

A VER: REVISIONING ART HISTORY  
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# JUDITH F. BACA

ANNA INDYCH-LÓPEZ



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Figure 1. Judith F. Baca, *The Great Wall of Los Angeles*, 1976–83. Overview of the mural along Tujunga Wash.

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Image courtesy of SPARC Archive.

# INTRODUCTION

If there's a source of pain, I do not avoid it. I think rage and the transformation of it into positive action is one of the great sources of productivity for me.

—Judith F. Baca<sup>1</sup>

Judith F. Baca is best known for her epic mural *The Great Wall of Los Angeles* (1976–83) (fig. 1), a 2,740-foot alternative visual history of California that she created in collaboration with other artists and teams of at-risk youth in a suburb of Los Angeles. Indeed, the monumental project is the subject of the final chapter and permeates much of the discussion in this volume. Taking inspiration from this unfinished, potentially endless work in progress, this study embraces Baca's open-ended approach to history as a means to understand her production and its artistic, sociohistorical, and cultural contexts. It looks beyond *The Great Wall*, however, to dissect issues that arise in relation to the broader arc of Baca's rich, complicated, and multifarious career in public art and muralism over the past forty-seven years. An examination of Baca's oeuvre not only helps redress the lacuna in the literature on Latina/o artists but also provides a unique opportunity to reconsider the terms of public art, social practice, and community muralism as they have been addressed in relation to international contemporary art of the Americas. Most important, I argue that close analysis of Baca's cultural production reveals her pioneering role in innovating both the methods *and* the aesthetics of working with diverse communities, placing her project on the cutting edge of public art practices.

In taking on this formidable task and artistic figure, I owe a debt to earlier studies on Baca, on public art in the United States, and on Chicana/o and Latina/o art as I seek to offer new lenses through which to consider the artist's work.<sup>2</sup> In particular, I embrace the political and aesthetic punch of Baca's production in order to focus on its oppositional capacities, specifically its ability to depict contested histories and historical struggle and to produce conflictive subject and cultural positions, which in turn generate an understanding of history as a turbulent process. For example, inherent to her work is the need to negotiate

among multiple and discrete parties—government agencies, civic-minded community members, youth participants, academic historians, activists, and so on—a process that reflects the contentions of the alternative histories being documented and forged in her public art projects. In the process of charting or collecting the history of a place on which she is working, she summons the totality of perspectives, which sometimes include racist biases, to make clear that dissension and opposing views are integral parts of writing and visualizing histories. Through the manipulation of visual form and a praxis that inherently embraces tension, negotiation, and the need for intense dialogue, Baca's public art moves beyond the shared cultural values, social harmony, and consensus often attributed to Chicana/o or feminist art production. Instead, she insists on oppositional tactics and methods gleaned from the dissension, such as rhetorical and formal strategies of "speaking back," in a quest for social justice. Baca's works model a public art of contestation that resists the essentialism of identity politics to formulate instead an idea of community as shifting and mutable, thus changing the expected relationship between aesthetics and politics in art focused on social change.

Baca's work is most often situated within genealogies of Chicana/o, feminist, and public art, but recently authors and curators have tackled her place within the expanded histories of which her work is also an integral part. For example, Baca had a significant presence in the spate of exhibitions between October 2011 and March 2012 that made up the Getty Foundation's Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. 1945–1980 initiative, which explored Southern California's pivotal role in the history of art and architecture. Her inclusion in five of the exhibitions signaled the beginning of new assessments of her work that acknowledged its multiple projections within a network of practices. Baca was one of the few Chicanas and artists associated with the Chicano movement to take a prominent role both in exhibitions about that tumultuous history *and* in exhibitions about other movements within Southern California. Many of these shows acknowledged her contributions to the development of abstract expressionist tendencies or to the experimental practices of the late 1970s that flourished outside the influence of commercial galleries and within the broader proliferation of alternative spaces and imaginaries.<sup>3</sup> A few years later, in 2015, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art featured one of her works on paper, *The Goddesses*

of Los Angeles, 1977–79, in the exhibition *Drawing in L.A.: The 1960s and 70s*, which highlighted experimentation in the practice of drawing. At the same time, Baca continues to receive national accolades, including being named a USA Rockefeller Fellow in the Visual Arts, an award in 2015 that recognizes her as one of the most accomplished and innovative artists in the United States. In addition, the California State Historical Resources Commission officially nominated *The Great Wall* in 2017 as a National Historic Site. In 2017, Baca's work was featured in four exhibitions that were part of the Getty's Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA initiative, including a solo exhibition, *The Great Wall of Los Angeles: Judith F. Baca's Experimentations in Collaboration and Concrete*, presented at the Art Galleries at California State University, Northridge. Her groundbreaking work *Las Tres Mariás*, analyzed in chapter 3, was featured in the exhibition *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960–1985* at the Hammer Museum. Other works were displayed in *The U.S.-Mexico Border: Place, Imagination, and Possibility* at the Craft and Folk Art Museum and in *Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano L.A.* at the MOCA Pacific Design Center and ONE Gallery (One National Gay & Lesbian archives at the USC Libraries).

