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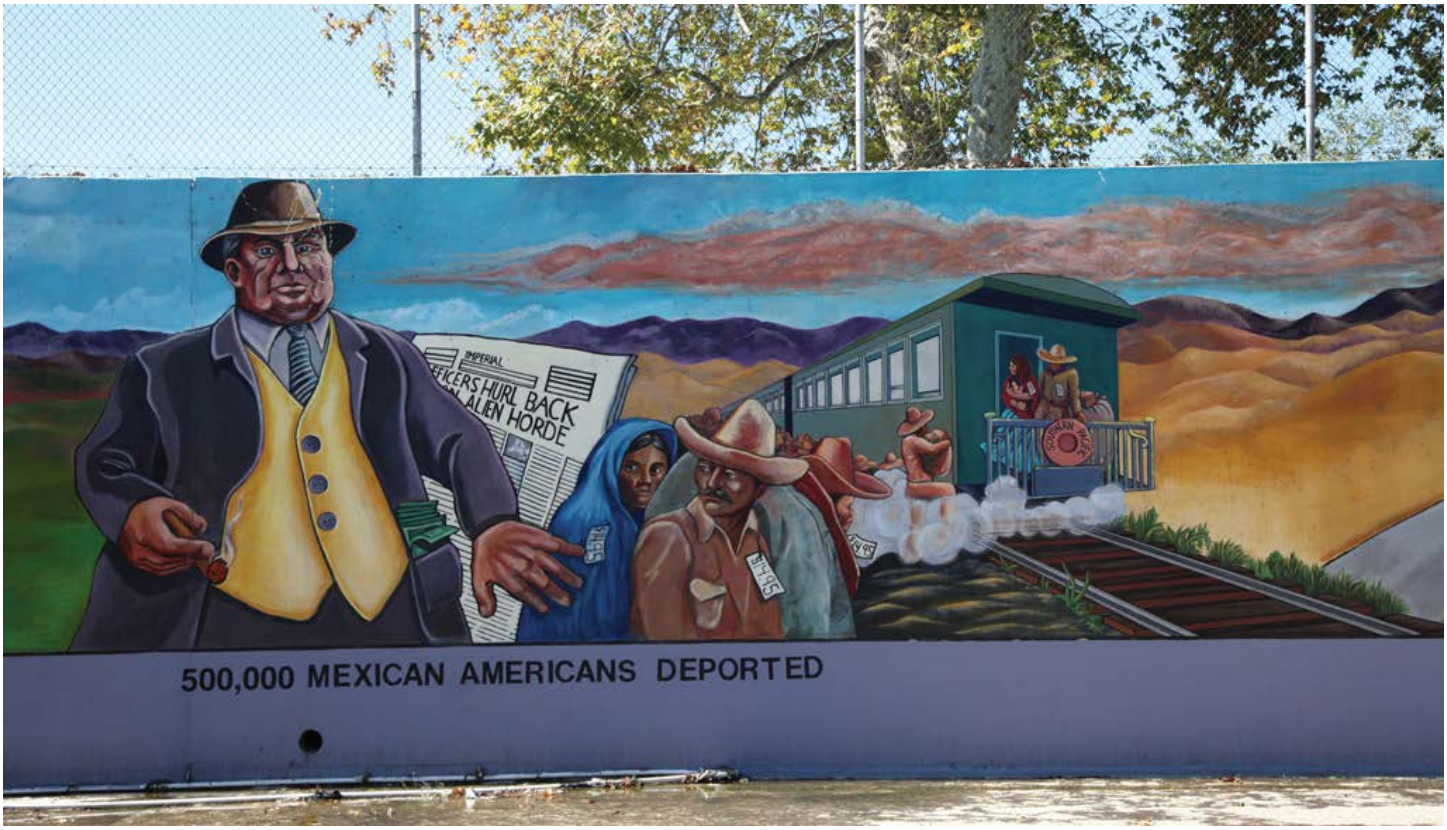
Concrete History: Chicana Muralist Judith F. Baca Goes from the Great Wall to the Museum Wall

BY ***Maximilíano Durón*** POSTED **04/19/17 9:10 AM**



Detail of the Great Wall of Los Angeles (1976–), by Judith F. Baca, showing 500,00 Mexican Americans Deported.
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND SPARC, VENICE, CALIFORNIA

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. The mural stretches for half a mile along the concrete wall of the Wash, a tributary of the concrete-lined Los Angeles River. Tucked away in Valley Glen, a community in the San Fernando Valley, far from the glitz of Hollywood, 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, and the anguish wrought on Japanese Americans by internment.

