Marcos Raya: The Anguish of Being

Marcos Raya
Claudia Morales-Haro
María I. Ochoa

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Cover Page Footnote
This article is from an earlier iteration of Diálogo which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."

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arrived in Chicago in 1964 back when Chicago was still known as one of the most industrialized cities in the world. It was a working class city, with factories in every neighborhood. A city of different types of ethnic nationalities: Italian, Polish, Czechs, Mexicans, Germans, etc.

I landed in Little Italy on Taylor and Polk Streets. Got a full scholarship from the University of Illinois Upward Bound Program. In 1967, I was sent to the Windsor Mountain Prep School in Lenox, Massachusetts, where I stayed for two years. We visited New York at least once a month, and were introduced to all the cultural activities of the late 1960s. I picked up on literature, philosophy and culture in general. By the time I was 18 years old, I knew what my calling would be and became a full time artist. In 1972, I arrived in Pilsen, a Mexican working class neighborhood. Pilsen was in absolute need of social services, and in the midst of that, I became a lumpen-bohemian-artist. I got involved in community activism from 1975-1985, and became the artist in residence at the legendary community organization, “Casa Aztlán.” I set up workshops for art classes, exhibits and cultural events.

I had one foot in my studio and the other one on the street. Painting murals, bringing culture to the poor were there was none.

— Marcos Raya

Claudia Morales Haro (CMH): Let us talk about Pilsen but not only of the artists. The culture and the second, third and fourth generation that exists in Pilsen, is there a new culture? Have we assimilated? What do you think?

Marcos Raya (MR): Back in the 1970's we were creating a community. There was a community movement that became the main struggle for most of the generation of the 70's. Many were recent immigrants. I was part of the Mexican muralist and civil rights movement. Although I did not completely dedicate myself to the community because it was so parochial and there were many issues, I did divide my time between the streets and the studio. Most of my murals at that time involved Central America and not only the community. If you are an artist in the 2000's you can quote me – really want to get where they want to get, they have to first get out of their mental and real ghetto, the Mexican ghetto. Young artists have to compete with everybody else. [Mexicans] must be part of the whole city of Chicago and still be Mexican. Like the gueros, they don’t use their ethnicity because they aren’t fools. Yes, everybody came from somewhere, it just happens that some of us just got here. My grandfather arrived in the 1900s so I can easily say that I have been here all this time.

In the market, especially in the art market, it does not pay to be Mexican, because you end up being only an ethnicity. This country was set up that way. It has a very colonialist perspective. You can see this in a bookstore, where you will notice all the western civilization literature and in some little corner you have women’s studies, Latinos, and gays. This literature is not part of the big picture. You can also see this in museums and everywhere else in society.

So how do you beat that? How are Japanese, Chinese, or Jews not part of the minorities? How did they manage to get among the elite? I am not saying you should give up your identity. I am saying that you should not only work on your identity. For crying out loud, we started painting about Mexican history more than 30 years ago and kids today are still doing that. That is absurd.

“Art for me means-ideas, ideas and forms that flow in the air. It is the artist that brings those ideas down to reality and makes them concrete. Art for me has always been a full time job. I get ideas and inspiration from just about anything that surrounds me.”
CMH: I hear you. I know what you are saying, however how would you respond to the fact that Mexican history and art are not taught or talked about in mainstream society? These kids discover this history and art when they visit places, like the Mexican Fine Arts Museum and they want more. By wanting more they do reproduce what already has been done. I understand what you are saying and at some level I agree. However, as a high-school teacher, I have to say that if these kids were given this information at an early age in school they could expand and branch out – out of the Mexican-ness.

MR: Okay, I am not a teacher. The problem exists when there are two Mexicans at a presentation. For now, let us say one of them is me, who is a Mexican citizen and another who is an American citizen. What is Mexican-ness? In Chicago, there are many recent arrivals that maintain the Mexican culture or the culture of poverty. Yet you have other kids, like from South America, that for some unknown reason become part of society and many become doctors, or engineers. They make it big somehow. There is a big world out there and not only a little community, like Pilsen. Do you know what I am saying?

