Mario Castillo’s Peace Mural (aka Metafisica) painted in 1968 in Pilsen, Chicago, IL

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A guide for schoolteachers to use as a stimulus for creating art projects for their students with ideas that can be combined with each other to create different projects or variations on a theme. Teachers are invited to create their own lesson plans based on these or their own ideas derived from Mario Castillo’s Peace mural.
DECODING THE PEACE MURAL (AKA Metafisica) 
Its Popular, Multicultural, and Universal Implications are Finally Revealed

Gentrification destroyed the Peace (Metafisica) mural created by Mario Castillo in 1968. First they cut a door and windows through its wall in 1988. Then, a few years later, they sandblasted the whole thing. This act is tied to the American trait of destroying the old to make room for the new.

With all certainty, when new, this mural was not about creating an “art for the sake of art” work of art or about creating a “pretty picture” to decorate some wall. Although this mural was somewhat revolutionary in some respects, it definitely was not about glorifying the heroes of the Mexican Revolution by painting their portraits all over the wall as hundreds of Mexican murals had done so since the 1920’s. Instead, its suite of abstracted images formed an all-embracing testimonial about the human condition of the times. With its symbolic content, the Peace mural was a work that summarized in one pictorial statement the global state of affairs at the end of the decade of 1960’s.

Although this mural was a product of the “Now”, no one had taken the time to ask Castillo the meaning behind all the symbols. Most of this symbolism was so esoteric that it was never totally revealed, until now. Moving beyond addressing only the concerns and issues of a subculture, the Peace mural was designed to be more universal in scope. Of the New Public Art murals, this mural presented itself as being the first to deal with syncretism. For this, Castillo credits his experience with the multicultural nature of Chicago, one of the world’s most cosmopolitan cities.

To begin with, there were three major cultural proclamations made by this work. It was; an ethnic statement about empowering Mexican Roots, a protest against the Vietnam War, and a reflection of the Hippie culture. The Peace (Metafisica) mural was an example of the cultural fusion that brought about the new age movement that gave us the Age of Aquarius which was initiated in the 1960’s by the Hippie’s cultural revolution. Hence, its iconography forms a synthesis between Psychology, New Art, Native American culture, Huichol culture, Environmental Interactive Art, Abstract Art, Science, Animism, Pop Culture, Mysticism, Activism, Folk Art, Hinduism, and Symbolism, bringing them all together into a mural that was packed with symbols. It also incorporated the Dada principle of chance or aleatory practices. Thus the mural became a multicultural amalgamation of diverse ideas.

Although most of the symbols in the mural were specific, they were also open to interpretation, especially as to any new possible meanings, otherwise not intended; i.e. when two separate images existed side by side and the viewer brought them together to form a new concept in their mind.

1. After going through various options, this became the original design. Even so, the left side shapes did not connect as well as right side group and eventually Mario Castillo made a change at the end.

2. The design below became the final design of the mural when Castillo at the last minute chose to extend the three linear shapes on the left to flow into the central complex for the sake of unity.
THE MUSIC CONNECTION

During his developing years, Mario Castillo considered an arrangement of colors as visual music. He believed that just as a music composer arranges musical notes to create a music composition so too, the artist could do the same with color. Thus Castillo came to regard colors as musical notes with which to create harmonious visual compositions on paper, canvas, or walls.

Around 1967 Castillo was intrigued with the idea of creating music from graphic shapes. He started to research this and created his early experiments at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. These initial trials consisted of using 16mm black film leader and scratching out the black emulsion on the side where the normal soundtrack would be. To do this, he worked with the “variable area” technique for producing sound in films, as opposed to the variable density.

This was tedious work since he used an X-Acto knife to remove the black emulsion from the clear acetate. These tiny “design” shapes had to be symmetrical and in a straight line running parallel to the edge of the film. Needless to say, this was quite a task, but after achieving a few inches of work, Castillo would cut the film leader and make a loop out of it. Then, to hear the sound being created by his markings on the film, he would run it through a film projector and hear its analog sound.

Later, around 1971, he designed the CORS, Castillo Optical Reader Synthesizer, and now he was able to use the whole width of the film to run or “play” through on the CORS. With this he was not only able to use variable area, but also variable density, which meant that now colors had an effect on the production of the sound. He received a 1972 American Film Institute grant to produce his first film, Animated Soundtrack. Below are three test-strips done for this experimental film.

Since music and color are part of the spectrum of physical vibrations, they have been related to each other since the time before Aristotle. Through the years, especially during the 19th century, there have been many new devices, which have dealt with producing color from sounds. In his experiments, Mario Castillo reversed this so that he tried to produce sound from colors. This was what Castillo was going for, but he had to stop his search with only having produced the AFI film.

To see some of the historical musical instruments related to music, light, and color go to:

You may also find more information on the subject at:
http://rhythmiclight.com/

The Peace mural was affected by this concern, for he saw this mural as a musical composition. Another way he thought of this mural composition was as a single note fluctuating through pictorial space. In music, a note has what is called an envelope shown as a graph (left side below).

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Castillo wanted to conceive his design as a composition in an envelope.
THE MURAL’S COMPOSITION AS A SOUND ENVELOPE (Continued)

Doing this would have allowed him to suggest a large dead body caused by the war:

But Mario Castillo wanted his design to be “up-lifting” since it was not just about the war and so he chose to create a new reference to the “musical note envelope” where the release pointed towards the firmament.