It shows achievements: there's the physician and researcher Charles Drew, who protested against the racial segregation of blood donors, transfusing a black patient. Mrs. Laws, a black activist forgotten by history who protested racially restrictive housing covenants in South Central L.A., holds a bold sign above her head: WE FIGHT FASCISM ABROAD & AT HOME. 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. A female figure suggesting Rosie the Riveter is sucked into a black-and-white television, toward suburbia. Family members isolated from each other as the twists and turns of L.A.'s multiplying freeways ensnare their bodies illustrates the impact that the construction of highway interchanges had on the city's eastside communities, bifurcating historically Chicano neighborhoods. 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, who, at 70, is an electric presence in rose-tinted sunglasses. Before completing her designs, Baca told me as we stood in front of the Wall on a typical L.A. December day (60 degrees and sunny), 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.

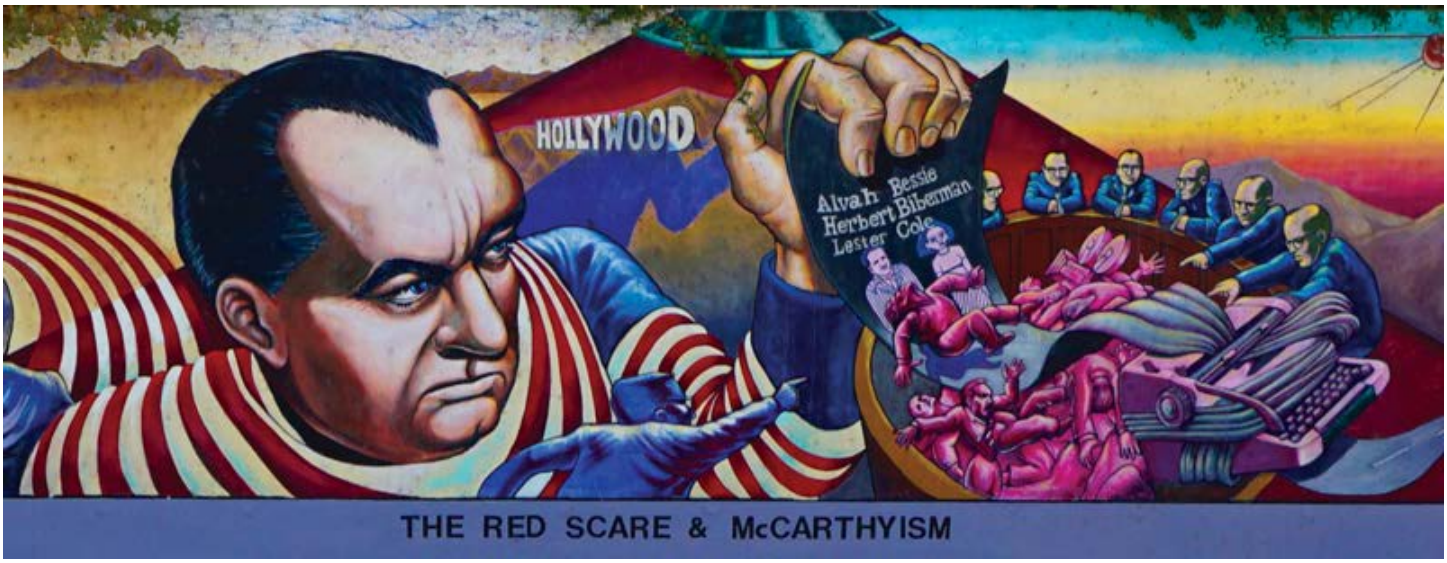
Judith F. Baca photographed at SPARC, Venice, California.
MAXIMILÍANO DURÓN/ARTNEWS

Artists have always worked with assistants—some with small armies of them—but Baca didn't fit into any paradigm the art world recognized. Back in the '70s, "they called me a teacher, a social worker, even a gang member—everything but an artist," she said. "This is not what art did. It did not intervene in social spaces, mitigating problems that these kids were facing. It was so foreign to the arts to be engaged in social justice action or transformative action within a community."

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. "I think the art world has had kind of an uneasy relationship with me," she told me, sitting on a sofa surrounded by sketches and studies for murals. "But now . . . I'm resurrected, right?"



