MAESTRAPEACE: Picturing the Power of Women's Histories of Creativity

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Maestrapeace is a monumental mural, five-stories at its highest, covering two walls of the Women's Building in San Francisco's vibrant, historically Latina/o and artists' neighborhood: the Mission District.[1] Designed and painted by a seven-woman multicultural, multisexual collective, and completed in 1994, *Maestrapeace* was commissioned by the community service organization housed within the building that has served women and children for more than twenty-five years. Created in a collaborative, multiple-stage process involving the local community, the Women's Building staff, and the artists, the painting permanently celebrates this feminist landmark and the power of female creativity across cultures and time.[2]

> The mural process was a testament to community involvement and artistic collaboration. In 1992 The Women's Building administration formed a committee to plan a mural project. Funding strategies were implemented and 8,000 questionnaires on possible themes were distributed to building visitors, neighbors, and community

6.2.indb 56 4/23/07 8:21:54 AM

> organizations. The results from this survey were compiled. About a year later enough funds were in place to begin. Fundraising was ongoing throughout the [two-and-a-half-year] span of the project, including several special events. A call was put out to artists to apply. The committee decided that the selected artists should reflect cultural diversity and artistic excellence. Out of the numerous applicants, seven women were selected….The muralists…collectively possess over a hundred years of mural experience. They play an active and integral part in the Bay Area mural movement. [They reflect] ethnic diversity (two African-Americans, two Latinas, one East Indian, and two Caucasians, one of them Jewish); [and] cultural diversity (Lesbian, straight, and bi-sexual), ranging in age from 26 to 56, including two grandmothers. (Soriano and Sanchez 1996, 2–3)

Maestrapeace is not a work of art meant to court the approval of art world or other institutional hierarchies. Its concern is not with the views of elitist, self-appointed arbiters of culture, still trading on the bankrupt, culturally Darwinian idea that only the formally or aesthetically "new," generated in the Eurocentric capitals of the world, represent artistic progress. Rather, *Maestrapeace* is a genuinely vibrant and generous visual work that exuberantly proclaims the legacy of women's creativity and the importance of art in the everyday lives of people. A coalitionary art and activist project, *Maestrapeace* is beautiful in its conception, its design, its color palette, and its harmonious relationship to the building on which it is painted—harmonious both architecturally and in terms of the building's function as a woman-centered social services center.[3] In the overall significance of its subject matter and its execution, the two-walled mural is a resource and a support, an uplifting gift to the users of the Women's Building and the residents of the community in which it is located.

6.2.indb 57 4/23/07 8:21:54 AM

Like the creators of the prehistoric wall paintings of Altamira (Spain) on which mural art is said to have been born, and the ancient murals of Egypt, Phoenicia, pre-Colombian America, Europe of the Renaissance, and 1920s–1950s Mexico, the *Maestrapeace* artists—Juana Alicia, Miranda Bergman, Edythe Boone, Susan Kelk Cervantes, Meera Desai, Yvonne Littleton, and Irene Pérez—capitalize on the sheer power of walls as a medium. A wall's larger-than-human dimensions boldly proclaim artists' perspectives on their subject matter, here appropriately illuminating the enormity of women's contributions the world over to the well-being of humanity. And whether on exterior or interior walls of public buildings, murals are accessible to a broad spectrum of ordinary people, making art relevant to everyday existence and an active, visual interlocutor within the social environment.

In this, muralism is a remarkably generous art medium, subsuming to some degree the individual vision of artists to those of the art collective and the community in mindful negotiations of representations important to the larger whole. This mural is also a courageous one, in light of the classist and racist snobbery surrounding those of our own time since the community-based Chicana/o- and African American-led mural renaissance of the 1960s and 1970s. *Maestrapeace*, like other Mission murals since the civil rights era, consciously and steadfastly resists art's appropriation as bauble of the rich, as decoration or illustration of art historical theories ultimately reflecting the values and particular tastes of the economically and politically powerful. In an uninterrupted history since the 1920s in Mexico, then the United States, and now across the globe, murals, alongside other wall art, such as graffiti and stenciling in urban spaces, render the public environment a museum, and more than this, a forum for the masses. These murals bring art as a medium of thought and debate to the community, and incorporate the community's vision and creativity. In the present era of increased commodification and

6.2.indb 58 4/23/07 8:21:54 AM

privatization of art as economic investment, and against the dominant cultural lie that art doesn't matter socially beyond decoration and personal taste, *maestra*, or masterful murals, demonstrate spiritual and intellectual ambition, alongside artistic virtuosity. They communicate necessary truths, uplifting and inspiring us to strive for what is in the interest of the greater good, reminding us that we are indebted to each other, as to the past and future.

