



NEWS RELEASE

February 10, 2000

For Immediate Release

Press release on art exhibition:

Maestrapeace Art Works

February 15 - April 6, 2000

Museum Hours: Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, 11-4; Tuesday evening 6-8; Saturday 11-2.
Open to tour groups by appointment.

Artists' slide lecture: Tues., March 7, 2000, 1:30-3:00, Conference Rm. B, Hinson Campus Center
Reception follows: 6-8 pm, Euphrat Museum of Art

Artists: Juana Alicia, Miranda Bergman, Edythe Boone, Susan Kelk Cervantes, Meera Desai, Yvonne Littleton, and Irene Pérez.

The exhibition *Maestrapeace Art Works* showcases the collective of seven women: Juana Alicia, Miranda Bergman, Edythe Boone, Susan Kelk Cervantes, Meera Desai, Yvonne Littleton, and Irene Pérez. Together they created the monumental collaborative mural *Maestrapeace*, which covers the four-story San Francisco Women's Building. *Maestrapeace Art Works* is a prestigious team of artists from different cultures and generations. The exhibition presents the mural and the process of creating it, along with artworks by the individual artists and current projects.

In 2000, the *Maestrapeace* artists are celebrating the sixth anniversary of finishing the mural, the organization of *Maestrapeace Art Works* to continue their collaborative work together, and a "rebirth" of the mural with new sections to be unveiled in conjunction with building improvements in 2000.

The mural is the first of its kind, a mural devoted to women's history, and it is relevant to anyone who has wanted to see their dreams and visions recognized on a monumental scale. A tribute to the often hidden history of women's contributions to societies worldwide, *Maestrapeace* conveys cultural diversity and inclusion through portraiture, icons, fabric patterns, and 500 calligraphed names of women. *Maestrapeace* honors famous and unsung women, highlights political activism, artistic and scientific achievements, and proclaims the healing power of women's wisdom. The figuration spans centuries through the combination of ancient spiritual icons with modern portraiture of women and girls in all stages of life.

Their process is a testament to community involvement and artistic collaboration. The exhibition and written material touch upon how to build community participation in a professionally painted mural, what assistance or lessons the community mural process can give to community organizing, and how the dynamic tension between individual and collective work can heighten both processes.

The exhibition Maestrapeace Art Works is a collaboration between Maestrapeace Art Works and Jan Rindfleisch and Diana Argabrite from the Euphrat Museum of Art.

The Process of Making the Maestrapeace Mural

In 1992, The Women's Building administration formed a committee to plan a mural project. They distributed 8,000 questionnaires on possible themes, and put out a call for artists. Seven women were selected and given the survey results. They honed their collective approach in marathon discussions and design sessions over two months, then presented the design to the Women's Building Board and a large community gathering for discussion and suggestions. After a few alterations, the design was approved.

Miranda Bergman recalls, "The questionnaires. We were asked to do the impossible, paint women's history worldwide, past, present, and future, on a building full of windows. The mural was distilled out of a whole lot of process. The depth of research, for example into the fabric patterns, the different cultures. Or deciding on the calligraphy of names of 500 women (there were so many women suggested, we just couldn't paint 500 small heads). Also how would we group the names: women in the past, the famous, the community? No, we would put them all together. The results are both simple and complex. One might see what looks like lace, but closer it is the gold squiggles of the calligraphed names. One might note a book burning, then come to understand that it is resistance leader Lillian Ngoya burning a passport that Black South Africans had to carry in the apartheid regime. Huge things are in small things, making people curious to learn more.

"The biggest challenge," Edythe Boone says, "was getting us seven together, a cohesive group, to listen, respect, possible love one another. I had never known a woman from India. We are all strong personalities. You learn to give up certain things you want but that the group doesn't want. I'm the oldest, 61, and I do know how to bring people together. I have an adopted son, 11. The group is his godmother. I felt there should be a male in the design. They said no. During the last week of design, they made the exception: Delexes, my son, the only male on the mural."

For Bergman words come to mind. "Transformation, herstory, organization, on a big scale. There were nine levels of scaffolding, seven of us plus some seventy other women. There was a kind of music of women's voices, tales going up and down. All would bare their hearts. The actual painting is fairly slow, revealing itself slowly to people watching or painting. Markings, then the squares of the grid, outlines, then color. The wall becomes a participant, "her," the eighth one, a responsive part.

"The process distilled the best. The wish or prayer for a vision coincided with how it actually was. Of course there were struggles, bureaucracies. To hold both in your hands. Walk the talk.

