The Painted Revolution

by Rohan John (with Pushpa Iyer)

Coloring by numbers was one of my favorite activities growing up, where a picture was divided into numbers from 1-10 and the numbers were coordinated by colors; this was supposed to give artistic perspective to youngsters. Sadly this was also the extent of any artistic ability I had. However, over time this exercise gave me a new perspective and new way of looking at things. The idea that certain colors were supposed to go in a certain area and never outside it, or that coloring outside the lines was easily the biggest taboo in that paradigm troubled me and made me want to rebel. I grew up questioning every rule made and it usually ended with me defying social norms in society. What has been exciting to discover since is that, for some, art has always acted as a vehicle of social and political change rather than just providing aesthetic joy. For these artists, money and reward is not the goal; instead, the act, the process and the goal of the art take precedence, be it to show defiance or comment on social developments in the world.

While in Los Angeles as part of the 2015 “Praxis of Conflict Transformation course,” we were fortunate to meet Omar Ramirez, a mural artist from the Boyle Heights area. Omar highlights social injustices and includes ways of transforming violence and injustice through his mural art. According to him, art in the early ‘80s was a representation of the politics of the artists and what they felt about society. In the ‘90s this shifted to art depicting the political and social movements around the artists, with the Chicano Movement being one that was very visible in the Los Angeles area and certainly one that drove Omar’s work. He reflects that he was transformed as an artist when he travelled to Chiapas with 50 other individuals to witness the Zapatista movement, and this was the turning point where he began to see art as a tool to convey social and political realities. Street artists such as Banksy and David Choe today carry brand value. Their art is admired and valued by mainstream society. However, Omar fears that when it comes to art, brands should not just be allowed to speak for themselves, and neither should spectators and admirers be allowed to define the art; it is the artists alone who can bring the art’s true meaning out.

As Omar speaks it is clear that his life experiences played a large part in his evolution and drive as an artist. He wanted to become an attorney initially, to fight the injustices he grew up around in the Boyle Heights area, currently on its way to becoming one of the most gentrified areas of Los Angeles, and the underlying racial issues that gentrification represents. As a student of UC Irvine he recounts the time he was given an assignment on identity; he wrote in Spanglish, which he believes was misunderstood by his professor as him trivializing the assignment. When he received an ‘F’ (Fail) grade he was advised that the only way he could continue in his degree program was to find a professor who would take him on, and work with him one-on-one. It led him to turn to art to express what he felt and soon after he entered the world of art under the tutelage of Judith Baca, Professor of Public Art at Irvine, whom he regards as his mentor. During this period he began exploring race and class dynamics, identity, hegemony and
individual resistance not only through painting but through performance and collaborative video art. In the ‘90s Omar experienced segregation of artists of minority races such as him and recollects how he and others weren’t given space in museums and in institutions to showcase their art. They took their art to the streets, where nobody could differentiate the art of a colored person to that of any other race, privileged or not. The power of these acts of defiance shows me how far people, no matter where they are from and what they look like, will go to find methods and means to use the tools at their disposal to express their opinions and their commentary on the world in which they live.

Omar’s work within the art world and outside has led to social and developmental change through means other than the brush and the canvas. He worked along with activists in the area to start the East Palo Alto Mural Art Project in 2001. They worked with the Murals Music and Arts Project (MMAP) and the subsequent Graffiti Arts Project which gave school children a space and a means to creatively talk about the issues that affected them – such as their school building being brought down to make way for a Home Depot. The East Palo Alto area, which in the early ‘90s was infamously known as the Homicide Capital of America, was also witnessing gentrification, had poor pockets and inaccessible and poor educational resources for its local population – an irony with Stanford University just next door. The youth of the area, not surprisingly, were turning to the drug trade and illicit methods to make ends meet and this was the time the MMAP through their Graffiti Arts Project and the East Palo Alto Mural Project entered the area. Hired as research assistants (Omar spoke about the extensive research he conducts before undertaking a mural painting), the project gave them an option to choose a different path of income, albeit a lower income. At the end of the project, many of the youth opted to continue their studies and enter college. A major social transformation was occurring.
Ramirez is an artist but his political views and work within cultural and social issues set him apart, and he took these passions and filtered them into his work with the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF). His projects with MALDEF helped empower Latino youth to explore and understand issues within education, civil rights, public policy and restorative justice. Through national and statewide programs he helped flesh out topics like the school to prison pipeline, xenophobia and environmental justice, to show the Latino youth the importance of thinking about these issues and more importantly being aware of their rights and services.

LA has a rich and diverse collection of public murals, which are showcased on all structures from walls and bridges through ethnic neighborhoods and even freeway underpasses. The Department of Cultural Affairs for the city states that there are an estimated 1500 murals depicting the cultural identity and varied history of the City of Angels, with many of these pieces of art being financed in part or entirely by the city.

But it has not been smooth sailing for the artists who uphold this rich tradition in Los Angeles. The city had declared a moratorium on public art that lasted until August 2013 as part of a systematic effort termed “war against graffiti.” The city and in particular the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), which often owned the spaces claimed by the artists, spent millions to remove graffiti and brought criminal cases against artists who claimed public space. Mural and graffiti art was linked to gang violence and many bemoaned the government’s lack of appreciation for art.

During our visit to Los Angeles we noticed many a mural and wall art piece, and the meanings of these pieces were sometimes apparent and sometimes not as much. There were differences in the themes the
art presented when we moved from one neighborhood to another. Within the areas of Skid Row and Boyle Heights the use of wall murals and graffiti art over buildings and public spaces reflected the inequality present in the Los Angeles community, from racial discrimination to wealth disparity and more insidiously, the casting away of the mentally ill. But the richer and more developed areas of Little Tokyo and Arts District have art of culture and high-brow appreciation with mostly aesthetic values.

We made note of every public art we saw, trying to decipher what the artist was trying to communicate through them. We distinguished art from those that seemed like obvious “corporate pay pieces” making gentrification come more alive, to religious art and art that gave the viewer a small gleam of hope in this large “City of Glitz.” Omar explained how certain walls had been showered with product placement after the moratorium because large companies were paying artists to build their art around their product to create a permanent advertising space in the city.

Omar described tensions over public art as the brewing of a battle for the soul of Los Angeles; art, he says, “has become one of the tools with which the downtrodden, the segregated and the minority fight back, not with violence and anger but with paint brushes and a multitude of colors.”

I know who I am rooting for…!

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I THINK I JUST SENT THE MAN I LOVE INTO A TRAP!