The various generations of Mission murals from the 1960s to the present are widely different in terms of the artists' ambitions and skills, the murals' subject matter, and the level of technical and conceptual success of the pieces as works of art. But against the shallow and uninformed generalization by some that murals are art historically naive or insufficiently tutored, that is, the work of community amateurs, is the reality that they continue to be a strikingly effective genre of choice among artists the world over, who are among the most acutely savvy about visual culture in our image-saturated globe. Given the increasing privatization of art, public space, and even of forums of public inquiry and commentary, mural and other wall art implicitly contests this silencing homogenization of the collective within the public sphere by private corporate interests and their ideological allies. In countless murals today, *Maestrapeace* among these, we see the best of what artists have to offer technically and, as much to the point, ethically, in a medium that has proven itself remarkable in its longevity, its visual and intellectual sophistication, and its politically effective agency on behalf of the greater public.

Moving politically and aesthetically beyond the legacies of the Renaissance and even the Mexican muralism of the twentieth century, for all of the latter's populist subject matter, *Maestrapeace*'s production, visual language, and subject matter are characterized by a feminist decolonizing ethos that seeks to empower negatively racialized, gendered, and/or sexed communities. In

6.2.indb 59 4/23/07 8:21:54 AM

this, *Maestrapeace* continues the legacy of the first all-woman mural collective, Mujeres Muralistas, a Latina, Mission-neighborhood-based group of the early 1970s that sought to celebrate the life-giving force of Latin American and U.S. Latina women's activities in vibrant, joyous murals throughout San Francisco's Mission neighborhood. These works baffled male muralists and critics who could not grasp the political oppositionality and the significance of atypically placing women's everyday labors as nurturing, life-affirming work at the center, rather than in the margin, of the viewer's, and eventually, the larger collective social consciousness. *Maestrapeace*'s own Irene Pérez was part of the foundational core of that historic feminist collective, alongside Patricia Rodríguez and Consuelo Méndez, with the collaboration at times of other artists, such as Ester Hernández.[4]

Each of *Maestrapeace*'s seven collaborating artists contributed formally and conceptually to the design and its execution. Drawing upon the thousands of surveys taken by the Women's Building staff, the artists cooperated in combining their individual sketches in a collective vision based on the gathered information. The painting itself was executed with the help of more than 100 volunteers, without whom the process would have perhaps quadrupled in the time (one year) it took to complete.[5] The result is a powerhouse of ideas, knowledge, and visual fireworks. Against the odds, the massive, two-wall mural is a harmonious, visually complex, rich compendium of women's accomplishments, featuring minute reproductions of unique patterns of weaving, needle work, and painting from traditions across time and countries, many of which are storybooks in their own right about the families and communities among which they were created. Who but a collective could have produced, for example, the list of more than 470 women poets, writers, doctors, scientific researchers, native healers, painters, political leaders, social revolutionaries, community activists, musicians, and intellectuals? The names

6.2.indb 60 4/23/07 8:21:54 AM

of these historical, seemingly larger-than-life, female "super-heroes" are painstakingly inscribed throughout the mural on images of golden ribbons of fabric that tie together the two walls of the building, and the building itself, symbolically embracing the social service organizations within it that serve women in need and their families.

At the foot of the mural, which is awe-inspiring both as a feat and in its content, viewers are on eye level with children peeking out from among swaths of fabric, as if from the swirling skirts of their elders. Positioned at the four corners of the mural walls are the monumental heads of humanity's symbolic foremothers. Representing the four corners of the globe, the two-story-high Olmec-like heads, drawn as if etched in stone, steadily and respectfully hold each other's gaze. The dimensions, the sculptural-style drafts(wo)manship, and the sensibility conveyed in these profiles evoke the durable presence of the powerful legacies symbolized in the archetypal grandmother: love, wisdom, meaningful knowledge, and responsibility for future generations.

If it is true that our gendering—the ways we have been taught to be female and male—are largely cultural conventions, and that therefore we are hardly explained by stereotypes of so-called femininity and masculinity, then it is also true that within the constraints of millennia of patriarchy in so many cultures of the world, women of unequal social, political, economic, and cultural power have managed, nonetheless, to produce and protect not only life, but our most noble human sensibilities. Against the cultures of death, war, and the life-sucking anxiety of greed-driven cultures, the mural celebrates the cultures of life, creativity, responsibility for others, and accountability to the communities of our present and future. From the ancient forebears to goddesses and historical figures, power is evoked not through violence or the arrogant gestures and expressions of those who consider themselves superior to

6.2.indb 61 4/23/07 8:21:55 AM

others, but through the serenity imparted by a life of integrity, equanimity, self-discipline, and spiritual nobility. And in this, the representation of women here is significant as part of the history of feminist revisions of racist and patriarchal views of females as ancillary breeders, sexual playthings, and generally inconsequential contributors to the history of human achievement.