"We had no idea how the work would be received. This was in the middle of a busy community, not feminist land. We chose to work with just women, and empowered women. This isn't divisive. An easy thing to say, another to do. The scale of the project was awe inspiring — perhaps a sense of one might not want to mess with these women. What happened was men would bring food, cry, say "This is for my grandmother." The prayer equaled the way people related to one another. The energy given back fed the creation."

Boone feels that people can learn to “work together, respect one another, even though different. Different approaches. Age doesn’t enter the picture. I have friends 85 to 20 years old. I can make them laugh. I don’t walk slower. Support from the Women’s Building continues. A love. Community groups inside cheered us on. They helped with ideas.”

Maestrapeace Art Works

The cross-cultural artistic collaboration was so inspiring for the muralists that they created Maestrapeace Art Works. Collectively they possess over a hundred years of mural experience, including fresco, tile, mosaic, and sculptural murals, and play an active role in the Bay Area mural movement. Experts in community relations and design development with diverse constituencies, they expand their frontiers with new mediums and approaches, and an artistic vision to promote world peace, justice, and creativity. They are developing a line of products with images of the mural, including a commemorative calendar. They actively seek new commissions and are finalists for a mural design (two sides of a building again) for the City of Hayward. They are designing and will paint the new images for The Women’s Building as part of its renovation in 2000.

Edythe Boone describes the camaraderie: “We meet once a month, take a trip once a year, a weekend in a cabin. We do have that magic together when we work together on art. We all know each other, the families. Support.” Littleton agrees, “Maestrapeace is an unusual group. All are powerful women. But we are like sisters. It works.”

Cervantes speaks of the impact of the organization and its place in the mural movement. “Our mural empowers women. Part of the inspiration for The Women’s Building came from the legacy of the Mujeres Muralistas, the pioneering women muralists in San Francisco in the 1970s, which included Irene Pérez. I joined after the first mural. The women were all individuals but shared. The individual vision moved to a collective vision. The seven of us approach community murals in a similar manner now. We follow the same philosophy, but the finished work will look and feel different. The person is more important than the piece — the need to feel included. *Maestrapeace* required volunteers and guest artists. Together we can do things we never could do alone.”

The Mural, Completed and Renewed

Bergman: “All of the mural continues to be current, for example the images of Lolita Lebron, Puerto Rican revolutionary and of women political prisoners. The existence of political prisoners in this country was in the news the first week in September [1999] because of a presidential pardon for twelve Puerto Rican dissidents who had been in jail for years. Also the image of Hana Ashrawi, Palestinian diplomat, human rights activist, holds an olive branch, applicable to her role, the continuing role of women, in ongoing Arab and Israeli negotiations, and advancement towards world peace. All of the mural stands with time. The Jewish woman with the yellow star, saying no to fascism, never again, is still current. Yemayah (a Yoruba goddess, symbol of transformation) and Coyolxauhqui (Aztec moon goddess breaking free from her captivity) — act your attitude still holds up.

Boone: “I met Rigoberta Menchu, very brave woman. The mural is just as relevant and timely today. The birth of woman. All the materials. Grandmother is on there, aunt, mother, daughters, my family’s name. We need to study our roots and other people’s roots, with greater respect for race, culture. You can pass it down, have conversations.”

A booklet *Maestrapeace, A Guide to the Mural of the San Francisco Women's Building*, 1996, describes the symbolism and imagery and lists the names of the 500 women lettered on the fabrics of the mural.

The life of the mural grows with the building, and like a child it needs care. In 2000, the entire Women's Building is being renovated from the inside out. Maestrapeace Art Works is designing and will paint additions to the mural. These will entail a corner section where a new cafe will inhabit the pre-existing bar, and an entire new section around a new front entrance. Preliminary design sessions suggest a figure playing music, an older woman and child sharing, a ceiling mandala, the integration of fabric patterns, names, and symbolic elements: water, reflection.

Individual Work of the seven Maestrapeace Artists

Miranda Bergman

Miranda Bergman has been a community muralist for over 25 years. Her personal work is often a continuation of the collaborative process. For example, the painting *Keeps on Rolling*' (1998) is part of a portfolio of prints by various artists about activist artist Paul Robeson, who turned that song from one of resignation to one of resistance. "I chose to collaborate with a teenage girl, who hadn't heard about this most recent history. She did research on him and I painted her and her poem and Robeson together, with her making suggestions along the way, such as putting the same flower in her lapel and in his lapel. It was great for her." Related is a life-size mixed-media sculpture of an artist, a woman. "It is called *The Artist Must Elect to Fight for Freedom or Slavery*. Originally she was Odelia, a friend, created for 500 years of resistance. She was hanging up T-shirts with Native American themes on a clothes line. Last year I darkened her skin for an exhibition to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Paul Robeson's birth. A bird rests on one of her hands; in her other hand, held high, is a paintbrush."

