

by a Navy man who never came home, she was joined by her mother and two sisters, Baca's Aunt Delia and Aunt Rita. The four women rented a one-bedroom duplex in Watts, where they all pitched in to raise the new baby.

"It was the perfect situation for creating an empowered young woman," Baca says. "I was the center of everybody's life, and nobody ever told me I couldn't do things."

Baca's mother eventually married an Italian upholsterer who moved the family to Pacoima and promptly banned Spanish from the household. Baca was 6, so shy in school that the teachers allowed her time alone to paint.

She was not quite so inhibited at Bishop Alemany High School, where she entertained her classmates by drawing naked nuns running across the blackboard. She returned to Alemany in the late 1960s, this time as a novice teacher with a rebellious streak. She didn't last long.

Baca says she was fired in 1970 for her unorthodox teaching methods and her protests against the Vietnam War, like the time she projected a picture of the My Lai massacre on a wall during Mass. Her instincts as a *provocateur* set her on the road to muralism.

Baca took a job with the city's parks and recreation department, teaching macrame to seniors and art to children—who chewed on the supplies. At community centers across East L.A., she became intrigued by graffiti artists and

found ways to crisscross their gang turf to tap their talents. Soon, rival gangs were requesting the services of "the mural lady."

She's come a long way from those tumultuous times: from her Marxist study groups, from her childless marriage at 19 that ended in divorce after six years, from her feminist consciousness-raising meetings. Today, Baca lives alone along the Venice canal in a stylish home designed by Frank Gehry's office (she considers Gehry a friend). Its studio loft and two-story tall walls accommodate her mural-making.

In the main room, a crowded altar holds candles and a photograph of her grandmother, Francisca, with her long braids, deep wrinkles and Apache-like looks. Baca took her middle name from her *abuelita*, a herbal healer and spiritual inspiration whom she calls "the source of all of this. The reason I'm an artist."

Up a staircase on the roof, Baca enjoys a 360-degree view of the bright, sunny basin. A wooden swing provides an elevated place for contemplation.

Her only regret is still having to work as a teacher to support her passion for mural painting.

"I have had a very blessed life," she says, gazing at the mountains on the horizon. "I've gotten to dream dreams and make them be. Who gets to do that? Pretty cool." □

Agustin Gurza is a Times staff writer.

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There's no stopping her "World Wall," either. The newest panel, from Mexico, is expected to arrive in time for an exhibition during Hispanic Heritage Month in September, the first local display of the project since 1991. A preview of the new cross-border collaboration, by Mexican artists Patricia Quijano Ferrer of Mexico City and Martha Ramirez Oropeza, who was partly raised in Pacoima, can be viewed on SPARC's Web site at www.sparcmural.org.

Still on the drawing board are three more panels from Baca, plus one each from native artists in Canada, prisoners in Brazil and bushwomen in Australia.

Inside the cavernous hangar, the existing panels are arrayed in a sweeping semicircle while conservationist Nathan Zakheim works on the mold damage. Zakheim and his three grown sons, serving as his diligent assistants, glide around the massive floor on shiny Razor scooters, sporting shaved heads or ponytails symbolic of their Krishna faith.

To fight the fungus, they have applied a powerful solvent to loosen the coating on the rear of the moldy panel, revealing dark stains underneath. The strategy is risky because Baca's art on the front of the canvas—with its four

enormous faces awash in oversized tears—is only millimeters away. When repaired, the canvas will lose its stiffness and regain its skin-like flexibility. "The painting will actually look and feel better than when it was new," Zakheim assures.

Most importantly, the panels can be safely rolled up and shipped again.

Baca takes time to explain each panel: the Hopi philosophy in her concept of balance; the Finnish use of universal symbols; the tensions behind the work by that troubled Palestinian-Arab-Israeli team, which made the front page of the New York Times.

Originally, the brooding Russian panel was even darker than it is now, she says. The artist, Alexi Begov, had struggled with Baca's upbeat theme during his country's convulsive period of change. "There is no vision of the future without fear," he protested. But Baca urged him to add a burst of color and light at the corner of his shadowy canvas, beyond the blind figure with a cane.

"I wanted him to see past the darkness," explains Baca. "I wanted him to go to the light and give me that vision of hope."

Zakheim and his sons had stopped to listen.

"You see what she's doing?" he asks. "She's using her paintbrush as a crowbar in the middle of these world crises."

