Community Murals - Art of the People

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List of Plates

All of the plates shown are from my own resource material except the plates listed below :

Introduction

"The visual language of the ghetto." (Camille Jose Vegara, 1993, p28). I feel that this sentence from Vegara sums up the entire message I wish to convey throughout my thesis. The community mural is a language of visual expression specific to people who live in the ghettos of our world. This thesis is about public art that is created for the people on the street, not for a gallery for the rich. The life on the street becomes the subject matter from which the community mural evolves. They are art works created for the people in the community and in some way involve the community in their construction process.

Through this thesis I intend to give a brief history about mural painting and how the movement of the community mural evolved, concentrating specifically on San Francisco. This city has always supported innovation and has consistently produced significant murals. Due to its large numbers of homeless and its diverse ethnic cultures it has a special reason for the wide presence of murals. I found the overall history of the community mural well-documented though there was not much information available on San Francisco murals specifically. The majority of the resource material I gathered was from the time that I lived in the city myself. My primary aim was to look at community murals in the city and compare how different projects have been approached in various areas. I furthermore obtained information from the San Fransisco library. Most of my resources are from interviews with local residents who supplied me with crucial information about the neighbourhoods that contained murals. In many instances local inhabitants and mural artists acted as guides and in some cases protectors. I was able to look at specific projects in relation to their aims, style, themes and community involvement.

I hope that through this thesis I convey the importance of the community mural to society today. Instead of offering people the blank walls of factories and tenements in their neighbourhoods, the community murals give images of

hope and meaning and break from the isolation of a difficult modern existence.

Chapter 1

From Cave Painting To Contemporary Murals

Murals throughout the years have been painted for various reasons whether it be economic, social, political or aesthetic, though most murals are said to be narratives painted onto walls.

> *Today's community murals are exciting partly because they embody this monumental art tradition, and partly because their world is our world, we can empathise with the paintings we see.* (Drescher, 1998, p9)

This is true even when we look at murals from palaeolithic France or Spain where we can see that the cave painting had a specific role in the time it was produced. From what historians have gathered, some of the paintings were part of everyday life and others were used only on special occasions. However, in places like China and Egypt much of the mural painting was directed more towards the elite. Even though they reveal some information about their cultures and history, they cannot be called "community murals". European murals are probably more direct decedents of today's urban expressions. The earliest paintings followed along the lines of church paintings which were created in the form of frescos or mosaics. Much of the imagery that was used was from biblical scenes and it was displayed to inform the illiterate churchgoers of such stories. In the twentieth century Diego Rivera painted his murals to teach the illiterate in Mexico about their religion and traditions.

With the coming of the Renaissance,thematic content shifted and new techniques such as perspective were developed. There was a change to secular wealth; merchants, and not just the religious were now patrons. From the fifteenth century there was a continuation of parallel traditions between public and private murals. From that time on, murals did not only consist of devout imagery in churches but also were painted in dining rooms and living rooms in private palaces. For the community muralist of today, however, a more

influential line stems from Mexican murals.

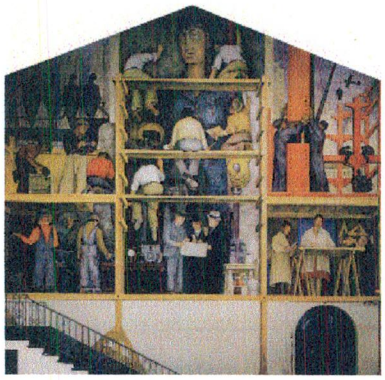
Influences from Mexico

When murals emerged in the 1920s in Mexico, they had the same role as the murals of the Renaissance, although motivated by a different social background. However, unlike those of the Renaissance, these murals were created by workers, peasants and the middle classes and not from the clergy or wealthy patrons. The mural in Mexico was not the mural of the Fine Arts, but was called the mural of the Poor People's Art. The major influence in this new wave of Mexican art was the Tres Grandes. This group was formed by Diego Rivera, Jose Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros (the three great artists of Mexican muralism). These men had been influenced by the stylistic forms in Europe including Cubism, Expressionism and Futurism. The three artists created a new form of mural painting which was a complete reaction to political events at the time - a more revolutionary style. They used new approaches to working, for example : bright colours, shallow spacing, narrative style and magical realistic elements. Rivera started by painting murals for the Education Minister (at the time Jose Vasconcellos). His murals were to educate the largely illiterate population about their indigenous history. Rivera was then joined by Siqueiros and Orozco, the three having their own individualistic approach to their work.

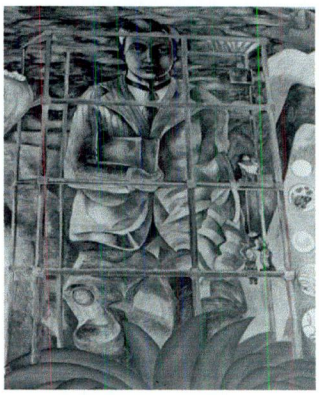
> *Rivera used a collage-like discontinuous space which juxtaposed elements of different sizes; Orozco employed non-naturalistic brushwork, distorted forms, and exaggerated light and dark, while Siqueiros added expressive uses of perspective with extreme foreshorting that made forms burst right out of the wall.* (Barnet-Sanchez, 1990, p7)

All three were heavily involved in politics in their country, and had ties with the Communist party. Through their artwork they were like spokesmen for the working man. In the 1930s, when a reactionary administration gained power in Mexico, all three left for the United States, though they did not loose their political beliefs. Rivera came to San Francisco, and the city came to have a

direct link with the Tres Grandes.



(fig 1.1) The Making of a Fresco



(fig 1.2) Homage to Siquerious

(fig 1.3) The Flower Carrier

(fig 1.4) Flower of Liberation

Rivera in San Francisco

Rivera had a significant influence on San Francisco muralists. He wanted to create art that spoke directly to the people. In order to do so, he abandoned much of what was typical of modern art, such as fragmentation and the use of abstract imagery, *"Rivera reasserts the use of narrative."* (K. Liam,1998,p1). During the period he lived in San Francisco, there were many muralists who would have watched and assisted him in his painting. This is how these techniques have been passed down through the years. Much of his work is shown in the representation of daily life through simplified realism and the symbol. One of Rivera's best known murals is in the Art Institute in San Francisco (fig 1.1). It had a great influence on community artist Chuy Campusano in his mural entitled *The Homage to Siqueiros* (fig 1.2). Rivera used a towering figure of an engineer worker in his mural in 1934, and later in 1974, Campusano revises the

image from a construction worker to a model Latino. Each of the images are divided into three sections by scaffolding thus showing individual scenes of urban construction.The men in both are determined as they grip the controls of production. It appears that this is an overtone through the murals, suggesting the triumph of the labouring classes over the bosses. This vision of California's wealth coming from natural resources and labour is also found in a number of other community murals. His imagery of strong Latino workers and of the land are often frequently re-appearing themes in work that is produced now. We can see this in fig 1.4 in the recent murals on Balmy Alley in San Francisco compared with the Rivera mural, *'The Flower Carrier'* in fig 1.3. The representation of the figures are also reminiscent of the forms which he often uses, as they are portrayed in strong shape and colour. The community muralists of today have adopted Rivera's approach to teach people of their heritage and culture through more modern the murals.

