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Art 111, Art Appreciation

Project 3: Art in Context

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Judith Baca

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Judith, or Judy Baca is a Mexican American muralist and artist of the modern twentieth century, specifically the seventies. Baca is also an artistic director of the non-profit Social and Political Art Resource Center, where she became the founder of Los Angeles' Mural program in 1974. Named the "Great Wall of Los Angeles," this half-mile long mural depicts many narratives, of different ethnicities to show the historic racism that had been endured. To further connect the gap between different ethnic, social, and economic parties, Judy Baca considered the procedure to create the mural, the history of the location, and the age of muralists.

The *Great Wall of Los Angeles* was created between the Tujunga Flood Control on Oxnard Street and Coldwater Canyon Boulevard in Los Angeles, California from 1974-78. Directed by Judy Baca and the SPARC, this mural was painted by over three hundred youths of different ethnic groups. In order to have been hired, the participants, or interviewees must be willing to work on a group mural, as well as have true interest in art (Baca 12). Before starting on the illustration, however, funding was needed; this project did not rely on just one source—rather donation of services and equipment. Furthermore, a series of public meetings were held at its future location in which many people could attend to contribute to the project. Invitations were extended to: the captain of the local fire department, the captain of the police department, local businesses, and citizens of the community. Additional solicitations were needed such as food and water service for the painters, transportation for supplies and the youth, and sandbags for the mural site to contain flooding (Baca 11). To prepare the concrete walls for painting, high-power water hoses were blasted, finishing the preparation with a seal and coat of primer. Then, the wall was gridded in order for the blueprints made by the youth to be transferred on. The 1,360 feet long mural was divided into eighty-six titled panels, blended through compositions. The depiction of California's history started from the prehistoric times through the

1920's (in chronological order)—with the intent to add more each decade. A variety of colors, perspective, symbols of “indigenous Mesoamerican art, [and] traditional European figurative art” were also influenced in the mural (“Great Wall of Los Angeles [Mural]”). The *Great Wall of Los Angeles* was an intensive process as the director wanted to ensure the representation of racial and sexual balance in San Fernando Valley (Baca 12). To increase the knowledge of the city's culture, flyers were put out for families to input their historical information.

Prior to developing the *Great Wall of Los Angeles*, Judy Baca continuously researched the history, taking the muralists on field trips and having historians come to talk. The location of this mural is important in that Baca had familiarity with the area and its value since she lived close for eighteen years. In the 1950's, Blacks, Chicanos, and Anglos lived a different lifestyle, with racial violence at the Pacoima Junior High School. The Los Angeles City Planners successfully isolated the different low-income minorities. When public meetings were held to bring together authorities of businesses, the police department did not attend. Personally opposed the mural, saying that it would be vandalized soon after the completion of the art, leading to the city's crime rate to increase. Despite the Planner's success in the past of the isolation, the influx of Mexicans still rose San Fernando Valley's population to forty percent, and its unemployment rate to over eight percent—with the youth taking up ten percent of that rate. Additionally, in the 1930's when the Los Angeles County Flood District put concrete over dry river beds. To improve the channels' aesthetics, the District went to Judy Baca in the early 1970's to create a mural. Not only were exploitation of people and land highlighted, but immigration, women and gay rights as well. As this channel is common with gangs, the director decided to employ youths from different neighborhoods in hopes of connecting them. While Baca's goal of creating this mural was to delineate the dismantling of white dominance and the oppression developed throughout

history of certain ethnic groups, she also heavily considered the youth's unemployment ("The Great Wall of Los Angeles: Bridging Divides and Mitigating Cultural Erasure"). Knowing the capability of the neighborhood's influence, from lack of education to family economic status, Judy Baca wanted this mural program to be an opportunity for the muralists to express their concerns and connections of present and history.

The age of the *Great Wall of Los Angeles* muralists ranged from fourteen years to twenty one, being selected by criteria based on poverty level. A series of problems emerged before the production of the mural. One of the highest that Baca weighed in on was the disadvantage of the community's ignorance in their concern. Parents at meetings voiced their worry about their children's life, affected by local factory trucks and the "spread of gang warfare" (Baca 16). Another issue addressed was the unemployment of the youth directly. This problem was caused by what Baca described as art being only viewed by the rich as a pastime. Artists were not viewed as those who were skilled in helping society like plumbers—rather, art is the first to be cut from a budget, leaving the workers to be unemployed. Along with not having a job, the youth tended to drop out of school. As a result, leisure time was available and their family's economic status added to the restriction of expressing their creativity. The youth then lacks the basic skills that allow them to be hired in the job market. Mentioned before was gang warfare—in an abstract written by Judy Baca, the director states, "Youth are identified with the neighborhoods in which they live" (17). Thus, if one does get recruited into a gang (even to just feel "safe"), he or she would experience peer pressure but also the "achievement of status and community recognition" (Baca 17). By creating this mural program, the youth were able to take advantage of their talent, and put it to good use while also being able to grow from their past, such as juvenile delinquency. After being hired, the formation of ten person crews were formed, and each group

got assigned by personal importance (to the mural's subject). Without specific skills, like the uneducated youth, they still heavily contributed to the mural through techniques of dry brushing and lettering that were prominent to the walls. This mural mostly looked for the youth's participation, however, putting the community's concerns of their neighborhood first was the ultimate goal.

The Los Angeles Mural Program, directed by Judy Baca, part of the Social and Political Art Resource Center in the 70's gave the people of San Fernando Valley a voice. Through years of oppression and isolation, the *Great Wall of Los Angeles* aimed to bridge the differences as well as give opportunities that the youth did not have as artists of this time period. At a half-mile long, this mural showed the Hispanic, Asian, Black, and Native American culture, with the maltreatment they also faced. The context of this mural was supported through the Valley's economic status, including its people and land, racial isolation, such as Blacks and Latinos, and the extension of art viewers. The *Great Wall of Los Angeles*, created between Oxnard Street and Coldwater Canyon Boulevard was finished in five summers.

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Images



Panel of the Great Wall portraying African Americans, year N/A



Judy Baca's mural covers lesser known histories of LA's communities of color, year N/A



Judy Baca and her artistic team sit together in front of the wall in the 1970s, 1976



Great Wall of Los Angeles: detail: 1522 Spanish Arrival, year N/A