The history and courage of women's struggles are remembered in the names of extraordinary women such as Joan of Arc, Sojourner Truth, Rosa Luxembourg, Lucy Parsons, Susan B. Anthony, Rosa Parks, and from our own epoch, Angela Davis and Audre Lorde. This history is also recovered in the form of images such as that of Puerto Rican nationalist Lolita Lebrón, standing before a cell of imprisoned women activists, and in the cultural, social, and political leadership of figures such as Niuta Teitelboim, the Warsaw ghetto resistance fighter; Lillian Ngoya, leader in the anti-passbook movement in South Africa; Hanan Ashrawi, the Palestinian diplomat; and Rigoberta Menchú Tum, among many others.[6]

On the 18th Street side, fish-filled waters stream down from a nude, pregnant figure, identified in paperwork available in the entryway of the building as "the Goddess of Light, Creativity, Rebirth," blending gracefully into the ribbons of patterned, painted, and stitched cloths of African, Asian, Scandinavian, American folk, Native, East Indian, and many other traditions. On Lapidge Street, the intertwined, flowing bolts of fabric originate, or end, depending on where the viewer starts, above the poised brush of a full-sized rendition of Georgia O'Keeffe, bringing full circle the celebration of all forms of women's creativity.

The legacy of the life-giving power of women's artistic, intellectual, and social creativity is expressed through huge hands, located midsection on both sides of the building and at eye-level at the corner, over an unused entryway. Along one wall, the over-sized hands of Rigoberta Menchú Tum,[7] the Nobel Peace

6.2.indb 62 4/23/07 8:21:55 AM

Prize–winning Guatemalan Indian human rights activist, hold the figures of Yemayá, African diasporic goddess of salt waters, and Coyolxauhqui, the Aztec moon goddess. As explained by Chicana artist Juana Alicia, both deities represent resistance to oppression: Yemayá embodies resistance to slavery during the Middle Passage and beyond, and Coyolxauhqui symbolizes defiance to patriarchy and war. Coyolxauhqui's body, traditionally shown dismembered and imprisoned within the moon's disk by her brother, Huitzilopochtli, the god of war, is now whole and breaking out of the patriarchal imagination, in a historically groundbreaking image by Irene Pérez. Rising out of a maguey cactus, symbolic of fertility in Nahua cultures, including that of the Mexica (Aztecs), the warrior daughter emerges, paintbrushes in one hand. Like the other goddesses and historical women depicted, she is shown as a creative spirit of the mural she illustrates.

On the adjoining wall, the huge heads of Laplander and Asian women elders face each other, one visible hand outstretched toward the other's, each holding the streaming cloths emanating from the goddesses, ancestors, and women's legacies of enriching life. The monumentality of women's contributions to the rich "fabric" of life is made evident in the sheer size of the one- and two-story-sized heads of the four ancient foremothers, of Menchú Tum, and of the animated golden figures of goddesses (Yemayá, Quan Yin, Coyolxauhqui, a dakini) one or more stories high, and of slightly larger than life women in the lower half of the mural. The richness of colors and patterns suggests the richness of women's lives and their work as a continuous history of creativity. The mural is truly a *maestra* piece, a masterpiece by accomplished women at the height of their artistic skills working coalitionally to center and honor women's contributions throughout the world and across time. Like an intricate weaving or piece of embroidery, the mural too is a glorious piece of "hand work," descended from these great art traditions as much as from those of more recent

6.2.indb 63 4/23/07 8:21:55 AM

vintage, such as canvas painting, that have been unnecessarily supervalorized against the "mere craft" of women's and Native people's art work. Thus, part of the uplifting effect of the magnificent *Maestrapeace* lies in this full-hearted embrace of the still silenced or belittled histories of women of all ethnicities and their contributions in the arts, as in other realms of social life.

Maestrapeace, furthermore, is visionary in its embrace of the varied spiritualities of the numerous traditions of San Francisco's multicultural communities, refusing to lionize ethnocentrically one over the other, and interrupting, rather than reinforcing, patriarchal interpretations of them. As powerful deities in their own right, the dakini, Coyolxauhqui, and Yemayá all help to authorize women's empowerment on the earthly plane, balancing a male-centered imagination that colonizes the religious imagination and its practices in order to justify a self-serving, male-gender-biased social rule.

In many ways, the mural is very much a product of the San Francisco Bay Area, and even more specifically, that of the historically multicultural, immigrant-influenced, youth-identified, and artist-rich Mission District. It enacts an integration of our different cultures through their respective arts, their religious traditions, and their healing practices, into a global activism for human rights, not just those of women. The community-accountable collective process, the inclusive painting team, and the cross-cultural subject matter focused on women's lives throughout the world—with many of their descendents co-inhabiting the Mission neighborhood—all work toward an equitable plurality, rather than an exotification of culturally specific characteristics as exceptional differences to white culture. We are shown that we do indeed come from the same source, all of us: women, a benevolent planet, and the spiritual world beyond the imperialist and elitist hierarchies misogynistic cultures have projected upon it.