In Castillo’s mind, the mural became the image of a growing plant because it had both, the right side and left side of the mural pointing upward while the center seemed to take “root” in the ground. This effect was a favorable thing to have because now the negativity contained in some of the mural’s symbols presented itself in a composition that conveyed an over-all message of hope.

At this time, Castillo was listening to classical music, especially to concertos by Mozart, Vivaldi, and Beethoven. Mario Castillo wanted to treat the Peace mural as a color “concerto” with three parts. In Castillo’s mind, each part was a movement. Castillo understood the importance of the number three and so he used this concept to create an analogy to the three movements in a concerto.

The first movement started with bold colors and a big bang, because this was the section the public saw first from the street. Then there was the middle section, which was intricate in nature and had a spiraling visual movement that coiled into the central circle. Finally the last movement tapered off and came to the end at a specific spot that seemed to point upwards towards the sky. Theme wise, as stated before, there were three general subjects; the tribute to the Mexican & Native American cultures, the visual protest to the Vietnam war, and the influence of the Hippie movement in America. So originally the mural had three areas or “movements” as seen below.

Then when the design changed at the end, the three areas came to be as shown in next image. In this final composition, each movement was separated by a small quiet space outlined in cyan (below) showing a series of somewhat parallel lines between the three sections.
SOME OF THE OVER-ALL SHAPES HAD MEANING AS WELL

This image below is the initial section of the mural (as seen from the street) showing the explosive color of the “big bang” mentioned before, but also literally, the graphic of a bomb’s explosion.

THE QUETZALCOATL PRESENCE (The Feathered Serpent) and the KUNDALINI

Castillo’s original mural concept was to have its left side represent the feathered serpent by only showing the upper part of the head. Then he connected the “neck part” to the rest of the mural.

In the case of Quetzalcoatl’s head, the Peace mural made use of pareidolia. Pareidolia occurs when the mind has the psychological tendency to see an image within a given pattern. It is like the double vision that is required in the Rorschach inkblot tests or when one sees a face on a cloud.

The representation of the snake’s teeth is apparent, but the teeth shaped units on all three linear shapes in the colored design also stand for the scales of the snake’s body. In addition, since this is a feathered serpent, they also represent short feathers. Whenever he could, Castillo economized by having a shape be three things as shown here; Quetzalcoatl’s teeth, snake scales, and feathers.
As mentioned before, in Mesoamerica, Quetzalcoatl is also known as the Feathered Serpent. Mario Castillo associated the feather (flying) serpent to Hinduism’s Kundalini (the coiled energy serpent). Below is a work by Castillo with this theme depicting a coiled serpent coming out of two Quetzalcoatl’s at the bottom, the base of the pelvic bone, where the energy serpent is supposed to reside. Then it is shown traveling through the seven chakras. The Kundalini is also related to Yoga.

THE NATIVE AMERICAN INFLUENCE

One of the main influences for the over-all design of this mural was the Northwest Coast culture from the states of Washington and Oregon. Examples of their art are shown below.

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THE MODERN ART CONNECTION

On page 18 and 19 there are other modern art notations: Castillo references Dada and Duchamp. Next is the eye of the feathered serpent as an explosive big bang depicted in a comic book style. It is also reminiscent of Wassily Kandinsky, the famous Russian artist who is considered to be the father of Abstract Art. But more important than all of this is the fact that it symbolizes the explosive force of the bombs that were being dropped in Vietnam at that time. The bands of color symbolizing smoke surrounding the explosion are done in the style of The Fauves or “Wild Beasts”, like the
paintings of Henri Matisse or André Derain, two of the best-known Fauvist artists. The small band of color to the left of this also depicts smoke rising with dust particles and pockets of Agent Orange. Because of its diversified content, this was the 60’s first Public Art Movement’s Urban Art mural.

THE PAISLEY AND THE YIN YANG

The paisley is an ancient Persian design made very popular in India and eventually traveled to Europe and America. It is a symbol for fecundity, proliferation, and wealth. It actually seems to be just like the halves of the Chinese Yin and Yang symbol. This Taoist symbol also called Taijitu stands for all dualities in life and their mutual interdependence on each other. They are probably related. It would be most interesting to find out which came first, but this information is probably lost in antiquity. In the 1960’s, the Beatles and the Hippies resurrected the paisley into the modern world.
THE PEACE SYMBOL AND CENTRAL SECTION

The central section of the mural contains its focal point, the Peace Symbol, which spirals energy outward into the field. Several shapes and symbols have double and even triple meanings, so not all is stated here. Please read the rest of the document.

The central motif contains a peace symbol, in red, in essence making a statement that enough blood has been spilled over this war.

The Peace Symbol is superimposed over a symbol for an hour glass, representing the passage of time with the 4 points indicating the four seasons.

The dark blue circle represents the earth, while the six-wing-like yellow shapes represent the legs of a lady-bug, landing on the earth for a blessing of good luck.

The earth is superimposed over the sun. So the Peace Symbol being over both is conveying that peace should reign over our universe.

The lady bug holds a ribbon with a bow as a good luck charm.

This represents a four legged embryonic creature in the “womb” of the universe; the yellow sunshine in the pregnant shape. It is in the style of the Huicholes, a culture from central Mexico. They are the ones who use colorful yarn to produce the “God’s Eyes” and other awe inspiring artworks.