What is a Community Mural ?

To create a community mural a strong community neighbourhood must exist as a background, just as the church needs its physical space for its religious murals. When I talk of 'community' it is not merely a geographical definition. It refers to a group of any like-minded people. We must always include the word 'community' in Community Murals as this is what helps us make the distinction between 'community art' and the more far reaching term of 'public art'. Public Art is done for the general public, mass population; it is usually commissioned by public bodies or the government. However, community art is created by or with a group of people who will interact with the art. Its standards are defined by people who live in that community and not by outside bodies. It includes projects done by an individual or group in consultation with a community, sometimes even people in the community may not actually paint the wall. The relationship the mural creates in the community is an intimate one. The real support group of a mural project is the community; they determine the work's meaning. Tim Drescher stated its importance to the community quite simply

when he said : *"The community is always a crucial aspect of the work's process and effects."* (Drescher, 1994, p13)

The muralist today, like Rivera, tries to teach the community. The muralist works on the street at the heart of the action in the community. Lacking the street, within the community there is no stage for the performers to act in, to create their work. The muralists are like performers acting in a play about their own experiences. All the senses that are felt within the community are brought to life on the wall through colour and shape. This is where the artists on the project have their greatest challenge, as they must make aesthetic decisions as well as political ones. When I say aesthetic, I mean to create a form that embodies a content. When I talk of political theory I am looking at a community which gives its people the chance to create a mural that expresses their opinions or traditions; this community is always in the minority. I feel the aesthetic form faces in two directions: outside, to the interpersonal material world we share, and inside, to the world of modern art. It is here that the movement of the community mural steps in. It fights that alienation and brings together subject and object as one.

The community mural movement is attempting to find a way so that the artist is not alienated as he works. In the mural projects they give an opportunity to people in the community to be educated about art and encourage them to make art. At the very least they give them a chance to make decisions about the kind of art that enters their community. Today we live in a society where many people are alienated and I feel that the community mural is like a light of hope shining in a community which may only have scenes of poverty and despair.

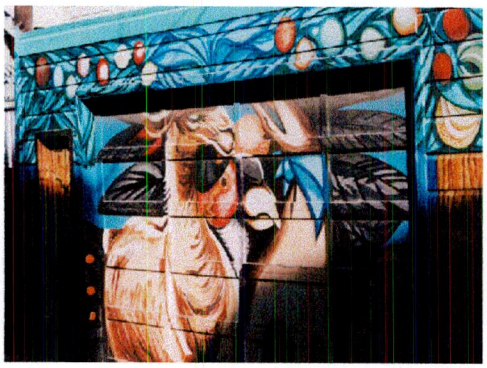
Chapter 2

The highest, most logical, purest and most powerful type of painting is mural painting. It is also the most disinterested, as it cannot be converted into an object of personal gain nor can it be concealed for the benefit of a few privileged people. It is for everybody. (Jose Clemente, 1977, p238)

What separates the easel painting from the mural is that the mural must take into consideration the architectural, environmental and social setting. The tradition of murals existed long before easel painting. Artists such as Giotto, in ways similar to the muralists of today, dealt with the specific problems of space, perspective and scale involved within a mural. Now, however, because art can be shown in photos and slides, and murals can be shown in exhibition spaces, there sometimes is a removal of the mural from its original context. When the mural is thus detached from its native setting it loses the roots of its aesthetic value that lie in its fight to overcome the architectural, environmental and social problems it faces when first presented. Once a decision is made to go ahead with a mural project, the muralists must begin to discuss how they will approach the wall in relation to its surrounding elements. The points which I am going to discuss are related to community murals that I saw in San Francisco, and may not apply to every mural, though they do provide a framework for murals in general. Firstly, I will look at the wall, space and scale of murals.

The Wall

When dealing with a mural, one limitation is the building on which it is being painted. Mural painters must study the wall. The kind of light it receives is important; for example, if you are dealing with a north-facing wall it will be in the shade and colours will appear cooler. On the other hand a wall with intense sunlight will bleach the colours. Also, the texture of the wall is important. For example with cement walls the lines may flow freely whilst on a



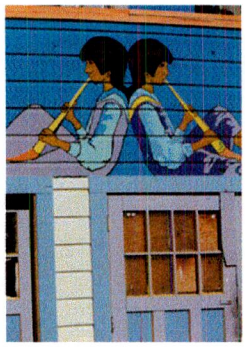
(fig 2.1) Untitled

(fig 2.2) International Hotel mural

brick wall the shadow lines of the coursing must be taken into account, particlarly when creating detailed lines. Looking at the image in fig 2.1 you can see how the gaps in the wooden garage door create dark lines running across the work. The muralist must work across these and try and make them as invisible as possible. There have been cases where blemishes or damage done to walls have been incorporated into the mural design. The shape of the wall is also important, including the irregularities of fire escapes, windows, doorways and the various entrances and exits. Sometimes what may first seem a hindrance to a design may become part of it and beneficial to it. We can see this in the mural from the International Hotel in fig 2.2. The two windows on the wall are incorporated into two elements of the design, making pieces for the figure to hold and helping in the perspective of the overall composition. The corner of the wall is another problem which a muralist must confront and I was amazed at how it can have many different roles. One can pretend that the corner is non-existent by having optical continuous lines running through it. Similarly, it can be distinguished as a painted pillar visually supporting the wall. All in all the architectural structure itself creates many problems that do not apply when using an easel.

