

THE PEOPLE'S JUDGEMENT AGAINST INSTITUTIONALIZED BRUTALITY AND RACISM

A Sculptural - Mural

By Leo Tanguma

Chapter ___

1981 - 1983

I arrived at my mural studio at about 10:30 that morning. Normally by that time, I would have already been painting for some hours. The project, which I was executing, demanded it. This was my most challenging work to date, a "sculptural" mural condemning police brutality in Houston. The 1977 killing of a Vietnam War veteran named Joe Campos Torres by six Houston police officers had compelled me, in 1980, to undertake such a work. Torres' killing was the latest in a series in which Chicano and Black people were subjected to brutal racist attack by white Houston police officers.

Searching for symbolism, which would represent such a theme, I had selected three towering panels with their uppermost heights angled at about 65 degrees (see attached sketch). My design called for these upright panels to reach 39, 45, and 35 feet in height. The tallest panel measured 12 feet in width at its base and narrowed to 6 feet where the angle then tapered up to its point. The two side panels were somewhat narrower as they flanked the central taller one.

My inspiration for choosing these shapes came after a visit to the site where Joe Campos Torres had been beaten and drowned. Its location was along Buffalo Bayou, near Houston's down town area where two severe beatings, at two separate times that night were administered to Joe by six police officers. According to court documents, Joe Campos Torres was arrested for being drunk and disorderly by three police officers who then took him to the spot described above. Joined by another three officers, they proceeded to beat Joe with their batons and with kicks and punches. After having severely beaten their handcuffed prisoner, the officers took him to Houston's city jail to be booked. The jailers, however, seeing Joe's grave injuries, directed the police men to take Joe to the hospital's emergency room.

Pretending to do as directed, the officers instead took the bleeding young man back to the site of the beating. There they resumed their assault, inflicting additional injury and trauma on the depleted, handcuffed Vietnam War veteran. Even though he was unable to stand, and only semi-conscious, the police officers threw Joe Campos Torres over the concrete embankment into the bayou twenty feet below. The police then left to finish their shifts while Joe Campos Torres drowned. His body was found the following day.

The police officers must have known and used the site of the assault before Joe Campos Torres' murder. It lay behind old out buildings where trees and shrubbery next to Buffalo Bayou provided a convenient seclusion for police beatings. While visiting the site I glanced up at downtown Houston's tall buildings. They seemed to form a high wall around the site, a wall of jagged edges surrounding a tomb. Late in the day, the shadows on the sides of the buildings struck me as most symbolic. My sculptural mural would utilize these shapes of the building's shadowed sides to suggest the hidden darkness of our society where covert official injustice takes place!

Back in my studio, as I prepared to paint that morning, I remember thinking how important and necessary what I was doing was. Local Hispanic politicians and leaders had prevailed on the Mexican-American community to not join public protests against the police. They stated that their reason for this admonishing the community was that, "communists and their sympathizers were organizing those protests." They suggested that joining any of those rallies would only serve the radicals' political agendas.

It was important, therefore, that my effort of condemning these responsible police officers, and the system that protected them and ignored police brutality, in a dramatic public mural be not dissuaded or misdirected in any way. Only friends and interested community people contributed to the sculptural mural. Now, halfway to completion, the mural was looking very good indeed.

About then there was a knock on my studio door. Even if the constant visits of people hampered my painting, I was always glad to have supportive visitors. Standing in a group, behind the main person of importance, were about four or five board members from the Houston Council on the Arts and Humanities. This organization disburses taxpayers' money to the arts in Houston. I was struck by their strained smiles, their rigid body language, and their stern attitudes. It occurred to me that the whole lot of them was constipated.

At the head of the group, appropriately enough was the chairperson of the arts council, Mrs. Norma Riddle. Slightly behind her was the executive director of the council, Mr. John Blaine, and the other members whose names I do not quite remember. I invited them in as gracefully as I could for I had had previous encounters with this group. I welcomed them and offered some of the coffee I had just made.

