

BOOK REVIEW: *Walls of Empowerment: Chicana/o Indigenist Murals of California* by Guisela Latorre (2008)

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Walls of Empowerment: Chicana/o Indigenist Murals of California. By Guisela Latorre. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008. 324 pages. \$60.00 (cloth). \$27.95 (paper).

Guisela Latorre successfully undertakes the potentially unwieldy topic of Chicana/o murals in California. This pivotal book offers a significant contribution to the fields of art history and Chicana/o studies because Latorre systematically presents these art works by delimiting the scope of her inquiry in two very important ways: First, she focuses on mural production in three West Coast cities (San Francisco, Los Angeles, and San Diego) and, second, she concentrates on ‘Indigenist’ iconography and ideology as the central thread. This critical foundation is succinctly set forth in the book’s introduction, “Indigenism and Chicana/o Muralism: The Radicalization of an Aesthetic,” in which the author introduces the notion of Indigenist iconography. Here, the author’s choice of wording is very precise. As she notes, the “Indigenist aesthetic” employed by muralists is “...positioned somewhere between Indigenism and indigeneity,” and it is a strategy that is consciously employed to further political and social goals (Latorre 4). While Latorre joins others in noting that such strategies occur in early twentieth century Mexican art, she cautions that viewing Chicana/o murals as ersatz examples of Mexican Muralism is highly problematic. Although visually and, sometimes, historically linked (*Los Tres Grados* produced murals in California

during the 1930s), Chicana/o and Mexican art are quite specific in terms of their distinct patronage and underlying motivations.

The book's ensuing chapters approach the material chronologically. Chapter one, "The Dialectics of Continuity and Disruption: Chicana/o and Mexican Indigenist Murals," illustrates the ways Latorre strategically focuses on specific themes and provides examples from each city while carefully unpacking the iconographic contents of paradigmatic images. In chapter two, "The Chicano Movement and Indigenist Murals: The Formation of a Nationalist Canon and Identity," Latorre situates muralism within California's earlier history before contextualizing it within the Chicana/o Movement. Her careful attention to historic context is a hallmark of the volume as it greatly augments the reader's understanding of the times and the motivations behind what was, and continues to be, at stake. The early presence of Indigenist aesthetics not only helped later artists to promote *la causa* in the 1960s and 1970s, but also underlined the long-standing presence of Chicana/os within the United States. On an intercultural level, the later works also tied the community to concurrent struggles by indigenous groups.

Chapter three, "Graffiti and Murals: Urban Culture and Indigenist Glyphs," addresses the relationship between muralism, graffiti, and their practitioners who often share the same urban territory. Latorre focuses on conceptual and formal aspects connecting the two groups, noting, for instance, that both subvert the status quo by means of visual oppositional acts. Further, the author makes the cogent argument that the power of the ancient Maya hieroglyph writing system and its aesthetic was not lost on either graffiti artists or muralists. Acknowledging graffiti's authority, Latorre cites works by artists who incorporate graffiti-inspired writing into their own murals.

Chapter four, “The Chicana/o Mural Environment: Indigenist Aesthetics and Urban Spaces,” reveals the discourse that exists between the painted wall, physical topography, historical context, and community. It is within this multivalent context that issues of history are underscored and continuously re-visited by the community. Examples of iconographic programs illustrate ongoing dichotomies within the community and relationships between the Latina/o community and the larger city. A case in point concerns the Los Angeles housing project Estrada Courts, where the flattened, iconicity of Indigenist imagery placed within the project’s interior relays well-understood notions of origin and history. Latorre then shows that, alternatively, the murals that face the outer perimeter of Estrada Courts display more “established and seasoned...public art with...linear perspective and overlapping planes,” thereby meeting the visual and ideological expectations of outside viewers (Latorre 150). San Francisco’s Balmy Alley in the Mission District provides a contrasting example. Primarily created by women artists, these murals extend Indigenist interests beyond the parameters of ancient Mexican mytho-history, publicly stating solidarity with the ongoing struggles of people in Central America and beyond. Latorre also reminds us that these art works must be understood as interactive backdrops for performance—especially present in the murals’ dedicatory celebrations. Latorre’s fifth chapter, “Gender, Indigenism, and Chicana Muralists,” concentrates on the gendered history of murals and mural production. The author goes beyond merely commenting on the visual iteration of prescriptive roles and behavior for men and women, as evidenced in early mural production, and offers a frank discussion of the glass ceilings faced by women muralists. Viewed by many at the time as *malcriadas* intent on undermining the movement’s main goals, women artists, singly and in groups, produced many of the most significant murals and mural cycles in California. Many sought alternative themes that focused on unification and discourse

based on commonalities shared with outside communities. Nowhere is this more evident than in the work of Judith Baca's *Great Wall of Los Angeles*. In conception, planning, and execution, Baca involved the community in a work that emends codified histories of the city. Ending the chapter with an invocation of the great warrior goddess, Coyolxauhqui, Latorre shows how, in the hands of muralists, the goddess transitions from icon to interactive agent of change.

The book's final chapter, "Murals and Postmodernism: Post-*movimiento*, Heterogeneity, and New Media Chicana/o Indigenism," deals with muralism's re-visioning in the era of postmodernity, where many artists promote the plurality of the Indigenist aesthetic(s). Latorre traces the historical presence of alternative critiques to the contestation of the *movimiento* by groups falling outside of the prescribed paradigms established by adherents of early manifestos. In the 1970s, a Chicana/o art collective known as ASCO, for instance, took their fight to the streets and merged performance and muralism, thereby simultaneously activating the artwork while transgressing the very nature of two-dimensional artwork. Today, artists utilize Indigenist themes to address universal concerns rather than those specific to the Mexican American population. Thus, they recognize and embrace an increasingly heterogeneous population.

Latorre's book marks a singular contribution to what is a growing body of literature on murals. While *Walls of Empowerment* is not exhaustive in scope, it is distinctive in its role as a lucid and systematic analysis of specific works that are thematically related. In this regard, the author's use of the Indigenist theme and her deft identification of its varied manifestations undermine reductive notions of Chicana/o muralism and iconography. Additionally, by clearly defining her process and limiting her geographic scope, Latorre has provided the reader and scholar with a methodological point of departure for approaching other bodies of work beyond that of mural production.