The Space

Today's muralists must consider the space around which the mural is created; the character of the surrounding buildings, the type of neighbourhood and the kind of traffic. Can it be brass, bold and colourful or more subtle and

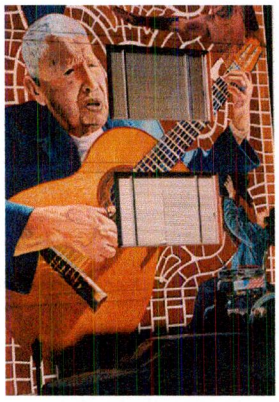


(fig 2.3) Untitled

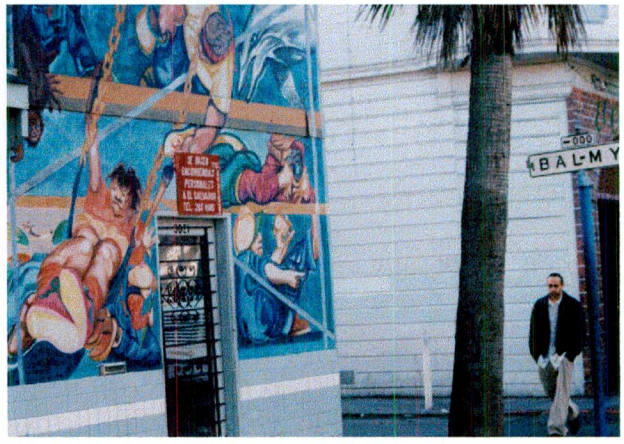
(fig 2.4) Untitled

meditative to look at ?

We see how the figurative mural in fig.2..3 becomes part of building it has been painted on, so its effect comes subtly to the viewer. The figures clothing has similar colouring to that of the wall so it blends into the structure rather than coming screaming from it. The figures seem to be leaning above the door in a natural manner so this, too, lends to their unobtrusiveness. Whereas with the mural in fig 2..4 the painting is like a billboard as it is extremely visible to a passerby in its use of bright colourful imagery and the striking composition.



(fig 2.6) Untitled



(fig 2.5) Untitled

Even though there are differences in designing for inside and outside murals, the angle of vision that the viewer has remains the same. If the viewer is standing in a space looking from below upwards, the mural must increase the size of the figure as it continues higher up the mural, keeping the proportion of the figure balanced from toe to top.

The mural in fig 2.5 of the old man has been dealt with in such a manner, that the figure remains completely balanced from the top to the bottom. This enables the passerby to read the figure equally from a far or near. Whereas, if one is viewing the mural from the side, the figure must be stretched in width so that it does not disappear into a stick form from one side of its body to the other. So, as you can see in fig 2.6 rather than dealing with one perspective or viewing point, the muralist must take on the task of facing various perspectives. Importantly, therefore, the mural is approached in a way depending on the space which surrounds it.

The Scale

The way scale is seen by a viewer is relative to the viewing distance, the size of the wall, its texture, and the scale of the surrounding elements. Often the working scales set in sketches must be adjusted in the making of the mural. One of the advantages of painting directly onto the wall is that the scale can be easily adjusted to the actual viewing conditions of the site. Working in this large scale reduces the apparent size of the wall and allows a greater viewing distance, so the mural can interact visually with surrounding elements. Because he is working on such a large scale the worker on a community mural uses different technique in their approach to painting on a canvas. A whole movement of the body from shoulder down is used in the creation rather than simply the wrist and fingers. Painting in this manner leads to less delicate brushwork, so the work concentrates on a more powerful idea from the conception and beginning of the design to the method of working concept. The little details are often lost in the enormous scale. This form of working is the natural course that mural painting takes and is an important part of its success as a popular method for a community group. In Fig 2.7 there is a distinction in styles used, through different children's contributions to the mural. The mural is

(fig 2.7) Rejoice

large so they can all work at the same time. Even though the quality of their drawing, when looked at under close inspection, may not be to a very professional standard, this goes unnoticed as there is a beautiful array of colourful imagery from the combined images bringing colour and a positive energy to the bleak surrounding area.

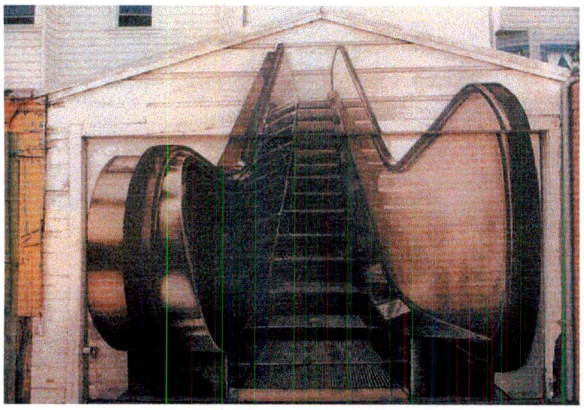
In the next half of the chapter I wish to discuss two different forms of art and how they are directly related to the community mural.

Graffiti Art, its assocation with the community mural

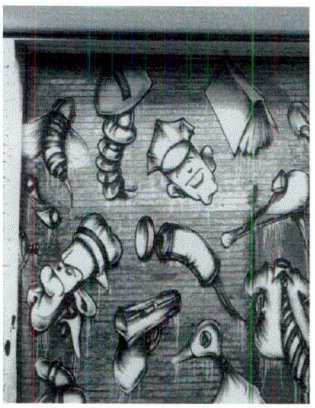
"Graffiti is incontestably different from mural art by virtue of its form and the approach to the surface, but is it not at the basis of all community mural expression ?" (Zussman, 1987, p20). I most definitely feel that the heart of graffiti lies in the same place as community mural expression. So the question is, why is there such negativity about graffiti art and not about community murals?

> *Its very existence is certainly a symptom of deeper underlying causes such as frustration at the lack of opportunity, education, privilege and other outlets for expression. Still, whatever else it may be, graffiti is a political battleground between right and left, conservative and progressive.* (Zussman,1987,p21)

The objection is that graffiti challenges the institution of private property by defacing it. However, the opposition against graffiti never discusses the much greater defacement of human lives resulting from private property, for example, how the less fortunate often get driven out of their homes. If we build a society where even the poorest of youths has a chance to advance, will there still be need for graffiti? I believe that community muralists and graffiti artists are still ultimately trying to express the same ideas, though community muralists construct their work in a more official way. They both have an ultimate goal of expressing their dignity and belonging.



(fig 2.8) Untitled



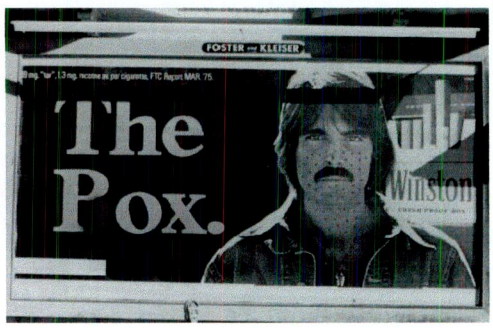
(fig 2.9) Untitled

When I was in San Francisco, I had the chance to see some work by graffiti artists done in a community project in Clarion Alley, in the Mission District. The pieces I saw are known as the highest form of spraycan work which can be done by a graffiti artist; they call it the 'masterpiece'. The first image I have is of a escalator in fig 2.8. It is meant to suggest a way out of the deteriorated environment of Clarion Alley.The technique was carried out by using an airbrush, which gives the image a real feeling of reality. The stairs look as if they could be ascended. The amazing sheen from the steel metal frame of the structure heightens the realistic element. In fig 2.9 there is a comic-like approach to the mural. The artist displays characters and images that are seen around the area everyday. There is a fantastic feeling of movement in the twisting of the images that is got by using the spraycan. This alley was mostly used by drug users and was dark and definitely avoided by people. Though now it is a friendly colourful, avenue with garage doors and fences serving as gallery wall spaces.