The cross of the Lord is represented in a slender shield which is ready to oversee peace on earth.

The paisley originated in ancient Persia and became very popular in India. Here in lower left corner, they represent the Metaphysical connection to the spiritual philosophy of India as it came to influence global culture with its gurus, mantras, mandalas, and meditation. The paisley’s symbolic shape is connected to the sperm cells which are ready to fertilize the “egg” of Peace.

The curved shape above represents the cultural aesthetics of the times, this being Pop Art. Here the symbolism of playing cards takes over. These images testify to the current political and cultural activism of the 1960’s. There is a vital underlying synergy being played out here, where you have Pop Art, a high cultural point of view, which in essence is trying to make the ordinary life of the populace become art, being paired with what was considered at the time a “Low Art” concern coming from a minority sub-culture. So in essence Pop Art is being fused with the people’s street art.

This section represents the “Flower Power” culture of the Hippie movement. While friends of Castillo were protesting the Vietnam war down on Michigan Av. & Grant Park, he was painting a mural asking for and promoting peace and thus “peace” became the title of the mural and its symbol the central focal point of the work. It is contained within a graphic outline of a Native American design. Some people took this as being influenced by “Primitive Art” but Castillo was highlighting the fact that the Americas gave birth to great cultures.
THE TRUNCATED TREE TRUNKS AND THE PAREIDOLIC CREATURE

The two darker shapes below, just to the right of the center, symbolized deforestation. They depicted dead and truncated tree trunks. To their left is a four-legged animal that represents the Earth’s creatures being injured by the destruction of the forests. On page 8, Castillo also mentions the Huichol influenced pareidolically recognized creature above the central circle with a second meaning. Consequently it shows a creature lying down on a devastated forest ground. By the end of the 1950’s, this scenario was happening down in Brazil.

![Mural Image](image.jpg)

Brazil’s new capital city, Brasilia is one of the world’s ultra-modern cities. It was only eight years old in 1968 when it was built in the rainforest. Before Brazil’s capital moved from Rio de Janeiro to its new headquarters in the Amazon jungle in 1960, there was and continues to be a lot of deforestation. The Amazon jungle is considered the “lungs” of the planet because of its enormous size. Its dense and fertile tree environment is like a super giant oxygen factory for the Earth.

It has been alarming to other nations how easily we are losing the one-of-a-kind habitat of one of the planet’s most unique and diversified ecological systems. The founding of Brasilia brought deforestation to unprecedented levels and right into the consciousness of the world and so this theme came into the mural as two “dead” tree trunk symbols. However, they also represented the burning of the jungles of Vietnam after being bombed. This is why the trunk on the left is shaped like a boomerang, to symbolize that all of this destruction caused by mankind could possibly return to us with negative consequences. The playing card symbols also pointed to the Vietnam War as being a “poker game” where the loser paid dearly, but the reality was that both parties suffered.

THE DYING LEAF

The shapes on the far right that congregate and point towards the circle represented a shattered leaf from the truncated tree. It is obvious that there could have been a design of a more “realistic” leaf, but Mario Castillo wanted to keep the over-all design as abstract as possible and at times, just hint as to the identity of things. He wanted the feeling of a leaf felt and not necessarily seen. This is in keeping with the same effect produced by the Romanian sculptor, Constantin Brancusi’s “Bird in Space” sculpture. Brancusi’s sculpture is a conceptual suggestion that you have to feel in order to see it, as is Castillo’s leaf. This concept of essential abstraction is also applied to the feather serpent’s head mentioned earlier. The phenomenon of pareidolia is also used here. The viewer is being asked to see something that is not there, but is only suggested in a subliminal way. The mural makes use of this double vision throughout.

9.
This leaf was meant to symbolize that the life of the tree had been ripped from its terrain by man-made disasters. A sculpture of Brancusi’s “Bird in Space” is shown after the last leaf image below.

THE DYING CUT FRUIT AND THE LIFELESS SUN

Another symbol of this is the half elliptical shape (A) in-between the two upper branches of the truncated tree. This signifies a cut fruit showing that the tree will no longer bear fruit after its habitat has been destroyed. Like the leaf, the dying fruit points to the dangers of deforestation.

THE TRUNCATED SUN AND ITS ECLIPSE BY THE EARTH

The central circle’s outermost ring represents the sun, while the inner circle with the peace symbol represents the Earth (or Moon for eclipse). Normally the graphic icon of the sun shows its emanating rays ending in points (B). This shows a healthy light, therefore a healthy Sun. But if the rays are in reverse (C), pointing towards the circle with their tips cut off, this does not look normal and it loses its identity and maybe starts to look like a flower. The idea here is that the rays of the sun start to look truncated and this is in keeping with the trimmed nature of the dead tree trunks. That is why the legs’ negative spaces of the Huichol creature on top of gray circle (D) also doubled as cut-off sunrays. Also this image has the Earth/Moon eclipsing the sun and this was another sign that the sun’s light was being cut-off. Because of the war and deforestation, essentially, the Earth was going through some “gloomy” times.
THE HUICHOL ART INFLUENCE

The Huichol culture (also known as the Wixáritari) is from central Mexico and is one of the few peoples who were never conquered by the Spaniards because they live in mountainous terrain. When they perform religious rituals, they ingest a desert plant that creates in them a state of altered reality and this induces them to see everything around them interconnected with flowing energy in bright colors. Through these rituals they connect with nature and its spirits since they believe that all matter has spirits. Their artwork represents these high states of awareness and suggests another world of electrifying color. They also create sculptures, which they cover with brightly colored shakira beads. Most of their yarn paintings deal with Animism.