The following pages build on this ongoing critical attention and on expanded views of Baca's production to construct an art historical genealogy for the artist. This study confronts the aesthetics of her practice through close visual analysis and by examining some of her formative experiences, including her training as a painter with Hans Burkhardt and her overlap with (and departure from) the Mexican muralist tradition, specifically the work of David Alfaro Siqueiros. Positioning Baca's oeuvre both within a history of dissent associated with civil rights movements and urban uprisings and within the breaking open of aesthetic and social hierarchies helps us better understand its far-reaching significance.

As I was researching and writing this manuscript, the literature on public art, participation, and collaboration developed at a tremendous pace. This study places Baca within these ongoing debates and within histories and theories of collectivity and the oppositional public sphere as a call to redress the typical erasure of women and especially women of color within this body of literature. Emphasizing urban cultural histories, such as the work of Eric Avila, Catherine S. Ramírez, and Sarah Schrank, this study examines the ways in which constructions of race,

class, and gender have an impact on lived experiences, social space, and symbolic representations in relation to Baca's works. It acknowledges the roots of significant issues such as participation or social practice within the pivotal historical moment of the 1970s and 1980s and within the specific sociocultural and aesthetic geographies of Southern California, where she played such an important role. Rather than simply arguing that Baca's production is the unrecognized predecessor of social practice, it seeks to illuminate her own distinctive and groundbreaking modes of public art practice on their own terms and within the contexts of Los Angeles urban culture.

In addition to pioneering public art as a practitioner, Baca is a significant scholar and theoretician of mural and community art praxis. Historians have unfettered access to the artist's perspectives through her own writings and lectures on public art, as well as her comprehensive website, which compiles aspects of her history (<http://www.judybaca.com/artist/>). The treasure trove that is the Judy Baca archive is unparalleled in terms of facilitating research. Inspired by feminist artist Judy Chicago, who encouraged Baca early to be the keeper of her own history, Baca was one of an early 1970s cohort who not only documented their work but also put in place the idea of archiving as a feminist practice in and of itself. By documenting and institutionalizing her own history and that of her peers, Baca made sure her story would not be lost to subsequent generations.<sup>4</sup>

The archival record also contains several extensive and seminal formal interviews, including a comprehensive one by Jeffrey Rangel in 1986 for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art and the detailed and insightful interviews conducted by Karen Mary Davalos in 2010, which formulate the origin point and foundation of this A Ver project. In addition to relying heavily on these key primary sources, my insights into Baca's work depend as well on her own writings, several interviews, ongoing email dialogues, and a site visit I conducted with the artist in 2014. No library, text, or archive could compare to the privilege of experiencing the murals firsthand, driving around Los Angeles with the artist, and visiting her home and studio with her.<sup>5</sup> Building on these resources, I also situate Baca's statements within broader contexts and submit her recollections to scrutiny, sometimes going against the grain of received interpretations in the very spirit of her oppositional stances.

Baca's archive is currently housed at the Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC), which she founded along with painter Christina Schlesinger and filmmaker Donna Deitch as a nonprofit and artist-run alternative space. Opening in 1976 in Venice, a neighborhood on Los Angeles's west side, SPARC emerged directly from the city of Los Angeles's Citywide Mural Program, which Baca initiated and directed in the early 1970s. Baca continues to serve as SPARC's artistic director in 2017. Along with a team of committed, energetic longtime staff members, she oversees a vibrant and active program of exhibitions, workshops, and residencies as well as the sponsorship, restoration, and documentation of hundreds of murals in Los Angeles and beyond. As an organization, SPARC is integral to Baca's story. The two are so imbricated that the historian, critic, or curator is often at pains to distinguish between them. This nomenclature problem highlights one of the most significant aspects of Baca's work, her ongoing dedication to fostering social change through the creation of alternative artistic institutions as an artistic practice. It also brings to the fore the emphasis on collectivity in her work. Where does SPARC end and Baca begin? Is it possible to codify this? Is it necessary to do so?

