

FROM THE COVER

Mural evokes pride, ownership in neighborhood residents

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left the city as a young widower not long after the mural was finished, frustrated by racism and a lack of support for his art. He thought he'd never return.

Gonzo has known Tanguma's masterpiece all his life, from slightly afar: He grew up in the neighborhood, driving by what was then the Continental Can Co. on the way to church and his grandmother's house. After tagging as a teenager, he put his spray paints to better use to become one of Houston's most entrepreneurial and popular artists with his company, Aerosol Warfare.

Still, eyebrows tilted when Harris County awarded Gonzo the \$70,000 commission to recreate Tanguma's mural. Figurative art like Tanguma's is not his forte.

"I've always heard you need to step out of your comfort zone to grow. This



Elizabeth Conley / Houston Chronicle

Leo Tanguma's iconic East End mural, "The Rebirth of Our Nationality," celebrates the struggles and triumphs of Mexican-Americans.

is a major challenge, in a good way," he said. "We took it back to the traditional roles of the master and the apprentice. Even today, he's showing me how he's doing things. Just learning from watching him has been an amazing experience."

Gonzo — whose real name is Martin Figueroa Jr. — has done most of the heavy lifting, with help

from just a few assistants the past nine months. Tanguma, who now lives in Denver, is visiting through Monday for the second time, to tweak details. While the mural is far from complete, "Rebirth" definitely looks alive again, wildly colorful.

It depicts a rowdy procession bent against an invisible wind toward a central, Adam and Eve-like couple who stand in a rose blossom that sits on a field of skulls. With 70 distinct characters, the mural portrays an epic narrative Tanguma devised to illustrate the story of Mexican-Americans in the 20th century. Among them are farmworkers, union activists, soldiers, prisoners and, most important to Tanguma, families.

In the vein of his mentor, John Biggers, Tanguma wanted Mexican-Americans to embrace their heritage, including its struggles and triumphs. But Tanguma, a moralist at heart, wasn't subtle in his criticisms of the community, either. The figures of Justice and an Aztec warrior are being trampled. The women are the most tortured figures of all; one crawls with cut-off hands.

Gonzo is thrilled to have

Tanguma's actual handwork on the repainted mural, he said. "That really makes it official."

During Tanguma's first visit in November — his first since the '70s — crowds gathered across the street to watch the two artists working together. Gonzo had just completed the outlines of the figures then, and was blocking in their brown skin color.

Jeanne Tanguma, Leo's wife of the past 30 years, stood across the street speaking in Spanish with the neighbors, who were already taking ownership.

"It was very emotional, coming and seeing what Gonzo has done," she said. "He has been such a good technician and an artist. He was so careful to depict what had been there. And the neighborhood is so proud. They feel it's their mural."

Yvonne Garcia, who grew up a few blocks away, has loved "The Rebirth of Our Nationality" all her life. "It's one of these things that gets in your head," she said.

Now the director of Hooks-Epstein Gallery in the Upper Kirby District, Garcia has an art history degree from the University of Houston and lives with

her husband not too far away from the mural in the East End. They have been driving down Canal Street every few weeks during the repainting, watching the progress. "A week ago, it was like, oh my god!" she said. "It's beautiful. It gets me emotional."

Gonzo is not rushing to finish the repainting, noting that it took Tanguma a year and a half to make. "My thing is, do you want it done now? Or do you want it done right?" he said, eyeing the gathering rain clouds over downtown. "We're not racing to a deadline. This wall hasn't come without its challenges, and a big part of it has been weather."

Hurricane Harvey arrived a few days after he completed the white primer. Then came winter's long, hard freezes. He's also had other jobs to complete — most recently painting in front of a live audience this week at the Offshore Technology Conference.

At the mural's far east end, a famous poem by Tezozomoc that was one of Tanguma's inspirations is also not yet re-created. The words are about preserving history through images for "those who are yet to be

born, the Children of the Mexicans."

Although Tanguma doesn't plan to come back until the dedication, muralist Anat Ronen is also helping Gonzo periodically. (Jojo Villarreal helped with the first two-thirds of the project.) Once the details are done, "Rebirth" will receive a clear, UV-protective coating.

Paint technology is more durable now, with more pigment, than it was 45 years ago, Gonzo said. "If Leo had had these materials back in the '70s, we probably wouldn't be here right now."

But then, Tanguma wouldn't have come back to find a city that he now likes very much. A quieter, calmer man, he is thrilled to see the mural looking fresh and alive again, and to see how the city has evolved.

"It's like a dream come true," he said.

Gonzo has learned to appreciate the big picture as much as Tanguma's painting techniques.

"Every day we're here, we get affirmation from people in the community," he said. "It's a very powerful thing."

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