collectively working with Maceo Montoya, a Chicano muralist, along with other youth on a Chicano mural in my hometown, Woodland. I appreciate Chicano murals because I like the type of style, and since I identify myself as a Chicana, I can really connect and relate to the messages that are projected through them. Three of my favorite muralists whose art contribution continues to inspire muralists and artists in general are Los Tres Grandes, or The Three Greats: Jose Clemente
Orozco, Diego Rivera, and David Alfaro Siqueiros. Their contribution was essential for the growth of Chicano murals all over the world and helped heighten the awareness and appreciation for this type of artwork. Throughout history, Chicano/a murals and murals in general have proven to reflect the community’s problems. I personally have found that these murals have evoked pride for my heritage and have enabled me to express that pride more fully. I feel forever grateful for Chicano muralism because it is able to project so many emotions and messages of the Chicano/a community and by doing so, has kept our beautiful heritage alive.

The Beginning

According to Ricardo Romo (1992-1996), the earliest kind of American murals date back to cave paintings on walls and inside tepees done by Indians in Mexico even before the Europeans arrival. Chicano murals have always reflected issues relevant to the societies in which they are placed. This makes it easy for ordinary people within the communities to be able to identify and connect with the murals because the problems being publicly displayed concern them. Tribe members would also tattoo their bodies with detailed symbols and painted designs on their ceramic clay pots. After the Spaniards established themselves they taught the local natives new artistic techniques, like the Italian fresco style. This mixture of both classes created the Mestizo race, which laid out the foundation of modern day mural painting, which continued to grow and change even after the collapse of the Spanish. After the fall of the Spanish, a new spark in art began with the upcoming generation of new Mexican artists. These new artists didn’t conform to European art traditions and decided to draw inspiration from their own history and culture. Los Tres Grandes introduced a new art movement that completely separated itself from
European artwork. Nationalism was their driving force for inspiration and they focused on philosophical issues related to their audience. These “Mexican masters inspired American painters, and with the support of the federal New Deal programs, hundreds of artist found work painting frescoes on public buildings such as post offices, libraries, schools, and park fences” (Romo, 1992-1996). They all preferred public art over gallery art because they thought that it was more important to serve all the public.

These new generation artists had perfect timing because at the same time new attention was emerging for national art, so the Mexican Ministry of Education fully supported these artists in the early 1920’s. Through this event, mural painting was revived in is still going on strong to the present day. Consequently, this paved the way for a series of events such as: “… the introduction of mural art by the Mexican masters during the 1930s, the subsequent development of New Deal American muralists, and the rise of large-scale mural projects by Chicano artists during the Chicano Movement in the late 1960s” (Romo, 1992-1996, p.126).

Chicano Mural Symbols

Themes and symbols for Chicano murals are mostly inspired by current events and problems that affect the community in which they are placed. Most Chicano murals have concentrated towards the new philosophy that the Chicano Movement provided in the 1960’s, which was mainly to instill pride in the Chicana/o heritage and to educate the community on important issues. Some of these themes and symbols are religion, indigenous motifs, modern portraits of important historical figures in history, and political and social problems (Cockcroft & Sanchez, 1993). Others also include cactuses, which I’ve personally seen in a lot of Chicano
murals that stand for perseverance and endurance. Added on to that list, there is also the United Farm Worker flag, urban culture such as cholos/as, and legendary mythical figures like La Llorona (The Weeping Woman). On the other hand, there are also certain slogans that are repeated in several Chicano murals like “Viva La Raza” or “Si Se Puede” (Cockcroft, Sanchez, 1993). There are many more, but there is a connection between these themes which all emerged from the Chicano movement and those first dealt with by Los Tres Grandes.

Recently, one of my favorite murals is by Maceo Montoya which he completed in 2008 in Woodland. This mural is important to me for two reasons. The first reason is because it is the first mural that I have ever personally worked on. Collaboratively with the leadership and guidance of Maceo we started from with an idea and ended up with the beautiful mural. My second reason is because I feel it accurately represents current problems in the Latino(a) community not only in Woodland but all over the world. For example, in the mural on the lower right-hand corner there are young kids with blinds on with a TV placed in front of them. This is portraying how the young generation of this nation is being blinded by media and how they are persuaded to think and act in certain ways. Another message the mural shows is how the immigrant families try to adjust to the American life but at the same time try not to completely assimilate and keep their own custom and values.
These murals in general are significant to me because they make me feel proud to be a Chicana. They are a positive contribution to society, and although not accepted by everyone, they carry an important message. Typical reasons that the public might not accept a mural would be because they can’t relate to it or understand the message being portrayed. By portraying an important message, which is relevant to society’s current problems, they persuade the people and enforce a movement and capture people’s attention. That is why I believe murals to be such a huge part of my life because at times when I feel confused or lost all I have to do is look at artwork and that usually helps me identify with my culture and helps me to remember that it means to be a Chicana. It means I have to remember my roots and the values and customs my parents instilled in me as I grew up and that have been passed on from generation to generation. Customs like celebrating the Day of the Dead and Independence Day. Remembering this provides strength and empowerment and I am able to regain hope and continue to pursue my goals and set a positive example for my siblings.

