

'Judy Baca: Memorias de Nuestra Tierra, a Retrospective' at the Museum of Latin American Art, Long Beach

Frances DeVuono

'Judy Baca: Memorias de Nuestra Tierra, a Retrospective', Museum of Latin American Art (MOLAA), Long Beach, California, 14 July 2021 – 31 January 2021



Video installation of Judy Baca's mural *The Great Wall of Los Angeles* at the Museum of Latin American Art (MOLAA), Long Beach, California, October 2021, photo courtesy of the Museum of Latin American Art (MOLAA)

Long before art writers were lauding 'social practice' or 'relational aesthetics', Southern California artist Judy Baca was actually doing it. She began in the 1970s during a period of mural renaissance throughout the western United States. From the beginning, Baca's work was distinguished by its commitment to both history and the communities where her works are sited. That made for an unlikely fit into the almost exclusively white, commercial art world of the time. Murals were dismissed as too 'ethnic', too political, and because they were often located in low-income areas they were not an art sector that galleries and museums

acknowledged very often. While her early mural, *The Great Wall of Los Angeles*, situated in the Tujunga Flood Control Channel of the San Fernando Valley, was well documented (at an impressive over half-a-mile in length, it should have been) the fact that nearly fifty years later this is Baca's first museum retrospective is yet another story of art world neglect.

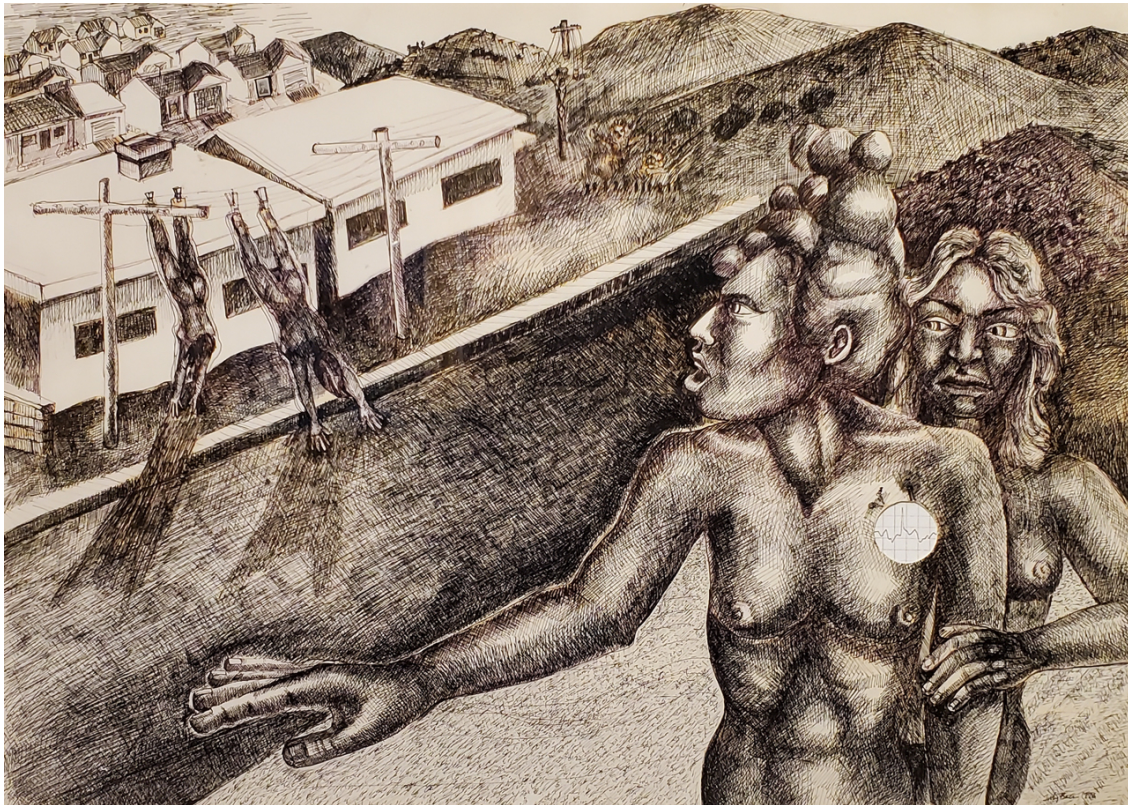
'Judy Baca: Memorias de Nuestra Tierra, a Retrospective' at the Museum of Latin American Art (MOLAA) in Long Beach, California, is a large exhibition of nearly 10,000 feet of space. As always, curators of public work face the difficult task of explaining what cannot be seen in its original state. In MOLAA's case, they have augmented reproductions, preliminary drawings, videos and timelines, by dividing the exhibition into three parts. One is dedicated to *The Great Wall of Los Angeles* itself, one a survey of Baca's public work in general, and a third space, titled 'Womanist Gallery', hosts a range of Baca's more personal work from over the years.