Though some people have a negative attitude towards graffiti the murals from Clarion Alley highlight how it is wrong to blacklist all graffiti, I saw how there could be beautiful expression through graffiti artwork that revealed positive, diverse interests and cultures.

Billboards can serve a useful purpose

What exactly do billboards have in common with community murals? Firstly, they both send messages to the community, even though billboards are advertisements for private corporations. Walking around San Francisco I noticed that once I left the city centre into housing areas, all the billboards were in areas populated by less well off people. These billboards displayed, for example, advertisements for cigarettes. The billboard in fig 2.10 has an advertisement for Winston cigarettes which has had its wording changed from 'The Box' to 'The Pox' and also has spot marks on the figure to coincide with it. In this way the vandal was trying to show the unattractive side to smoking by personally altering the existing print. This is something that is often done to billboards that advertise negative or unhealthy products in a community, which may have very bad influence on the youth in the area.



(fig 2.10) The Box

The management of Galleria de la Raza, which is a gallery for the arts in the Mission area changed the role of the billboard outside their gallery. In 1975 an unknown individual painted over the Foster and Kleiser billboard. He painted an advertisement for a local community arts magazine displaying local artists work in it covering up an existing advertisement. Foster and Klieser sent their workers to cover up the work with a new advertisement, but the Gallery asked them not to cover up the piece. Finally, Foster and Klieser removed the billboard, so in the area there was only a blank space. However, through persistence, the gallery got them to put up a large masonite panel, the same dimensions as the

(fig 2.11) Salsa Ahora

billboard's. This is still there today. Fig 2.11 there is an example of an advertisement by the gallery. In this case, the advertisements are the ones that help benefit the community. The billboard demands constant changing of ideas and images in keeping with the life in the community. Times, needs, issues shift. This also eliminates the need for constant restoration of the work. As one resident said, *"it's a good way of communicating with political and cultural issues, put up good info"*. (Local resident, 1998, interview)

Chapter 3

San Francisco Murals

San Francisco now claims to be the mural capital of the world. Compare San Francisco's 754 murals and its population of 730,000 with that of Los Angeles with 1,500 to 2,000 murals for a population of over 3 million people. It is a city which has constantly supported the arts and encouraged the expression of the individual compared to other cities in the United States. It has many themes running through its social work such as multi-culturalism, feminism, gay rights, pluralism and an addiction to having fun. It is probably one of the main cities in the world that has remained free-spirited, a carry over from the liberal, rebellious attitudes of the 'sixties. There is also a very strong following from left to right on the political spectrum. Throughout my stay in San Francisco, I noticed the constant struggle the people made to have their views heard. When reading the weekly *San Francisco Chronicle* I would see political articles that would be written to inform the public of government misdemeanours. Even walking down the streets there were signs posted up by members of the public about present political discrimination. The signs would also deal with many of the problems that are present, such as Aids, crime, and homelessness.

During the time I spent in San Francisco, there was a surge of creativity through the streets, and the community mural was part of this creative element. Though other cities have supported important and influential murals, from the 'sixties, to the present day I believe that San Francisco is the most consistent and influential city in the movement. In this chapter I wish to give a broad outline of the community mural in the United States finishing with specific murals in San Francisco which I found the most interesting.

Murals in the 'Sixties

Toward the end of the 1960s there was a huge political change in the United States. People began to speak up for their rights and the voices for freedom were exposed. Movements such as women's liberation and the outcry after the Vietnam War brought strong political activity to the everyday individual. The mural at this time became part of public expression. The community mural became a voice for the people. The mural stood for oppressed national groups and minorities, the working class, the pensioner, the street youth, the tradesman and the student. In 1968 a very prominent activist of community murals said :

> *There is no Black art in the Museum of Fine Arts, so we are going to utilise the facade of the buildings in our community as our museum...Black people [are] painting murals about themselves and their situation...Black art is not a decoration...it's a revolutionary force.* (Cockcroft, 1977, p31).

This quotation sums up the whole feeling that was being generated at this time. The community mural was giving a way of expression to people, without resorting to violence. Chicago was one of the first cities to create a large interest around the community mural. One of the most famous and inspiring murals was *The Wall of Respect and Truth, (fig 3.1)* in Chicago. Because of this mural, and others around that time, the community mural began to come out of the predominately black areas and to move into the more working-class and ethnic neighbourhoods too. Due to this upsurge of interest around the mural and the role it played in social protest, a number of organisations were established around it. The advances in mural techniques, scale and expressiveness were

(fig 3.1) Respect and Truth

gradually noticed by the established art world. *Time* and *Life* magazines both wrote articles about the community mural's popularity in 1970. Also, an article written by Harold Hayden was published in the *Sunday Times* which gave a warning of the dangers of the upsurge in.
community murals :

> *There is at least one danger in all this attention. Genuine people's wall painting, with its artist-to-people communication, could be neglected in the current move to decorate the city. It is easier and safer to sponsor exercises in abstract form and colour.*(Hayden, 1971, p4)

The community mural now had to compete with the fine artist who was already obtaining commissions and support from the government and local bodies for wall spaces. Now there were three different kinds of muralist projects developing :

- the continuing politically active muralist
- the individualist expression of the artist
- the publicity muralist who painted signs for shop owners.