6.2.indb 64 4/23/07 8:21:55 AM

As a work modeled on the creative artistry of women everywhere, the Mission District mural offers us an image of our interwoven human origins, and our increasingly re-entwined, joyous, creative future. A paean to the enormity of women's contributions to life, *Maestrapeace* is a public national art monument, on par not only with contemporary pieces like Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* and the AIDS quilt, but with the lasting tributes to the human spirit of great achievement everywhere.

Notes

My gratitude goes in particular to two members of the Maestrapeace collective, Juana Alicia and Susan Kelk Cervantes, for allowing me to interview them. Juana Alicia and Meera Desai were also kind enough to read carefully and respond to earlier drafts of this essay. Other information on the mural was gathered from *fourStories: The Women's Building 2001 & 2002 Bi-Annual Report*; a two-page guide to the mural provided by the Women's Building staff at the entryway of the building; "Maestrapeace: A Guide to the Mural on the San Francisco Women's Building," a booklet produced by Aracely Soriano and Sandra Sanchez (San Francisco: Mission Cultural Center, 1996); and the Maestrapeace Art Works Web site, http://www.maestrapeace.com.

[1] "It can even be argued that Rigoberta Menchú *herself* collaborated with the making of the *Maestrapeace*. When she was unable to attend the mural's first dedication, a second one was organized to accommodate her busy schedule. As a way to justify the second dedication, Menchú simply asked, 'Why shouldn't a *maestrapiece* such as this have two inaugurations?' Unbeknownst to her, Menchú had just provided the perfect title for the mural" (italics mine). Guisela Latorre, "Gender, Muralism, and the Politics of Identity: Chicana Muralism and Indigenist Aesthetics," in *Disciplines on the Line: Feminist Research on Spanish, Latin American, and U.S. Latina Women*, edited by Annie J. Cruz, Rosalie Hernández-Pecoraro, Joyce Tolliver (Newark, Del.: Juan de la Cuesta-Hispanic Monographs, 2004), 338. Latorre cites as her source Miranda Bergman, "Big Women," *Public Arts Review* (1995): 44–45.

[2] The collective design creation lasted a few months, and then was subjected to about another month of approval by different committees. Another two months were then spent persuading the landlord board that the mural could be removed if necessary without destroying the integrity of the historical building. More than eighty women, not all artists, were asked to help in different aspects of the preparation and painting of the mural (Susan Kelk Cervantes interview by the author, San Francisco, 20 July 2004). The painting took thirteen months to complete and was an enriching and bonding experience for the artists. Since the mural's completion these women have been meeting every month in an ongoing circle of support, and together host a Web site and sell images

6.2.indb 65 4/23/07 8:21:56 AM

related to the mural (Susan Kelk Cervantes 2004; interview by the author with Juana Alicia, Berkeley, 13 April 2004; and the Maestrapeace Art Works Web site).

[3] The mural is painted over an existing vanilla-colored layer of paint which the mural design incorporates rather than engulfs with its own color scheme and design. Windows, for example, are not disguised through color or drawing. Visually, the mural coexists with these architectural details, while the false columns on the second-floor of the building, above the main entrance way, are redesigned as parts of torchlike flowering plants.

[4] For more information on Mujeres Muralistas and the Co-Madres all-women collectives of the Bay Area, see María Ochoa, *Creative Collectives: Chicana Painters Working in Community* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 2003). On the indigenous aesthetic at work in the contributions to the *Maestrapeace* mural by Chicana artists Juana Alicia and Irene Pérez, see Latorre, "Gender, Muralism, and the Politics of Identity."

[5] Kelk Cervantes 2004.

[6] Saint Joan of Arc (1412–1431) was a military heroine who led the French to victory against the English in the early fifteenth century. Rosa Luxembourg was a nineteenth-century German Jewish socialist thinker who warned of the elitist tendencies she saw among the Russian Marxist leaders. Sojourner Truth was an African American abolitionist and feminist during the nineteenth century, and like Susan B. Anthony, a feminist foremother who argued for women's right to vote. Rosa Parks, a contemporary of Martin Luther King Jr., is said to have sparked the civil rights' struggles by refusing to give up her seat to a white person. Lillian Ngoya was a leader in the anti-apartheid struggle of South Africa.

[7] The primacy given to Menchú in the mural reflects the predominating frequency with which she was mentioned as an admired female figure in the surveys taken by the Women's Building staff (Kelk Cervantes 2004).

6.2.indb 66 4/23/07 8:21:56 AM