

THE REBIRTH OF OUR NATIONALITY

Houston, 1972–1973

A Brief Account

One hundred gallons of bulletin enamel paint were donated by the Sherwin Williams Paint Company. Some art supplies were provided by the Texas Art Supply, and the scaffolding was loaned to us by a construction company. The only resource we could not acquire, and the one we needed most, was personal funds. Despite their expressed goodwill, our cheapskate sponsors would not assist us in securing funding for our personal use. When I attempted to raise funds on my own, I succeeded in acquiring only the most minimal amounts.

Our loosely-knit mural team consisted of Remigio “Sparks” Garcia, a Vietnam War Veteran and a student, like me, at Texas Southern University in Houston.

Briefly, a young woman named Janie Galvan, worked with Sparks and me. She had just returned from Italy after having studied art in the renaissance city of Florence.

An art student from the University of Houston named Mariana Escalante, became part of our team, also.

Note: Mariana and Sparks fell in love while painting on the mural and were later married and had a beautiful family.

Our youngest member was a boy named Tony Guerrero, 14 years old, from Houston’s Second Ward. A wonderful painter, Tony was part of our team throughout the life of the project.

I developed the mural theme with the assistance of Sparks. My role was to direct the project.

We set up shop at the Ripley House Community Center which was located not far from our Canal Street wall. We were provided a decent room at Ripley by its director, Mr. Felix Fraga, and we were soon busy drawing our mural design. Our sketch dimensions were about 20 inches high by 12 feet wide. We discussed and drew our ideas following a general concept I had developed months earlier. We discussed whether, on a mural about people struggling for self-determination, we should be looking to European or even North American artists for examples or inspiration. I felt that in such an important work as we were about to do, we should study our own Mexican mural heritage. Our goal was to paint a mural depicting our Chicano Mexicano community coming to rediscover our cultural and human dignity. If we were to honor our community, we should learn more about it, especially by studying our Mexican mural masters (see attached photos).

We completed our mural drawings in about three weeks, and entitled it "The Rebirth of Our Nationality." We started in July of 1972. We proceeded very well and soon had the attention of the entire city for we were painting "the biggest mural in Texas!" I got carried away by saying that a couple of times and soon regretted it. I realized what we were painting was more important than its size.

When people in the barrio started coming by to see what we were doing, we began what was to become a daily dialogue with the community on the question of our cultural self-identity and our struggle for civil rights. The central symbol of a young couple emerging from the petals of an enormous 22 foot wide flower appealed to everyone. It was easy to explain that our community represented a new generation which had blossomed to appreciate its own dignity and recognized the struggle that had gotten us to that day.

In our daily discussions in front of the mural, we soon met numerous other artists. One of these was Lupe Aguirre, an ex-con who was now a welder, and a very talented painter. He periodically painted with us and we became very good friends from then on. Lupe had twin boys of about six years of age and even though divorced, he had custody of the boys. Lupe was part of a group of us who later went to visit Siqueiros.

Along with Lupe, we met Mr. Atanacio Davila, a highly decorated WWII veteran. Mr. Davila was watching us paint from across the street one day, and seeing him, I climbed down from the scaffolds and went to meet him. After introductions, I asked him if he was an artist, a painter. He answered that he was indeed a painter and accepted our invitation right away to paint with us. He said that he lived nearby and that he like what we were doing. I noticed that his right hand was missing two fingers, having only remnants of the thumb and the two other fingers. I found out later that when throwing a hand grenade, it exploded as he let go, injuring him severely. He had been behind enemy lines with U.S. Army guerillas in Japanese-held Burma. When he was injured, it took more than a month before he could be evacuated for medical treatment back in U.S.-held territory. Mr. Davila became a role model, not only for the many youths we came into contact with, but to the rest of our mural team as well. We greatly admired him and I am proud to say, after painting with us, Mr. Davila went on to paint murals on his own. We became good friends and I will never forget him.

There were cantinas, or bars, only a block away in either direction, and one right across the street from our mural. We often received visits from drug users, tough guys or simply drunks. We were careful not to become too friendly with those who could be a negative or destructive influence to the young people from the barrio who painted with us, looked up to and respected us.