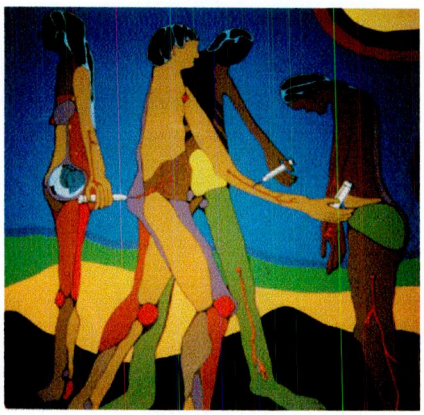
Even with all of the different types of murals forming, there was still growing support for the community mural. I wish to hone in especially on San Francisco and what was happening to the overall support for murals which was growing at this time. There was an organisation established in San Francisco called Gallerie de la Raza. It was set up in the early 'seventies. The organisation grew out of four other San Francisco Bay organisations which existed in San Francisco : the Mexican American Liberation Art Front, Artistas Latinos Americanos, Casa Hispana and Artes 6. The gallery is set in the Mission District which is famous for its murals. It devotes all its space and time to artists from Mexico, El Salvador and other Latin American countries. It holds six exhibitions a year for the Latin American artists who are new to the United States. It also has a shop called Studio 24 which sells crafts, books and children's toys from the countries it promotes. Gallerie de la Raza's director Rene Yanez co-operated

with the Neighbourhood Arts staff in coordinating mural projects throughout the Mission District of San Francisco. They carried out this programme from 1971 to 1973. Many other projects like this continued to emerge. Muralists from various backgrounds began to meet in San Francisco in an area called Haight Ashbury. In 1974, murals appeared in Chinatown as part of a battle to preserve the International Hotel which housed many old Asian people as well as community groups such as the Asian Community Centre. The main funding which came from an outside body in San Francisco was from the Mayor's Office of Community Development (OCD). Some of the mural projects that came about at this time in San Francisco are still running today. In San Francisco there are certain areas which have a clearly dominant role in relation to the community mural. These areas are the Mission District and Haight Ashbury. I will now discuss a few murals that appealed to me that have been created in these areas.

The Mission District and its murals

The Mission District is San Francisco's oldest neighbourhood. The area itself is the dominant Mexican and Latin American area. The change in immigration laws in the 1950s resulted in large numbers of Latin Americans coming to live in San Francisco, who brought with them their tradition of monumental art. The Mission District alone has over two hundred community murals which are painted on banks, schools and restaurants, most of them dealing with the themes of the struggles and achievements of Latinos themselves. The reason why areas like the Mission District have such a huge following in community murals is because of the genuine need to help to keep a community spirit alive and to direct youths away from drug addiction, prostitution and crime. The murals help to give a positive attitude in the streets and also adds bursts of colour which take away from the grim-looking poverty that surrounds the neighbourhood. I have highlighted some murals throughout the Mission area that interested me the most. Through the guided tours which I went on with community workers, I found some interesting murals, but by walking around the area I found many others myself.

One of the earliest significant murals that was painted in this area, was in 1973 in the Jamestown CYO Centre (fig 3.2) on 23rd Street. I am starting off with this mural as it was one of the first group-efforts, involving several artists from the area. The mural dealt with drug abuse. I found the depiction of the drug users very striking through the artist's use of colour and simple imagery. The drawing of the veins through the body and the needles puncturing the skin are quite horrifying. The message of the effect of drugs on the body is certainly loud and clear to the viewer. Even though this mural was created in 1973, the message is still effective today.

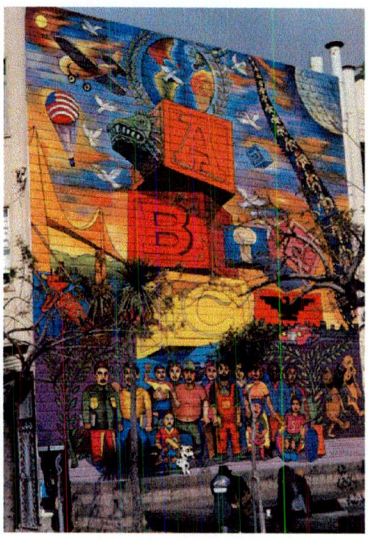


(fig 3.2) Untitled

In 1974 , a project was started by Spain Rios (an influential community muralist). Rios took an idea over from Ralph Maraiages who had an idea to paint the walls surrounding a mini park on 23rd Street / Byrant Street, which is in the heart of the Mission District. Rios began to do research into the schools around the area and ascertained that the children of the Mission area, even though they originated from Latino traditions, knew little of their heritage. He also had remembered in his own school after having been punished for speaking Spanish. With a number of other artists he set about creating a project of variant murals in the Mini Park. The artists Richard Montez and Tony Macheds, along with Rios, painted various scenes about the future of the Latinos people. Another organisation called Mujeres Muralists helped paint a mural for the park. Overall, the mural project was an enormous success. As it was such a large collaboration with community members from non-artistic backgrounds, it sparked a lot of attention, even worldwide.

In San Francisco, 1981-1982 is remembered as the banner year for community murals. In many sections of the city murals had been painted, often the efforts of several years of support work by artists and community groups.

Many of the funds for murals in the Mission District were supported by $100,000 in neighbourhood initiated improvement grants from the office of Community Development. The city's Mural Resource Centre had finally been in the position to secure and administer a portion of its budget for the murals and has continued to do so. The reason why I have jumped to the year of 1982 is because the Mini Park project murals had, by this stage, become seriously graffiti damaged. The mural's aesthetic quality and their message had been lost to the community.



(fig 3.3) ABC

However, because of this increase in funding people were able to restore or replace murals. For example, Rios, replaced one of the murals in the Mini Park which had been badly damaged. He was able to put forward a much more modern and relevant mural to the project which he entitled *ABC*. I am now leaving the Mission District in order to discuss some of the mural projects on which I found information on in the Haight area, which were developed around the same time.

Haight Ashbury and its murals

The Haight area is probably most famous for its 'summer of love' in the year 1967 when hippies, free-sex, no-hassle and psychedelic drugs were the daily routine along the streets of Haight. Nowadays, the youth on the streets carry out the ethos of the 'sixties, jokingly asking for spare change for drugs and alcohol. In fig 3.4 and fig 3.5 you may look at the atmosphere on the streets. It is a uncommon area where there is a mix of white and black, rich and poor, and young and old. Due to a lack of information on the murals in the Haight-Ashbury area I concentrated mainly on their main organisations.

The most prominent murals in Haight-Ashbury are painted by a group

called Haight-Ashbury Muralists. They painted many murals in the vicinity between 1970 and 1980. One of their murals, which still exists today, is *Rainbow People* (fig 3.6) which was painted in 1974. It shows a rejoicing and coming together of all the ethnic groups in Haight, marching together, playing music

(fig 3.4) Haight

(fig 3.5) Haight

(fig 3.6) The Rainbow People

detail of octopus

(fig 3.7)Kill the Commies

(fig 3.8) Educate to Liberate

and growing crops together as they cut off the greedy tentacles of a monopoly corporate octopus. The octopus was originally Richard Nixon but after Watergate's scandal drove him from office, his successors were substituted.