CMH: Yes I do. As a teacher that is also my philosophy. However, kids reproduce what you have already seen and done and can not get beyond that because we do not give them the necessary tools. There is a culture of poverty. We breed and reproduce it. Maybe I am still young and naïve.

MR: Let me give you another example. Germans are the biggest ethnic group in the United States and have been great scientists and industrialists. Then comes the Second World War and Germans become the enemies, little by little they had to Americanize. Now some Germans are more American than any American in this country. Some Germans even changed their names. Today you look around and find a Polish and a Mexican museum, but how about a German museum? In the case of Mexicans, yes, it is a different deal. Why? For one, half of the United States’ land was Mexican land at one point in history. Second, over time there were many U.S. citizens born with Mexican descent. It was Mexico before it became the United States, plus Mexico is right next-door. I would rather see a country that is Mexicanized than Americanized. I would rather see a fusion of Mexican and U.S. civilization. Murals that keep popping up with pyramids do not say much.
CMH: I see what you are saying.
MR: Plus, how did someone start painting Latin America with only bright colors? How can that be? Who started that idea when Mexico is black and white? Mexico's reality is black and white with so much crime and corruption. Where did all this color come from? A lot of it comes from Hollywood or from some fetish that the white people have. We often believe what they think of us.

Maria Isabel Ochoa (MIO): Today would you do a mural in the community?
MR: I have already and I have started with new ideas. It's going to be about the war. This war is not going anywhere, it's only going to get worse. The United States' weapons being used are going to get more advanced. Five years from now, soldiers will not be used, they will use robots. Plus, why does the United States have military bases in Ecuador and Colombia? That is really bothering me. As you can hear, I have many ideas. There are a couple of murals that I would like to do.

MIO: When you decide to do a mural in the community, how do you go about doing that and where do you see yourself in ten years.
MR: Before I would just run and ask someone if I could paint something on their wall. Nowadays, of course, I still ask but I also get funding and make sure that it will last. Someone has suggested that I paint one at the Chicago Cultural Center. Not sure if I will. Ten years from now, I will still be here. I am not sure how the neighborhood (Pilsen) will look like. I do think that the city is going to be for those who can afford it. Unless I buy my own building, I am not sure if I will be in this area.

MIO: Do you have any role models in Chicago?
MR: Not really. I have always made my own movements. I am not a loner but I have been on my own for the most part. I never join an organization, unless I run the organization. That is one of the reasons I never became a community muralist. I always painted the murals with my own money. After Los Tres Grandes, you can not beat them. It is like going to Paris and trying to beat Picasso. Plus the concept of community has disappeared. We live in one of the most global cities. There is no such thing anymore.

The loop is rapidly expanding, we wake up every day and there are new buildings everywhere. Globalization has taken care of that. Everyone is being displaced. Mexicans are going to the suburbs. The city is going to be for those who can afford it. It is the power of capitalism at its purest form. Either you learn how to swim or te ahogas. We can no longer use the same formulas used in the 70s, it is a different time.

However, I will never stop being political. An artist has to analyze his surroundings and the world. I am most proud of many recent happenings in my life. I have had someone from the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston visit me to buy some of my paintings for the museum. When I was a teenager this is what I wanted. It has not been easy to be an original. That is the hardest part for an artist.

Anybody can paint nowadays. Very few even care about paintings. Who wants to spend the time just painting, you know? With today's technology you can do all these things with computers. I imagine it is harder for an artist today. By the time an artist finds his or her niche and discover their originality, times change and it is hard to keep up. It is no longer at the national scale, it is now global.

NOTE
1 The Big Three, The Mexican artists known as “Los Tres Grandes,” were Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros.