



Sparc Leads Charge in L.A. Mural Restoration

By: Melanie Camp

<http://www.yovenice.com/2015/10/17/sparc-leads-charge-in-l-a-mural-restoration/>

Yo Venice says:



ABOVE: Venice's SPARC Mural Restoration Team are working with Brother Boco, the original artist of the Highland Park Mural 'Return to the Light,' as part of a city-wide effort to revitalize murals. From left, Ariel Luna Anais, Brother Boco, Ian Robertson-Salt, and Myisha Arellano.

A heatwave blankets Los Angeles. It's hot at Venice Beach but even hotter inland at Highland Park where a team of artists from SPARC, Venice's Social Public Art Resource Center, located at 685 Venice Blvd., have left the relative cool of the sea behind to hang off scaffolding in the sun.

They trace faded lines and squiggles, and scrub paint back into a mural that is fading off the stucco wall of a low-income apartment complex. For just over 20 years artist Brother Boco's mural "Return to the Light" has fought a battle against the elements while standing guard over passing motorists on the 110 Freeway. The time has come to return this wall of art to its former glory.

All together, in a partnership with the Department of Cultural Affairs and the City of Los Angeles, SPARC will restore nine murals as part of a new City Wide Mural Program that has enabled mural restoration across Los Angeles.

“We have currently identified nine historically significant murals, that art historians, scholars, and community groups have deemed important, urgent priority, works that if there is no intervention they would be completely disappeared, lost all-together,” said Carlos Rogel, project manager at SPARC and coordinator of the City Wide Mural Program.

A local Venice organization, SPARC has been around since 1976 after one of the organization’s founders, Judy Baca, had an idea for a space where public art could be developed and artists from different backgrounds could come and create social justice work.

One of SPARC’s first public art projects was the Great Wall of Los Angeles, a half-mile long mural, painted in the Los Angeles River along the Tujunga Flood Control Channel of the San Fernando Valley.

Rogel said the Great Wall of Los Angeles mural “recovered the stories of minorities and people who had actually been left out of the history books.”

“[Baca] created these visual metaphors and in the process engaged with at-risk youth from the juvenile justice system, local community members, local students, and provided this all encompassing training and painting experience,” Rogel said. “Out of that methodology came SPARC. SPARC was founded with the idea that arts and social justice moved hand-in-hand and could actually be utilized as a way of transforming society.”

In the 80s, when Baca came to a stopping point on the Great Wall of Los Angeles she was approached by Mayor Tom Bradley.

“He was interested in exploring the possibility of doing Great Walls across the entire city; of course, half-mile murals across the whole City, there’s not enough walls that are long enough to do that. So, Judy came up with a way of creating modules of the Great Wall and allowing them to travel to different parts of the City,” Rogel said.

And the Neighborhood Pride Program was born. Baca held local think-tanks within communities to find out what issues really mattered in the different areas of Los Angeles.

Rogel explained that these community meetings gathered people together “to have conversations about their experiences, their memories, their aspirations. Whether it was to bring awareness to issues of AIDS and HIV that were affecting the African American community, to racism and exclusion, all the way to low-income, working-class families and those issues.”

From here came the inspiration behind many of the 109 murals that were developed. “In those meetings what ended up happening was, these young artists -- many instances they were young artists of color, minorities, women, who hadn’t had opportunities to create public works – were given the space to be able to visualize stories and narratives that were very much like their own. These works became competitions; they attracted artists, locally, and internationally. So, you saw a renaissance that exploded across the city. If you can imagine 109 murals suddenly being painted in this really deep method, to really capture people’s hopes and dreams. That’s what we got out of the Neighborhood Pride Program. These really beautifully articulated works that spoke to people’s experiences, their aspirations for the future,” Rogel said.

The program came to an end in 2003. Competition with the advertising industry for public space and a lack of city funding created a very difficult environment for artists to produce work that wasn't commercial.

"We also saw the loss of the respect for artists rights. All of these factors culminated in a 10-year moratorium, a ban on murals across Los Angeles. This also led to the loss of any monies for maintenance. We ended up seeing murals that had existed for over a decade, sometimes two or three decades, be abandoned without any sort of resources to educate the public on how to maintain these works or even jobs for artists. So, a lot of artists left. That 10-year ban ended up turning Los Angeles into a creative desert. It was really an anti-artist period," Rogel said.

It wasn't until as recently as 2013 that the City of Los Angeles lifted the ban on murals. In doing so it opened up the opportunity for a new City Wide Mural Program. As a result, nine of the 109 original works from the Neighborhood Pride Program, including Brother Boco's Highland Park mural "Return to the Light," have been given an opportunity to, also, return to the light.

Flakes of 21-year-old paint dust the scaffolding, like crunchy confetti underneath Brother Boco's feet. He said he never used to think twice about climbing to high places for the sake of art.

"Now, it's not so much being up high that troubles me, it's how much it'd hurt if I fell. I'm old enough now to know it's going to hurt," he said.