Closest to the entrance to the exhibition, the 'Womanist Gallery' and its title is a nod to Alice Walker's critique of second-wave feminism in her book, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, published in 1983. Walker used the term to differentiate women of colour and lesbians from those of the largely heterosexual, white middle class that dominated feminism at that time.¹ Because the room begins with a very early work, *Three Generations/Tres Generaciones*, completed in 1973, and includes works throughout the decades up through 2021, there are hints of the artist as a person as well as a trajectory of her visual approach. *Tres Generaciones* is a painting of the artist and the women who raised her. The figures are statically arranged and its palette is subdued, especially when contrasted with the fluid and confident lines of a self-portrait made during the recent pandemic, and the even larger triptych completed in 2021. The east wall of the gallery is dedicated to a series of black and white photo stills taken from performances where the artist was made-up and glamorous in the adopted persona of La Pachuca, a female counterpoint to the Zoot suit-wearing men of the 1940s and 1950s.

There are a number of small dream-like drawings, ranging from images of women making love, to women leaving; one is of a woman's head and torso encased in a box, another is a floating head with flames coming from its mouth. *Marvin Gardens*, from 1979, consists of an iconic Mayan figure looking back towards a suburban home that has two figures hanging by their toes from its clothesline.

But the centrepiece of the room is *When God Was a Woman/Cuando Dios Era Mujer*. Although begun years ago, it was completed right before the exhibition. As a 12-foot, double-sided triptych, it has all the elements that characterise Baca's most successful work. Colours, while

¹ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1983. Walker defined a womanist as 'Womanish, the opposite of girlish... Being grown up... A Black Feminist or Feminist of Color... A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or non-sexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or non-sexually.' See the entry for 'The Womanist Movement' on the website for Howard University's School of Law library: <https://library.law.howard.edu/civilrightshistory/womanist>, accessed 30 September 2021.



Judy Baca, *Marvin Gardens*, 1979, drawing, dimensions unknown, collection of the artist, photo courtesy of the Museum of Latin American Art (MOLAA)



Judy Baca, *Matriarchal Mural: When God Was A Woman*, 1980–2021, double sided triptych: 'Thirteen Women in the Volcanic Eruption'/'Las trece mujeres en la erupción volcánica', photo courtesy of the Museum of Latin American Art (MOLAA)

bright, are never primary; instead, paint is modulated into gradients of hue and tone. Both sides have central compositions, but the forms and shapes are laid out in a subliminal geometry that is seen throughout her later work.

