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Institutional Whitewash

by **Thomas Lawson**

Mural by Italian street artist Blu being painted over by MOCA workers, December 2010. Photo: Casey Caplowe.

In mid-December 2010, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that MOCA director Jeffrey Deitch had ordered that a just-commissioned and not yet completed mural by the Italian street artist Blu be whitewashed to safeguard the sensitivities of the museum's local community. The news sparked some controversy, although it's fair to say it was initially mostly on blogs from the East Coast and further afield and not so much in Los Angeles itself. There are many reasons for this, not least the fading significance of the *Los Angeles Times* since it was bought and eviscerated by the Chicago Tribune Company.

Locals know that the mural never had much of a chance to be seen, not just because the museum moved so quickly to cover it over, but because it was painted on the back of the Geffen building, facing a low-cost parking lot that only operates during the workday, and is screened from a relatively quiet block of Temple Street by a row of trees. This was not something with the high-impact visibility of the digital billboards that do rile local public opinion. **1** The biggest problem was likely an ambivalence about the meaning of the museum's invitation to Blu in the first place. In a follow-up piece on the *Los Angeles Times* Culture Monster blog, local street-art hero Shepard Fairey was quoted saying, "I think that though MOCA wants to honor the cultural impact of the graffiti/street art movement, it only exists in its purest form in the streets from which it arose." **2** What Fairey is pointing to is the fact that street artists are guerrilla activists, with no concern for property rights; they take what they can when they can, in order to make their statement, and accept whitewash and bulldozers as part of the landscape. Permanence is not a value, getting the message out is. **3**

It turned out that MOCA is organizing an exhibition called "Art in the Streets," slated to open in April, for which the Blu mural was to be a kind of teaser. There is to date very little information on this exhibition on the MOCA website, which may indicate a reluctance among the fraternity of street artists to accept the inevitable explanation and contextualization that accompanies any museum exhibition. For this kind of canonization inevitably raises the question: Can an art practice intended to carry a confrontational message, a voice of outrage against the status quo, maintain its authenticity, even its life, when turned into a commodity and safely boxed in the institutional space of the museum? This tension, between artists who intend to make strong political statements in the public sphere and the owners or custodians of the spaces they choose as their platform, has a long history. It is a particularly interesting history in Los Angeles, a city well known for lacking public space and public discourse.

A guerrilla performance at MOCA's Geffen Contemporary in early January used projected graffiti to protest the whitewashing of a mural by Blu. Photo: Deborah Vankin.

Institutional whitewash has been an integral part of the story of outdoor mural painting in Los Angeles since David Alfaro Siqueiros invented the genre in the summer of 1932. (He was, of course, already established as one of the three great muralists of the Mexican Revolution, working in fresco techniques on walls sheltered from the elements.) Siqueiros arrived in the city in May of that year, escaping the likelihood that his ongoing confrontation with the postrevolutionary Mexican government would escalate beyond house arrest, and embarking on what would be a whirlwind of creative action. While in Los Angeles for just seven months he mounted two exhibitions of paintings and prints; invented a method for painting on outdoor walls, and made three such murals; gave several lectures on the revolutionary implications of his new technique; published these talks in various local art magazines; and taught a class on fresco at the Chouinard Art Institute. He even found time to get married.

The outdoor murals inadvertently grew out of the fresco class. Siqueiros felt that the only way to teach the technique was through example, and he asked the owner of the school, Nelbert Murphy Chouinard, if he could create a fresco in the classroom. Already worried about his politics (and perhaps fearful that he would come up with something as insulting as Diego Rivera had done the year before at the California School of Fine Arts [now the San Francisco Art Institute], placing his own oversize butt at the center of a composition that honored workers and artists over patrons) Chouinard refused permission, offering instead an exterior wall in the school's sculpture court. **4** Siqueiros leapt at the challenge.

The immediate problem to be solved was how to make a durable surface that would hold color. After consulting with the architects Richard Neutra and Sumner Spaulding, Siqueiros came up with a method that used cement and various industrial

coloring agents. The second problem was how to scale up and transfer the drawings onto the prepared wall, and after talking with friends in the movie business like Joseph von Sternberg, he decided to use electric–powered projectors. With these modern industrial techniques, his class—renamed the Bloc of Mural Painters—was able to complete the 19-by-24-foot mural, *Street Meeting*, in just a couple of weeks. The subject was a meeting of workers on the factory floor, and it depicted several life-size figures in the foreground with about a dozen smaller figures hanging from a mezzanine-like structure, watching the debate. Something like eight hundred people came to the unveiling of the mural on July 7, 1932, and already there was some scandal because the mural showed what looked like a union meeting at a time of labor unrest, with the extra frisson of an African American male depicted on equal footing with a white female. Within two weeks the entire work had disappeared, and it was unclear if this was the result of faulty technique—the color sinking into the still-drying cement—or an act of censorship on the part of the school authorities. **5**

