Judy Baca and Crew, Summer 1981, 1981 Photo: Linda Eber
Judy Baca's *The Great Wall of Los Angeles,* reputed to be the world's largest mural, is located in the Tujunga Wash, a flood control channel that traverses a suburban section of the San Fernando Valley northwest of downtown Los Angeles. The Great Wall, documented in this MATRIX exhibition through photographs, drawings and blueprints, currently measures 2,050' long and 13½' high (including a 3½' lower border), and is expected to extend beyond one mile at completion. It was started in 1976 when the Army Corps of Engineers asked the artist to help transform the stark concrete intrusion in the landscape into an environment more compatible with the recreational purpose of the parkland on either side of the drainage area.

What has emerged in five years since the project began is a panoramic interpretation of California history, remarkable for its physical magnitude and, as well, for its collaborative process, its design evolution and its significance as a culminating statement for the first energetic decade of an indigenous mural movement in the Los Angeles barrio that peaked in the late 1970's.

**The Artist**

Judith Francisca Baca, born in Los Angeles in 1946, has been a public muralist since her graduation from California State University in 1969. She is one of the standard-bearers of a group of independent wall artists of Mexican-American descent whose work began to appear in the late 1960's, like spontaneous combustion, in the neighborhoods of East Los Angeles, where many of the city's one million Chicanos live. With the assistance and close spiritual involvement of often inexperienced neighborhood people, these artists created over 500 wall paintings by the end of the 1970's. To them walls were the pages of a community's newspaper and, self-appointed editors, they wanted to contribute a richer, more articulate, more hopeful language than that of the graffito. (Among the other leading Los Angeles barrio artists are Charles "Gato" Felix, Willie Herron, Carlos Almaraz, Gronk, Norma Montoya, John and Joe Gonzales, David Botello, David Lopez, and Manuel Cruz.)

During that period Baca personally created and directed the execution of scores of large murals. Known not only for her striking images but also for her ability to bring people together in common creative purpose, she remains an indefatigable force behind paintings and related multi-discipline festivals and educational programs in streets, recreation centers, correctional institutions, convalescent facilities and parks. Between 1974 and 1977 she was director of the Los Angeles Citywide Mural Project, the support structure for over 1,000 people -- practicing artists, apprentices and residents of ethnically diverse neighborhoods -- credited with painting 115 murals. Seeking a better understanding of the techniques used by the Mexican muralists, she spent the summer of 1977 studying with keepers of the tradition at the "Taller Siqueiros" in Cuernavaca. She is founder of the Social and Public Art Resource Center and has been its director since 1977. It is through SPARC that, along with many other responsibilities, Baca carries on her work with the Tujunga Wash mural. In 1979, she returned to California State for an M.A. in art, and is currently on the faculty of the University of California at Irvine.

**The Mural: Content**

As the story of California unfolds on the Great Wall, particularly in the sections depicting recent decades, the mural's content becomes consistently descriptive of the injustices experienced by repressed groups of people in the path of history's cruel sweep. Having presented a rapid overview of the state's early history in
1,000 feet, the artist allocates 350 feet to each decade after 1910, and limits her historical material to around ten topics per decade. Within so disciplined a system each choice is significant and strategic. Chosen for inclusion, and poignantly represented, for example, are such shameful chapters in California's past as the exploitive years after the Crash when government and private developers snatched land away from California's original settlers, the Indians, with invalid treaties and unfair prices -- as low as 45 cents an acre; the segregationist 1930's in Los Angeles, supposedly a city of new opportunity, when lodging for distinguished visiting Black musicians was limited to the legendary Dunbar Hotel; and the period following Pearl Harbor when thousands of Japanese-Americans on the Pacific Coast were classified as "enemy aliens", taken into custody, and interned in relocation camps for the duration of World War II. About these and the many other scenes in her mural Baca quietly points out: "I didn't make the history; I'm just recording it."

[At the end of this text the reader will find a narrative guide to the images in the mural.]

THE MURAL: A COLLABORATIVE PROCESS

The Great Wall of Los Angeles has been created in four consecutive segments so far, each of which has taken a year to research, organize and execute. The painting is done during the summertime when the Wash is driest and young people are available to assist (at minimum wage) with the arduous manual labor. The conceptual work -- beginning with the refinement of thematic emphasis by a team of university historians -- takes place in the months before work at the site, as does the fundraising, the recruitment of assistants and apprentices and the sketching.
Once the studio designing has been done, scaled blueprints prepared to guide the sketching process and scaffolding installed, work on the wall begins. It takes place in fourteen major steps: 1) sandblasting the wall surface, 2) hydrablasting it, 3) applying an undercoat of white gesso, 4) marking out a grid system with snap lines and plumb lines, 5) transferring the images from blueprints in charcoal sketches, 6) painting in the sketches with detail, 7) applying darkening underpaint in shaded areas, 8) applying a semitransparent magenta wash (which serves as a base to hold the colors together and also cuts the penetrating glare of the sun, reducing the danger of retinal damage to the painters), 9) blocking in flat colors from coloration sheets prepared for each section, 10) bringing out a range of lights and darks within color blocks, 11) blending three basic colors to establish depth and dimension, 12) highlighting features, 13) applying black emphasis lines so that the images may be "read" from a distance of 75 feet, 14) coating the completed mural with a clear acrylic sealer to protect it against the water and debris which occasionally rush through the channel in the winter months. Says Baca: "I have a photograph of Thomas Alva Edison submerged right up to his nose."