While women such as Eva Cockcroft and a few others were making murals, even murals with social messages, they were a minority in the 1970s. Baca recalls attending a mural workshop at the Tallera Siqueiros in Mexico in 1977, where she was the lone female among twenty-six men. But what distinguishes Baca most of all is her insistence that public art not only incorporate the histories of areas where it is sited but that it also tangibly addresses people's needs. Even before she began *The Great Wall...* Baca saw mural making as a complex intervention – a work of art, yes, but also a method to educate the public about its histories, and most importantly an effective way to engage young people from the community. In a video interview excerpted for the exhibition, a young Baca talks about how she saw public art as a creative alternative to the seduction of gangs that so dominated Los Angeles in the 1970s and 1980s.² And, unlike many other artists working collaboratively, Baca has always paid salaries to the people she calls her 'team'.³ Although she had been making murals since her early twenties, around the time of *The Great Wall...* Baca (along with the artist Christina Schlesinger and the filmmaker Donna Deitch) started the Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC), which is still in existence forty-five years later. Located in an old police station in Venice, California, SPARC is both theoretical and practical. Its mission statement is clear: 'to produce, preserve, and promote activist and socially relevant artwork... and ultimately, to foster artistic collaborations that empower communities who face marginalization or discrimination'.⁴

The long hallway that connects the three parts of the exhibition operates as a kind of super-ego for the show – an explication as well as an exposé. At the beginning is a set of tender drawings Baca did for a mural about her own family's migration from Mexico into the state of Colorado, culminating with a scaled down replica of the finished mural now at the Denver International Airport. But the next section includes a video that documents Baca, in 2005, attempting to address an anti-immigrant mob demanding the removal of her (by then) twelve-year old installation at a metro station in Baldwin Park, a city near Los Angeles. That piece,

² Because Baca states this in an excerpted video interview from the 1970s that is being shown in the MOLAA exhibition, I asked her in a recent telephone interview if she thought that this violence had abated since that time. She responded that 'gang violence has been reduced in terms of murders due to territorial battles, but it's more serious now. It's kicked up to the next level [where] kids are now being imprisoned' (conversation with the artist, 30 September 2021).

³ Judy Chicago, another feminist artist working in Los Angeles at the time was embarking on her own iconic installation, *The Dinner Party*. *The Dinner Party* revisits the work of women artists regularly left anonymous in history. Chicago and Baca were feminist colleagues, so comparing their approach informs both their work. Yet while Baca paid minimum wage salaries, Chicago made her monumental piece solely with volunteer labour. In an interview with Amalia Mesa-Bains, Baca describes this difference as a class issue, in that Chicago drew from a pool of white middle-class women while Baca was often working with low-income youth. See the transcript of the 'Oral history interview with Judith Baca in Venice, California, August 5–6, 1986' in the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-judith-baca-5436#transcript, accessed 30 September 2021

⁴ For more information about SPARC, see <https://sparcinla.org/>

titled *Danzas Indígenas*, was sited close to an original colonial mission, so Baca designed it to address stories from descendants of those groups. The vitriol from the white crowd shown in the video, with their American flags and placards, yelling ‘assimilate or vacate’, closely mirrors the anti-immigrant fervour so prevalent today. In a conversation with the artist, Baca said that including this video in her retrospective was important, precisely because it pre-dated the Trump era. Here it is seen as an ongoing chapter in American history.

Baca’s view of America is complex. In the same section of the hall is a small portrait she produced in 1972, titled *Homeboy Killed by a Placa*. It is a tender, loose rendering of a young man, dead, with gang initials covering his face and ‘17yrs’ stencilled below his body. The text states that his name was Jerry Fernandez, and that he was a seventeen-year old member of Baca’s mural crew who was killed by a warring gang.

In the middle room, *Arch of Dignity* connects Gandhi to Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta. The latter two as founders of the United Farm Workers Union (UFW) are pivotal figures in US labour history. The *Guadalupe* mural honours the workers from a small agricultural town. *CARECEN: Migration of the Golden People* is an homage to the Central Americans who settled in Pico, California, after fleeing Central America during the wars of the 1970s and 1980s. We see how Baca, like many artists, began using digital processes to organise layout and imagery. One of the working drawings for *CARECEN*, with its combination of digital photographs and painted surfaces, is a beautiful piece in itself.