This is an approximation to the true color of the mural when it was painted.

The Peace mural was influenced by the Huichol’s use of color. The color of the image below has been intensified to simulate how it was intended to appear. Back in the 1960’s there were no exterior paints in super bright colors. The Huicholes use a lot of gradations of vivid colors that give their art a magical look. This was the saturated look that this mural was attempting to achieve.

HUICHOL GOD’S EYES

In the 1960’s the Huichol God’s Eyes were very popular. They are made out of colorful yarn wrapped around sticks. Now, children make these at school using various types of wooden sticks.

Los Ojos de Dios (God’s Eyes) have also been designed to look like Eastern Mandalas used for meditation. The multi-colored lines defining the eye’s diamond are also present in the mural. (Copyrights of these six photos above & below, belong to their respective photographers)
HUICHOL YARN PAINTINGS

These paintings make use of very intricate designs and are also done with intense colors. All of Huichol art depicts daily life, religion, and mythology and tends to create a field that appears to be totally populated by figures and symbols. It seems to lack any “breathing” space. This is called “Horror Vacui”, a Latin term which means being afraid of empty spaces. Castillo makes use of this concept inside the shapes while at the same time creating contrast with the yellow negative space.

THE MURAL’S FAR-RIGHT SIDE; ITS SYMBOLS AND THEIR MEANING

The right “branch” of the truncated tree contains a scorpion within a circle. It is a symbol for one of Mexico’s most picturesque states, Durango. Many American Western movies were filmed within the absolutely beautiful “western” scenes found in this northern state. Furthermore the symbol represents the Scorpius constellation. In this way, the astrological sign of Scorpio brings in an element of mysticism into the mural. Mario Castillo does not recall if the young artist who painted this was born under the astrological sign of Scorpio or if he simply was born in Durango, or both. Nonetheless, the scorpion has a pop culture connection, for it is also an icon found in the #40 card of one of the most well known Mexican games, La Loteria, Mexico’s equivalent to the Bingo. But this image is intriguing because it is known that roosters and hens eat scorpions and this looks like the head of a chicken with a pink beak that has her eye on her next meal.
THE SCORPION  (see text on previous page)

THE METAFISICA SHAPE

In this somewhat of a quadrilateral rectangle, a continuous white line begins to form as a doodle, and soon after it manifests itself into the word Metafisica (metaphysics). As the white line reveals itself as a word, it seems to ask, “What is the truth about what matters to the mind, the heart, and our being as we experience our physical and non-physical world?” --- Then the white line becomes a doodle again that transforms itself into an abstract form of the map of Mexico. This seems to imply that Mexico is a “magical” place. In actuality, Mexico has a program that assigns towns a “Pueblo Magico” status if the town feels magical to visitors. Many beautiful towns are designated “Magical.”

The word Metafisica has two rows of eyes on the top and on the bottom. These eyes communicate an intelligent presence that is observing the passage of time and all things within it. Since ancient times, they represent a focused vision that perceives all movements with keen awareness. Besides being symbols of visionary sight towards the outside world, they also stand as representations of the inner world of the spirit. That is why they are called “windows to the soul”. They remind us of the “all-seeing” eye on top of the pyramid in the dollar bill.
THE METAFISICA SHAPE and THE ALL-SEEING EYES

The eyes are major parts of our sensory system, since they play an important role in helping us know more about ourselves, our identity, and our environment. Through them we see the cause and effect of all events around us. They help us be who we are and give meaning to our existence.

Combined with “metaphysics”, the eyes guide us in understanding the essence of the fundamental principles of our reality. They are the major reason as to why our reality becomes real to us. But then, we all come to understand that our eyes can fool us like when we see a mirage or some kind of “magical” illusion. That is why we have to look beyond the surface and also understand the truth underneath the superficial world.

Besides the mystical allusions expressed in the eyes of the Metafisica cartouche, they also refer to a dark high-tech world created in the futuristic novel, “1984”. First published in 1949, the book “1984” written by the British author George Orwell, has remained popular ever since. Columbia Pictures released a film version of this science-fiction novel in 1956 and in the 1960’s the idea of an oppressive world dominated by the inescapable control of an “Inner Party” was a popular theme in America, especially after American troops landed in Vietnam in 1965. By now, much of the terminology used by Orwell in his novel, has become part of our universal consciousness.

At the end of the 20th century, Orwell’s implications of an ever-present surveillance in a future dystopian society had started to claim its territory in our contemporary urban landscape. Since the Digital Revolution ushered in the Information Age, we actually have started to live under the fish-eye lens of Big Brother’s cameras.

THE AMOEBA/SUPERNova

The iconography of this shape is pretty significant since it contains a symbolic image that embodies the whole universe because it represents the macro (an exploding supernova) and the micro (an amoeba). Since this mural is based on Native American aesthetic principles, it makes a connection to the philosophy of life of the ancient Americans; that nature and the universe are interconnected. Therefore, it is proper to have a symbol that represent all life in the cosmos so as to make us aware of everything around us. In this way, we, as a people, can start to figure out how we fit in into the harmony of nature.
THE SLENDER SHAPE WITH LETTERS “FLOATING IN AIR”
This slender cartouche is encrypted with five characters blowing in the wind. It makes reference to Bob Dylan’s protest anthem “Blowin’ in the Wind”: “The answer my friend, is blowin’ in the wind, the answer is blowin’ in the wind”.