Siqueiros seems to have been more excited by the possibilities of the new techniques he had discovered than disturbed by any possible censorship. He gave several talks at the John Reed Club (a Marxist club for artists and intellectuals) on the revolutionary potential of these new ways of working, including the idea of working as a collective. **6** And in any case, within weeks he had a commission to create a much larger mural on the second floor of a building on Olvera Street, part of a plan to create an art and tourist center in what had been the long-neglected heart of the original city. His patrons here were the socialite Mrs. Christine Sterling, who had led the effort to renovate the area, and F. K. Ferenz, the manager of the Italian Hall building in the center of the development and the director of the Plaza Art Center, who was also a member of the John Reed Club and a Communist sympathizer. These two were in an unlikely alliance to create an ersatz Mexican village to promote better civic relations and better business, and they imagined a large decorative mural of tropical plants and wildlife as a capstone to their project. What they wanted was a lush and optimistic vision of “tropical America,” a trophy ornament to top their vision of a colorful, folkloric village of thick adobe walls, red tiles and strumming guitars. **7** Ferenz must have understood Siqueiros’s politics, but maybe thought the clarity of the commission would guarantee an uncontroversial result.

Siqueiros's assistant Robert Bredeccio in front of *América Tropical* in 1932, before it was whitewashed.

Commission in hand, Siqueiros met with the Bloc of Mural Painters to decide on an approach and soon came up with a plan to indict the historical weight of colonial oppression in Central America. **8** The overall design featured a crumbling Mayan temple overtaken by the bulging roots and limbs of giant ceiba trees, and the collective worked around the clock to complete the 1,800 square feet in less than three weeks, adding two armed campesinos crouching on a red pedestal to the top right corner of the painting before ceding the field to Siqueiros himself, who then worked through the final night alone to add the central figure of a mestizo peasant crucified under an American eagle. Once completed it was clear that the crouching figures were attempting to shoot the eagle in a symbolic representation of revolution. The mural was unveiled to much consternation and scandal, and within a month, his visa renewal denied, Siqueiros was on his way to Argentina. Within 18 months, the only part of the mural visible from the street, the armed insurrectionists, had been whitewashed. **9** Shortly thereafter the entire work was painted out. The whitewash did not cause as much outrage in the press as had the image itself.

Before leaving Los Angeles Siqueiros managed to paint one more mural, and the fact that it still exists today helps underscore the multiple ironies of context and ownership that play out across the decades of political mural art. This last piece was entitled *Portrait of Mexico Today* and was painted in a covered patio at the Pacific Palisades home of the film director Dudley Murphy. **10** It depicts the Mexican “strongman” Plutarco Elías Calles, whom Siqueiros considered a traitor to the revolution (and who had effectively forced Siqueiros into exile), with bags of money and a gun. Opposite the menacingly unmasked criminal cower some women and a child, near the bodies of two murdered workers. It is a trenchant work, but made safely at a distance from its target—and behind the gates of a private residence.

The Bloc of Mural Painters—whose members included Luis Arenal, Reuben Kadish, Phillip Goldstein (later Philip Guston), Harold Lehman, and Sanford McCoy (an older brother of Jackson Pollock)—went on meeting after Siqueiros’s departure. Determined to keep their focus on contextually vital political content, they continued to experiment with cement as a potentially radical vehicle for their art and, responding to the problem presented by private property, developed a system for making portable murals. Together they made a series of these mural works for a planned exhibition at the John Reed Club on New Hampshire Avenue in Los Feliz. As Harold Lehman explains, their two themes were “the exploitation of labor by capital in America, and the other was the persecution of the Blacks.” **11** The exhibition was to open in mid-February 1933, but on the evening of February 11, following a tip that a Communist organization was meeting, the Los Angeles Police Department's “Red Squad” raided the club and destroyed three of the murals depicting elements of the Scottsboro Boys case. **12** Various liberal arts groups protested this act of official vandalism by the Los Angeles Police Department, with one group, the Intelligent American Fellowship, based at West 106th Street, likening the raid to an act of the Ku Klux Klan. Captain William Hynes of the Red Squad rebutted these charges, saying at a press conference that the John Reed clubs were part of the international Communist Party and that the “so-called ‘Japanese Press Conference’ who were to hold a chop suey and social are, in reality, a group of Japanese Communists.” **13** He did not offer any other rationale for the destruction of the artworks.