Despite her accolades and successes, Baca has been sounding an alarm about the state of mural art in recent years. She worries about a decline in public funding, a trend toward



ROBERT GAUTHIER / Los Angeles Times
Baca, conservationist Nathan Zakheim and his son Kuvaleshaya, right, work on "World Wall" panels.

commercializing prime spaces and a tendency to "reduce muralism to decoration of blight."

As she told an international meeting of muralists in El Paso two years ago: "Perhaps no greater struggles exist in our country than those over the control of diminishing public space, which is so critical to the health of a democracy. Many murals have been lost to appropriation by 'supergraphics' companies for giant Gap ads.... We must demand equal time of those who use every inch of public viewing space to sell us things we do not need."

After all these years, Baca is still struggling for resources and respect.

Los Angeles recently gave her agency \$100,000 to start the restoration of the "Great Wall"—but not without a fight. Baca says SPARC almost lost the contract to a private restoration group, evidence of what she sees as waning support from the city's Cultural Affairs Department. Only her well-cultivated City Council connections saved the day.

"I almost lost control of my own major work," she says. "I put my life on the line for that piece. It would have been a total betrayal [to lose the restoration contract]. That would have taken me to my knees."

Baca has been down before. In 1995, following a prolonged political battle, she backed away from SPARC's plans to use city funds for a mural of the Black Panthers on the wall of a Crenshaw district barbershop. She claimed the city had threatened to cancel the agency's annual contract, then at \$257,000, if it spent tax money

on a work that lionized the radical group.

SPARC later raised private money for the mural, which was eventually completed. But the very next year, the agency got no funding for its Neighborhood Pride program, a citywide mural project launched in 1988 under then-Mayor Tom Bradley. Annual funding for Neighborhood Pride, which is scheduled to complete its 105th mural this year, has dwindled from more than \$400,000 in 1989 to \$189,000 last year, and SPARC is scrambling to make up the difference from private sources.

Baca makes no bones about who is to blame for the financial squeeze: Al Nodal, the city's recently departed Cultural Affairs czar, who fought to diversify the distribution of the city's mural money.

Nodal acknowledged recently that he worried about Baca's developing a mural monopoly in the city. SPARC received more Cultural Affairs funds than any other agency during his 10-year tenure, he said, more than L.A. Opera or the Philharmonic.

"But Judy is an incredible champion, so it's never enough," adds Nodal, now working on efforts to break the U.S. embargo against his native Cuba. "The city can't continue to forever fund the program at the level she's going to need. They think the government's always going to save them."

Nodal also says there should be room for styles of murals that don't follow the SPARC aesthetic, rooted in Chicano politics and community organizing.

"They're fantastic," he says. "I'd love to have one [of their murals]

in front of my house. But there are other artists with other points of view who would never have a SPARC mural."

Still, Baca has managed to keep loyal supporters at City Hall.

"I think she's a visionary and a remarkable activist who has worked effectively within the system," says retiring City Councilman Joel Wachs, whose political career, like Baca's activism, began 30 years ago. "I think she brought respect for the mural art and what it stands for."

In the face of discouraging setbacks, Baca says her working-class roots keep her strong.

"I'm from Pacoima!" she says, laughing. "Give me diversity and I'll flourish. I bloom in acid."

Baca's maternal grandparents, Teodoro and Francisca, fled the Mexican Revolution in 1919 and settled in La Junta, Colo., where Mexicans attended segregated schools, lived in segregated housing and were buried in segregated cemeteries.

The indignity of being discriminated against even in death inspired Baca to create a mural called "La Memoria de Nuestra Tierra" (The Memory of Our Land), installed last year in the main terminal at the Denver International Airport. The 55-by-10-foot digital painting shows colliding landscapes superimposed with images of the travails of immigrants who toiled in the mines, fields and railroads of Colorado.

Seeking better opportunities, Baca's mother moved to California near the end of World War II and found a job at a Goodyear tire plant. But when she got pregnant

calls "the source of all of this. The reason I'm an artist."

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Baca: Artist Sees Herself as a 'Cultural Attack Dog'

Continued from Page 3

"Go ahead," Baca shot back. "It'll be on the front page of the paper tomorrow."

The guards backed down.

Baca likes to call herself a "cultural attack dog," but she is also a cultural earth mother. In her year-after-year nurturing of the "World Wall," she has exhibited the mix of unflinching advocacy, wily politics and artistic devotion that marks her 30-year career, geared increasingly toward elevating her barrio art to a global stage.

"Muralism is the only art form that was so identified with communities of color [in the United States] that it came to be considered lower-class," says the bespectacled Baca. "But in reality, muralism is a very noble art form because it talks about civic space as an amenity to our lives. We require civic spaces to come together, and we should be inspired by those spaces to become better citizens."