Judy Baca, *CARECEN: Migration of the Golden People/CARACEN: Migración del Pueblo Dorado*, 2003–2021, digital Giclée print (as preparatory sketch for mural), collection of the artist, photo courtesy of the Museum of Latin American Art (MOLAA)

It isn’t clear if *Siqueiros in Los Angeles 1932* is a working drawing or a personal work, but here the entire image is composed of collaged digital photographs. The subject is the famous Mexican muralist and activist whose 1932 mural in Los Angeles was almost immediately denounced for its emphasis on US imperialism. In this work, one not only sees Baca acknowledging kinship with another artist who made art with activism at its core, but this piece, stripped of her careful painting style, shows how she does it. Like Siqueiros, and

even more so, in every work since the late 1970s Baca is forcing our gaze compositionally. In *Siqueiros in Los Angeles* the city and its river sprawl out in a dramatic S-curve, creating a visual trail that directly leads back to Siqueiros busy at work on the lower right. Whether it is paintings with central figures, a series of activities, or simply space, Baca variously arranges them all in lines, angles and curves that resolutely lead the viewer's eyes where she wants them to go.

And it is this visual alchemy of design and paint, along with what had to have been tireless research, that dominates the imagery of *The Great Wall of Los Angeles*.

Conceived by the artist in 1976, and then abruptly brought to a stop in 1983 due to a combination of flooding in the area, structural problems and funding, this is how most of us know Baca's work. MOLAA has dedicated two rooms to *The Great Wall*... – one consists of a nine-channel video installation that surrounds the viewer with images from the mural beginning with a few news clips about the artist at the time. The second room is its future. Viewing something as long as *The Great Wall*... while seated on a museum bench has its own benefits. The projection is close to the mural's actual 8-foot height and its 2,754 feet of imagery spans from the left, occasionally intercut with Baca's preliminary pencil drawings. Covering all kinds of American histories in terms of time and people, images run from prehistoric animals and vegetation, to the Chumash Indians, to the violent massacre of Chinese Americans in 1871, the deportation of 500,000 to one million Mexicans and Mexican Americans during the Depression, to the Manzanar Internment Center for Japanese Americans in World War II, and more, up through the 1950s. The range of histories is astonishing and the level of research even more so when one realises that Baca was only thirty years old when she began work on this project.



Judy Baca, *Siqueiros in Los Angeles* 1932, 1999, digital print on metal, collection of the artist, photo courtesy of the Museum of Latin American Art (MOLAA)



Detail from *The Great Wall of Los Angeles: the 1950s Chavez Ravine and Division of the Barrios*, 1983, reproduced for the MOLAA exhibition (note: this was a section of Los Angeles where residents were forced by the city to give up their homes in order to build a baseball stadium for the LA Dodgers), photo courtesy of the Museum of Latin American Art (MOLAA)

Recently, it was announced that this monumental work will be restored and expanded with the aid of a five million dollar grant from the Mellon Foundation over three years. A small, separate room describes both the mural's history as well as its designs for expansion. It is a quiet space. There are preliminary sketches of civil rights protests at 1960s lunch counters, the occupation of Alcatraz Island by Native Americans in 1969–71, and a timeline. Forty-five years since its inception, and thirty-eight years since work stopped on *The Great Wall of Los Angeles*, MOLAA gives us a tangible sense of this mural's history both as an object and enterprise. One wall in the room is dedicated to listing each name of the four hundred people who have worked on the mural thus far. Tellingly, by privileging these names, Baca reminds us that the mural's history includes more than herself.

Frances DeVuono is an art writer, artist and former Associate Professor of Art at the University of Colorado Denver. She was a Contributing Editor for *Artweek*, and her reviews and articles have appeared in magazines such as *Art in America*, *Arts*, *Art Papers*, *Sculpture Magazine* and *New Art Examiner*, among others, as well as in *Third Text Online*. She currently lives in Berkeley, California.