In a direct line with the *Maestrapeace* mural, a continued collaboration and twist on muralism, is a recent Bergman artwork referring to Mumia Abu Jamal on death row. "Meera predesigned it and I painted it with Susan and Meera without rehearsal. We had only an hour to execute a 9'x9' painting. We are so used to working with each other, climbing over each other." A rough work, it was created in a performance with jazz musicians and refers to inside and outside, to color theory, both in terms of painting and in who goes to prison by way of skin color." An earlier work is similar, a world view, with two painted canvas braids (c. 12' long each) depicting different colors and types of hair braided together.

Edythe Boone

"The AIDS mural in Balmy Alley — all connected to it. I always involve the community. People decide they want a mural. Then someone objects. There is always a problem, a fight, a getting together." Boone completed her first mural project over 25 years ago in a Harlem housing project where she was raising her four children. Over the years she has painted many murals. In 1999 she painted *Elements of Power/ Voices of Change* in Oakland with Cervantes and Desai. She is also an art teacher, and specializes in working with youth.

In her paintings Boone focuses on portraiture, often enhanced with fabric and other materials. "I paint women, three dimensional, portraits, real or imagined. For example I may see someone and remember her. Some have stories. *Coming of Age* is my granddaughter, when she was around eleven and growing breasts, little knots. She started crying. I started drawing on watercolor paper; I made her older, put a flower in front of her. A print

of this is in Nation stores. I did a homeless woman on a train. I used wire for her nappy, tangled hair.

I love art, need a studio, feel cramped. What I want, it will happen.

Yvonne Littleton

“Art is as essential as the air we breathe.” Littleton is working for an art-focused public health degree. As an artist she works alone and collaboratively, switching freely from murals, to graphics, to portraits. As a health professional she sees her area as building self esteem, strengthening the mind-body relationship, and assisting the disenfranchised. Her degree program at San Francisco State University combines public health with community health education, which includes community organizing. She sees art as a medium for community organizing, for example newspapers with a special focus: Black, Lesbian. So much imagery and culture is involved in healing. “Art is my contribution.”

Her 1998 mural *Planting Seeds of Recovery*, sited on a substance-abuse recovery center in San Francisco, welcomes people coming in the door, giving hope that they can come through the program. In a family-reunification project (parents estranged from children by courts) three years ago with the Department of Social Services, she taught parents how to teach art to their children. This helped heal the parents themselves, which in turn helped the child and relationship. Her contribution takes many forms. In a recent prenatal project for the homeless, a project that was conducted on paper, she got art supplies for women and kids in the budget.

Littleton’s art experience is varied: teaching at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, working in stage design, graphic design, and portraiture. But her real love is art for healing. “Being innovative. How best to describe it — I don’t know the words yet. I have the heart of an artist, and I’ve been in public health for 20 years. I want to marry the two. The whole person. Empower people, heal, grow, whole.”

Irene Pérez

Pérez was a founding member of the Mujeres Muralistas, a group of Latina women muralists who contributed to the renaissance of muralism in the U.S. in the 1970s. In 1974 she worked on a 45' wall on Mission at 24th, along with Graciela Carrillo, Patricia Rodriguez, and Consuelo Mendez. “At that time a lot of the images were of men. All the heroes were men and it seemed like the historic events only happened to men, not to families or communities.”

In the '90s, many of Pérez’s large paintings have referred to Latino heritage, community, and immigration issues, such as one which countered the anti-immigrant sentiments of Proposition 187, or another with barbed wire and sacred heart, both from 1996. (“An Aztec eagle is breaking a barbed wire that shouldn’t be there.”) Her silkscreen poster *Que Viva Tu Recuerdo* advertised Oakland Museum’s exhibition (1995) of altars for *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead). The 1997 painting *La Rosa mas Hermosa*, with musical notes, signals her redirection to music during the last few years. She created the work for a mariachi festival. In her home Pérez has a most telling altar, which contains a heart, a goddess figure, and photo of singer Selena (“*morena* — she didn’t lighten her hair to make it in the music world — she was a business woman”). Selena’s sister was a drummer which inspired Pérez, who now plays drums in the Tex-Mex group Cruzin’ Coyotes. In another part of her life, Pérez works in nursing. She likes working with people, and art enters all parts of her life. Her home includes her hand-painted furniture. She has created T shirts for her musical group the Cruzin’ Coyotes, and infant shirts too.

