

*Judith F. Baca*, by Anna Indych-López. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, 2018. 190 pp., 87 color illus. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0895511607

Scholars have long debated tensions and best practices for assessing aesthetics and the local impact of community-engaged art practices. In her book *Judith F. Baca*, Anna Indych-López adroitly addresses this debate and revises the previous framing of Los Angeles-based mural artist Judith Baca by scholars who “emphasized process, neglecting the importance of the visual in formulating her overall critique of community, history, and the public sphere” (15). Indych-López’s main argument is that “Baca’s cultural production reveals her pioneering role in innovating both the methods *and* the aesthetics of working with diverse communities, placing her project on the cutting edge of public art practice” (1), which she thoroughly supports through meticulous research and discerning visual readings of Baca’s art. Highlighting Baca’s formation as a visual artist, artistic director, fund-raiser, organizer, political activist, and historian, she successfully argues that “the core of Baca’s practice is a consistent embrace of struggle and conflict not only as subject but also as an element of the actual making of art” (9). Her objectives are more than achieved in this compelling study, in which she closely unifies multiple fields of art historical inquiry and applies a fluid, interdisciplinary methodology that incorporates intersectional feminism and biography. Extensive and illuminating oral histories are central to Indych-López’s explanation of how Baca’s processes and aesthetics portray history “as a turbulent process” (1).

*Judith F. Baca* is a powerful and engrossing eleventh volume in the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center’s *A Ver: Revisioning Art History* series, which explores the cultural production of US Latinx artists. Of critical importance to the field of Latino/a/x art history is Indych-López’s construction of an art historical genealogy of Baca’s projects within and beyond Chicana/o, feminist, and public art. She is well versed in the history of Chicana/o art and has undertaken extensive scholarship

on Mexican muralism, which helps her illuminate Baca’s embrace of both movements while resisting their patriarchal and monolithic narratives. She explains that Baca “feminizes the political practice of Mexican and Chicano muralism” (109) and “fulfilled elements around collaboration that [Mexican muralist David Alfaro] Siqueiros did not truly realize” (34). Importantly, she also places Baca’s “feminist path of inquiry” (94) and her role in “socially responsible, community, and public art practices” (112) in the larger art historical context of modernism and post-modernism, and breaks the restricted art historical frame that Baca had traditionally been placed in to include performance and postwar art. Particularly instructive is Indych-López’s analysis of Baca’s relationship to landscape and large-scale history painting.

Authorship vis-à-vis collective projects and the role of site in shaping a work’s production and reception are central themes in this book. By highlighting distinct perspectives through oral histories that do not shy away from criticism of Baca and her practice, Indych-López emphasizes issues related to the nature of collectivity and thus complicates rather than codifies Baca’s projects. The discussion of Baca’s approach to “social justice in relation to the built environment” is compelling (20). Los Angeles is a looming figure in this narrative, but the author also offers a much-needed departure from L.A.-centric readings of Baca’s work by placing it within a transnational framework.

The book is organized into five chapters, which interweave a dynamic discussion around the concept of mobility as it relates to identity, place, and culture in Baca’s life, collaborative art practice, and chosen subjects. The first chapter’s analysis of critical terms in public art centers Baca’s work within larger debates around art in the public sphere and redresses the “erasure of women, especially women of color,” within the study of public art and collectivity (3). Chapter 2 focuses on Baca’s portrayal of history as a project

of contestation and explains how the artist problematizes the concept of community and moves away from “identity politics to formulate instead conflictive processes of identification” (16). Chapter 3 follows this with an examination of Baca’s biography and how she “turns place making into a highly destabilized endeavor” (43) in works such as *La Memoria de Nuestra Tierra: Colorado* (2000), *The SPARC Dust Mobile* (1978), and *The World Wall* (1992). Indych-López illuminates Baca’s research methods—including the use of interviews, historical photographs, archival documents, and collaborations with historians—and outlines her digital innovations deployed in mural production.

Chapter 4 explores the controversies that arose in Baca’s public art projects such as *Danzas Indígenas* (1993) and *La Memoria de Nuestra Tierra: California* (1996). Indych-López considers how Baca resists patrons’ expectations of her as a Chicana to create “culturally affirmative content” (75), and explains how race, class, and gender are bound up in the work. Of particular import is her examination of not only Baca’s public work, but also her performance art and use of the gallery as a transgressive space. The thorough history and affecting analysis of *Las Tres Marias* (1976) offers a highly nuanced and much-needed reading of Baca’s relationship as a Chicana to the 1970s feminist movement. Chapter 5 focuses on Baca’s authorship within the limits of collectivity and her aesthetic innovations in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s sections of *The Great Wall* (1974–ongoing), which “engage controversial myths as a means to ‘brown’ history” (147). This chapter discusses Baca’s educational impact on the youths who worked with her and other muralists such as Juana Alicia, who are also feminizing the public sphere.

Beautifully illustrated, the book includes stunning foldouts of Baca’s murals, archival photographs, and maps. Future editions would benefit from additional photographs that depict Baca’s works as they are viewed and

activated by visitors (there are currently only two such examples). Such additional visual resources would not detract from the aesthetic focus that Indych-López successfully argues for; instead, they would add another layer of visual understanding to the spatial aesthetics of Baca’s public art projects. Correspondingly, a more focused discussion of how the site of a mural impacts the visitor’s encounter with the work would be useful. Outside of controversy, what other responses do passersby have to Baca’s public projects? Along with framing spatial aesthetics in concert with visitor experience, a protracted analysis of patronage beyond Baca’s more controversial works would add insight into her impact on the public sphere. In that vein, fleshing out and contrasting the influence of distinct commissioning bodies within and outside of Los Angeles municipal agencies and institutions on Baca’s work would be worthwhile. An expanded interrogation of how calls for projects and requests for proposals shape Baca’s subjects, aesthetics, and production would amplify the dialogue around the varied demands that the artist negotiates in her projects.

Nevertheless, *Judith F. Baca* makes a groundbreaking contribution to the scholarship on community-engaged art practices and offers several useful models that transcend a specific study of Baca’s work, such as modes to examine authorship in collectively produced artworks and the value of studying unrealized public art projects to understand the “triangulation of power between artists, patrons, and communities” (93). In addition, a wider impact of this book is Indych-López’s dismantling of the insider-outsider construct within and beyond Baca and her projects; it offers a strong model for researchers examining Chicana/o/x and Latin American studies together within a globalized context.

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