Discouraged, the artists of the Bloc soon dispersed, some to Mexico, others to New York, and the legacy of radical mural painting remained quiescent for several decades. Siqueiros’s *América Tropical* lay forgotten under its layer of whitewash until the paint began to peel away, in the late sixties, and the historian Shifra Goldman photographed the devastated mural, which launched a long campaign to restore and preserve it. **14** The rediscovery of Siqueiros’s presence in the city coincided with a new period of political activism and helped ignite an enthusiasm for mural painting across Southern California. This is typically understood as an expression of Chicano pride, but in fact many different ethnic groupings used outdoor murals to stake their place in the broader cultural history of the city. In addition, many nonpolitical artists saw murals as a way to expand their work beyond the confines of studio and gallery. Much of this work was done on the sides of small businesses and on freeway walls, water channels, and other spaces without the means or infrastructure to ensure longevity. Just as

Siqueiros's murals were made possible by technical innovations, most of these later murals were made possible by improvements in acrylic paint, which allowed artists to paint directly on many surfaces. But no paint is lightfast, and the California sun began to bleach the color out of these works quite quickly. Over the years various ownership changes, community changes, and a lack of interest and money have allowed many murals to fade away, get covered in gang tags or simply be whitewashed. **15**

But sunlight and disinterest have not been the only enemies of outdoor murals; there have also been several instances of a more active suppression. In 1984 Barbara Carrasco, already well established as a banner maker and muralist for César Chávez and the United Farm Workers, was commissioned by the Los Angeles Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) to make a mural for the Olympic Games, which was to be held in the city for the first time since the summer of 1932, when Siqueiros was beginning work on *América Tropical*. Planned to be a mural of similar dimensions, Carrasco's *History of Los Angeles: A Mexican Perspective* incorporated a number of vignettes from that history within the stylized strands of hair flowing behind a gigantic profile portrait of a young Chicana woman. In a prefiguring of Deitch's recent decision, officers of the CRA found two of these vignettes—one depicting a mass lynching of Chinese workers and the other the internment of Japanese Americans—likely to offend, and decided against installing the mural.

Kent Twitchell, *Ed Ruscha Monument* (in progress), 1978. Courtesy of the artist.

Not every case of mural destruction has a political undercurrent, and two of the most significant in legal terms involve the oddly spiritual and deeply unconfrontational work of Kent Twitchell. In 1986 his well-loved mural *The Old Lady of the Freeway* was painted out by the owner of the building on Temple Street that supported it, in order to make way for a billboard. Citing the California Art Preservation Act of 1980, Twitchell took the landlord to court, and a monetary settlement was reached in 1992. In a strange repetition, another work by Twitchell, a giant, full-figure portrait of Ed Ruscha on the side of a government-owned building on Olympic and Hill in downtown, was whitewashed in 2006. This time Twitchell sued the US government and 11 other defendants, using the federal Visual Artists Rights Act as well as the California statute. **16**

Both laws prohibit the “desecration, alteration or destruction” of works of public art unless the artist is given ninety days notice to remove the work. Twitchell settled this case for a record $1.1 million in 2008.

One evening in the wake of the recent whiteout at MOCA, a group of activists gathered at the parking lot on Temple facing the now empty wall. Using a laptop and a portable laser projector they presented a short program of protest, culminating in an image of Blu’s lost work with the word censored across its face as if stamped. **17** There will always be a place for decorative wall painting, and artists will continue to find relevant uses for the mural genre, but the limits of the materials—the paints and walls—and the inevitable conflicts with property owners and their rights surely indicate that the mural has passed into history as a vehicle for political expression. Better to follow Siqueiros in seeking modern-day postindustrial techniques, as these protesters did. The portability, brightness, and high definition of the image, plus the ability to introduce motion and interactivity, provide politicized street art with a whole new world of possibility. It will be interesting to see if these new technical developments spur a significant new outpouring of public art with political intent.