THE MURAL: EVOLUTION OF DESIGN

The first 1,000 feet of the mural came to life during the initial summer of 1976, when 80 teenagers, many of them sponsored by the juvenile justice system, worked under Baca's direction and traced the time span from the dinosaur period through the beginning of World War I. The result of that summer occupies over two-thirds of the long photographic panel on the East wall of MATRIX. Although a vibrant display of youthful enthusiasm, it lacks the stylistic consistency, the technical skill and the firm grasp of the medium evidenced in the more fluid segments painted in the summers of 1978, 1980 and 1981 when Baca assumed increasingly greater design control. So the mural, in telling the story of California's development, is a chronicle, as well, of the artist's personal development, of her growing clarity as a leader. "In those first 1,000 feet," she says, "I gave away too much power. The result is a loosely connected series of easel paintings."

She is constantly seeking a better reconciliation of the conflict between her responsibility to the viewer and the subject, on the one hand, and, on the other, her responsibility to the communal process through which the images are presented. From 80 workers the first summer the working crew was reduced to the 35-50 who completed 350-foot sections of the wall each of the subsequent summers. Within that number, the design staff will now be strengthened, its accountability increased and Baca's personal supervision upgraded one more notch when she takes on the next 350-foot portion -- the 1950's in 1982-83.

THE MURAL: SITE AS METAPHOR

The site of the Great Wall is in itself metaphorical. This pictorial evolution of California takes place within a river bed, reminding the visitor of the flow of history. Yet it is a false river bed. For the Tujunga Wash is a part of the remarkable Los Angeles water system, a feat of engineering arrogance through which the Owens, Colorado and Feather Rivers have been diverted from hundreds of miles away into the sinks, lawns, pools and cocktail glasses of three million people. Control is the purpose of the Wash, and control is the theme of much of the history the mural depicts. It is the story of the harnessing not only of nature in the building of a state, but also the harnessing of people. The dominant culture represses, exploits, limits. Expansion and opportunity
for some are built on the forced submission of others. Where better depicted than within a retaining wall?

The metaphor grows more complex. This is a Wash that cuts through a middle class residential neighborhood, as many repressed minority cultures have eventually cut through and altered the established pattern of the dominant culture. But this telling of history is subterranean. Like the Wash and its 13½-foot mural below ground level, the events and moments the Great Wall features are the ones many historians ignore. Flow, control, and containment are elements of unresolved tension in the locale of the Great Wall of Los Angeles -- and contribute to its impact.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The efforts of the Los Angeles muralists have been part of a nationwide eruption of creative energy which, beginning in 1967 with the Wall of Respect, painted by the Organization for Black American Culture in Chicago, transformed walls in many of the country's larger cities. It was an opportunity for artists at the grass roots and the communities from which they sprang (or with which they identified) to find a visual voice.

In Hartford the group of Black and Hispanic music heroes depicted on a wall at the apex of Main Street and Albany Avenue, Homage to Our Musicians, designed and supervised by Arturo Lindsey (1976) and Michael Borders' Genesis of the Capitol City (1974) on the corner of Asylum and Trumbull Streets, now destroyed, are important local examples of the mural movement.

Wall painting was not without precedent in the U.S. but the ideological relevance of the new movement was of a unique intensity and character. While indebted to the precedent set in the 1920's and 1930's by David Alfaro Siqueiros, Jose' Clemente Orozco and Diego Rivera, Baca and her peers in Los Angeles and other North American cities do not see themselves as a reincarnation of the great masters of Mexican mural art. Like "Los Tres Grandes", the best of today's muralists are consummate designers, creators of powerful images, and highly skilled at manipulating color and the other compositional elements of their work strategically to meet the special requirements of open public spaces. Like their revolutionary forebears too, they are committed to mural painting because of its social purity. As Orozco said in 1929, a mural "cannot be converted into an object of personal gain, nor can it be concealed for the benefit of a few privileged people." But unlike the Mexicans who designed and painted by themselves for the people, Baca and the Chicano muralists work democratically with the people.