Mrs. Riddle said they did not want any coffee but were there to see the mural I was painting. She may as well have said. "No, we don't want any of your coffee, Leo; we're here to see what kind of mess you are doing here!" I didn't bother to ask why they wanted to see my mural, for already their attitude conveyed the reason.

Since the various mural panels around my spacious studio were not arranged in any sequence or order, I explained that it would be better to first view my mural plans. On my large work table I spread out three separate sheets of brown wrapping paper. Each of these measured about three and a half feet wide by seven feet in length. Placed side by side, my mural drawings were then easy to understand with the twelve-foot panels visible in different degrees of completion leaning on the studio walls. The largest

of the mural towers were assembled on the studio floor, ^{with} which measured forty-five feet in length, and would someday soon be standing upright, by that same imposing height.

I could see that in spite of themselves, they were impressed. Not only was the sculptural mural structure of monumental scale, but my paintings were, if I may say so, equally excellent. Apparently, the group had previously discussed what a terrible, radical, bad person and painter I was. Yet, in spite of this, some of them nodded discreetly and approvingly to me, careful not to let the others see them.

I explained the meaning and reason behind each scene. As the group gathered around my eight feet by eight feet table, I noticed something in the group, which I had never seen before. Usually, when groups came into my studio and viewed my drawings, they tended to incline forward over the table to see the drawings better. Now, it was difficult not to laugh at what I saw, for my visitors were standing upright, leaning back somewhat, forcing themselves to look downwards at an angle over their chests. The only reason I can think of for that strange posture is that they each did not want to seem eager to see my drawings lest their co-council members should notice.

As I observed them, I could see their confusion and bewilderment, for I had treated them courteously and respectfully. I had the distinct impression that they expected me to be crude and vainful. They were expecting, I think, for me to be argumentative and rhetorical – a subversive of some sort. While my presentation to them was civil and intelligent, one of them asked if I was aware that people considered me a troublemaker. I replied that it saddened me to hear that, for all I ever depicted in my paintings were justice, human dignity, and love. I said also that by their suspicious attitudes, it was they, rather, who were provocative, as well as misinformed and biased.

Finally, Mrs. Riddle could stand it no longer, interrupting me rudely by saying, “Leo, if you are so discontented here, why don’t you go back to Mexico?”

To which I responded, “But Mrs. Riddle, I’m not from Mexico...”

Then, her quick retort, “Well, wherever you’re from.”

“I’m from Texas, Mrs. Riddle, like all my family...”

“You’re just trying to cause trouble with that monstrosity! You are trying to divide the community between Mexicans and Anglos!” she said.

At this point Mrs. Riddle turned away angrily, walking towards the door, mumbling something to her companions. Seeing them leave, it occurred to me that for all their bluster and indignation, they could do nothing to stop me. Or so I thought.

I wished I had said to her, “What I’m ‘discontented’ about is police brutality and murder, and indifferent people like you.”

Needless to say, their visit did disturb me because I was also executing another mural, one funded by the very arts council my unhappy visitors represented.

Returning to the case of police brutality, it will be remembered that defenders of the police tried to assign blame to Joe Campos Torres for his own murder. It was pointed out that Joe has resisted arrest, had cursed the police, and even defended himself while being beaten. In spite of everything, criminal charges were finally brought against the police. Still, of the six officers who beat and murdered Joe Campos Torres, only three were ever tried and convicted. Finding the three guilty of murder, the Texas judge handed down a sentence of one year for each of the officers, plus a fine of \$2,000, which was later dropped by the judge. Shocked by the verdict, the Mexican-American community initiated street demonstrations and expressed their frustration with the Texas justice system. There were demands that the officers be tried in Federal Court under a new federal law and be charged with violating Joe Campos Torres' civil rights by depriving him of life.