From left to right it contains the letter “C”, followed by “π” the symbol for Pi, then letters “V, Y, and S”. It is like an acronym, and in actuality, it is initialism in Spanish. The “C” stands for “Cielo” (Sky), the symbol “π” is just itself “Pi” (Pi), the flying “V” is “Viento” (Wind), the flying sideways “Y” is the Spanish word “y” (And), and the “S” is “Sol” (Sun). So in English this is reads as “Sky, pi, wind, and sun”, which is a made up phrase just for this mural that reflects the Hippie’s “philosophy of life” that is well encoded in the Beatles’ song, “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds”. This song had just been released in 1967 and it became another anthem for the Hippie’s cultural revolution.

“Pie”, the pastry, in Spanish is like a “tarta” or “pastel”, but many people call it “paei”, the phonetic sound in Spanish of the English word “pie”. So the symbol of Pi also refers to the pies in the Beatles’ song, Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds, “Where rocking horse people eat marshmallow pies”.

The mathematical concept, Pi, of course refers to the circle, because of its reference to the diameter of a circle and its circumference. This combined with the color yellow of the background refer to the ancient god of the sky, the sun. The three shapes appear to be “blowing in the wind” and float towards the concentric circles on the far right. This circle is a hopeful symbol of peace, security, and protection. Blue, the “peaceful color of the sky”, encircles the inner circles and tries to calm down the “bloodshed colors of the Vietnam war” within it.

ENVIRONMENTAL INTERACTIVE ART: The Shadow Foundation in the Peace Mural
In essence, all murals are site-specific because they are painted on a particular wall that exists within a certain architectural environment. Even so, many muralists do not take advantage of the fact that they could interact their work to a greater level with their environment and in some form, include the viewers as participants or actually have the environment interact with the work. This section shows the motivational basis behind the reasoning for making a natural shadow become a part of the mural. Mario Castillo wanted to make this be an environmental interactive work that dealt with animistic beliefs of how our ancestors saw the organization of the physical universe.

Since 1967, Mario Castillo was interested in site-specific art and environmental art. The properties for this art-making procedure became of preference in some of his Minimal Art sculptures, which clearly demonstrated this inclination. The early environmental art works that Castillo created back then never had adequate photographic documentation and some of his drawing proposals were given away. At that time, he was also involved with another aspect of Post-Studio Art or New Art.
THE NEW ELEMENT, THE SHADOW PIECES, AND ONE-MINUTE SCULPTURES

This new element was in regards to the duration of the existence of the piece. Some times the design process that created the work could take over a hundred years and in itself, the process became an ever-changing art piece. Others were made to last for the life of a new building under construction or the infinite life of an actual landscape in the Sonoran desert. Then other pieces would take less than a minute to create. These momentary pieces were done in the late 60’s and early 70’s and involved various media. This short-lived Instant Art piece (below left) is dealing with the ephemeral subject of actual shadows. It lasted for about one minute, while the photo was taken. Mario Castillo held the three wood dowels up against the wall while Harold Allen took the photo. The actual piece was never viewed by anyone, except the photographer and the artist for it was disassembled immediately after creation.

This, in essence, was a one-minute sculpture done about 18 years before Erwin Wurm started to do his one-minute pieces. Yes, it would have been more like Wurm’s work if Castillo had been shown holding the dowels. But obviously, Castillo was doing instant ephemeral Minimal Art sculpture under the dictum of “less is more”, so having someone in the photo would have been too much.

The painting of glasses is one of several paintings with an emphasis on shadows done around 1966-67. It shows Castillo’s concern for using them as a subject matter. The Linear Shadows piece above was published as part of Sonia Sheridan’s School of the Art Institute of Chicago’s project, the Portable Postcard Exhibit in 1969. You may see this at:


Under: Portable Postcard Exhibit – 1969 _ March 12, 2011 _ Click on “+30” image and search for Mario Castillo’s  OR

https://www.facebook.com/184066178298089/photos/a.187064061331634.38953.184066178298089/187064167998290/?type=3&theater (This last one takes you directly there)

Here are three Castillo site-specific shadow pieces. The concept for the first one is from 1969, and this 10’ high orange piece is a recreation of this idea done in 2004. The last one was done in 1970.
THE SURREAL SHADOW PIECE
Mario Castillo’s 2004 site-specific installation below demonstrates his concern for shadows. Here he is drawing extra non-existent shadows on the wall to point to “extra” invisible light sources.

This corner piece mixes the actual shadows with the graphic ones and turns it into a very elusive surrealistic work. It prompts the questions of “Which are more real, the ephemeral shadows or the ones drawn on the wall? Are both part of the same illusion?”
ANIMISM, DADA, and SHADOWS (as they relate to the Peace Mural)

What has been stated about shadows in Castillo’s work displays his deep interest in this intriguing subject, which became an element in his work. All of this information about Mario Castillo’s shadow pieces serves as groundwork for the way the Peace mural was involved with Animism, another Native American influence.