Once the visual voice was discovered it became a podium for presenting views of a community's experience contrary to what the country's prevailing image-makers were inclined to give public credence. Often as important as its content, the medium of the site-specific mural -- its physical and topical immediacy -- has been a hopeful antidote for the city's enveloping depersonalization. And it has mitigated the alienating effect of commercial television which, instead of providing the community with identifiable cultural references, draws its mythology, vocabulary and imagery out of a melting pot. Thus the murals are not only by artists looking for audiences but also by audiences expressing themselves through artists.

Observers of the urban mural movement in the U.S. have described the profound impact these paintings have had on the spirit of the neighborhoods where they have been done. For warring gangs, whose members are often recruited to participate in the projects, the
walls have become a medium for complex symbolic communication: a means of projecting status, of seeking truce, of acknowledging a cultural kinship -- "raza" -- that transcends the exclusionary, sometimes desperate, identity of gang membership.

The ritual significance murals can hold was reflected four years ago in a Los Angeles neighborhood's daily offering of fresh flowers placed beneath its mural in tribute to a boy from the community who had helped paint the mural and was subsequently killed by a rival gang from another neighborhood. Later when residents were relocated to a new housing project, they insisted on taking their mural, like a portable shrine, with them.

In the 1960's and 1970's the collaborative creative instinct of artists and communities, despite its counter cultural character, was actively nurtured by government. As with the W.P.A. of 40 years before, public unemployment reduction funds -- along with leadership from public arts agencies -- provided the financial and organizational underpinning for many of the works. The withdrawal of this backing, as federal, state and municipal revenues have decreased and as the nation's philosophy of government has shifted, is seriously undermining the movement. The artists have tended to move to forms less dependent on public support; some have taken logical next steps into performance art; some have yielded to the potential security of creating marketable art. Many of the neighborhoods that once provided the space, the sites and workforce for the paintings, have felt the numbing impact of a declining economy and the erosion of social support programs. The passivity of despair seems to have overshadowed the instinct to protest or celebrate through public art.

In this context The Great Wall of Los Angeles assumes a particular significance. The challenge to its completion grows stronger but work continues. Its unifying force, its hope, is the determination and vision of Judy Baca.

Anthony Keller
Hartford, Connecticut
November 1981

Exhibition organized by
Andrea Miller-Keller,
Curator of MATRIX.

A GUIDE TO THE IMAGES IN THE GREAT WALL OF LOS ANGELES

The Great Wall of Los Angeles summarizes California history through the perspective of ethnic groups that have contributed to the state's development and, at times, been victimized by it.