Detail of Judith F. Baca's Great Wall of Los Angeles (1976–), showing an alternative history of the 1950s: Farewell to Rosie the Riveter, Development of Suburbia, the Red Scare & McCarthyism, Division of the Barrios & Chavez Ravine. *Click for full detail.*

MAXIMILÍANO DURÓN, ARTNEWS/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND SPARC, VENICE, CALIFORNIA

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."

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 (as were a number of nuns). 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.

During breaks between her morning and evening classes, she continued to protest against the war, this time as part of the Chicano Moratorium, a coalition of politically minded Mexican-American antiwar groups marching against the high death tolls of Chicano men in Vietnam. 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 has a way of making people step out of their own struggles into a larger understanding of what constitutes a life," her longtime friend, the artist Amalia Mesa-Bains told me.

Around this same time, Baca was

Judith F. Baca in front of her painting *Tres Generaciones* (1973), showing a portrait of her grandmother, ca. 1986.

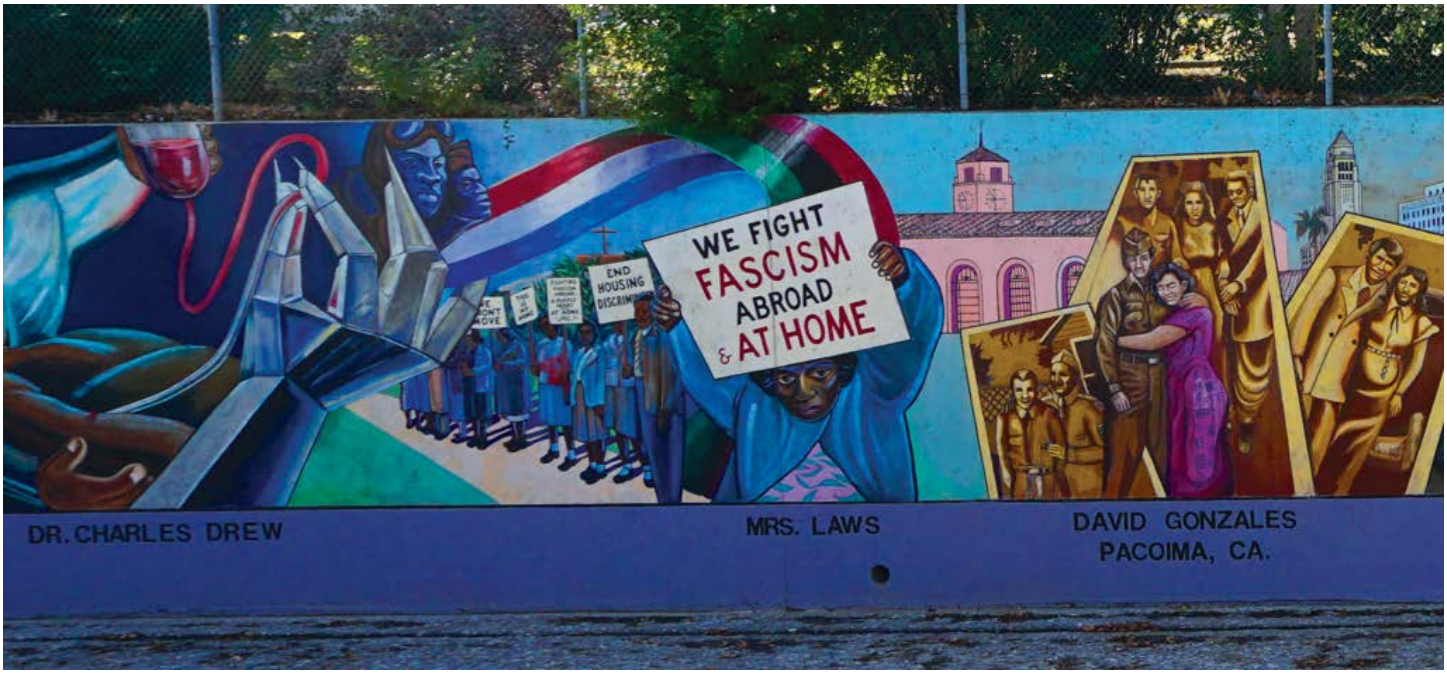
COURTESY SPARC ARCHIVE (SPARCINLA.ORG)

going through another kind of awakening. She was in the middle of a divorce from her husband of four years, and would later come out as a lesbian. She moved to an apartment complex in Venice and joined her landlord's consciousness-raising group. 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. "People don't take women artists seriously, especially a Mexican woman artist, as I am," she would write in an artist's statement in 1978.