Interview

Maceo Montoya, a Chicano muralist who has made his way into the art world, explained to me from firsthand experience how he feels about murals, specifically Chicano murals and artwork in general (personal communication, October 28, 2008). He was born and raised in the small town of Elmira, California. He comes from a family of artists. His dad Malaquias Montoya is a renowned artist, activist, and educator, and his brother Andres Montoya has a poetry collection called, “The Iceworker Sings,” which won the American Book Award in 2000. Maceo graduated from Yale University in 2002, where he majored in History and Ethnicity Race and
Migration. Later on, he received his Masters of Fine Art at Columbia University in New York in 2006. He has also completed several public art commissions and has even worked as an art instructor in Oakland. On top of that, he has also done several solo exhibitions and group exhibitions such as: Caras Vemos, Corazones No Sabemos: The Human Landscape of Mexican Migration to the United States at the Snite Museum of Art, University of Notre Dame, and the most recent one, Inter-viewing Paintings, which is a survey of contemporary Eastern and Western painters at the SOMA Museum of Art in Seoul, Korea. He is currently living in Woodland, California where he paints and writes. He has an upcoming novel from the Bilingual Review Press at Arizona State University.

Maceo explained to me that he always did art but it wasn’t until his senior year of college when he was writing his thesis on the debate over revolutionary art in Mexico, which focused on muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros, that he realized that everything he wanted to do to affect social and political change he could do through art. He also told me that when he first started he was very idealistic about art’s role in society, and he still is, but he said, “I’ve come to understand that being a political artist isn’t accomplished by merely stating, ‘I’m a political artist.’ One must make compromises along the way, not necessarily in one’s work, but in one’s direction in order to survive as an artist.” He went on to explain that it is an essential individual endeavor to want to do work that is relevant to society but at the same time there is a necessity to find a way to make a living as an artist. From personal experience he said, “These two goals are often in contradiction to one another.” This is a problem that all muralists face at one point. Censorship occurs all the time and although it is a big problem, there is little that can be done about it, since it is hard to prove when it is occurring.
Maceo was first involved with mural painting since his dad Malaquias Montaya had been painting murals for the past forty years. “I grew up watching the process,” explains Maceo. Maceo’s favorite artists were also the great Mexican muralist, *Los Tres Grandes*, Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and Jose Clemente Orozco. He conducted his first mural at Yale University in 2002 with one of his friends, Francisco Delgado, who was then in the MFA program. He told me that he loved the physical labor mural painting required, like putting up the scaffolding, climbing it, and just basically having to set up and take down the studio every day. In total, Maceo has worked on about nine murals.

**Reflection**

As I did my research, I was surprised to find out that mural painting originated in Mexico thousands of years ago, and even before the Europeans arrived, by the Indians who used to mix natural dyes to paint figures on cave walls and inside their buffalo-hide teepees. These tribe members also tattooed their bodies with symbols and painted designs on ceramic clay pots. So even modern day tattooing originated all those years ago with the Indians in Mexico. I also found it interesting that the mixture between these Indians and the arrival of the Spaniards is what actually created the modern way of mural painting. I think it is amazing what great things that can result out of collaboration between different races and cultures. I also enjoyed finding out the history and evolution of mural painting through the different social events occurring both in Mexico and in the United States. I was happy to be able to find information about the three greatest muralists of all time: Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and Jose Clemente Orozco. I was happy because even before conducting research on them I already had an appreciation for
their artwork and it satisfactory to actually know more about them. I found it interesting to go see how they became the greatest at their craft and how each implemented their own style to mural painting, leaving their marks forever.

Before conducting my research, I already had some background knowledge on the topic of mural painting and I even had personal experience. These past months I have been involved with a mural in my local community in Woodland. Therefore, I know what it takes to take on a mural project and the hours of commitment and the detail it entails, as well as the physical labor. I also had some knowledge of the Mexican muralists Orozco, Siqueiros, and Rivera since I had already studied some of their artwork and life through many of my past classes during my previous K-12 schooling.

After all the research I conducted, my perspective has not changed much, although, I do feel a satisfaction knowing where and how mural painting came about. Lastly, I am just happy that I chose this topic because it is a big part of my life and it influences my overall outlook on life, and now I have a lot of knowledge on the topic, which makes everything even better.
References