The group always painted the struggle of the poor and working class people to better themselves. The organisation was run by a group of artists - Miranda Bergman, Jane Norling, Arch Williams, Jo Tucker and Thomas Kurt. One of their largest and most controversial murals was called *Our History is No Mystery*. It started on John Adam's School on Hayes Street and rose some 7 feet high to the corner on Masonic, where it turned and continued for some 200 feet. It represented a school history lesson about the working classes in San Francisco. It went from the Native Americans to the Gold Rush, racist treatment of the Chinese, the earthquake and fire of 1906, the struggle for education for all and many other themes dealing with general human rights. The mural was met with a great response when it was in progress and on its completion, especially since all of its ideas came from a direct response from the community itself in relation to its themes and design. Sadly, however, in the 1980s the mural was attacked. The faces of the black people were painted over and spray cans were used to write across the mural such slanders as *'kill the commies'* (fig3.7). By the end of the 'eighties the mural had to be cleaned up a couple of times by the locals and the artists. In the end the muralists decided to replace a lot of the imagery on the walls, keeping the theme less political. The main image today is one called *Educate to Liberate*, (fig 3.8). This specific mural was a regathering of the Haight-Ashbury Muralists after their separation as a group, even though

they all stayed actively involved in community murals.

At this point a comment on mural defacement is appropriate. The vast majority of community murals are designed and painted with the support of the people living in the community so the presence of the mural is one which is respected. Therefore, vandalism of the mural, as in Haight, is a rare occasion. The general idea is that if the muralists work closely with the youth in the area, they will not deface it. However, if a mural has been up eight or ten years it may no longer have a specific connection with the new young people and, therefore, may get less respect. In the case of Haight, the mural seemed to be attacked by a very small group of extremists that were against any culturally cooperative scenes. In cases like this the muralist can only clean up the defacement to the mural and try not to be disheartened by the vandal's acts.

Now that I have given a brief introduction to the community mural in San Francisco in the Mission and Haight District, I wish to discuss in my next chapter a specific organisation in the Mission District which is based around the community mural. This group is called Precita Eyes Murals.

Chapter 4

Precita Eyes Mural Arts Centre

The Precita Eyes Mural Arts Centre (fig 4.1) is a community-based centre for the arts which is located in San Francisco's Mission District, and serves both as a studio for planning and designing commissioned and portable murals and as a workshop for mural painting . It was my main resource for information throughout my research. The centre is a project of the Precita Eyes Muralists Association which is a non-profit, tax-exempt association for muralists, and it evolved from a community workshop in 1977 organised by the current Director Susan Cervantes. The murals that are created in Precita Eyes are dedicated to enhancing their environment and educating people in the mural process. The murals are cultural expressions of a thriving diverse community but they also speak of dreams, truths and transformations of that community. Precita Eyes has always been involved in education and bringing the arts to the neighbourhood children, and this is the true function of a community mural. Precita Eyes Murals also operates the only arts supply store in the Mission District and derives much of its income from its Mural Tours and the Art Classes which have been running now for eighteen years. *"Over 12,000 students have benefited from arts education not otherwise available to them because of socioeconomic barriers or impoverished school curriculum ."* (Green City , 1998, p1).

Many students have taken educational mural fieldtrips through the Mission District and have gone on to work on murals themselves. In fig 4.2 and fig 4.3 we can see murals that were created by such fieldtrips with children.

> *Precita Eyes is a Green Business and utilises community creativity to create and preserve heritage and identity and enrich the neighbourhood through tourism, education and cultural exchange, visual beautification, and most of all, by praising and uplifting the spirit.* (Green City1998),p2)

(fig 4.1) Precita Eyes Mural Arts Centre

(fig 4.2) Untitled

(fig 4.3) Untitled

Like many non-profit organisations, the centre struggles to get by. It receives private donations and grant funding, but the majority of its financing comes from its own output and activities. At the moment, the centre is fundraising for much needed funds so it may establish itself in a new building located in the heart of the Mission District. In October, Precita Eyes kept me informed of their progress as they have moved into their new premises. They are now trying to raise funds needed to pay off their mortgage. Through this project there is an enormous group effort in the local community as they are working and striving together to keep the centre alive. In an article I read by the founder Susan Cervantes (the Director) I gained a perspective of the importance of the centre to the community mural.

> *Art created with people sharing our collective creative forces is, I believe, our highest human potential. Every project I have directed proves this over*

and over again. I see the changes on the participants faces when they see themselves strengthened by the contributions of others. (Cervantes, 1998, p1)

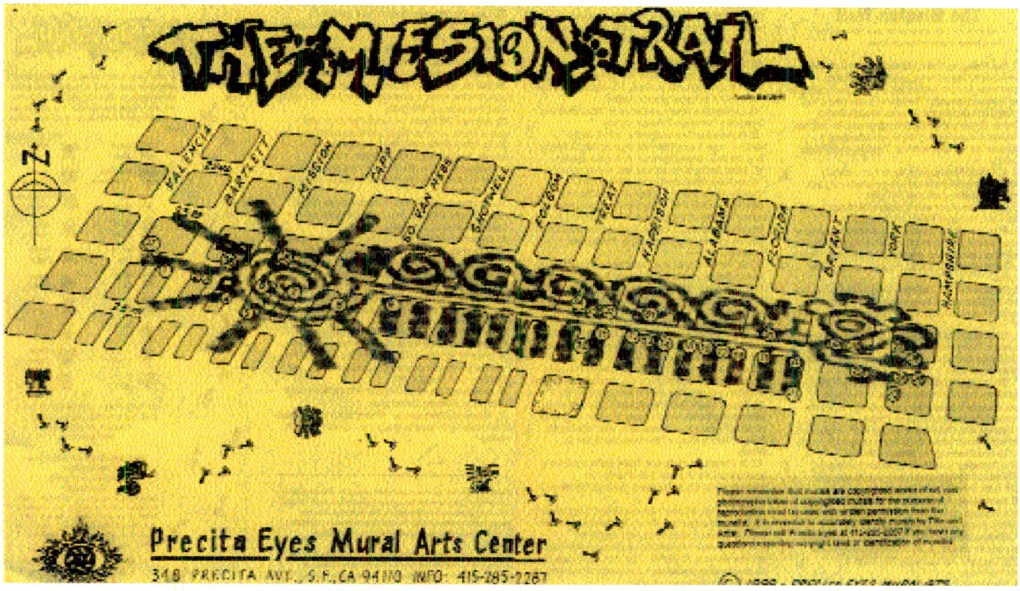
This demonstrates that the importance of having the community mural, is not a mural for the individual, but for the whole community to share. There is a social bond between people when they work together, an internal healing, and in today's society I believe this is magical as there is such a breakdown in community involvement and intercommunication. People can also gain a heightened respect for each other as they strive for the same goal. It is similar in some ways to musicians and performers in an orchestra who contribute individual parts to an accomplished, imbricated whole.