It was this aspect of Baca's life that particularly interested curator Connie Butler, who included maquettes for two of Baca's murals in her landmark 2007 exhibition "WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution" at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. "I was very interested in re-narrating the history of feminist art, particularly in L.A., which has largely been understood as a history of middle-class white women artists," Butler said. "I knew it was more

diverse than that. It's important to think about the Chicana artists and what their relationship had been to the organized feminist art practice in L.A., and that led me straightaway to Judy." In 1976 Baca organized a group exhibition at the Woman's Building, titled "Las Chicanas: Venas de la Mujer," one of the first exhibitions solely of Chicana artists. "She was a fireball who matured into a powerhouse," said Judy Chicago, the cofounder of the Woman's Building who would later advise on the Great Wall.

These days, intersectionality—a term coined by critical race theorist Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw as a way to understand multiple social identities that people hold of themselves—is an accepted lens through which to address discrimination and oppression, but back in the 1970s it wasn't. Baca was a woman, a Chicana, and a lesbian, at a time when the first two were thought of as mutually exclusive identities, and the third was not discussed at all. "Judy calls herself a bridge," Indych-López said, "a bridge between the two worlds: the feminism of the Woman's Building and the Chicano community. She was unique in being a prominent member of both worlds . . . She claimed a space for women of color within feminism, and a space for feminism within Chicano and Chicana art."



Detail of Judith F. Baca's Great Wall of Los Angeles (1976–), showing "Mrs. Laws," fighting against racially restrictive housing covenants in South Central Los Angeles.

MAXIMILÍANO DURÓN, ARTNEWS/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND SPARC, VENICE, CALIFORNIA

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. In short, it would make murals, or, as Baca is fond of calling them, "sites of public memory."

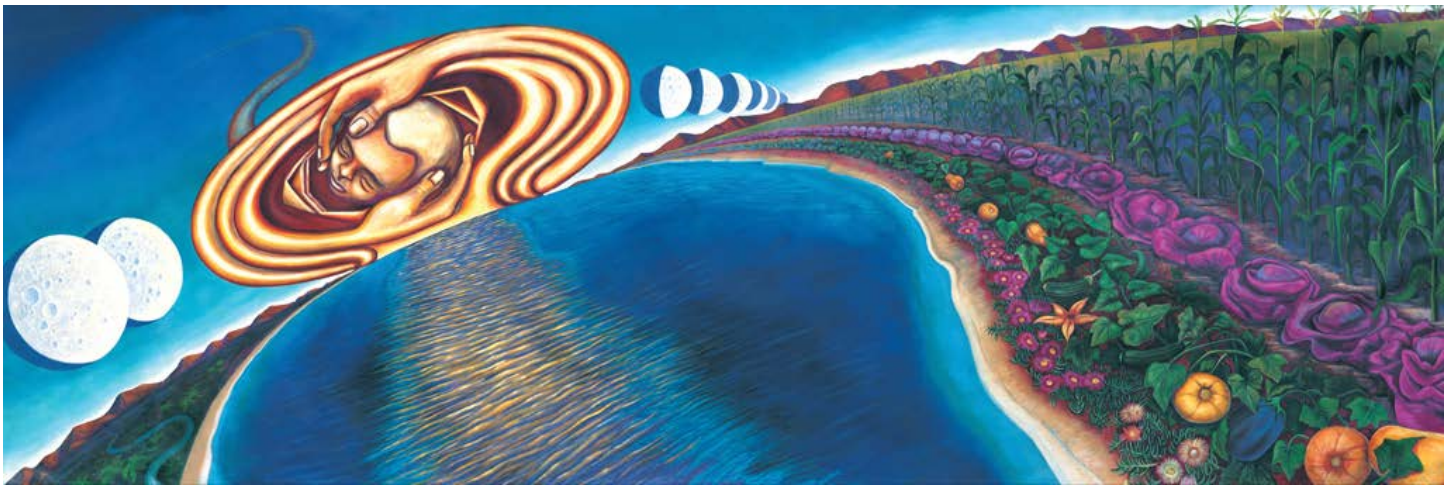
Two years earlier, the Army Corps of Engineers had approached Baca about beautifying the Tujunga Wash, which had been paved with concrete in the 1930s, in an attempt to tame the flood-prone L.A. River. Under the auspices of SPARC, Baca set to work thinking about designs for a mural there.

