

CHAGALL RETURNS TO VENICE BEACH

In 1971, Judy Baca and I sat down at her kitchen table in Venice and wrote up a plan that became The Citywide Mural Project, a proposal to put two murals a year in each of the fifteen councilmanic districts. By 1976, the Citywide Mural Project had evolved into SPARC, and the number of murals dreamt of at that kitchen table had grown into dozens.

In the early 80's, I moved back East, where I come from, settling into a loft in New York City. I painted -- but no murals. In 1991, the mural siren called and I found myself back in Venice designing and painting "Chagall Comes To Venice Beach" at the Israel Levin Senior Adult Center. Painting this enormous, 18' x160' mural was great fun --- the crew included young muralists, seniors, day-trippers, and homeless people from the beach. Around this time, I also painted "The Big Splash", a mural at the Greyhound Station at 7th and Alameda in downtown Los Angeles.

People loved the Chagall mural and came from miles away to see it. In 1994, disaster struck with the great earthquake rocking and cracking the Israel Levin Center. The walls of the building were so badly damaged the mural had to be sandblasted off. When I received the news in New York City, I felt terrible: all that work and fun and life gone. But SPARC and the Jewish Federation reassured me that they would find a way to restore "Chagall".

The community, accustomed to the colorful mural with the fiddler and the flying fish, was bereft at the loss of their beloved piece of public art . A petition was started at the Center to restore the mural . As pressure mounted, the necessary money was raised. In the spring of 1996, I was very pleasantly surprised to find myself on a plane heading west, armed with my mural brushes ready to paint.

Renaming the mural "Chagall Returns to Venice Beach", I made a few design changes. With the newly refinished building, we had gained wallspace. We added Moses receiving The Ten Commandments from a black God and a scene commemorating the 3,000th anniversary of Jerusalem. Two local homeless artists made brilliant additions: Bill

Bosia contributed his signature angels and Dougo Smith painted a fantastic Pacific Ocean Park Pier on the front wall. In fact, the entire Ocean Front Walk wall is a new design: besides the pier, we added the wailing wall, a giant samovar, and a scene of Jewish family life across the generations. I was also lucky to have Sybil Grinnell, who had worked on the original mural, painting alongside, as well as seniors from the Center.

The whole time we were painting, people came up to us to say how glad they were the mural was coming back. Some people had even saved chunks of the original mural from when it had been sand-blasted off!

In the five years since the first "Chagall", two people vitally connected to the project had died: Rick Barnett, whose original idea it had been, and Dora Bayrack, who wrote a poem for the wall. I painted Rick's portrait on the wall -- he is the rabbi with the little rabbi standing on his head -- and Dora's words still sing on the corner of Ozone and the boardwalk. "Chagall Returns to Venice Beach" is dedicated to Rick Barnett and Dora Bayrack.