endnotes

1. In addition, the work itself does not appear to have been one of Blu’s strongest or his most innovative response to a low-visibility situation. In 2008 he used some out of sight locations in Buenos Aires and Berlin to make this mural-in-action video that has since gone viral.
2. It is worth noting that before coming to MOCA, Deitch represented Fairey, and that the final show at Deitch Projects was “**May Day**,” Fairey’s shout-out to working class heroes of the ages. Christopher Knight, "**Shepherd Fairey Weighs in on MOCA's Mural Controversy**," *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 14, 2010.
3. Artist Charles Gaines recently discussed these conflicts in his essay, **"Free Speech and Property Rights,"** published January 6, 2011 on the website CLANCCO.
4. In keeping with its location at the San Francisco Art Institute, Rivera's 1931 mural, *The Making of a Fresco, Showing the Building of a City,* is more about making art than confrontational politics. It shows a group of painters on scaffolding at work on a mural of a giant machine operator. The centrality of Rivera’s butt seems more a joke than a jibe, and the work as a whole is more contemplative than any of Siqueiros’s provocations.
5. The mural was discovered more or less intact under a heavy layer of whitewash in the kitchen of what is now a Korean church in June 2004, and efforts continue to find a way to restore it. See David Ebony, "Siqueiros Mural Rediscovered," *Art in America* (April 2005).
6. In a lecture entitled “The Art of the Cement Fresco” given at the John Reed Club in 1932, Siqueiros said: “The skeleton process of working is this. First drill gun or hammer clean the wall, making holes to improve the solidity of the application, and generally roughen the surface making that peculiar texture which is necessary for cement frescoes. Second, the cement is put on in small patches, just like the old lime plaster used to be put on, and the color is applied with the air gun while the cement is wet. Third, after the cement has crystallized, it is waxed with a mineral wax. This wax is more permanent than the old waxes used, animal waxes decompose easily.” In an article entitled “The New Fresco Mural Painting” in the July 2, 1932, issue of *Script* magazine, Siqueiros reworks this description of his working method, adding, “We worked as a collective group, the entire project being directed and executed by those most talented or experienced in the various phases of the problem.” Both quotes taken from documents from the Collection of the Getty Research Institute and the Collection of the William Clark Memorial Library, UCLA, respectively, that were on display in the exhibition **"Siqueiros in Los Angeles"** at the Autry National Center in Los Angeles.
7. Historic postcard, ca. 1950, showing Olvera Street, an idealized Mexican village in downtown Los Angeles.
8. “Naturally, when the manager made his request, he thought we would paint an *América Tropical* bursting with joy, colors, dancing; but this could not be the Latin American tropics. Brazil was dominated by the Ford house; it was in the Brazilian tropics where generals are sold out to English imperialism and tear the country apart. These tropics are

exploited by the allied bourgeoisie from the diverse imperialistic nations the same way as tropical Mexico is, where Indians work in gum factories for a petty pay, and where there is no authority but that of the imperialistic company itself. A bitter drama is taking place in the tropical regions of Mexico which we all know; a drama of Biblical dimensions of peoples without rightful autonomy, geographically rich cultures which are starving. So we painted, as best we could, the Mexico of Latin America." David Alfaro Siqueiros, cited in Irene Herner, "What Art Could Be," *Convergence: Autry National Center Magazine* (Fall 2010): 21–22.

9. "A week ago fifteen feet of the fresco was whitewashed, thus hiding it from the street. This brings up once more the question of artist rights versus owner's rights.… But property right is, finally, the right of money, which is not always synonymous with good judgment. The fresco is not destroyed, but merely partially covered. Someday we may find that decisions of this kind will be referred to properly constituted boards on which art and property are both represented." Arthur Miller, *Los Angeles Times*, March 18, 1934, cited in Luis C. Garcia, "Siqueiros in Los Angeles: Censorship Defied," *Convergence: Autry National Center Magazine* (Fall 2010): 41.
10. *Portrait of Mexico Today*, pictured above in its original location, is now in the collection of the Santa Barbara Museum of Art.
11. Harold Lehman, quoted in Lynn LaBate, "David Alfaro Siqueiros and the Chicano Mural Movement in Los Angeles," *Convergence: Autry National Center Magazine* (Fall 2010): 27.
12. It is still shocking to read of the deeply ingrained institutional racism of the period. The Scottsboro Boys case began as a brawl between two groups of young men riding a freight train through Alabama. The African American group beat the whites and threw them off the train, and in retaliation the whites alerted the authorities, spicing their report with charges of rape. As a result the blacks were almost lynched by a mob, and were run through a series of appalling prejudicial trials which seesawed up and down the entire appellate system, with the lives of the defendants always in the balance. The first ruling by the US Supreme Court, returning the case to Alabama on the grounds that there had not been an adequate defense, was returned in early November 1932, and would have formed the backdrop to these paintings. For more on the Scottsboro case, see Douglas O. Linder's **website** on famous American trials.
13. From an undated 1933 copy of *Daily Illustrated News*, under the headline "Red Squad Head Defends Police Procedure," UCLA Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library.
14. Now, after years of neglect and many false starts, the City of Los Angeles and the **Getty Conservation Institute** are working to open a reconstructed version of Siqueiros's *América Tropical,* with a viewing platform and an interpretative center, in time for the eightieth anniversary of the work in 2012. Above: schematic design by Pugh + Scarpa Architects.
15. This pervasive neglect is amply documented in Judith Baca's **appeal** for city help in establishing funds and protocol for restoration. One example is the disrepair of Willie Herron's seminal work from 1972, *The Wall That Cracked Open*, before it was painted over by graffiti abatement workers.
16. The 1990 Visual Artists Rights Act is available online at the Cornell University Law School's **website**.
17. See Deborah Vankin, **"Street Artists Hold Protest Performance at MOCA's Geffen Contemporary"** in the *Los Angeles Times*, January 4, 2011.

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