"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. "One of the elements of her work is her capacity to think beyond the normal realm that artists think in."

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. "I was dealing with the concreted river, and making a relationship between the stories of the people and the destruction of the river. I mean that metaphorically and spiritually. It was the recovery of the river and the recovery of our stories," Baca said.

The Great Wall may not be one of L.A.'s most visible—or visited—monuments, but it is in many ways a landmark. The Wall "is tied to Baca's sense of a non-seamless history—of a history of ruptures, and struggle," Indych-López said. "She's not trying to replace one canon with another, but in a way she's visualizing history as a process of contestation in and of itself."



Judith F. Baca, *World Wall: Balance*, 1990.
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND SPARC, VENICE, CALIFORNIA

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. Between 1988 and 2002, SPARC and Baca, again working with some backing from local government but still independent, cooperated with nearly 100 artists to produce 105 murals. She made her mark on the city.

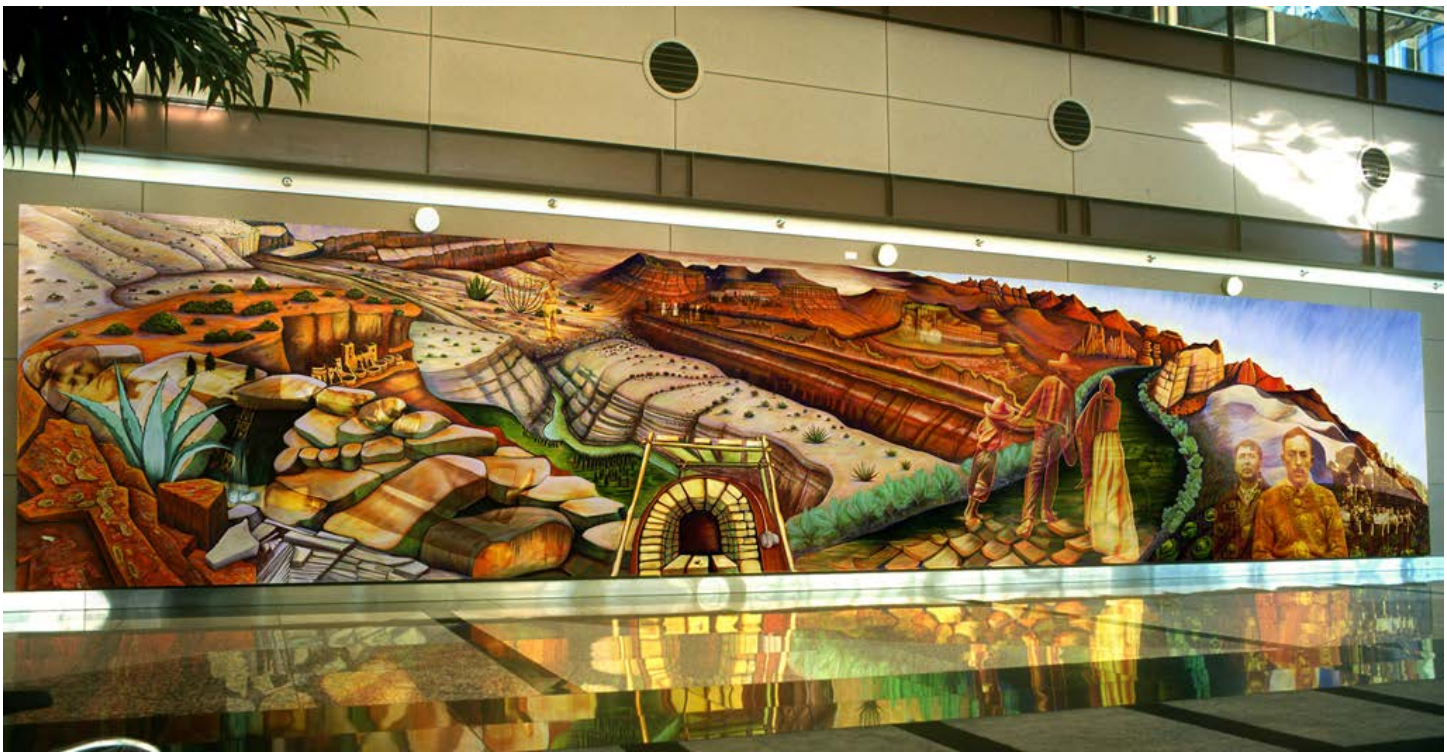
"If you spend any time in L.A. and have any awareness at all of the Chicano history here, she is one of the iconic people that you just *know* about," Butler, the "WACK!" curator, said. "Even though she has less visibility maybe in the contemporary mainstream art world, she's an iconic figure within that history here."