Juana Alicia

One of the latest collaborations for Juana Alicia is the giant mural she created with Emmanuel Catarino Montoya for the new International Terminal of the San Francisco Airport. Entitled *Santuario/Sanctuary*, it has images of arrivals, reunions, and flight — airplanes and birds. Alterations were made as airport officials focused on reducing flyers' anxiety, for example a couple's embrace was made less dramatic, an imposing airplane landing was reduced in size and soaring paper airplanes were added. In preparation the artists created pastel and watercolor studies, sculpture studies, and a preliminary fresco study of a face on plywood panel weighing 500 pounds. Juana Alicia has a manner of combining public and personal art, so that many of the studies stand completely on their own as finished pieces of art with their own layers of meaning. Large patterns, used to apply the design to the wall, are artful too — a few bold strokes suggesting a thoughtful gaze, the curve of a cheekbone.

Juana Alicia's expertise includes murals, illustration, and printmaking. The murals involve a broad community: Skyline College, Cesar Chavez (Hawthorne) Elementary School, the San Francisco Mime Troupe Building, San Francisco State University, and Managua, Nicaragua. On a few of these murals she had worked with Susan Cervantes and Miranda Bergman prior to the Women's Building. Other works are individual, personal, with many depicting family or friends, such as four large drawings of women meant to be grouped as the four directions. Another unusual recent acrylic painting is doublesided and 18' tall, a pregnant woman on one side, a winding umbilical to a dying male figure on the otherside caught under a helicopter's lights. Juana Alicia has taught at Stanford University, coordinated the Visual Art Program at New College of California, and co-founded and co-directed the East Bay Institute for Urban Arts in Oakland.

Meera Desai

Much of Desai's work is personal and spans abstract paintings, large and small, and drawings with figures. She combines disparate elements such as raw canvas and decorative designs, an esthetic she attributes to growing up in a bicultural home. Many of the paintings include embroidery on the canvas, referencing women's use of embroidery in South Asia. A recent drawing featured a bright orange pigment used in India. Desai has directed and painted over eighteen murals throughout the Bay Area since 1991, including one for the Asian Art Museum which she painted with her sister, Monica Desai-Henderson. *Rhythms of India* (1997) was for an exhibition celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of India's independence. "It focused solely on India, something I always wanted to do, part of my cultural heritage. I don't think there is another one like it." The temporary mural was painted as part of a demonstration, with people watching and talking with the artists as they worked.

A recent participatory mural was for the Asian Women's Shelter in San Francisco. She and her sister received a Creative Work Fund grant to do three murals. In the dining area is a collaboration with the residents, using their ideas and drawings. Desai and her sister designed the second one in discussion with staff at the Shelter. The third mural, on canvas, was painted by four children, three of whom were residents, one the daughter of a volunteer. For a mural for Spring Valley School in San Francisco, the artists incorporated ideas from the principal, who wanted a nature-oriented work for the multipurpose room. They painted the upper portions, and some 500 students (K - 5) painted the lower portion. Desai has taught mural painting at Laney College and East Bay Institute for Urban Arts in Oakland.

Susan Cervantes

Susan Cervantes spends seven days a week in her leadership of Precita Eyes Mural Center, which she founded in 1977. "Many people don't know how to put ideas from different people together, even many artists. A unique vision can unfold, which no one would come up with on their own. I can see how it's going to start to form. It's what I focus on: orchestrating, bringing it up to the level of a new vision. I share skills, knowledge. They might block. Teach, orchestrate, direct. Learn to let go. Same as *Maestrapeace*."

One big mural is on the 450' long fence containing the construction site of the new museum. The fence will last for three years. Around 300 children, youth, and residents participated, from little kids up to some guest artists at 30 years. "It was painted in one day. Each study is about 100" long. Coloried copies of the studies went to each station. 15 stations, 500 jars of paint — 700 brushes to clean."

"We are in the middle of a three-year mural project for sidewalks on Mission Street. I did a full scale painting (5'x12'), *Xochitlquetzal* (Goddess of Earth and Life). Then we cut it up and laid it out to serve as a guide for people laying down the mosaic pieces. An interesting process. I think we are the first to do a mosaic mural and tile painting for a sidewalk. I'm working with Peter Carpou of Larkin Street Youth Center and Carolyn Marks from World Walls for Peace. Peter designed Quetzalquatl. There's also a world tree motif. Youth from the Youth Center came in weekly to paint the tiles. We install the first one this summer."

Most of the murals involve considerable collaboration. Thirty students, two-thirds of whom were nonartists, participated in *Song of Spirit*, on the exterior of the Student Union Building, San Francisco City College, completed over three weekends in April 1999. A mural in the Castro was painted by artists with AIDS. Some were with the organization Art from the Heart Heals. Some came with oxygen tanks. One mural right after another. Sometimes Cervantes does them alone, but "I am more interested in community. To heal, make peace. All need to do art."

— Jan Rindfleisch, Director, Euphrat Museum of Art
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