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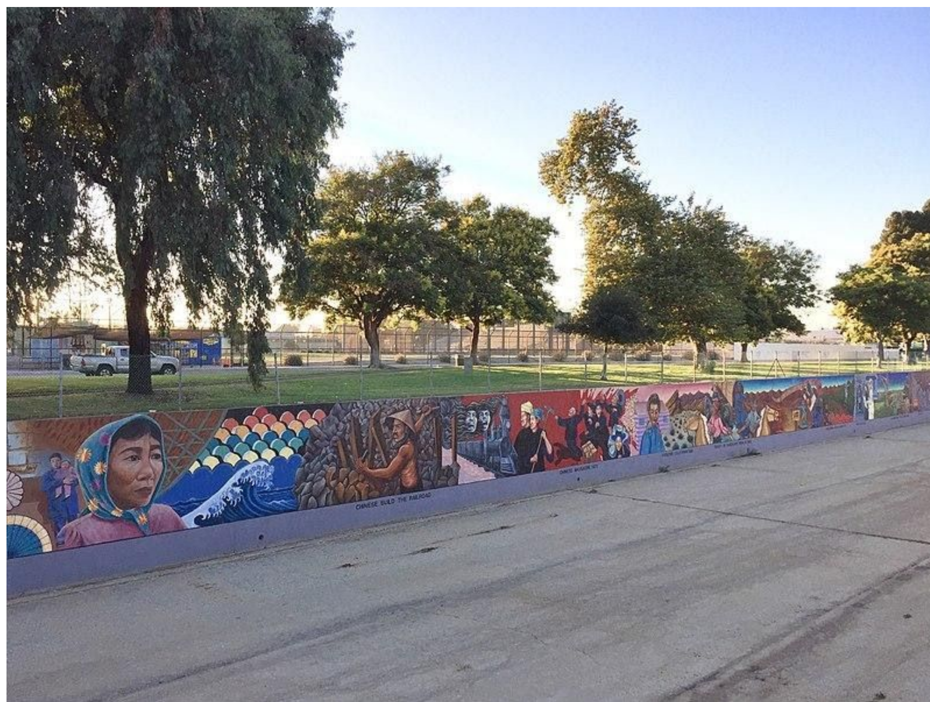
Concrete History: Chicana Muralist Judith F. Baca Goes from the Great Wall to the Museum Wall

By Maximilíano Durón, April 19, 2017



The Great Wall of Los Angeles From: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/3/38/Great_Wall_of_Los_Angeles2.jpg/800px-Great_Wall_of_Los_Angeles2.jpg

To get the best view of the painted mural known as the Great Wall of Los Angeles, you have to step through some underbrush, peek over a chain-link fence, and angle your gaze downward over the expanse of the **Tujunga Wash**. Tucked

away in Valley Glen, the mural is an exuberantly colored sequence of images that begins with prehistoric times and ends in the 1950s.

The sweeping narrative—the Wall's official title is "The History of California"—opens with mastodons and saber-toothed tigers looking across a river, and across time, at a camp of Chumash Indians, some of California's earliest residents. It moves through the arrival of the Spanish (seen from the indigenous point of view), the mass deportation of Mexican Americans during the Great Depression, the turning back of the transatlantic liner *St. Louis*, loaded with European Jewish refugees during World War II.

It shows achievements: there's the physician and researcher Charles Drew, who protested against the racial segregation of blood donors, transfusing a black patient. It also shows terror: a grim-looking, red-and-white-clothed Joe McCarthy tumbles film industry figures (as well as their cameras and typewriters) into a wastebasket for their alleged Communist sympathies. By the time the wall reaches its conclusion, Martin Luther King Jr. sits in the back of a bus gazing at a smiling Rosa Parks, seated in the front row.

Peering along the Wall's expanse, it quickly becomes obvious that the history presented there is from the perspective of those who have not always been recognized—women, minorities, queer people. Still, it helps to look at it with the woman who conceived it 40 years ago, Chicana artist Judith F. Baca. Before completing her designs, Baca told me as we stood in front of the Wall, she consulted with people who lived in the San Fernando Valley; she wanted to hear their stories. To execute the mural, she enlisted hundreds of teenagers, many of them drawn from L.A.'s juvenile justice program. They completed it in 1983.

These days, however, Baca's reception is changing. This September, her work will feature in three exhibitions, including **one about her innovations on the Great Wall**, in the highly anticipated third edition of the **Getty Foundation**'s "**Pacific Standard Time**," an initiative of more than 70

exhibitions and programs from San Diego to Santa Barbara. This version carries the theme "L.A./L.A.," an acronym that, depending on whom you talk to, stands for any combination of Los Angeles, Latin America, and Latino art. And UCLA 's Chicano Studies Research Center, in collaboration with the University of Minnesota Press, is publishing a monograph on Baca by scholar Anna Indych-López, as part of the center's "A Ver" (Let's See) series, a 15-year effort to provide scholarship on Latinx artists. Once sun faded and water damaged, the Great Wall got a makeover in 2011, with Baca restoring it to its original vibrant colors, and plans are in the works to add a viewing bridge, designed by wHY Architecture, across the channel, and to extend the mural's narrative through the 1970s, and beyond.

A few days after visiting the Wall, Baca and I met at the Venice offices of the **Social and Public Art Resource Center** (SPARC), the mural-making organization she cofounded in 1976, and has been the artistic director of since 1981.

