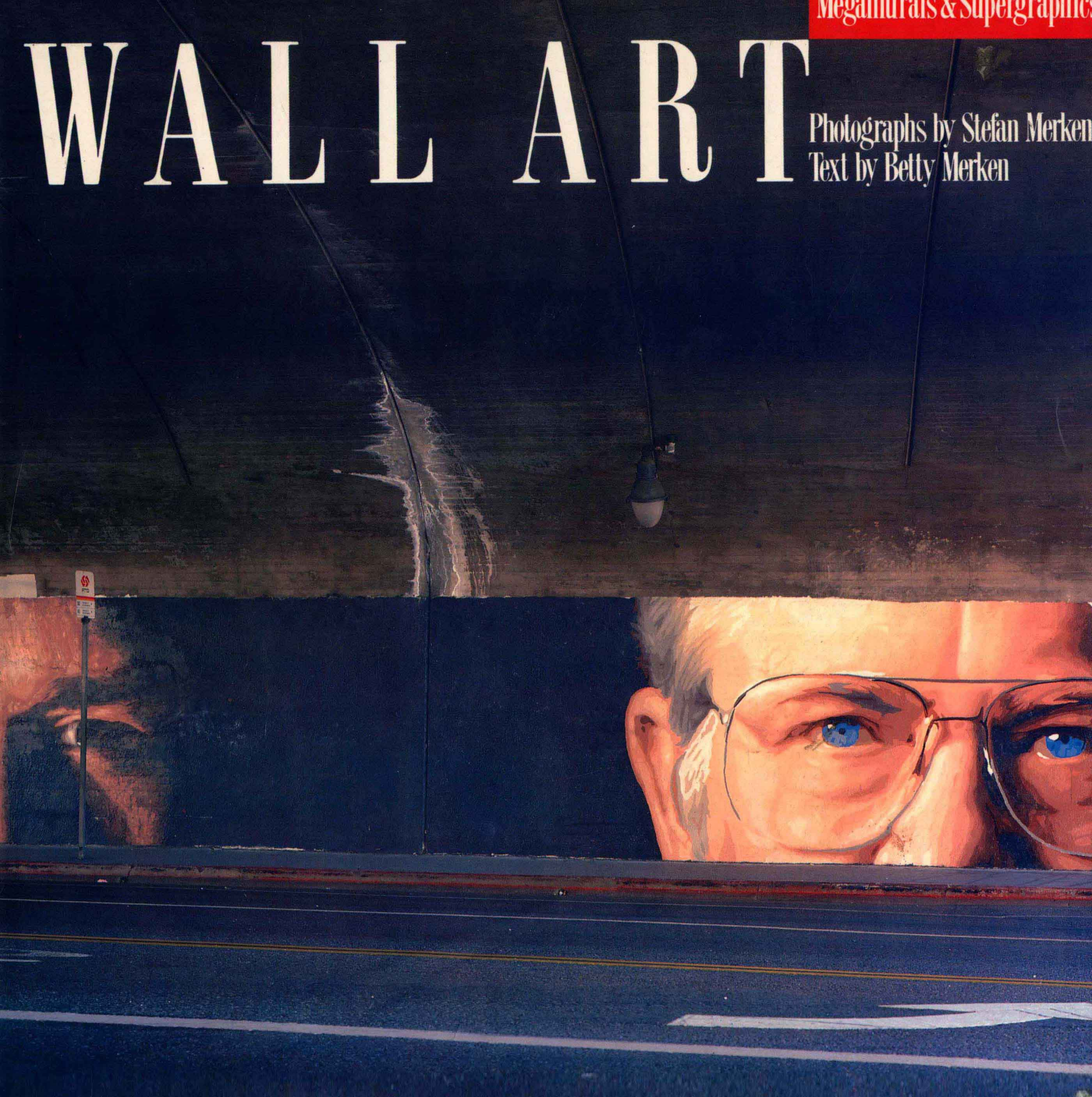
Megamurals & Supergraphics

WALL ART

Photographs by Stefan Merken
Text by Betty Merken



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RUNNING PRESS
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INTRODUCTION

Imagine yourself in Los Angeles on a warm, clear Sunday morning. Driving along Ocean Park Boulevard toward the beach, you glance to the right, and there alongside you looms a fantastic painted image nearly a block long: a brilliant and stunning fantasy, it portrays a dozen or more carousel horses unbridling themselves and breaking away from the landmark Santa Monica Pier Carousel, galloping and prancing with delicious abandon toward the sea.

This enormous mural, in so public a place, allows you to enter the imaginary world of the artist, to identify with the spirited horses, and to experience multiple levels of fantasy and metaphor — all this on an ordinary public wall, accessible to anyone by car or on foot (see page 80).

Closer to the beach, a turn into a sleepy little alley in Venice brings you face-to-face with a modest garage door (see page 38). Painted there is a dreamy, surreal image of an old woman walking on the beach, pulling her groceries behind her. On a distant horizon behind her, three bathing beauties of the 1930s, lucid reminders of her youth, beckon with waving arms and beguiling smiles. In the foreground, an obtuse young woman in shorts glides by on roller skates, oblivious to all around her, as if this beach is and always was her domain. The provocative effect of this mural deepens when you see, painted near the bottom, a fragment of a newspaper article headlining the forced removal of senior citizens from their cherished apartments.

Murals as compelling as these appear and disappear all over Los Angeles — on walls, on garage doors, in alleys, in the barrios, on the freeways. Although you will find these murals in almost every town in California, Los Angeles always has had the greatest number. It is estimated that today Los Angeles has as many as 5,000 outdoor murals, making it the model city for mural art.

