

The Murals of Balmy Alley
By Willy Lizárraga

First there are the colors. Green from the avocados. Red from the tomatoes. Bell peppers, plantains, the indescribable color of mangoes. The street is an open market. Life is a parade of colors and smells, all put together in a code that sounds like Spanish sprinkled with English words, or maybe it is the other way around.

The street is full of people. A highly discriminating ear might be able to differentiate the accents. A distinctly Cuban voice comments about the old man dressed in shining green, *A ese le zumba el mango*—that one is totally nuts. *¿Que le zumba qué?* the dark woman at the cash register inquires in a perfect Salvadoran cadence. And the laughs are a mixture of playful black eyes that for a second stop checking the fruits in the market and implicitly agree that it doesn't matter. *No importa lo que le zumba.* The old man is okay. A little crazy, but ok. *Pobre hombre, por Dios,* Grandma says.

All the mangoes go in one bag, the yucca and the cilantro in another. Grandma does not speak English. She goes shopping with her little grand-daughter, who sucks on a guava as if her life depended on it.

Twenty-fourth street is now a mixture of cilantro and guava, and Grandma walks up the street, passing by a group of strident young men—full volume, big car, watching the girls go by. *Ay, por Dios, estos muchachos.* Grandma grabs the little girl by the hand and turns left on Balmy Alley. The colors, yes, here the colors are all over the walls as if the avocados, guavas, tomatoes, bell peppers, and bananas had left their essence, their soul, imprinted on them.

Balmy alley is one block long. Between Folsom and Harrison it goes from 24th to 25th streets, the very heart of San Francisco's Mission District. By now, almost every muralist in the area has had a mural in it. At the beginning there were the colors, of course, but something else, something that Mia Gonzales, who directed an alternative school across the street from Balmy Alley, tries to put into words. She used to watch kids struggling to recover from their traumatic war experiences in Central America, struggling to learn a new language and to come to terms with a new country. Their English was insufficient and words in general were too far removed from them. Drawings and colors, on the other hand, were their best vehicle of expression. To Mia, the idea of doing some murals with the kids on Balmy Alley came very naturally. The alley was their backyard. They just needed the colors.

"No brains and everything to gain. That's how we did it. We just had a lot of *ganas*, you know." *Ganas*: eagerness, desire, heart. Not exactly, though. How do you name that human element that seems to make history turn faster or farther, that signals a change and creates a landmark to which we find ourselves turning back with admiration?

"In a way I just wanted the kids to experience red. I wanted them to find out for themselves," Mia Gonzales smiles. We are talking 20 years ago. Memory is fuzzy; it plays games. Mia is no longer teaching, but still works in the same neighborhood. She runs the *Galería de la Raza* just a few blocks away from Balmy.

Mia never thought the alley was to become such a landmark in the heart of the Mission or in California's mural history. At that time she knew Patricia Rodriguez, who lived in Balmy, and Graciela Carrillo, Irene Perez and Consuelo Mendez. They were all students at the San Francisco Art Institute and the idea of making a mural appealed to them. With help from René from René Yañez, Carlos Loarca, Michael Rios and Ralph Mandariaga, all of them somehow connected to the *Galería de la Raza*, Balmy Alley got its first colors. Patricia, Graciela, Irene and Consuelo were later to be known as *Las mujeres muralistas*, one of the first, if not the first group of women muralists in the country.

"We just wanted to paint." Irene Perez tries to remember. "We were young and the idea of doing murals was a great opportunity to do something. At that time mural art was mainly a man's world, but so what? I can

still remember the strange sensation of being on a scaffolding in Balmy alley for the first time. I remember one day a man walked by, stopped below me and started to pee, as he probably always had done, and I felt like an intruder. I kept on painting.”

Colors, women and children. Mia Gonzales speaks vivaciously. Her eyes look at you, but they also seem to be looking inward, into the past, into the many faces of the people who worked together from the early spring of 1972 until 24th street place—that’s what the alternative school was called—closed down in 1974. “We were all volunteers. The money we got was merely for materials. The hardest part, undoubtedly, was the soliciting. We went to all the people in the neighborhood. We spoke to the homeowners of Balmy, to the renters, house by house. We felt that it was our barrio as much as theirs and we did it for art’s sake.”

Ten years later there were still the same colors, though a little faded, and, ironically, the same war in which the U.S. involvement seemed to escalate.

Disconcerting war reports were coming home. Many North Americans were traveling to Central American and bringing back information quite different from the “official truth.”

“Artists were particularly incensed by the cultural destruction: the closing of the universities, the imprisonment, torture and murder of many teachers and artists, and the decimation and displacement of Indian populations resulting in the loss of their rich heritage.” This is Shifra Goldman writing about that peculiarly fruitful period during the Regan years in which art and politics once again mingled and danced together in a remarkable effort to speak out.

Innumerable exhibitions, shows, poetry readings and street demonstrations for peace in Central America took place in most of the main cities in this country.

In San Francisco about 30 artists got together, a very mixed group, like the city itself, and in 9 months painted 28 murals in Balmy Alley. It made sense to do it in the Mission, not only because there was already an established and vital mural tradition, but because the neighborhood itself had been profoundly affected by the war in Central America. The Mission was a place where thousands of families escaping from that war had made their homes.

Ray Patlán, director of the Balmy Alley Project and one of the most prolific and well-known muralists in the country, lives on the Alley. He walks through it and talks about it as if it were his living room.