Mission Mural Trail

One of the newest programmes set up by Precita Eyes while I was in San Francisco was the Trail. The Mission Trail plots a path through the Mission District. While I was in San Francisco I had the chance to talk to Elsa Colardo about the project itself. The aim of the trail is to enhance public knowledge about the Mission District, its history and diverse cultures. It highlights the arts and cultural centres, murals and businesses which have been influential in the development of the District. The Trail is like a chain stamped on the footpath welcoming visitors. The idea was originally thought up by Susan Cervantes and then the project was co-ordinated by other members in Precita Eyes. Much of the funding was given by San Francisco Enterprise Community Program. For this project, the Sunrise Sidewalk Cleaners of the Colombian Boys and Girls and Rap (Real Alternatives Program) were the main people involved from the community. They made stencils and painted symbols and footprints along 24th Street and Mission Street.

The trail is provided with a map (fig 4.4) so you may take your own walk around the murals. In due course, they aim to publish a booklet with

information from the muralists, business owners and cultural centres as well as directions and information on the symbols and all involved in making the trail. At the moment there are 34 sites located on the trail.

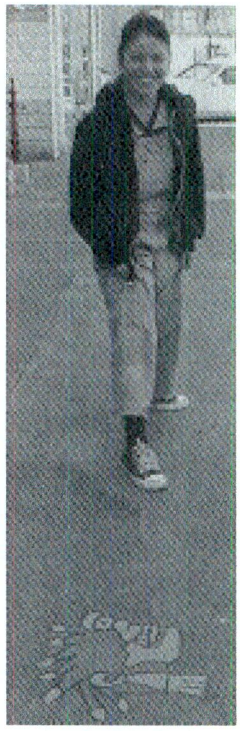


(fig 4.4) The Mission Trail map

(fig 4.5) Quetzalcoatl

(fig 4.6) symbols of Aztec Calender

The symbols used along the paths are of Quetzalcoatl (the ancient God of creation, art, wisdom and a symbol of greatness and splendour of the past), (fig 4.5) and day symbols from the Aztec Calender, (fig 4.6). Originally, I was told that they wanted to use Maya or Inca symbols similar in meaning and relevance to symbols of the Aztec Ring of the Days (the calender) but unfortunately information was limited in these areas. Overall, the symbols used so far probably represent a strong Latino community and their Mexican heritage, though through time they may change some symbols and make them more multi-cultural as this would represent better the diversity of the community. For now, they are mostly Aztec in origin. The Aztec Calender contains many different symbolic elements which are mostly represented by different animals. These are shown along with Quetalcoatl's foot-prints which are used in the trail to guide the observer from one site to the next. These are appropriate because on the Aztec codices, several footprints indicated the direction of the people's physical movement. In (fig 4.7) there is a guide standing at one of the symbols. Through the trail Precita Eyes wishes to educate the youth about their history using the symbols which will follow through the district which they inhabit everyday. In this way knowledge of past and activities of the present are united.



(fig 4.7)

One of the most interesting stories that I heard on my guided tour of the Mission was of "El Eskeleto" (the skull) and his presence on a mural called *'The Primal Sea'* on the Garfield Public Pool (fig 4.8). During the construction of the mural someone came at night and painted on the freshly primed wall a small image of a skull wearing a top hat (fig 4.9). The Precita Eye Muralists painted over it but the next morning the image re-appeared so they decided to leave it there. They figured it had been done by somebody in the community, and that it was only fair to keep it and incorporate it into the design. On the completion of the mural the artist revealed himself, because he was so overcome that they had kept his image. A few years later the wall was badly damaged with red spraycan paint which included putting a bow-tie on the image of the skull. The

(fig 4.8) The Primal Sea

(fig 4.9) The Skull

artist came forward and asked how he would clean the bow tie from the skull and subsequently he decided to clean the whole wall, which was luckly quite easy to do as it had anti-grafitti varnish on it. I feel this story tells a lot about community murals and how they work. Precita Eyes respected the unknown artist's work and thus he showed his respect in return to them by cleaning up their mural. The *'Primal Sea'* was painted by Precita Eyes with community youths. Each image in the mural has a separate representation of different sea imagery, with the skeleton being the source looking over all the sea life. They say now he is their guardian.

Urban Youth Classes

After school hours children may be seen in San Francisco painting words on walls around the city. The Urban Youth Classes in Precita Eyes have also another running project called "What do you think ?". Through this project the youths get a chance to express themselves verbally. Precita Eyes said they hope to have thirty walls city-wide flashing cartoon style word-bubbles, featuring quotations chosen and painted by children. The quotations are painted in a calligraphic style designed by the youths (fig 4.10). The letter-style reflects the mood of the quotations and the projects overall meaning may be followed from mural to mural. The children will really be creating street art, much of which is

not documented and some of which is destroyed. In this way Precita Eyes takes on the role of documenting the work done by these youths in their urban environment. They are keeping a record of art and life in the twentieth century. So youths who are voiceless in the city get a chance to have a voice that is heard through the murals they create. If art means expression of the self, what the children are doing is in effect creating their own expression. Even if people cannot make out the words, the message is still there. Their voices are being heard or noticed by the general public. This project is also an educational experience as well as an expressive one. There is complete exploration of materials and the design process, giving the kids a chance to develop their skills of painting in spraycan, airbrush and drawing, and in the execution of murals. With this process, Precita Eyes are opening up to the youth in the community by completely directing their work to the culture of present day.