In response to the public outrage, a federal judge finally agreed to hear the case. This caused a sigh of relief in the community that now, perhaps, justice would be done. Their expectations were soon shattered once again with an even greater insult than the state sentence. Federal Judge Ross Sterling sentenced the three policemen to one year and one day in prison. This sentence, however, was to be served concurrently with the state sentence. In other words, the federal judge, in effect, gave the murderous officers an extra day in jail for depriving Joe Campos Torres of his civil rights by killing him.

During all these controversies, events were taking place in my family life which made me slow down in my mural work. In early 1979, my wife, Ruby, was diagnosed with advanced cervical cancer. A local doctor, a family medicine practitioner by the name of Dr. Messerschmitt, had two years earlier determined that she had only minor "female" bleedings. This resulted in a somewhat relaxed attitude in Ruby towards her bleeding even as her condition worsened. After my many pleadings, she had a second medical opinion, and our worst fears were confirmed.

Late in 1981, I had to reconsider my mural projects. I decided to spend less time painting in order to be home with my wife and to help her overcome the cancer. It became difficult working on a project with no pay at a time when my wife's illness required all our resources possible. I concentrated instead on another project, an equally monumental work depicting the despoliation of the natural environment. This project provided me funding of two grants which I had been awarded a year earlier by the Houston Council on the Arts and Humanities. These grants came from the same group whose board members had paid me the very unpleasant visit which I have described. In any case, I worked on the police brutality mural only sporadically. My wife's condition, meanwhile, continued to deteriorate.

The time period I am writing about is 1979 through 1983. During this time, I had undertaken four murals, two of them truly monumental in their dimensions. All were monumental in their subject matter. These were:

1. The police brutality mural, which I initiated, with contributions from community friends towards art supplies and building materials;
2. An environmental mural, funded by two grants from the Houston Council on the Arts and Humanities; and,

3. Two African-American murals, funded by the Cuney Homes Housing Projects Residents Council and the Houston Housing Authority.

For the police brutality mural, I had acquired the warehouse studio I described earlier. After that studio space ceased to be available, I took the mural to a studio space in Baytown, about 30 miles southeast of Houston. After harassment and intimidations by Baytown police officers, I took my work back to Houston, this time to a more secure site that was managed by more sympathetic owners. My new host was Centro Aztlan, a Mexican-American, politically active, and working class oriented community center. Finally, I thought, a place where my mural would be safe.

My wife was admitted to the University of Texas Medical Center, in Galveston, Texas, on April 1, 1983. She died April 27th of that year. In another area of my writing, I wish to recount those sad days. For now, I will relate what happened to the police brutality mural while I was at the hospital with my wife that month of April.

Before my wife's death, I had completed the two murals on the African-American experience and felt so grateful to my Black friends for having asked me to paint for them. Ruby's last months were especially difficult, made worse by the arts council canceling my environmental mural in mid 1982, depriving me of my salary. Christmas that year, with Ruby terminally ill now, was the saddest and most hopeless time in our family's life.

It was difficult for my children and me during their mother's last days and at the funeral. I managed to go on, even though I could not escape the feeling of hopelessness and desolation. After some weeks, I decided to return to paint on the police brutality mural. At Centro Aztlan, a Mrs. Zapata, or Zavala, of the Centro told me that the mural was not there anymore, and that somebody had taken it away one night. My forty-five foot tall sculptural mural, my life's best work, had disappeared. The mural was never seen again. Through the years, I believed what Mrs. Zapata (or Zavala) had suggested that day – "Maybe the police took it." She was lying! I found out later what really happened from a then board member of Centro Aztlan who now resides in Denver. This person told me how Centro Aztlan board members, including Edward Castillo, and someone he called "Pinche" Eskimo, had gotten rid of the mural. It seemed that Mrs. Riddle, the Arts Council, the Police Department and all the racist and sellouts in Houston had won. They had succeeded in nullifying the work of an artist, who more than any other at that time in Houston had painted the struggle of the oppressed. I felt utterly defeated. That day, after hearing that my mural had disappeared, I drove to Herman Park near the Texas Medical Center where Ruby had once been treated.

I sat in my car and cried.

