

Judith F. Baca

Artist, Educator, Scholar/Activist and Community Arts Pioneer



Brief Summary: One of America's leading muralists, Judith F. Baca (Judy) has been creating art for three decades. Powerful in size and subject matter, Baca's murals bring art to where people live and work so that they can see themselves reflected in a public space. Raised in a strong, all-woman household, Judith F. Baca was especially influenced by the values of her grandmother, a Mexican immigrant and herbal healer. In 1974, Baca founded the City of Los Angeles' first mural program, which produced over 400 murals and employed thousands of local participants. In 1976, she co-founded the Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC), which promotes community-based, participatory public arts projects. Since 1980 she has been a Professor of the University of California, first at UCI and since 1996 at UCLA.

Baca is at the top of a distinguished list of artist creators. What sets her apart from many other artists is an inspired ability to teach and a creative pursuit of relevancy in developing educational and community based art methodologies. Through a lifetime of achievement, Baca has stood for art in service of equity for all people. She is a lesson for us on the integration of one's ethics with creative expression, never compromising and never flagging in her devotion to a practice that is committed to public education for all and to pedagogical process for its participants.

"I really don't want to produce artwork that does not have meaning beyond simple decorative values. I want to use public space to create a public voice, and a public consciousness about the presence of people who are, in fact, the majority of the population but who are not represented in any visual way. By telling their stories we are giving voice to the voiceless and visualizing the whole of the American story." Judy Baca

Longer Narrative: Art and creative expression are at the heart of what makes us human. A social or political movement that isn't fueled by vibrant and deeply inspiring art and music has a hole in its soul and should probably not be trusted. As we learn to appreciate more keenly the key relationship of arts to social change, we hope we're coming to value our artists in a deeper way.

Around the world, artists are responding in abundantly creative ways to the calls of the Earth - and people - in trouble. In Queensland, an Australian Aboriginal artist named Dr. Pamela Croft makes Mud Maps, integrating the language of her indigenous art form with the tangible evidence of climate change to the creek nearby, where the altering tides create delicate patterns in the mud.

She does this to inspire people to act. She also makes this art to challenge non-Aboriginal people to come to an understanding of the world as her people see it – a people who are estimated to have inhabited that land for over 50,000 years.

Like these Mud Maps, Judy Baca's murals are as much about the process of how they're made as they are about the end result. Each artist begins from the awareness that the land has memory that must be expressed. Both create art that's shaped by an interactive relationship among history, people and place that marks the dignity of hidden historical precedents, restores connections and stimulates new relationships into the future.

Judy Baca's murals focus on revealing and reconciling diverse peoples' struggles for their rights and affirm the connections of each community to that place. She gives form to monuments that rise up out of neighborhoods, rather than being imposed upon them. Together with the people who live there, they co-create monumental public art, places that become "sites of public memory."

Judy is a world-renowned painter and muralist, community arts pioneer, scholar and educator who has been teaching art in the UC system (including at UCLA) for over 20 years. She was the founder of the first City of Los Angeles Mural Program in 1974, which evolved into a community arts organization known as the Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC). She continues to serve as its artistic director and focuses her creative energy in the Cesar Chavez Digital Mural Lab, employing digital technology to co-create collaborative mural designs.

Judy's public arts initiatives reflect the lives and concerns of populations that have been historically disenfranchised, including women, the working poor, youth, the elderly and immigrant communities. Throughout Los Angeles and increasingly in national and international venues, SPARC's projects have often been created in impoverished neighborhoods that have been revitalized and energized by the attention these murals have brought and the excitement they have generated. Underlying all of SPARC's activities is the profound conviction that the voices of disenfranchised communities need to be heard and that the preservation of a vital commons is critical to a healthy civil society.