(fig 4.10)

Mural Restoration

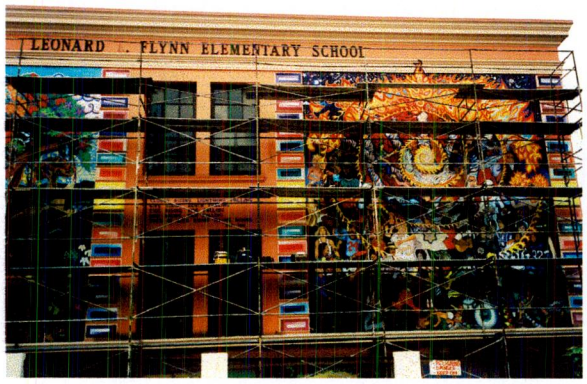
As well as encouraging the new techniques in mural painting, Precita Eyes has an active part in keeping their old murals in good condition. In 1997, through to 1998, San Francisco has seen a number of murals destroyed through demolition, construction and general corrosion through time. To counteract this Precita Eyes organised a new restoration program, bringing their community's historic murals back to life. For example, they restored murals on Flynn Elementary School and the Balmy Alley murals. The restoration program is also fundamental to the youths at Precita Eyes, as they will now learn the process and techniques for future years. While I was in the Mission I saw some of the restoration of the mural on Flynn Elementary School, (fig 4.11). I got the opportunity to talk to Sarai Hinkley who was working on the mural:

> *Restoring murals is good practice mixing colours. Even though I'm not painting my own ideas, I'm restoring murals painted by brilliant artists, I'm learning how they paint, how they see and how they collaborate. This kind of practice restoring murals is the best way to learn how to paint. I love painting outside on sunny days with kids playing all around us, not feeling isolated when I make art.* (Hinkley, 1998, interview)

One of the murals that was very badly damaged in Balmy Alley was called *'Indigenous Beauty'* (fig 4.12). It was painted in 1984, but unfortunately, was vandalised by grafitti to such an extent that much of the original design could not be restored. So in 1991, Susan Cervantes with Myra Fourwinds managed to restore some of the mural's original imager, (fig 4.13). They painted in their own images in the remaining gaps. They painted eyes to represent a witness who could look at the next vandal coming to the mural. The artists and community get a chance to learn about past murals and history in their community, but more importantly they learn to look after and respect it.

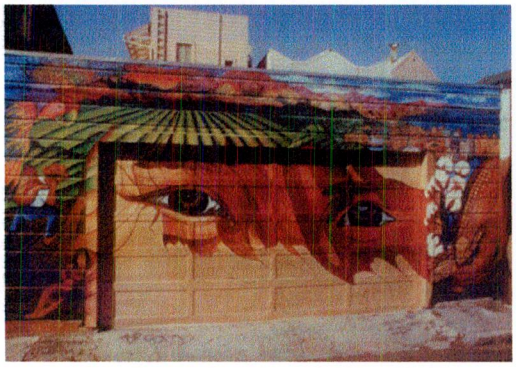
Mural Awareness Month

In May of 1998 Precita Eyes held an awareness month for murals. During this time, they held a host of different events raising money and enthusiasm about murals. They organised day long festivals for different sections of the centre's activities. They had free art classes for toddlers, and they had an awards ceremony for the most talented muralists. During this whole month Precita Eyes had organised the painting of promotional posters which would be posted up in the bus shelters around the city (fig 4.14). This kind of ingenuity in Precita Eyes is what keeps the organisation alive. Precita takes on a form of working which is both commentary and art, because its murals are all part of a struggle, a struggle which is based around the needs of expression for the community where they are situated. It was with Precita Eyes that I realised the need for the community mural and its importance to everybody in the community.

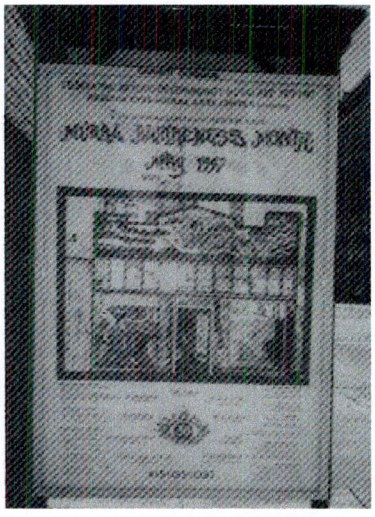


(fig 4.11)
Flynn School

(fig 4.12)
Indigenous
Beauty



(fig 4.13)
Indigenous
Beauty



(fig 4.14)
Bus Shelter

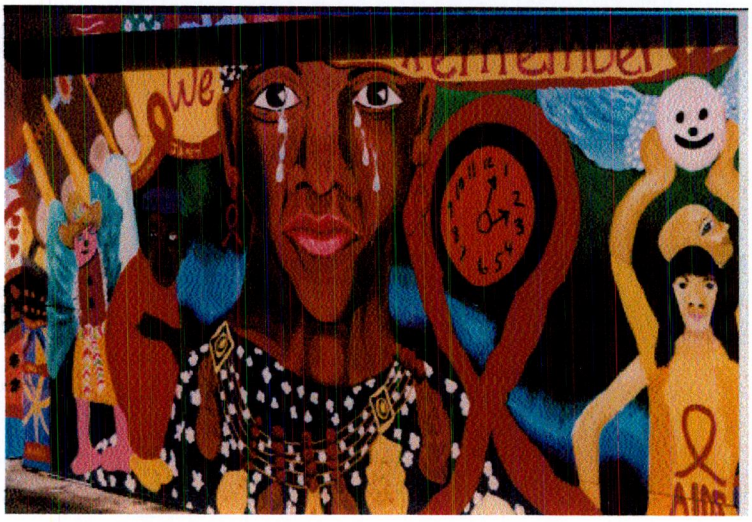
Conclusion

"Collective mural painting breaks down individualism, helps individual abilities to grow, and builds communities" (Montoya,1978, P36). This quotation refers to the basic grounding on which the function of the community mural stands. There is a collective involvement by people of all nationalities and backgrounds when creating the mural. From the Mexian muralists we have learnt that we can be educators through the mural. The subject matter of the mural is undoubtedly crucial in this method of working. It is a chance to educate, to share with the community ideas happening all around and within people's lives, and warn people of such dangers as racism and drugs.

In fig 5.1 children have painted a mural with the help of their local community centre in order to pay respect to people they have known who have died of Aids. Even though the quality of the work on the mural may not be regarded by the art critic as of a very high value, to the people living in this community it is worth far more than any amount of money. The print over the image reads *"We Remember"*, and there is a distinct feeling of hope through the combination of the type and images. It is a feeling of hope, as they have not forgotten these people and also because they are not ashamed to share with the neighbourhood their relationship and respect for these victims. This is the positive energy that comes out of community interaction. Here there is an education process taking place. People are aware of what is happening in their community. None of the projects which I have discussed in my thesis could have existed without communication and interaction between community members. Therefore, this kind of work creates and develops strong neighbourhood identity and a stronger united society. *"This connection encompasses each community's interdependence with the unique natural features of its place, and its perception of itself and its place."* (Block, 1998, p4).

The community mural in San Francisco is most definitely a strong, interactive movement that is growing in the community. Organisations like Precita Eyes are

generating more popularity as people see the enormous benefits it adds to the security in neighbourhoods. Even through Precita Eye's new internet access their message of the community mural can be spread. When walking around the streets of Dublin I cannot but think of the benefits that would be had by the introduction of the community mural to our inner-city streets.



(fig 5.1) We Remember

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