Many ancient cultures believed in Animism as a way of life, especially the indigenous peoples of the Americas. For them, all of nature was interconnected. To them, all matter in the universe was dependent on each other and animated by some spiritual force. Mario Castillo’s mural “The Ancient Memories of Mayahuel’s People Still Breathe” at the National Museum of Mexican Art in Chicago, IL, is a work that deals with the same belief where everything in nature has its own Anima or spirit. Castillo was aware of this Native American principle well before the Peace mural was painted.

THE DADA PRINCIPLE OF CHANCE OR ALEATORY PRACTICES & FLUXUS NON-PERFORMANCE

When painting Peace, Mario Castillo observed how a tree that was next to the mural cast its shadow on it. He noticed the tree’s shadow moving across the mural as the day passed. It seemed to caress it. The two-dimensional tree shadow blurred the line between the 2D pictorial reality of the mural and the physical reality of the tree and its branches, thus creating moments of engagement where the two overlapped and appeared to create a third reality caused by the superimposition of the dark shadow over the mural’s color.

He thought that during the wintertime the bare branches would create some highly interesting shadow lines that would interact with the mural and become a part of it. Knowing that he was not going to be in Chicago that winter, he asked his stepfather, Harold Allen to photograph the branches’ shadows over the mural that winter. Castillo wanted to have a record of this passage of time and interaction with the environment. The resulting photo is below on the right side:

It was by pure serendipity that this interaction of nature and art came about. The tree’s shadow, especially during the winter, made the mural an inter-active piece with nature and a stronger site-specific work. In Castillo’s mind, the bare branches were a perfect reflection for the truncated tree in the mural for they seemed to embrace the fact that the mural addressed deforestation. This aspect of the mural in some form was a Fluxus performance or better yet a “non-performance” because no audience was required since nature performed its act regardless of one. The tree’s shadow turned the mural into Living Art.
This was not the first time that Mario Castillo incorporated aleatoric elements into his work. The indeterminate nature of a methodology of chance had been present in his work previously. Castillo enjoyed experimentation and that is why he relied in using a spontaneous, liberating, and at times automatic approach in the making of some of his artworks.

**MARCEL DUCHAMP’S READYMADES**

Basically, this type of regard for using new anti-art ideas such as the “brushing of a tree’s shadow” over a painted mural and calling it art was reflective of the Dada Art Movement. The Dadaists introduced procedures that were “out-of-the-box”, rebellious in nature, and highly experimental. At this time Mario Castillo was into investigational art trying out all kinds of things. The tree sort of became a Duchampian readymade or “found object” that turned out to be integrated into the mural to give meaning and life to it and push the mural’s existence beyond the wall into the real world. In the mid 60’s, Castillo had started to get involved with Body Art and Installations. He liked the idea of going into an exhibiting space and creating large instant art pieces within a short period of time. In some, he used bright ribbons.

**HUICHOL COLOR STRIATIONS**

So prior to his painting the Peace mural, Castillo was making use of striated saturated colored lines to create installations on walls, between ceilings and floors, and wall to wall. These were inspired by Huichol art. They used yarn for their art and to keep materials similar, Castillo used ribbons of various widths. He also taught at a Senior’s Center where he introduced Huichol art to them.

Mario Castillo’s “Ribbon Installations” dealing with vibrant Huichol striated color from 1967-68

Huichol influenced striations of color around Peace mural shapes

**THE REALITY OF FLAT HARD-EDGE COLOR IN HUICHOL ART**

The two-dimensional flatness found in some Huichol paintings is something that Mario Castillo was attracted to because of its purity to form and its affirmation of its own reality. What does did mean? Well, if an artist is working on a flat plane, such as a wall, and they paint something showing a 3-D form, such as a sphere, then they are not being true to the surface they are working on. This means that there is a disregard for the dimensional reality of the wall’s surface. This gets into creating the illusion of something that warps the reality of the wall. However if the artwork is done with flat hard edge colors, the artist is being true to the medium in all respects. There is no denying that the wall’s surface is flat and that the artwork recognizes this and it exists also in a parallel 2D world. As a matter of fact, Hard-Edge painting as an art movement was prevalent at the time but Castillo’s stimulus came from Huichol art and ancient Mesoamerican codices.
This type of Hard-Edge flat color was utilized to produce most Pre-Hispanic art, from codices to ceramic and textile design. It is precisely this quality of Mesoamerican art to which Castillo pays tribute in both murals: the Peace-Metafisica mural (1968) and the Wall of Brotherhood (1969).

**Huichol Use of Flat Hard-Edge Color** (copyright © by their respective photographers; used here for education)

The Peace Mural’s Use of Flat Hard-Edge Shapes Following Huichol Principles

**A LIBERATING AESTHETIC**

To summarize this historical mural is to recognize that this was a work of art that reacted to the living moment of the “Now”. This abstracted chronicle of the times reflected the 1960’s towards the end of the decade. Art that results as an effect of current stimuli from a given timeline, in which it is created, carries the trademark of that period. Mario Castillo did not want to stamp the wall with historical figures from his Mexican heritage. Instead, he wanted the mural’s image to be historic in itself while still showcasing his Mexican culture in a new form. Even his methodology (using youth as a painting team) for creating the Peace mural made history.