In the pages that follow, especially in my discussion of *The Great Wall* in chapter 4, I address aspects of collaboration and collectivity that are sometimes deemed controversial. I argue that even though Baca pioneered significant modes of collaboration that came to define the social aims of her project, she also strategically and deliberately exerted aesthetic control, precisely as a means to ensure the most effective visualizations of the teams' collective ideas. In highlighting her aesthetic mandates, and keeping in mind the broader series of which this book is a part—a series dedicated to Latina/o artists—I necessarily attribute artistic authorship of the projects to Baca while acknowledging the team members and mural makers who collaborated or were hired. In taking this approach, the study does not intend to sideline the hundreds who participated with Baca, but aims to address directly the parameters and intricacies of collective authorship, as well as her leadership role, as they played out in the projects she oversaw. Assigning authorship becomes a tricky endeavor, leading to slippages and inconsistencies with naming and labeling. I err on the side of most often naming Baca as artist (as does the preponderance

of the literature). Based on more than expediency, this decision provokes the tensions of authorship embodied by the works, Baca's specific praxis (in which she strategically hired artists and participants), and collective practices broadly speaking.

This is not a comprehensive history of Baca's life and work, nor is it a survey monograph that charts the entirety of her production or all aspects of her heterodox praxis. Instead it centers purposefully on specific moments and works from Baca's career in order to position her as an artist who formulates an innovative public art of contestation that both focuses on and engenders historical contention. Chapter 1, "The Mural Lady," establishes a framework for the theoretical issues surrounding Baca's work, specifically in relation to public art and community-based projects, while it also charts her early work in Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles to show the roots of her particular model of muralism that defies monolithic notions of community or publics. The second chapter uses the structuring concept of "arrivals and departures" or "comings and goings" to explore Baca's contingent place making in relation to her broader practice of historical inquiry. It explores her biography, her artistic training, and the various Southern California milieus that had an impact on her work (Watts, Pacoima, Northridge, Venice). It also traces the actual departures from her life, as when several youths with whom she worked were lost to gang warfare, engendering an analysis of the graffiti-muralism divide. "Arrivals and departures" also speaks to Baca's projects that address themes such as migration and formal concepts such as mobility in her work to bring to the fore the ways in which she interrogates the instabilities, indeterminacies, and conflicts of histories and communities.

By setting Baca's work and practice against the rhetorical matrix of "speaking back," chapter 3 in many ways formulates the core approach of the book. Detailing her working methods, it argues that she reinforces the subject of her work—social and cultural dissent—through visual and discursive strategies of opposition that set her projects apart from the frameworks and discourses into which they are typically placed. The chapter explores, for example, her contestation of Chicano and Mexican muralisms as well as her commitment to claiming a space for women of color within white feminism. Chapter 4 investigates her monumental project *The Great Wall* by analyzing her nuanced approaches and methods of "looking back" on history.

Focusing on the mural's imagery of urban renewal, racialized spaces, and Los Angeles film culture in relation to the politics of space, the chapter details Baca's consistent embrace of struggle and conflict as subject. It also dissects *The Great Wall's* aesthetic innovations, including its dialogue with Siqueiros's dynamic realism and with sources in US popular culture and cinema, to reveal the formal and visual vocabularies that provoke destabilized subject positions as a means to explore historical tensions.

Often engaging contention as an element of the actual making of her work, Baca uses dissension as a structural and theoretical principle to challenge conceptions of the public sphere and artist activism and to make interventions in the built environment of Los Angeles (fig. 2). She exposes history itself, and the visualization of it, as a project of contestation. In all these ways, Baca's work encapsulates the art practices of the 1970s and onward that, by challenging received histories and mainstream modernisms, changed the very meaning of art in society.

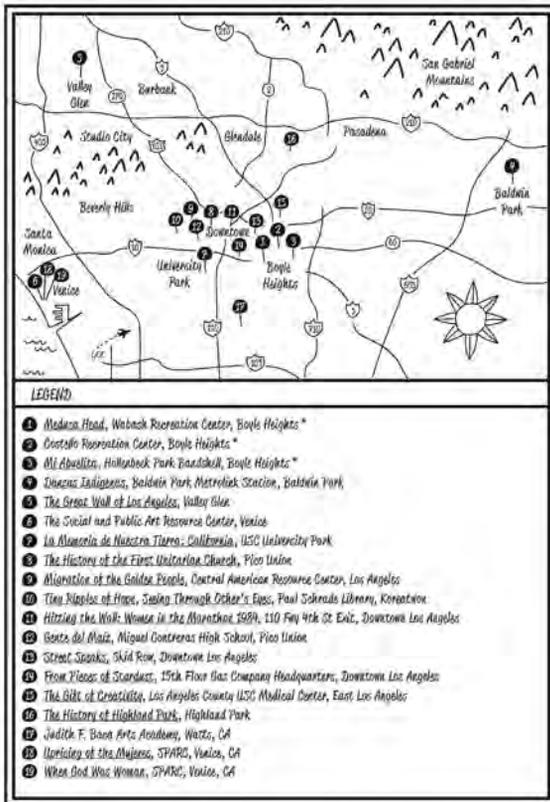


Figure 2. Map showing the location of public art projects by Judy Baca in Los Angeles and the location of SPARC.

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