“We decided to call ourselves PLACA. In Spanish it means many things: identity mark, also cops or police car, signature, license plate. We liked the name maybe because what we wanted was essentially to leave a mark. And we started like in the begging of Balmy Alley, by talking to the people who lived in the alley. At first they were a little reluctant—after all, it was an act of protest against the government—but then they agreed very willingly. The only condition was not to paint overtly bloody scenes.”

Ray was so busy organizing the whole thing he didn’t have time to paint his own mural until the very last day. It covers one garage door. Two stout Indian women, dressed in traditional clothes, walk to the market—Camino al mercado is the title (“On the way to the market”). They are seen from above, a balcony perhaps. The odd perspective produces a magical effect, as if the alley has turned upside down like a vessel, and the garage doors are windows through which one can see the world.

“I wanted to paint a tribute to women,” Patlán says, “to their strength under the most difficult conditions, a tribute to life as well, to the fact that someone has to go to the market even in the middle of a war.

Susan Cervantes has dedicated her life to mural art. She is the founder and director of Precita Eyes Mural Arts Center, just a few blocks away from Balmy Alley, and at some point was associated with Las mujeres muralistas. “It’s impossible to separate Balmy Alley from the various post-Civil Rights movements of the late 60’s and 70’s, when different ethnic minorities, by asserting and expressing their own identities, were to fuel one of the most interesting artistic expressions of that period,” she says.

The Precita Center, in addition to many other educational and artistic activities, conducts a mural tour every Sunday through the Mission District. As we walk along Balmy, Cervantes says, “I think it is important to understand the difference between public and community art, particularly when we are talking about murals in a neighborhood. It’s one thing for an artist, or a group of artists, to come to the streets to paint; it’s another when

the community is involved, especially the kids. When the kids paint and draw on the walls of their own neighborhood, the relation between the mural and its surroundings has more intimacy and meaning. As a result, the murals in which the community have participated tend to remain graffiti-free, while the others are more often vandalized.”

Some of Balmy’s murals have graffiti on them. In most cases, though, the graffiti has been carefully placed to one corner as a sign of respect. But perhaps what is most interesting is the official presence of graffiti as an art form in the alley.

“I guess it was a way of facing the problem—the only way,” says Ray Patlán. “I talked to some members of the local gangs and invited them to paint on Balmy. Besides, Balmy belongs to el barrio. It’s part of the beauty of it. It was once again an opportunity to bring together the people of this barrio and its murals. Of course, they were excited with the idea of having a space for themselves....I think we have a responsibility to create that space so the kids around here can keep on being part of Balmy.”

Yes, Balmy keeps changing and people walk by. Cars go by. Kids play. There is a nonchalant sensation that Balmy is just a metaphor for what happens to the Mission, to mural art in general

Indeed there are plans to remodel the alley. Or shall we call it a facelift? There is the fear of changing it into something that it isn’t quite what it was meant to be. So what was it meant to be?

For Jorge Hernandez, head of a group of architects who are planning Balmy’s remodeling, the uniqueness of the alley resides in its three-dimensional quality. “There are murals all over the city; but here on Balmy they form an autonomous, almost closed space in which you can be. We are trying to find a way to formalize that space, to somehow signal how special this little alley is, not only for the Mission, but for the city. Ironically, Balmy is considered by the city an unincorporated street. That is, it is not an officially recognized alley. That is why they don’t do much to take care of it.”

A palimpsest is a page that has been written on two or three times, in some cases with the previous texts imperfectly erased and still partly visible—a common practice in the Middle Ages. Perhaps the palimpsest-like quality of Balmy Alley is what remains at the center of our fascination: a palimpsest made of fences, walls, garage doors that shelter layers and layers of stories, colors, a never-ending process.

“Almost every muralist I know,” says Eduardo Pineda, a well known muralist in the Bay Area and Ray Patalán’s main collaborator, “has painted something on Balmy just for the love of it. In 1984 there was a whole movement; but since then more murals have been painted and are being painted. Perhaps Balmy is the closest thing to a mural sanctuary that we have.”

Juana Alicia, who did not participate until later on Balmy, speaks: “At that time I happened to see a documentary about Guatemala called *Cuando tiemblan las montañas* (“When the mountains tremble”). The images of men being taken away by the army and the courage and despair on the women’s faces were my motivation to do a mural in the alley. I entitled it *Te oímos Guatemala* (“We hear you Guatemala”). I think Balmy for most of us muralists is something like a sacred place.”

Inspired by Balmy Alley, artist Jamie Morgan plans a similar project on Lowell Street in Oakland this summer. “My mural on Balmy was inspired by an article I read about Archbishop Romero’s assassination while he was driving to mass in his church in San Salvador. It was a tribute to him. In the case of the Lowell Street Mural Project it’s a totally different thing. It has been the site for illegal dumping, and with the collaboration of all the people in the neighborhood, we are trying to win back that street. Murals are ideal for this: they are so much fun and everybody in the neighborhood will have a chance to search and express his identity and history.”

Ray Patlán, Mia Gonzales, Jaime Morgan, Irina Perez, Brooke Fancher, Xochitl Nevel Guerrero, Janet Storm, Herbert Siguenza—the list is just beginning. They all constitute Balmy Alley, old and new, one layer or another. As you walk through it, garage doors, fences, walls speak the anonymous and comforting language of solidarity. These images represent a commitment to the most basic need of human communication through art: to write your own history with your own colors.