Castillo designed this mural while he was a student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. In those days, students in American art schools were not allowed to work with their ethnicity. That was a standard taboo and a complete “no-no”. With the Peace (Metafisica) mural, Castillo felt liberated from academic constraints to do whatever he so desired. But he also did not want to fall in line and do another of the so many “traditional” murals that had been painted in the past. He purposely chose not to do any “Renaissance” realism that would pay tribute to European art. Mario Castillo was adamant about this and instead wanted to honor the original American peoples.

So, in designing the Peace mural, Mario Castillo was consciously aware that these lands had belonged to the Native Americans and had no second thoughts about the aesthetic foundation he would use as a structure for placing the abstract symbolism of the mural; this had to originate from Native American art. Essentially, this was the conceptual springboard he used to depart from the prevailing academic art standards of that time. In addition, he used the mural as a platform for addressing identity. Mario Castillo wanted to embed an essence of Mexicaness within the mural while at the same time using this framework for inclusions of multicultural manifestations.

**THE 1960’s CULTURAL REVOLUTION**

Sort of like puzzle pieces creating an image, the collective prismatic geometry of the mural was such that it created a multifaceted unified whole. This was a pictorial narrative that came about within the cultural context of the 1960’s. It was in keeping with the great cultural change America was going through for “the times were drastically changing” or so, the prophet of that generation, Bob Dylan, warned the world in his song, *The Times They Are A-Changin’* - released in 1964.
The decade of the 60's was a time immersed in a cultural revolution unlike no other, this transformation was linked to the music young people were creating and listening to. Some of this music had a strong social purpose and motivated American youth to contemplate their existence and gave them a purpose in life and a reason for being. All of this became part of the base that launched (together with other fields) the new era of globalization in the 1970's.

THE CULTURAL MEDIUM IN THE ATMOSPHERE & A MURAL FOR THE GLOBAL VILLAGE

The Beatles’ travels to India brought us in connection with Ravi Shankar, India’s sitar virtuoso. Actually George Harrison took classes from him and introduced the instrument in the 1965 Rubber Soul album’s song "Norwegian Wood (This Bird Has Flown)". After this release, Castillo, as well as thousands of other music lovers, started to collect, Shankar’s albums. Mario Castillo would actually cross paths with Ravi Shankar when he became a professor in the Ethnographic Music Department at Cal Arts while Castillo was doing his graduate study there. Shankar would offer free concerts during the lunch hour in the Main Gallery while everyone enjoyed his mesmerizing music.

So in the mid-60’s, these musical foreign influences were introduced into the Beatles’ music. It was this popular culture filtered through their new sound that began to create awareness for other forms of world music. The Beatles’ incorporation into their songs of other musical tendencies affected people’s tolerance and appreciation for other cultures, thus creating a path towards a form of global cultural integration. Other groups were doing the same thing but this British band was the most influential in planting the seed for cross-culturalization that began to flourish as their influence spread beyond music into the diversified spectrum of human experience.

Imagine this: It is curious to note that the occurrence of this new phenomena seemed to be sandwiched in-between the layers of the Earth’s atmosphere. While these “good vibrations” of sound wavelengths were activating the bottom layers of the atmosphere, the upper layers were dominated by satellites sending their electromagnetic wave transmissions to Earth. Sound frequencies, through their vibratory nature, tend to influence matter and alter its behavior. Indeed, it is scientifically proven that sound has an effect on physical materials and living organisms.

People create sound waves and in turn sound waves influence people. Let us assume what this implies; perhaps the Cultural Revolution was a result of our being immersed in an ocean of wavelengths, which surrounded the planet as a second type of atmosphere made-up of audible frequencies. Let us speculate that all of these diversified waveforms sandwiched within our atmosphere produced a proper medium in which the new globalized culture could grow. Mario Castillo considers that this proposition could be a possibility since sound frequencies do have an influence on matter.

So it is interesting to contemplate the hypothesis that people created a synergistic exchange of energy where the new music combined with the satellite transmissions and radio waves that mankind created succeeded in engulfing and changing people’s lives. This proceeded to evolve the medium in which the message was being germinated to once again have an effect on “massaging” the human sensorium. Lastly, consider this; as a result of what was happening in the airspace, sandwiched within our atmosphere, the Earth started to become a multi-national pueblo (in sound waves first; yes, first there was the sound) that had no other alternative but to produce the rise of Marshall McLuhan’s “global village”.

We could say that Mario Castillo’s Peace (Metafisica) mural was the first mural for the age of the “global village” which McLuhan’s book “Understanding Media” (1964) popularized in that decade. Even though the mural used influences from past cultures, it resulted in a final creation that was a design for the contemporaneous time for it renewed and brought together modern and past ideas into the present moment.