Even still, Brother Boco continues to paint.

"It's good. It's been good," Boco said of coming back to Los Angeles to work on his mural. He now lives in New Mexico and has been working on a series of interactive murals on butterfly wings. Once complete, people will be able to stand between the wings and take a photo.

"At first, to be truthful, I had some reservations because I have some projects I'm working on currently and it meant that they'd have to go lingering. But this was an opportunity to get back here and this mural meant a lot to me because of the elements involved," Boco said.

Speaking of the meaning behind his mural, Brother Boco said, "All of us, that is our quest and our eventual destiny, to the light again. There's so much darkness in the world that we have to try to navigate around it, through it. There's so many traps, pitfalls, that all of us fall into from time to time. But the thing is just keeping ourselves anchored to the source of it all, the source of all creation, the source of life and as a result I think if we petition or prey for guidance through life, that will come for us. It is something to see how it manifests itself, unfold if you will. I'm always amazed and in awe."

When asked about the inspiration behind his work, the artist explained he couldn't take credit.

"Well, that's the key to all inspiration, it comes from on high. The most divine is the one that channels inspiration to us, through us. So, I can't take credit for that mural, no creative person can take credit for their creation because they are co-creators, in that sense, because it all flows through them mentally and then physically they do the work to make it manifest. So, with that said, it's through the spirit of the creator that all creation comes about, including us," Boco said.

Boco has two mural site assistants, Myisha Arellano and Ariel Luna Anais, both young artists who have been employed by SPARC to work on projects such as this. The work might be draining in the baking sun, but both women are content, grateful to be able to pay the bills doing what they love.

"[It's] super fun to paint for a living. I never thought that'd be what I'd get to do after college," Anais said. "It's pretty cool because I've been working alongside artists that have done a lot of important pieces and learning about the social climates that inspired them."

The City Wide Mural Project, like the Neighborhood Pride Program before it, and SPARC's Great Wall of Los Angeles before that, has once again been an avenue for young artists to earn money working on art.

"I was curious about the original assistants from the neighborhood who helped with the mural," Boco said, explaining that a few days before Adrian Tapia, one of the original mural assistants from 21 years earlier, had stopped by. "I think he's been inspired by it because he's leading a productive, positive lifestyle now. He has his own musical band. He's still doing art, but he's not doing it on walls, he's doing it on canvas. It was good seeing him and seeing that he's moving in a positive direction with his life."

It's not just those who are working or have worked on the mural who find inspiration in the art.

"There's a lot of people, especially when working in neighborhoods, that are really appreciative to see these pieces that they grew up with getting restored to their original state. So it's really cool, you get a lot of people that tell you 'thank you' and 'that's my favorite,'" Anais said.

Ian Robertson-Salt, site manager for the mural's restoration, has a longtime association with the mural.

"I only live five minutes away, so to me this is one of the most important murals in the area and to be able to work on this project is a real pleasure and an honor," he said.

Rogel explained that over the years all the murals from the Neighborhood Pride Program have become an important part of the identity of the communities in which they stand.

"What we're finding is that these works have been there so long that they are like these markers of public memory," Rogel said. "That they have in many ways, settled into the everyday psyche of these spaces. The concepts, the ideas, the issues that are depicted are still relevant today. We have a mural that depicts police violence, that also depicts the history of the Black Panthers and today we see Black Lives Matters being ever present in our minds and seeing the effects of police brutality on our people of color. These murals are there to remind us that at any moment we have to be vigilant. That we have to also foster our creative energy to create these solutions for these difficult social problems that we face."

The program not only solidifies community sentiment and bonds a new generation of artists in Los Angeles, but it has been an opportunity for SPARC to use the cutting-edge technologies and scientific breakthroughs they have developed.

"It's been a pleasure to work with the City Wide Mural Program team, training a new generation of young artists and conservators, and also bringing technology to the field of

muralism, which is one of the large focuses we have here at SPARC's Digital Lab," Rogel said. "We're using state-of-the-art technology. We've developed new chemistries, new coatings with very high-tech UV stabilizers. One of the ways we've been able to achieve so much in such a short period of time is because we developed a product called Mural Shield. It incorporates light stabilizers and actually consolidates paint. It's not a coating, it's not a chemical that sits on top of the paint. It actually becomes a part of it and it actually fuses paint layers together."

The product is designed to not only protect color pigments from environmental wear, but it also enables easy maintenance. In cases where murals have been tagged with graffiti, all SPARC needs to do is send out a team with a power hose, soap, and water and the graffiti or environmental pollutants, in essence, melt away leaving the mural untouched below.

"We're changing the perception around murals. They can become permanent monuments," Rogel said, underscoring the change in society's perception of murals as impermanent, fading overtime, or permanently damaged or vandalized by graffiti.

As SPARC continues their collaboration with the City of Los Angeles and Department of Cultural Affairs through the City Wide Mural Program, it seems for murals in Los Angeles, the future looks bright.

For more information about SPARC visit sparcinla.org.