A defining moment in Baca's thinking about art came in 1969, early in her career. The first in her family to graduate from college, she had just completed her B.F.A. that year at California State University, Northridge (CSUN), where she trained as a minimalist painter. (She had briefly left CSUN to become an illustrator, making isometric drawings for the aerospace manufacturer Lockheed.) At her graduation party, Baca's grandmother, who had migrated from Mexico to the United States during the Mexican Revolution, asked the new grad what she planned to do with her life, and Baca proudly pulled out her thesis portfolio. After flipping through it, her grandmother asked, "Well, what's it for?" Baca decided then and there that she wanted to make art that would strike a chord with the people she'd grown up with—Chicanos in Watts and Pacoima, a neighborhood a few miles north of the Great Wall. "For Judy," said Indych-López, "I think high modernism was not something to necessarily reject, but to adapt to her own uses."

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After graduation, Baca became a high school art teacher within the Archdiocese of Los Angeles at Bishop Alemany High School; after less than a year she was fired for attending protests against U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. Without a job, she enrolled in a citywide program funded by a federal initiative that gave underemployed artists and educators opportunities to teach. Administered through L.A.'s Parks and Recreation Department, the program had her teach art to young children and senior citizens in parks. Because she was a Chicana, she was assigned to East L.A.

Baca also started talking with local teenagers, some of them involved in gangs, who hung around playing dominoes in the parks where she taught. Independent of her work through the city program, she enlisted 20 of these teens, some from rival gangs, to create a mural in the Hollenbeck Park bandshell. *Mi Abuelita*, completed in 1970, shows a Mexican grandmother whose outstretched arms curve with the walls of the bandshell, embracing whomever stands in it.

With *Mi Abuelita*, Baca introduced a model, one that she would refine over the course of her career, for working within communities to develop imagery for public artworks. Her process begins with meetings within the community to source stories. She then consults oral historians, scholars, cultural ethnographers, and, when she can, people who have lived through the events to be depicted.

She would eventually become involved with the feminist community around the **Woman's Building**, an education and exhibition space near MacArthur Park that took the Virginia Woolf essay "A Room of One's Own" as its guiding principle. Among her cohorts at the Woman's Building, she was one of the few women of color; among the members of L.A.'s **Chicano art movement** of the late '60s and early '70s, she was one of the few women.

In the wake of *Mi Abuelita*'s success, Baca's boss at the Parks and Recreation Department promoted her to director of Eastside Murals, and she began creating various works across the historically Latino eastern portion of L.A. By 1974 she took

her work citywide, founding the **Citywide Mural Project**, L.A.'s first public mural program, which organized the creation of murals across each of the city's council districts by sourcing artists and assistants from the neighborhood. Within two years, though, Baca was worried about losing funding for the program, afraid that the city would either pull the money or begin censoring some of the murals' grittier images, such as scenes of immigration and police brutality.

So Baca struck out on her own, cofounding, with artist and educator **Christina Schlesinger** and filmmaker **Donna Deitch**, the Social and Public Art Resource Center. The organization's mandate was to fund community-based public art projects throughout L.A.'s marginalized areas. Its name, which Schlesinger suggested, comes from the title of an essay, "A Single Spark Can Start a Prairie Fire," by Mao Zedong.

Two years earlier, the Army Corps of Engineers had approached Baca about beautifying the Tujunga Wash, which had been paved with concrete in the 1930s, in an attempt to tame the flood-prone L.A. River. Under the auspices of SPARC, Baca set to work thinking about designs for a mural there.

"What I saw [looking at the Wash] was this metaphor: the hundreds of miles of concrete conduits were scars [on] the land," she wrote in an essay. "I recalled the scars I had seen on a young man's body in a Los Angeles barrio. Fernando, my friend and mentee, had suffered multiple stab wounds in East Los Angeles's gang warfare. . . . Together, we began to design transformative tattoos in an effort to make the ugly marks into something powerful and beautiful. . . . Overlooking the channel, I saw a relationship between the scars on his body and the scars on this land. I dreamed of a tattoo on the scar where the river once ran."

It was a large canvas to work with but she was undeterred. "She can be very intimidating to people because of the scale at which she works and thinks," said Mesa-Bains.

In the summer of 1976, Baca recruited nine other artists and 80 kids to paint the first 1,000 feet of the mural. Her mantra

was, “If you can disappear a river, how much easier is it to disappear the history of a people?” The wall would take five sweltering summers and 400 artists and youths to complete.

The Great Wall may not be one of L.A.’s most visible—or visited—monuments, but it is in many ways a landmark.

For SPARC, the Great Wall—“a kind of blueprint for how to work with massive groups of people,” as Indych-López thinks of it—was a launchpad for its Great Walls Unlimited: Neighborhood Pride mural program.

“If you spend any time in L.A. and have any awareness at all of the Chicano history here, she is one of the iconic people that you just *know* about,” Butler, the “WACK!” curator, said.

In 2001 Baca made a mural for the Denver International Airport, *La Memoria de Nuestra Tierra*, that traces the migration story of her grandparents, who fled their ranch in the countryside of Chihuahua when Pancho Villa’s troops pillaged it. They moved northward: first, to Ciudad Juárez to stay with family. Fearing reprisal, they crossed into El Paso, Texas, the Mexican Ellis Island, and eventually settled in a railroad town in Colorado called La Junta, or the junction. “The opportunity to tell that story in that region became really important for my family,” Baca said. “I had told everybody else’s story, but I hadn’t done ours. I took it as an opportunity . . . to tell the migration story, which was not only my family’s story, but the story of hundreds of thousands of Mexican people who came during that time to Colorado and the Denver region.”

With murals like the one in Denver, Baca has been pushing the form into new territory, using digital tools that fuse painting with scans of photographs. Today, SPARC is at the forefront of research to advance muralism through its affiliation with UCLA, where Baca is a professor. In her digital mural lab, on-site at SPARC, she and her students have developed new substrates to preserve murals, as well as new ways to create ones, such as “painting” on-screen and fabricating them with a high-res printer.

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