Its message was about the past, present, and future, fused all together into the Now. The colorful visual ode of idioms embodied on the wall sang to passersby their encoded messages until the mural faded into the pages of history.
THE PEACE MURAL WAS FIRST IN SEVERAL WAYS
Prior to this, everyone seemed sufficiently happy to know just the basic information. In actuality this mural was historical in several ways:

For the new Public Art Movement of the 1960’s, the Peace mural was the first in the following:
1st Latino mural
1st to establish a prototype for using students to paint a mural
1st anti-Vietnam War mural
1st to pay homage to Native American cultures
1st Abstract Art mural or 1st Geometrical Mural (as some critics have called it)
1st Symbolist mural
1st Syncretism mural
1st to deal with “Flower Power” and the Hippie movement
1st to pay tribute to Huichol and Mesoamerican art
1st Metaphysical mural
1st Urban Art Mural
1st to blend High Art with people’s art
1st to make use of Dada and Fluxus Principles
1st to reject Renaissance perspective and Western Art’s academic ways of modeling realistic forms
1st to use 2D Design as an over-all unifier to bring the whole mural together into one composition

After the Peace (Metafisica) mural was finished, Castillo was asked once in a while for the rights to print the mural’s photo, but never was he asked about the meaning of the mural. He felt obligated to tell its story when art historian, Dr. Olga U. Herrera, asked him for its use in a lesson plan for high school students. Dr. Herrera is director of the Washington Office of the Inter-University Program for Latino Research (IUPLR, Washington, D.C. office) and together with Melissa A. Carrillo, Director of New Media and Technology at the Smithsonian Latino Center they are working on a project of historical proportions to bring the history of Latino Art into the classroom through an online immersive education initiative, the Smithsonian Latino Virtual Museum’s Chicago Art Now Gallery.

When Dr. Herrera asked for the rights to use the Peace mural, Mario Castillo replied favorably, but he thought that if a lesson plan was going to be done from it, that the person doing so should have access to the significance of the mural’s symbology. So this prompted the need to have a document explaining how ideas came about for creating the Peace mural and the meaning behind its iconography. With this in mind, Mario Castillo would like to thank Dr. Herrera for creating the demand for the story behind the mural to finally be told, a manuscript that could have easily been lost forever.
Fifty Ideas for Possible Art Projects to be done by Students Based on Peace (Metafisica) Mural:

1. Aleatoric Art: From a scribble or random markings create an art piece
2. Pareidolia Art: Create a subliminal face or figure over a photo from nature or your artwork
3. Paisley Art: Design your own Paisleys and create a pattern or an art piece with them
4. God’s Eyes: Use bright color yarn to make an Ojo de Dios
5. Create a Designer’s acronym or an initialism with any words or names you choose
6. Do a selfie doing a one-minute (or less) sculpture (be careful, do not do anything dangerous)
7. Illustrate something metaphysical
8. Create a Pop Art collage that reflects the “Now Moment”
9. Create a surreal photomontage
10. Create a shape that is the abstracted essence of something
11. Do an art piece on deforestation (you may include text in it)
12. Design a poster on a historical war and use bold and contrasting colors
13. Do a work that is influenced by a Native American culture
14. Do a photo montage with Hippie Fashions or create a real or simulated tie-dye pattern
15. Do an art piece that results from listening to a musical piece while you draw/paint simultaneously
16. Do a Rorschach inkblot work and then enhance it beyond its original state
17. Create a totally Abstract Art piece (non-objective) and create a mood with the colors used
18. Do a work that results from the study of any Folk Art
19. Report to the class on the benefits of Yoga or do art related to it
20. Do a graphic art piece combining at least three symbols
21. Do a drawing that shows the essence of the Native Americans’ Animism beliefs
22. Do a collage on an important Pop Song that reflects the time when it was composed
23. Do a piece on any new astronomical discovery; the macro world (using a cool color scheme)
24. Do a piece on the Micro world; micro-organisms (using a warm color scheme)
25. Do a piece where shadows are the main subject
26. Design a site-specific work of art
27. Create a short visual film for a certain arrangement of musical notes
28. Do a grid collage with a certain theme with at least nine fish-eye lens images
29. Design your name with images or symbols around it with a selected color scheme
30. Do a contemporary scene and color it as a Huichol painting using striated bright colors
31. Do a “Horror Vacui” densely populated work using earth tones: use bright hues to highlight
32. Study the meaning of colors and do a symbolic piece in which the colors tell the story
33. Do an art piece reflecting the ethnic/cultural heritage of one of your ancestors
34. Research symbols from your ancestry, abstract them into a design and use hard edge flat color
35. Create a surprise Dada piece within a box that opens and closes
36. By yourself or with a group of other students, design a mural for your school
37. Design a Northwest Coast Totem Pole with today’s images
38. Do a piece on the cyclic nature of life in the forest/jungle and show how species are interconnected
39. Create a poster on a study of a Georgia O’Keeffe flower and relate it to “Flower Power”
40. Do an art piece that is multicultural and shows diversity
41. Create a Yin Yang design; depict two opposites inside each half. Yin is negative and Yang is positive
42. Create a mandala with geometric and organic properties using complementary colors
43. Meditation: Do a short contemplation exercise on a favorite subject and draw the results from it
44. Research Marcel Duchamp’s readymades: Find an object and turn it into an art piece
45. Do an art piece that combines a growing/sprouting plant combined with musical symbols
46. Design a triptych (3 areas) piece that makes use of an analogy to a concerto with three movements
47. Do a diptych (two panels) using the philosophical nature of opposites in the Yin Yang
48. Create an artwork based on one card from the Mexican Loteria game
49. Using the iconography from playing cards, do a Pop Art piece with them
50. The Ladybug has a special meaning. Find a cultural meaning for an insect (Ants, Beetles, Bees, Butterflies, Crickets, Dragonflies, Grasshoppers ... etc.) and do an artwork with that.

These ideas can be combined. You can do three in one: i.e. micro and macro inside the Yin Yang.