Baca, who turns 55 next month, has been at the heart of the mural movement in Los Angeles since 1974, when she was put in charge of the city's first mural program. Two years later, she co-founded SPARC, the Social and Public Art Resource Center, a nonprofit group designed to create, catalog and conserve public art projects, large and small. Its mission: dot the landscape with tangible monuments to previously invisible communities.

Baca remains artistic director of the Venice-based agency, which has an annual budget of \$750,000 and hundreds of works to its credit. SPARC has inventoried more than 1,000 city murals, assigning priorities for repairs and creating a database with artist

name, location and date of each work. The agency has also amassed one of the world's largest collections of mural photographs, with 30,000 slides.

But Baca and SPARC are probably best known for "The Great Wall of Los Angeles," a panoramic painting on the concrete walls of the Tujunga Wash, a drainage canal in the San Fernando Valley. Completed during five summers between 1974 and 1984, the half-mile-long work is billed as the world's longest mural, depicting the history of California's ethnic groups from the state's indigenous origins to the 1950s.

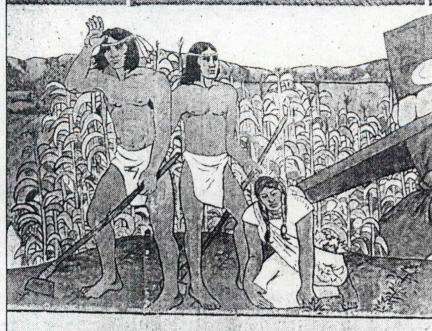
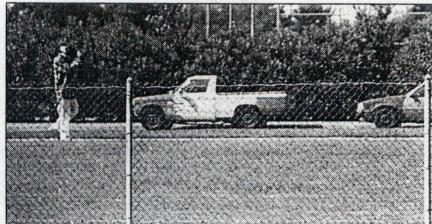
Baca calls it "the largest monument to interracial harmony in America."

SPARC has recently started to restore the work, damaged by time and the elements. And it plans to extend the project into the new millennium, with new images for the missing decades from the 1960s to the 1990s. One idea submitted in response to the agency's request for public input: an Aztec warrior wearing a flowing headdress and wielding a leaf blower.

The existing sections of the "Great Wall" were produced with input from scores of experts and average residents, and with help from hundreds of youngsters, many on probation or parole, who were urged to pick up paint brushes instead of pistols. SPARC still relies on those strategies—democratic consultation and cross-cultural collaboration—to create its community-based projects.

Baca calls it public art in the service of public good.

"I didn't want to produce meaningless paintings that the rich would buy and be put in a museum



The half-mile "Great Wall of Los Angeles," on the Tuj

where my family wouldn't go," she says. "I wanted to be, you know, useful to the struggle for justice and to these kids who were in such despair."

This week in Washington, Baca will be honored for her work as an educator at the 15th annual Hispanic Heritage Awards, given to Latinos for their contributions to American society. The awards ceremony Saturday at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts will be taped for broadcast nationally by NBC on Sept. 22.

With a master's degree in art education from Cal State Northridge, Baca teaches at UCLA and also serves as director of the university's Cesar Chavez Digital Mural Lab, designed to experiment with new techniques for making large-scale artwork. The project is housed at SPARC, which this year celebrates its 25th anniversary.

In June, Baca also received the Creative Vision Award from Santa Monica's Liberty Hill Foundation, which funds grass-roots groups working for social change. At the Century Plaza ceremony, she was recognized for turning her art into "a means for fostering civic dialogue in the most uncivil places."

The hangar where the "World Wall" is being stored and restored is located on the controversial Playa Vista development site, near Marina del Rey. Baca pulls up to the entrance one recent afternoon in her Mercedes-Benz SUV, equipped with a satellite-mapping device in the dashboard, her high-tech guide to mural locations.

As she passes loaded dump trucks heading the other way, Baca

admits a twinge of anxiety in the middle of the bumpy road. To be no stopping adds with a shrug.