Judy Baca's work channels the creative process of monumental mural design to develop models for the transformation of both physical and social environments in public spaces. And she does mean monumental, both in space and time: The Great Wall of Los Angeles* is 'tattooed' along a flood control channel in the San Fernando Valley. It is currently the world's longest mural, at 2,700 feet long. The Great Wall depicts a multi-cultural history of California from pre-history through the 1950's. It was begun in 1976 and plans are underway for its next four decades of evolution.

Drawing from diverse traditions ranging from the great Mexican muralists such as Rivera and Siqueiros, to some of the WPA's public art initiatives of the 1930s to Joseph Beuys' experiments in "social sculpture," what Judy has initiated and nurtured in Los Angeles may represent the grandest, most ambitious and empowering, authentic people's art project in the U.S. in the last 60 years, and the most diverse one, ever.

*Upon completion of Judy's signature work "The Great Wall of Los Angeles," Carey Rickey wrote in *Art in America*, "Los Angeles finally has a monument as sprawling and complex as the cosmopolis itself, a testimony to the many cultures that contribute to it and not only to the dominant culture that governs it." The Great Wall, is one of Los Angeles' true cultural landmarks and one of the country's most respected and largest monuments to inter-racial harmony. The significance of the Great Wall is multidimensional: a beautifully fluid and intricate visual narration of overlooked histories from prehistoric times to the 1950's; a transformative process that directly engaged over 400 participating youth in the creation; and the inspiration to create a new wave of public art. The Great Wall is a modern day cathedral built by its community to teach those who follow as a site of public memory.

The success of the Great Wall is based on the intersections of; creative process, aesthetic tradition of the Great muralists of this century and its unique place in American art history. In a society that tends to prize individual achievements over group endeavors, community participatory art can easily be mistaken for social service programming or community education. Although the Great Wall has served both these purposes, Judy maintains that its greatest value is in the collective nature of its production. "The process employed in the of making the Great Wall was art," she says, "because in that process a single creative vision was carried out; a vision that was both inclusive of other artistic expressions and was a people's retelling of their own history."

The Great Wall is a symbol of inclusiveness and democracy. Over the course of 41 segments, the work prominently features marginalized Americans and events in a historically accurate framework. The Great Wall provides one of the only visual references for important historical events, it specifically illustrates and honors the role of California ethnic minorities during many significant events from prehistory through the 20th century, including events such as the gold rush, the building of the railroads and two world wars; the development of California as an agricultural and economic leader, as a center of scientific invention and as refuge to immigrants; the role of ethnic minorities in music and the arts, and in civil rights movements of women, Blacks, homosexuals, Chicanos, Asians, and Native Americans. To understand the breadth and depth of Judy's vision, it is best embodied in the work of the organization she founded, SPARC. Creating Sites of Public Memory: The Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC) was founded in 1976. SPARC is a cultural center that creates public art as a vehicle to promote civic dialogue, foster cross-cultural understanding and address critical social issues.

SPARC is proud of its rich legacy of artwork that provides an ethnic face for our city. SPARC's public projects, which are national and international in scope, now number in Los Angeles alone in the 100's and are considered among the most important landmarks of our city. For 30 years SPARC has been working in Los Angeles' communities, including poor and immigrant communities with youth and their families as participants in the production of public monuments – artworks that make their stories evident to local, national and international audiences. Through the expansion of the American historical narrative, SPARC seeks to create understanding between diverse ethnic groups and respect for the significant contributions made by diverse populations that make up a nation of immigrants.

