

Judith F. Baca

Grandmother

“The formative years, the most important years, were really good for me because, first of all, I didn't have any sense of the limits of what women could do. I did not have the appropriate role models of what girls were supposed to do or not do. My grandmother was a person who practiced a lot of -- a very religious woman, a very indigenous woman, and a very profound character who had a sensibility about the world around her that really transferred, I think, into my whole idea. You can claim that--if there's any claim I would make--[that someone was] . . . responsible for me being an artist, it would be her. I think my mom was kind of pressed to be an American, right? My grandmother . . . never spoke English, never really got with reality the way it was, you know. I remember being in my teens and trying to teach her the Constitution so that she could get her citizenship. So then we'd go [on] for hours [saying], ‘We, the people’.”

Marking Territories

“Well, the murals were an extension of . . . the walls [which] were filled at that time with political slogans. And one of them that was kind of influential that I saw on Second Street in Royal Heights was a statement that said, ‘I would rather live one year as a lion than a hundred years as a lamb.’ . . . It was, like, five feet tall in letters. These little [letters]-- not just the gang markings. The gang markings were territorial in nature, but there were slogans that were beginning to appear [like] . . . ‘Free Los Tres’. All those slogans were starting to appear as a method of community newspapers, of political activity. It just seemed to me that those were simple statements and that we could be more articulate, that if we took it further, we could actually say more. I really liked the idea that the work could not be owned by anyone. So, therefore it wasn't going to be interesting to the rich or to the wealthy, and it didn't have to meet the caveats of art that museums would be interested in. It didn't have to go through the censorship of exhibitions because our exhibitions at that time were very difficult to get into spaces that would allow them to be just simply what we want[ed] them to be. We didn't have our own spaces. Chicano art was beginning to burgeon, and we were having meetings of organizations like the ‘Concilio de Arte Popular.’ I mean, there were all kinds of things like that -- ‘Arte Visuales.’ We didn't get along very well . . . You know, they were like all-male dominated. They were basically not really inclusive of the women as real makers. We were supposed to get the coffee . . . -- We didn't really figure out how to create a sort of set of precept, but there were really important moments of discussion. Sister Karen Bocalero was opening Self-Help, and as I was producing--beginning to produce this work. I was beginning to think I need an organization in which to do this . . . I would open SPARC . . . In 1974, I would become the director of the City of Los Angeles’ mural program, not because I intended to do that, but because I went to them [the City Council] with an Eastside mural project . . . and got laughed out of the council. [They said], ‘What, you want us to give you money to work on the East side? Those kids

are . . . -a lost cause. Crazy idea.’ So, I went and talked to a person from the council, an African-American man who was the deputy for the first woman council member, the only woman council member at that time. It was Curtis Rossiter. The man said to me. ‘You think too small.’ I went back and thought, ‘I think too small?’ He said, ‘You go over there and ask them for money for the East side? They don't care about those kids.’ I said, ‘How could they not care?’ You know, first of all, the shocks . . . each one of these revelations is a shock. I went back and rewrote the program and I said, ‘I'll do a citywide program. It'll be in every neighborhood in the city.’ . . . that went through. I started to understand how politics worked. I began, you know, because . . . I was holding this idea that it was possible through art to do a transformative act. In other words, I started to see the power of these teams, of the first group -- Las Vistas Nuevas -- the one that did the Hollenbeck Park work. I started to see them working across gang territory, across differences. I saw them feeling the sense of incredible power and pride because we created public statements, public voice, and public spaces, that we in a sense were marking territories that had been taken over and controlled by others and saying this was our space, that we had claim to it, that we were here, and these first images were outrageous in the sense that they placed brown people in the public sector. They placed us--people of color--in the public sector. Now, you have to understand how outrageous that was. *Mi Abuelita*, a big grandmother in the Hollenbeck Park, with her arms extended. The children could dance on the stage in her arms. Everybody related to it. People brought candles to that site. For twelve years people put flowers at the base of the grandmother image. It was about the sense that we were empowering ourselves not to make art that was collected by a few people who could afford it, but to take public space and to create a public voice and a public consciousness about the presence of people who were, in fact, the majority population, but not represented in any visible way in the Board of Education or the City Council . . . There [was] no Council representation in that time. We're talking about a time profoundly different than this time but in some ways not so different. Also, to create the treaties between the kids. I saw the power of these transformations that happened in them. I became more and more motivated as I started to have faces to the people who I was working with, knowing that if I could get a job, this would make it possible for Fernando to finish high school, or that if I could do this, then I could get this kid out . . . who's on probation, released in my custody so he could get out of jail, or if I could do this. So, each one began . . . It just catapulted and I could see very simple goals, but to a larger view, and each step made a bigger vision.”

Breaking Barriers

“Those visions and those ideas were based on a different time. And it's important for us to break those molds and ideas of what is achievement and what is something we should be satisfied with. I really think that we have to break . . . If there's nothing else that I can say about my own life, it's [to] break the mold. Don't look at those models and think of a larger vision. Have the biggest vision you can have because if your dreams are stilted by what has happened before, there'll never be new thoughts. There'll never be a different reality. If you can't dream it, it can't occur.

So, what I'm really advocating for is for us to have larger visions, to see ourselves in a completely different way . . . Don't think that your work is done when you have gotten work. The next part, really, is for us to bring everyone to the same condition, to the same situation where . . . basic respect and human rights are acknowledged and sought. For the arts, I'd say that . . . we need to be, as a community, recognizing that the spirit of all of our movements has been in the arts, and that we need our community to be supportive of that work from new generations of creative people . . . They are the soul of any work that people do. So, for the next generations of young artists, I'm praying it will be easier for them because we were like spearheads banging against, you know, metal to try and . . . our heads became spears . . . We were struggling to get through those barriers . . . It should be easy. People should . . . open the doors. We should say [that] if you are a creative person, if you are a poet, you work with the spoken word, or if you combine [the] spoken word and hip-hop [or if] you're a graffiti artist that paints and makes sound, let's welcome . . . [you] into the fold and not say the highest achievement is to be vice president of Coca-Cola. That's a very small vision. Small vision."