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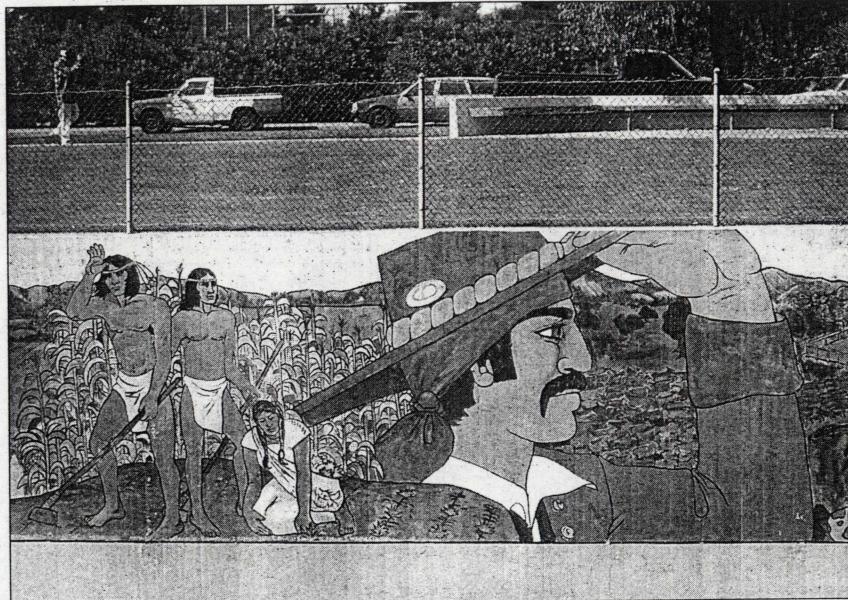
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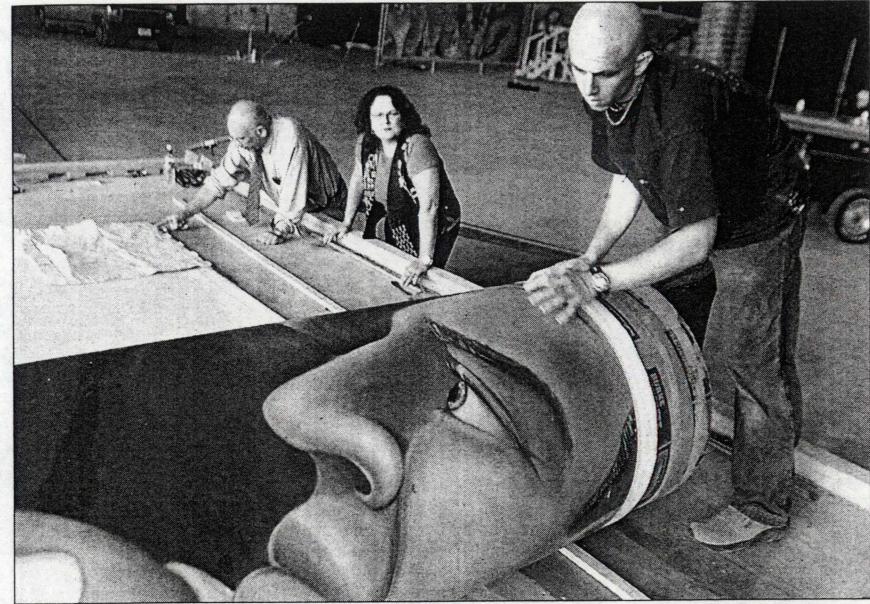
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ROBERT GAUTHIER / Los Angeles Times