Since it was founded in 1976, Judy Baca's artistic direction was formulated with the concept that the arts could be engaged with the most important issues of our time and that ordinary people/community members could be participants in the arts. Through SPARC she chose to amplify the voices of those marginalized in our Los Angeles communities and to provide a new vision of what art could do: women, people of color, poor and working people, day laborers, youth, prisoners, etc became the focus in our programming. Judy and SPARC believed then, as they do now, that art could exist "outside of the rarefied white boxes" in places where people live and work. Their works are monuments that rise out of communities; memorialize what the people choose to remember. Through their processes of community inclusion they help identify, and articulate through community dialogues, issues affecting specific communities. Through pairing of artist with community SPARC's community dialogical processes, they create works of art that visualize the needed transformation. Their work is based on the premise that people must be able to dream change before it is possible to achieve it. In Guadalupe California in a poor farm working community composed of 90% immigrant campesinos, Judy created four murals which articulate the expressed need for local medical care, fresh water (local sources were polluted by agribusiness pesticides) a soccer field for the children and decent housing. Children had no day care and were often in the fields with working parents and exposed to pesticides. The people of Guadalupe used the mural as means of measuring their achievements twelve years later. The public artwork served as a public memory of the articulated community concerns and a reminder of a dream for change.

Through Judy's artistic vision of 30 years, she and SPARC have taken the work to blighted streets in the inner city of Los Angeles and to concrete flood control channels; scars where our rivers once ran. They painted a 1/2-mile of the river with murals with 400 youth, built parks in vacant lots, hung photographic tapestries in senior citizens centers, and built sculptures for children to play on in vacant lots and produced hundreds of murals. Los Tres Grandes of Mexico, the popular culture of low riders, tattoos, political street writing transformed by the aesthetics of each changing cultural group with whom we work informed our sense of beauty and order. They continue to capture the rhythm of the streets in giant works that place an ethnic face on a city where a 129 languages are spoken in our schools but whose life and aesthetics are often not represented in the cities physical and aesthetic environments.

Current documentation shows that with over 700 official cultural and historical landmarks in the City of Los Angeles, only about 60 relate to people of color, women, and Native Americans. The images pertaining to women tend to show women's clubs and homes or women who designed houses. The images pertaining to African Americans tend to towards churches and music. The images of Latinos tend to reflect the Spanish/Mexican colonial era.

In contrast, community members, activists and advocates have identified over 100 links along the Heritage Parkscape (A project spanning the LA River from the San Fernando Valley to Downtown Los Angeles) that serve as a "family album" to revive the forgotten history of diverse communities from the Great Wall of Los Angeles to the Rio de Los Angeles State Park, the Los Angeles State Historic Park, and El Pueblo de Los Angeles.

Judy's legacy and the myriad of legacy murals SPARC has produced over the years are part of California's ethnic heritage. They are "landscapes of experience" that feature stories of the experiences, contributions, and adaptation of ethnic people to life in California. Ned Kaufman, founder of Place Matters, wrote of the need for heritage sites for Latinos and other ethnic minorities in a recent Cultural Heritage Needs Assessment for the National Parks System "that the United States is, and has always been, and will continue to be a country of many cultures needs no demonstration... Minority participation in heritage programs has been limited and the picture of American history presented by official designated sites understates the diversity of the nations actual history... Out of over 76,000 properties currently listed on the National Register of Historic Places, a computer search turns up 823 associated with African American heritage, 35 with Asian, and 12 with Latino."

In a country of immigrants, too often believing that history began when they arrived, a lack of insight into one's position in the continuum of the history of "place" and the accompanying understanding of contributions made by one's own community and by other communities can lead to racial and economic conflict. Public art can play a vital role in the creation of a shared public memory: What a people choose to memorialize in public is indicative of the story it wishes to tell the next generation. Too often, the public voices of the disenfranchised are silenced, their memories discounted, their history excluded from the conversation that becomes a nation's tale. The citizenry of California and the nation can thank Judy Baca as one of the individuals responsible for making sure that all people's history is remembered and memorialized through public art.

Judy Baca is one of the most remarkable public artists for social transformation in modern American history. One of her most indelible quotes is: *Collaborative art brings a range of people into conversations about their visions for their neighborhoods and their nations. Finding a place for those ideas in monuments that are constructed of the soil and spirit of the people is the most challenging task for public artists in this time.*

To learn more about Judy and SPARC visit: <http://www.sparcmurals.org>