There were also many Anglos from the more affluent parts of Houston who often stopped to talk to us. Most just wanted to be near the action, any action, going on in the city. More than once some of these spoiled brats offered us pot and even cocaine, assuming we used the stuff. When told to leave, they were surprised at our ingratitude.

One high school teacher, we'll call her Dr. Betty for she had a PhD in art, came to volunteer on a Sunday. I assigned her to paint with Tony Guerrero. The assignment was for Tony to show and demonstrate to her how we did the paint blending and the highlights and shadows on the large parts of the 240 foot wide mural. After an hour, Tony came to talk to me. There were three complaints:

1. "That lady don't want me showing her nothing!"; and
2. She just paints what she wants and "she's making a mess," and
3. "She has a bottle of liquor in her purse, and she's drunk."

I went and explained to our drunken visitor that we'd rather not have her help because she was drunk and this was a bad example to our young helpers. She was up on the mid-level scaffold plank when I spoke with her and I immediately regretted it, for in angrily collecting her things, she fell off the scaffold. Luckily, there was grass on the spot where she landed and she was not hurt. Still, she muttered something like "stupid, ignorant people!" and left staggering toward her car. Looking at the painting she had done next to work which Tony had painted, I realized just how well Tony painted and that I should pay special attention to him. I decided to leave Tony's and Dr. Betty's painting just as they had done it. To this day, one can see the work of a barrio boy who learned to paint on a street mural, painting freely in large scale, and a highly educated teacher with confused theories and esoteric notions about art.

But I do not want to leave the impression that no drinking of alcoholic beverages was allowed. In fact, I often drank beer which kind people brought as a gift. How could I refuse? Only drunkenness was not allowed, or the use of illegal drugs.

The mural became a focal point in the barrio where people from all walks of life, from every part of Houston, gathered to view and ponder our pictorial ideas. It became a gathering place under our immense and looming imagery, like a dramatic backdrop to our excited discussions. Under its gaze, where the giant figures in the mural seemed to join our goings to and fro, we discussed every issue both sacred and profane. Below the moving figures, we met children, as well as elders, business men and con men, prostitutes and nuns, right wingers and left wingers, drug dealers and social workers, vatos locos and university students, fake and honest politicians, but most importantly, we met and discovered ourselves. It became a place where we became storytellers to humble barrio people, as well as to pompous and well fed visitors. In the mural, our community exalted itself and barrio people, along with us aspiring muralists, shouted our self-discovery to the world. The mural evolved a life of its own as a messenger from our unconscious appearing in our midst as a dramatic healing mirror where, notwithstanding the simplicity and innocence of its creators, reflected the collective dream of our community.

The mural progressed very well and we made friends, not only from the surrounding barrio, but also with people from other barrios. People came from the North side, from Denver Harbor (where I lived), from the Westside, even from surrounding towns like Sugarland, Galveston, Baytown, South Houston and other small towns around Houston. We even has occasional visitors from San Antonio, Corpus Christi, Austin and other Texas towns.

My professor at Texas Southern University, Dr. John Biggers, was very impressed with our mural. He visited me often as I was receiving credit in his course on advanced painting. Dr. Biggers' young protégé and adopted son, Harvey Johnson, often came also. After Dr. Biggers had advised and criticized me on the painting, we would eat at one of the Mexican restaurants in the area.

Dr. Biggers admired the Mexican mural masters. He was a friend of Pablo O'Higgins, a former assistant to Diego Rivera, an expatriate American now a renowned and highly respected muralist in Mexico. He was also friends with Elizabeth Catlet, a famous African-American artist who had resettled in Mexico and married the well-known and accomplished muralist, Francisco Mora. Dr. Biggers had a personal bond, as well as a spiritual solidarity with the Mexican people and their artistic expressions. These sentiments he shared with his students and encouraged us to study Mexican muralism.

He also taught us about African-American artists whom he admired and who had dedicated their lives and art to their people's struggle. He taught us about his mentor and friend, Charles White, Romare Bearden, Henry Tanner and many others. For a Chicano student like me, this instruction was truly precious. I connected Dr. Biggers' guidance with my own experience in the barrio and what was taking place in our Mexican-American community nationwide, and integrated these into a more universal viewpoint.

My greatest gratification was in seeing my Chicano kids from the barrio, with visible pride, explaining to others, the meaning of our mural.