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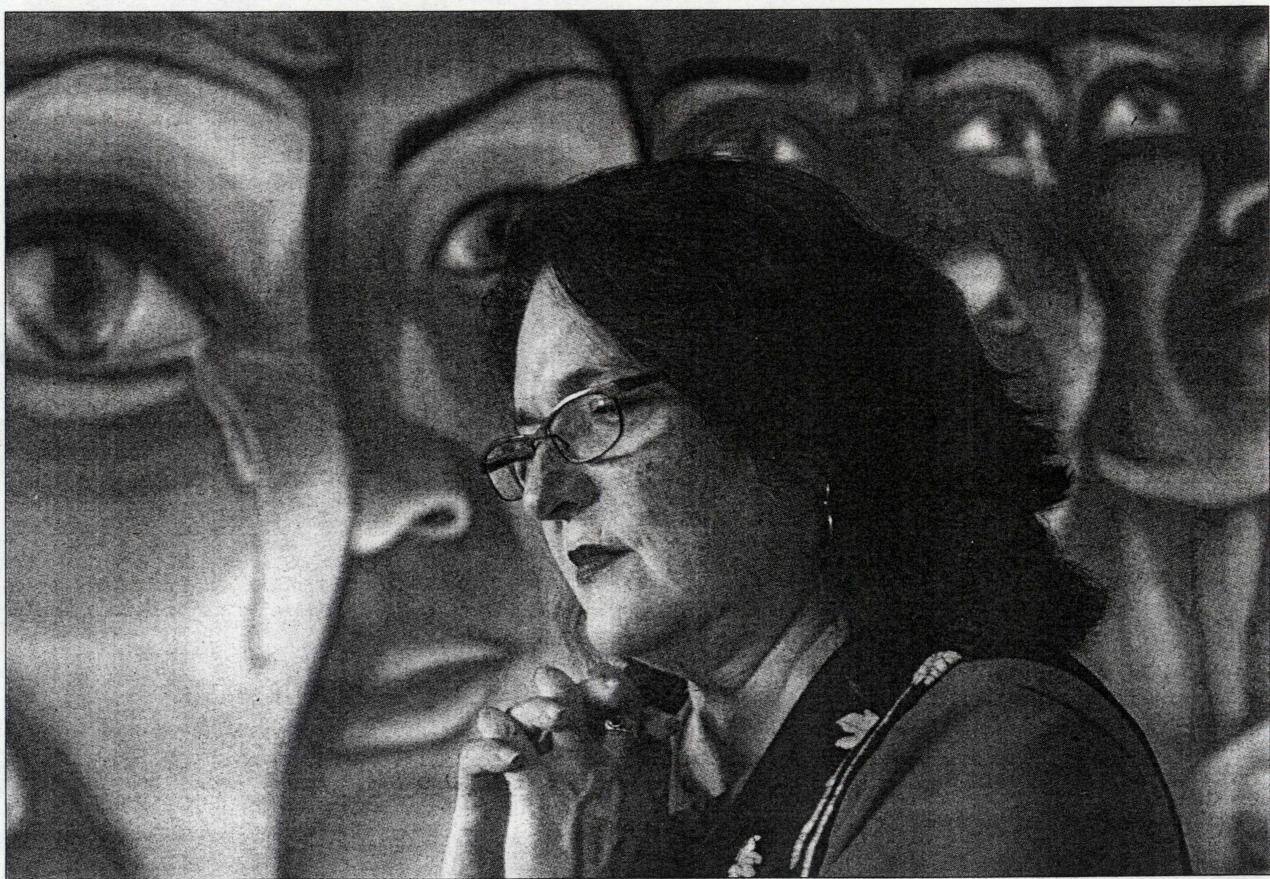
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ROBERT GAUTHIER / Los Angeles Times

"Muralism is a very noble art form because it talks about civic space as an amenity to our lives," says Baca, with "Triumph of the Hearts," part of "World Wall."

By AGUSTIN GURZA

Judith F. Baca steps close enough to feel the massive mural she calls "Triumph of the Hearts," a 10-by-30-foot canvas rendered in colors as vivid as her red shoes and matching shirt. The tips of her fingers delicately rub the surface of the canvas, which is being treated for mold damage.

"Touch it," invites Baca, L.A.'s pioneering Latina muralist, relishing the sheer sensuality of her large-scale medium. "Feel the stiffness of this section. It's hard to imagine it's living fiber."

The damaged canvas feels dry and rough, compared to the smooth, supple texture of another panel adjacent to it. The "very cool thing" about organic materials, explains Baca, is that "they have memory and they'll go back to the way they were woven."

The panels are part of Baca's resilient, epic mural project, "World Wall: A Vision of the Future Without Fear."

The work, now eight panels in all, was conceived at the end of the Cold War by this activist painter who got her start in East L.A., grooming gangsters and taggers as her comrades in art. She produced the first four sections, then took the movable mural on the road, gathering new panels from artists in other countries who added their perceptions of

THE GLOBE IS HER CANVAS

To artist-activist Judith F. Baca, murals are a unifying force, and she will let nothing stand in the way of works such as the epic 'World Wall.'

peace.

The project, set up temporarily in an old aircraft hangar, has become a Baca saga. It appeared at a festival of the midnight sun north of Helsinki. It was viewed by 150,000 people in Moscow's Gorky Park during the collapse of the Soviet Union. It was blown down by gale winds in Monterey, Calif., a site ironically chosen as a safe haven for a quarreling trio of muralists from the Middle East.

And it almost landed its creator in jail on the eve of an exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. In the summer of 1991, Baca ar-

rived in the capital for the Smithsonian show with a group of her art students, only to discover that the work had been stored on a damp floor like carpet, one panel atop the other. So she and her young helpers instantly started lifting and hanging the sections to avoid damage.

When the gallery's staff told the group to vamoose at closing time, Baca refused. As she recounts the confrontation now with a chuckle, her loyal students arrayed themselves between her and the security guards who threatened to arrest her.

Please see Baca, Page 86