Following the mural from left to right in the MATRIX photo panels, the California story begins on the East wall of the gallery with the prehistoric beasts whose remains have been found in the La Brea tarpits, and with some of the Pacific Coast's early human dwellers (1000 A.D.), the porpoise-worshipping Chumash Indians. Then, in 1542, the arrival in San Diego Bay of Portuguese Explorer Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo, hired by Sain to find a water passage connecting the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans, opens three centuries of competitive claims on California territory by England, Spain, Russia, the U.S. and Mexico. Cabrillo's discovery of California is watched by the Black Amazon Queen Califa from a cloud of smoke. Next, a
succession of scenes bring the mural into the twentieth century: 
the building, in the late 1800's, of a chain of Franciscan missions, 
the first by Father Junípero Serra in 1769... the conversion of 
Indians to Christianity, a critical weakening of the tribal struc-
ture...the establishment of California as a province of Mexico from
1822 to 1848...skirmishes between Mexicans and Yankees over gold
discoveries in 1848, the year Mexico surrenders the province to the
U.S. and just before California becomes a state...the move west,
after the Civil War, of thousands of settlers, and the discriminatory
labor practices and vigilante justice that become common practice...
the railroads, built on the backs of Chinese workers imported by
the Southern Pacific's "Big Four" (Charles Crocker, Mark Hopkins,
Collis Huntington and Leland Stanford) and the subsequent anti-
Chinese riots by local labor groups in San Francisco and Los
Angeles in the 1870's, precursors of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act...
the Land Boom of 1887 which boosts population and industry, but
further threatens the survival of native Americans and their cul-
ture. By the turn of the century immigrants from all over the world
come to work the land in a state discovering rich soil, new ap-
proaches to irrigation and hitherto untapped natural resources.
World War I begins and the women step into traditionally male jobs.
Charlie Chaplin brings the plight of the commoner to the silent
screen. A Mexican corn goddess whispers inspiration into the ear
of "Tomas" Alva Edison (possibly of Mexican birth, suggests the
Great Wall research team) whose invention set in motion one of
California's unique industries, filmmaking, represented by William
S. Hart and a rogue's gallery of Western gunslingers. Prohibition
arrives and barrels of booze are axed. Black jazz musicians and
their audiences, restricted by segregation in the land of opportunity,
take refuge in Los Angeles's storied Dunbar Hotel. The stock market
crashes, a production line's efficiency no solution. Motion
picture spools unrel a cornucopia of fantasies, a brief prelude to
the Depression breadlines and the low-wage strikes (partially
obscured in the photo panel). Indians find themselves on the losing
side of invalid treaties and sell two-thirds of their land to
exploitive developers for forty-five cents an acre. 350,000
Mexican-Americans, the "alien horde", are hurled back across the
border through mass deportations (partially obscured). Poor
Oklahoma farmhands -- the Okies vividly described in Steinbeck's
Grapes of Wrath -- flee the barren Dustbowl and come to California,
their laundry line providing a connecting image to the Nisei
internment camps during the shabby period after Pearl Harbor when
"Yellow Peril" fears precipitate the mistreatment of thousands of
Japanese-Americans. Moving around the corner to the South wall of
MATRIX, the gallery visitor finds a photographic panel showing the
most recently completed segment of the Great Wall, scenes from the
1940's, painted during the summer of 1981. Commentary on this
portion is provided by Judy Baca: "442nd Japanese infantry making
up the stripes of the American flag. In the shadow of the stripes,
Japanese moving toward the internment camps in previous 1930's
segment. ...A Jewish family in the shadow of Hitler's hand learns
of Hitler's action in Europe through the radio, Goosesteppers lead
into local Jewish rallies in Los Angeles against Fascism. ...Pearl
Harbor, Jeanette Rankin in Congress, generals and businessmen plan-
ning the war and women in the war industry. ...California aqueduct
which transports water from north to south, creating a desert region
of the Owens Valley to aid developers' interests in Southern
California. ...Black women workers opening doors to war industry
with Charles Drew, the inventor of blood plasma, who cradles him-
self while he dies unnecessarily from the unwillingness of a
southern hospital to treat him for loss of blood. Metal hand
symbolizes dehumanization, cutting off life line while stripes
of various ethnic groups break through fingers. Mrs. Laws of
South Central Los Angeles mounts campaign against covenant laws
that deny her family access to housing. ...Photograph from
Chicano family albums in the 40's with David Gonzales, local
Chicano war hero, and his mother in the foreground. Taxis bring
servicemen into L.A. for the "Zoot Suit Riots", in which Mexican
boys are beaten and stripped with consent of the police. ...Luisa
Moreno, labor organizer, wrapped in banner of the Congresso of
Hispanic Groups. The train brings braceros to work in the
California fields. ...The St. Louis brings European refugees to
the U.S. with a spirit emerging out of the ship to reach for
American soil. The death camps make up the background apparition
images. ...The founding of the State of Israel and the Atomic
Bomb in the background. The baby represents the postwar baby boom.
The TV has President Reagan in a war movie from the period and
through the kitchen window are the tacky-tacky housing tracts of
the San Fernando Valley. The Soldiers of Color look in the plate
glass at the American Dream, still finding that little has changed
for them upon their return."

Still remaining are the 1950's, the 1960's, the 1970's and 1980's.
After that, it is Baca's intention to cross the drainage channel
and paint the other side: a long speculative panel on the future,
which will relate thematically to the known history opposite it.
Works in MATRIX:

1930s History of California: Deportation of 350,000 Mexicans, 1980, pastel on paper (by Jan Cook), 24" x 36".

1930s History of California: Deportation of 350,000 Mexicans, 1980, blueprint (by Jan Cook), 24" x 36".

1940s History of California: 101st Infantry, 1981, pastel on paper (by Judy Baca), 24" x 36".

1940s History of California: 101st Infantry, 1981, blueprint (by Judy Baca), 24" x 36".

1940s History of California: World War II Sequence, 1981, pastel on paper (by Jan Cook), 24" x 36".

1940s History of California: World War II Sequence, 1981, blueprint (by Jan Cook), 24" x 36".

The Great Wall of Los Angeles, color photographs of the length of the mural through Mid-Summer '80 (by Douglas Kirkland), c. 8" x 300".

The Great Wall of Los Angeles, color photographs of the segment painted during Summer '81 (by Linda Eber and Raymond Dang), c. 14" x 96", 7 prints.

The Great Wall of Los Angeles, nine color and six black and white photographs which document the activity on the mural during Summer '81 (by Linda Eber), 8" x 10" and 11" x 14".
Selected bibliography about Baca:


Zucker, Martin, "Walls of barrio are brought to life by street gang art," Smithsonian, vol. 9, no. 7 (October ’78), p. 105+.


PLEASE NOTE: Judy Baca will deliver a MATRIX Evening Lecture on Thursday, November 12, 1981 at 7 p.m.

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