

THE ART OF COMMUNITY

Mural designs express students' hopes for their Northeast Valley neighborhood and society at large.



As the school day began, the high school students huddled around their works of art. Some of them drew or painted quietly, concentrating on their craft. Others fine-tuned their compositions. A few in each group focused on their artist statements. This was the scene over many weeks—at Pacoima’s Social Justice Humanitas Academy (SJHA)—as part of the Skirball’s annual in-school residency program. Together with their beloved Museum Studies teacher and a noted local muralist, the thirty-two teens designed murals of their own, inspired by the art and activism of their tight-knit community.

For years, the students’ teacher, Jeanette Ramirez, had been curious about the Skirball and its ongoing work with LAUSD schools and various educational nonprofit organizations. When she learned that in 2017–2018 the residency program would center around Los Angeles muralism—including works on Pacoima’s famed Mural Mile—she decided to apply. In her application Ramirez wrote, “I try to instill in my students the importance of valuing art and artifacts from their own community, [which] are often overlooked because they aren’t displayed in museums... but instead on walls.”

The art on these walls, located just minutes from SJHA, provided a framework for the residency’s investigation of LA street art. To guide the students in this process, the Skirball paired Ramirez’s Museum Studies class with an artist whose work is featured on Mural Mile, Kristy Sandoval. An accomplished muralist—with more than thirty public works on view in the city, from Van Nuys Boulevard in the Northeast Valley to Slauson Avenue in South LA—Sandoval is a Pacoima native and dedicated community organizer. She has deep roots in the place that she and the students call home. For



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Facing page: Teaching artist Kristy Sandoval showed the residency class her 2012 mural *Mi Vida, Mi Cultura*, a commission she completed with fellow artist Ramiro “Rah” Hernandez, in collaboration with El Nido Family Centers’ Gang Reduction and Youth Development program. Above: Featuring the declaration “We are just as strong,” one of the students’ mural designs was inspired by *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima*, by Joe Rosenthal. The teen artists used the iconic wartime photograph as a basis for illustrating the ongoing struggle for LGBTQ equality.



Above: According to the students' artist statement, the mural design *Roaming Butterflies* "addresses the discrimination against the undocumented and how they are able to fight it together."

Sandoval, the murals in Pacoima help to beautify and instill pride in the neighborhood. More importantly, they're a way to engage the next generation. "I wanted to work with youth, put messages out there for them. And I wanted them to tell their stories," she explained.

Early in the ten-week residency, Sandoval led the eleventh and twelfth graders on a walking tour of Mural Mile. As they moved from block to block, Sandoval emphasized that none of the larger-than-life works could have been achieved without the ardent support and hands-on participation of the people who live, study, volunteer, work, organize, and govern there. It is



Pacoima's communal spirit that she and fellow muralists seek to capture—not only in the final imagery but in the creative process itself.

Back in the classroom, the students learned about color theory and composition, as well as how to use the grid method, projection, and other techniques to create their mural designs. They drew inspiration from the rich mural tradition of their hometown, as well as masters of Mexican muralism such as David Alfaro Siqueiros and José Clemente Orozco. Organized into six groups, the aspiring artists identified the personal experiences and social issues that concern them most as young Angelenos.





The residency students reconvened at the Skirball to unveil how their separate designs would appear as a single work. They hope to secure approval and funding to paint this composite mural at SJHA.

>> continued from page 16; please open flap

One group addressed the struggles of migrants worldwide by illustrating monarch butterflies, an oft-used symbol of the immigrant rights movement. By depicting the butterflies breaking free from a jar, the students projected their wish for migrants and immigrants to live free from discrimination. Another group depicted interlocking arms of different skin colors, with the word unity spelled out in multiple languages. As group member Matthew explained, “We believe that we should be in unity with each other no matter what we speak or our ethnic background.” Yet another group of teens delivered a dramatic critique of gun violence in America and abroad. In their mural design, a list of cities where mass shootings have taken place surrounds a map of the world, and the words “Pray for peace” are crossed out in favor of the far more urgent plea “Demand peace.” For the artists who created this imagery, the prevalence of gun violence calls for action, and it is our shared duty to effect change.

Ultimately, through their works of art, the SJHA students gave expression to the causes that matter most to them and their hopes for the world. For them, as well as Sandoval and Ramirez, the residency was



about practicing art as social commentary. In her application to the Skirball program, Ramirez pointed out, “I often ask my students to reflect on what art created during our lifetime will tell future generations.” As her class demonstrated over many weeks—collaborating on mural designs that illuminate their experiences and perspectives—the future of Pacoima, LA, and beyond provided compelling inspiration.