

# With a wide brush

Venice muralist paints the town red ... and blue and green

By Jasmine Lee, Staff Writer

VENICE — Judith Baca is an artist, but you won't find her paintings hanging in a gallery. Her artwork is larger than life, her figures loom on street corners and peer at you through acrylic eyes. Baca's masterpieces grace the sides of bridges, walls of neighborhood stores and other locations that can accommodate such expansive illustrations. And they're not for sale.

The Venice resident is a muralist and proud of it. Her art is not about priceless pictures or sublime sculptures; it is about contributing to her community.

"I stubbornly resist people saying public art is a lower art form. Murals speak to all types; some speak about loss, some about joyful presence. Each mural speaks with its own voice, that's what is so exciting about it. They say, 'these are the people who live here,'" said Baca, a senior professor at UCLA's Cesar Chavez Center for Chicana and Chicano Studies.

While public art has an "in-your-face" reputation, that is not Baca's intent. It takes a little bit of self-assurance to create something as large and as high-profile as a mural, but Baca does not do it for individual attention. She favors the public arena of murals to other art forms because "the work is owned by no one and owned by everyone," an appealing alternative to the galleries that excluded her when she started out.

Perhaps there is a mural you notice on your way to work every day. It is part of the scenery, a part of your daily life.

"I don't create murals to be more elite or important, but to integrate them into everyday life and culture," said Baca, 49, who is now working on a project commissioned by USC. "Art in history has always had that function; it's only recently that art has become elite. Ancient art had functionality as a spirit container, as things you ate out of or sat on."

It was with this sense of "art activism" that Baca founded the first city of Los Angeles mural program in 1974, which produced more than 250 murals in its 10 years of operation, and the Social and Public Art Resource Center in 1976. One of the latest SPARC projects is a restoration of Christina Schlesinger's "Chagall Comes to Venice" on the Venice Beach Boardwalk at the corner of Navy Street and Ocean Front Walk.

Venice-based SPARC, with help from the Ford Foundation Minority Stabilization Fund, produces and preserves public artworks. Through SPARC, Baca completed the world's longest mural, "The Great Wall of Los Angeles," located along the



MARILYNN YOUNG / WESTSIDE

Artist Judith Baca takes a moment from painting her wall mural in her Venice home/studio.

## F.Y.I.

♦ **WHAT:** The Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC), which houses a mural gallery as well as a resource center with 25,000 slides of murals from around the world.

♦ **WHERE:** 685 Venice Blvd., Venice.

♦ **WHEN:** Monday, Wednesday and Friday, 9 a.m. to noon and 1 to 5 p.m.

♦ **PHONE:** For more information call (310) 822-9560.

nando Valley. The half-mile-long mural was painted over five summers from 1978 to 1983 with the help of local youth from different backgrounds, some recommended by social workers or the juvenile justice system — all paid for their efforts.

This multiethnic collaboration is what the mural is all about.

"The point is to raise dialogue, to communicate. Our very survival is based on communication and disagreement. That is the most American aspect of America," she said.

SPARC is also the headquarters for UCLA's Mural Digital Lab, where Baca and her students are combining the latest in computer technology with the traditional art of murals. The computer systems allow a muralist to digitally transform artwork into the proportions needed for a mural, a move which helps the ancient art keep pace in the modern world.

"I want to keep pushing conventions of even the genre of murals," Baca said.