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Revolution/Evolution I
A view of Self-Help Graphics' latest show

By Kat Avila | Web Published 2.27.2003

It's raining, a free carwash for me, though I'll have to scrub to get the birdshit off the hood. I'm driving toward Self-Help Graphics & Art (<http://www.selfhelpgraphics.com>), thinking I'll probably also stop by Olvera Street (<http://www.olvera-street.com>), which I haven't visited since a high school field trip.



Web latinola.com



Self-Help Graphics is a uniquely tile-covered, community-based art center located at 3802 Cesar E. Chavez Avenue in East Los Angeles. There is a small parking lot (with its own giant statue of the Virgin of Guadalupe) in the back, the same side you enter the facility. The office and auditorium are on the second floor, and the Galeria Otra Vez exhibit space and Tienda Colores gift shop are on the first floor. Office hours are Tuesday-Saturday, 10 a.m.-4 p.m. The gift shop is open Friday and Saturday, 10 a.m.-4 p.m., and Sunday, 12 noon-4 p.m. When the gift shop is open, the gallery is open. If you come when the gift shop is closed, which is what I did, you need to go to the office for a door key to see the free group art show, Revolution/Evolution I, until March 9, 2003.



It was nice having the entire gallery to myself where I could stare at the paintings at every traffic-free angle, as long as I wanted to. From two large, iron-barred windows, long black curtains were already pulled aside, to reveal a strip mall in front and Brooklyn Hardware on the west side. The mural on the side of the hardware store was defiantly, energetically defaced with graffiti - two expressive communities having a territorial dispute.

After a quick survey of the layout of the exhibit within the block "y"-shaped gallery, I returned to the front where Janet Swanson's photographs of the show's artists - Paul Botello, Alfredo de Batuc, Ernesto de la Loza, Man One, Chuy C/S, and Reyes Rodriguez - were posted. A few steps forward was Chuy C/S's work, which included a partial card display of an educational and entertaining Chicano loteria (modeled after the Mexican bingo game), as well as a moody rear view of a nude "Santiago" (1998) whose body is subtly marked with tattoos.

Adjacent to Chuy C/S was Reyes Rodriguez, who says of his work in the exhibit notes, "Sometimes, we avoid removing thorns that have been embossed within us. In these paintings I am working out a way to free them," referring to oil-on-canvas "Blue Thorns" (2003) and "Ella" (2003), two monolithic faces. On one side the faces are partially obscured in shadow, growing in clarity on the other side. In "Ella," her eyes are closed, but there is an emergent power behind the lids, hinted at by the more clearly manifested eyes of "Blue Thorns" and "Looking In" (2003).

The work chosen by Alfredo de Batuc (<http://www.debatuc.com>) for the exhibit was created over the course of 13 years. The most enjoyable is "Pisces" (1989), what appears to be two penis-head fish straddling the phallic Los Angeles City Hall building. Fish appear frequently in his work. He explains, "The fish started to appear in my work in the early nineties, maybe right after the Rodney King riots. I associate fish with being the most evolved life form that dwells under the surface of the water, ... [h]owever, my fish always appear outside their natural element."

Another recurring image in de Batuc's work is "the Presence," a round mask-like face rendered sometimes with exaggerated Asian eyes and African lips, developed from facial features of Olmec stone heads, ancient Roman bronzes, and the Great Buddha in Kamakura, Japan.

De Batuc is currently working against the clock for a solo show opening on March 15 at Icaro Gallery, 4258 Atlantic Avenue, Long Beach. The show's title is "PAZ: Contemplating Peace, New Paintings by Alfredo de Batuc," one artist's response to the odious cheerleading by our national leaders for war.

Paul Botello's colorfully and beautifully hatched acrylic-on-canvas "Adam & Eve" (2003) dominates the room it's in, but his desirable blonde "Primavera" (2003) should not be missed. In her flowing tresses are butterflies, a dragonfly, caterpillar, and ladybug; a poppy is tucked over an ear. What makes this painting deep is the skull just to the left and behind Primavera's profile; you'll miss it if you look too fast.

If the name Botello sounds familiar, Paul's older brother is pioneer muralist David Rivas Botello, co-founder of East Los Streetscapers (est. 1975) with Wayne Alaniz Healy.

One of the top graffiti artists in Los Angeles, Man One (<http://www.manone.com>) has fused monster and human together in his most interesting spraypaint work, a trio of pieces - "No Search Warrant" (2001), "Pouring My Guts Out" (2001), "Entrapment" (2001) - that can be read separately or together; the colored background behind the black-and-white characters is a single unit. His "Special Interests I: Bushwack" (2001) can be seen on the postcard promoting the current Self-Help Graphics exhibit (also pictured above).

Man One has been doing mural projects with continuation school students. He's also been working on a mural for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Centers for Disease Control and Protection (CDC); the mural encourages youth to stay physically active for better health.

Another muralist, Ernesto de la Loza, in his exhibit statement, says, "I want to break the division between mural work and exhibition art stressing both mediums as fine arts." His smaller acrylics on wood features familiar backgrounds and faces associated with Los Angeles, such as the Griffith Park observatory and Cardinal Roger Mahoney.

After returning the gallery key, I walked around to the east side of the Self-Help Graphics building to see Eva Cockroft and Alessandra Moctezuma's mural "Homenaje a Siqueiros/Homage to Siqueiros" (1998), incorporating a reconstruction of David Alfaro Siqueiros's whitewashed "La America Tropical/Tropical America" (1932). Siqueros's mural (painted at Olvera Street) hit too close to home with its powerful statement regarding U.S. capitalism and racism showing a crucified indigenous American with an American eagle sinking its talons into the cross.

On my way back to the parking lot, I gazed appreciatively at a front segment of the building with a black-tiled sun and birds of fragmented mirror glass flying against it, and wondered how long it took artist Eduardo Oropeza to tile the building.

Continuing with my plan to visit Olvera Street, I drove around looking for a place to park, finally ending up at the Los Angeles Mall. Taking the elevator up to street level, I strolled out to see the Latino Museum of History, Art & Culture (<http://www.thelatinomuseum.org>) in front of me. Admission is free. The museum is exhibiting art from their permanent collection until March 23, 2003.

I recognized Alfredo de Batuc's name from the Self-Help Graphics exhibit. He has an acrylic with collage at the museum called "La Anexión de México/The Annexation of Mexico" (1991). Luis

Becerra's mixed media on wood "You Have Taken My Land and Made Me an Outcast" (1999) screams for attention with its name-calling, e.g., "WHITE MAN BUTCHERS OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN," and indigenous people and buffalo bleeding profusely from bullet holes.

A mixed media/installation piece in the side gallery is Miki Seifert and William Franco's "Quecholly, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Weapons of Mass Destruction" (2002). At the center is a life-size sugar skull surrounded by marigolds, smaller sugar skulls, candles, and by a wide black band of white-faced soldiers with bayoneted rifles.

Leaving the museum I continued on my way to Olvera Street, passing the Garnier Building where the Chinese American Museum (<http://www.camla.org>) is expected to open this year. Reading the sidewalk plaques in front about the history of Chinese Americans in Los Angeles, I thought of all the things that they don't teach you in school, but thanks to involved people we hear about them.

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