Baca and SPARC have since expanded into projects like *The World Wall: A Vision of the Future Without Fear*, a multinational mural effort. The piece, which has traveled nationally as well as internationally, includes contributions from artists in Finland, Russia, Canada, and Mexico, as well as an Israeli-Palestinian collaboration. Typically installed in a semicircle, the center panel of the portable mural, titled *Balance*, depicts two golden hands encircling a man's head, which rises above a deep blue stretch of water, surrounded by lush vegetation. The image is meant to evoke the harmony that can be achieved when humans respect the land they live on, and all of its inhabitants.

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. "Not to take advantage of all the tools and materials [available] keeps you from being an artist of your time," Baca said. She added that, with these new tools, "beyond my ability to climb scaffolding, I might be able to continue making large-scale works."



Judith F. Baca, *La Memoria de Nuestra Tierra*, 2011, installation view, at the Denver International Airport.
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND SPARC, VENICE, CALIFORNIA

Although she's best known as a muralist, two of the "Pacific Standard Time" exhibitions to include Baca's work this fall will feature non-collaborative pieces. The first show, "The U.S.–Mexico Border: Place, Imagination, and Possibility," co-curated by Lowery Stokes Sims and Ana Elena Mallet for the Craft & Folk Museum in Los Angeles, will include Baca's *The Pancho Trinity* (1993), three Styrofoam sculptures of stereotyped dozing Mexican men ("panchos" in the lingo of the art-for-tourists trade) painted with scenes—a graveyard, a

chain-link fence—depicting the perils faced by Mexican migrants. The work, as Sims writes in her essay for the show, "reinvents the iconic kitschy image of the 'sleeping Mexican' to comment on the struggle of immigrant groups."

For "Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960–1985" at the Hammer Museum, co-curators Cecilia Fajardo-Hill and Andrea Giunta have chosen *Las Tres Marias*, a three-panel painting that includes two life-size portraits of Chicana women with a mirror between them. When the viewer looks at the mirror, he or she becomes the third Maria. "For me, this piece has all the trademarks of Judy Baca as an artist," said Fajardo-Hill. "She has always fought for social justice through art. From that point of view, this work does something powerful that creates visibility and makes a huge statement for women, Chicana women in particular."

But it is Baca's community-based work that is certain to be what she is remembered for, though it has always presented difficulties for reproduction and is market-resistant. "The bulk of her work has always been in the public sector, and you can't put a price on that; it can't be sold or bartered or exchanged or put into some warehouse in Geneva," Mesa-Bains said. "It's on a scale that cannot be acquired."

"She stands alone," Mesa-Bains added, "the power of her production, the scale and scope of its reach, and ultimately, the social justice impact that she's had."

Last September, I ran into Baca at a Ford Foundation symposium in Manhattan on "U.S. Latinx Arts Futures." During a discussion of Ph.D. programs in Latinx art history, the speaker moved to a slide to show the names of 16 Ph.D. candidates nationwide. "Those are my students," Baca marveled under her breath, recognizing five of the names as her students at UCLA, in the Expressive Arts Track of the Chicano/a Studies Ph.D. program. Like the Visual and Public Art Institute she created at California State University, Monterey Bay, the Expressive Arts Track bridges Baca's public work with her teaching.

Baca shows no signs of slowing down. In January, she was a speaker at the Women's March Los Angeles, protesting the inauguration of Donald J. Trump. "The work I'm doing in the digital lab is now really gearing up to resist Trump," she told me days before the march. "We're preparing. SPARC has been, from its very beginning, an organization that has provided a place for social justice, thought, vision, and civil rights through the arts. I think that's more important now than ever."

Maximilíano Durón is a Los Angeles–born reporter and photo editor at ARTnews. *He covers artists of color, particularly Latinx/Chicano artists, as well as queer art, digital art, and breaking news in the art world.*

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