Perhaps the openness and freedom of expression that characterize the lifestyle of Southern California help to make Los Angeles, with its omnipresent sunshine, a fertile place for public art. In exchange for this openness and freedom of expression, however, mural artists must undergo working conditions that would dishearten most of us — turbulent freeways, traffic congestion, and automobile pollution — and the murals themselves are often victimized by vigilante graffiti and defacement.

Some of these murals are painted almost overnight; many others are the culmination of months of planning, organizing, and fund-raising. All require strenuous physical labor. However accomplished, these murals transcend mere decoration: for as they embellish our urban environment, they also affect our perception, our aesthetic, and our politics, and in many cases they educate us as well.

"Millions crowd the freeways daily, and murals might be the only art they have ever seen," says Ruth Bachofner of the Ruth Bachofner Gallery in Los Angeles. "To some, the murals will stir or awaken curiosity and may open the avenue to museums and galleries."

The sheer number of public murals in Los Angeles is staggering; throughout the city, large painted images of every description loom up and catch your eye from the freeways and side streets, giving onramps new meaning and beckoning drivers to explore new and unknown neighborhoods.

The barrios and neighborhoods of East and Southeast Los Angeles are well worth this exploration. Mural art as a vehicle for social commentary is highly developed here, where Chicano artists shut out by establishment art galleries have taken their work to the public walls and with enormous pride and energy have created big art — immense, flamboyant images, born of a defiant social consciousness and nurtured by intense community pride. Many of these murals, painted well over a decade ago (and often inspired by early twentieth-century

Mexican muralists José Orozco, Diego Rivera, and David Alfaro Siqueiros) have been painted over and no longer exist. Scholars from around the world are attempting to locate information about the murals that have been destroyed and are amassing slides and information to document those that remain.

Chicano mural art proliferated in Los Angeles in the early 1970s, when talented artists portrayed the social realities of their neighborhoods and the conditions of their lives, and often tried to suggest alternatives. Many of these early Chicano muralists now have international reputations.

Two independent muralists, Wayne Healy and David Botello, began to work together on murals in 1975, calling themselves the Los Dos Streetscapers. Their work can be seen at the Estrada Courts and Ramona Gardens housing projects in Los Angeles, as well as at various other locations in Los Angeles (see pages 34 and 115). Art Alaniz and Rudy Calderon joined the Los Dos Streetscapers in 1980, and the group collectively became the East Los Streetscapers, a self-supporting artists' cooperative. The four artists continue to collaborate as muralists while also working independently to express their individual aesthetic visions. East Los Streetscaper murals such as *El Corrido de Boyle Heights* and *La Familia* (See pages 14 and 91) have received international exposure in publications and traveling exhibitions.

The civil rights movement of the 1960s and the social upheavals that followed sent artists searching for meaningful ways to link their politics to their creative expression. Despite the social activism of the 1960s and the 1970s, the art world, ironically, did little to address the social realities of many people's lives. So the emergence of mural art at that time seemed to be welcome fare for the insatiable appetites of many artists, minority and otherwise, who were barred from the mainstream of gallery art. For these artists, mural art could serve the multiple functions of validating their individual artistic identities, expressing the heritage and experience of their people, and portraying social and economic realities. Mural art also involved inner-city youth in creative work and served the cosmetic function of urban renewal and the beautification of communities.

The city of Chicago, with its strong tradition of labor protest and socially conscious art and literature, leads other American cities in its representation of murals from black communities. However, in Los Angeles, the neighborhoods near Watts and along Crenshaw Boulevard contain an abundance of murals expressing black heritage and values. Mural artist Alonzo Davis, a committed social activist, was instrumental in developing mural art in this part of the city (see pages 47 and 69) as well as in establishing the Brockman Gallery in Los Angeles to showcase the work of minority artists.

As artists continued to create on city walls, community organizations and municipal administrators began to recognize the importance of murals and to fund their production. The City Wide Mural Project was established in Los Angeles in 1974 with direct funding from the Los Angeles City Council to plan and execute community murals in diverse neighborhoods. Under the guidance of local mural artist Judy Baca, the City Wide Mural Project thrived. Later, from 1977 to 1983, artist Glenna Boltuch Avila directed the program, and under her enlightened direction the City Wide Mural Project provided Los Angeles communities with hundreds of murals painted in styles varying from figurative to expressionist. Many accomplished mural artists who are now working independently got their start through the City Wide Mural Project.

One such artist is Richard Wyatt, who has dedicated six years of his career to creating public imagery throughout the city of Los Angeles. "Most of these murals have been produced in communities which are generally under-served by the arts, especially the visual arts, due to the scarcity of museums and galleries in the immediate area," Wyatt says. "The subject matter in my work celebrates the multicultural sensibilities of L.A.'s diverse ethnic groups."

Beginning in the late 1960s, larger-than-life images, meant to engulf one's senses and to alter perceptions of reality, began appearing in Venice Beach in Southern California. Venice Beach, where one can expect to see anything, seemed just the place to provide the kind of artistic license necessary for the emergence of these types of murals. Here the images seem especially appropriate, even indigenous, and it is difficult now to imagine this beach community without them.

Two young artists, Terry Schoonhoven and Vic Henderson, were creating murals in Venice that were an extraordinary blending of superrealism and *trompe l'oeil*, with surrealistic overtones. Each artist had been working independently on realistic paintings tinged with surrealism, and had been disappointed with the gallery scene of the late 1960s. Their first collaborative effort was *Brooks Street Painting*, a mural on the outside wall of Vic Henderson's rented studio building in Venice, painted with the landlord's permission. The mural seemed to reflect the view from Schoonhoven's studio down the street, and was such a successful *trompe l'oeil* image that it caught the eye of many passers-by, including two other artists, Leonard Koren and Jim Frazen. Koren and Frazen joined the other two and became known collectively as the Los Angeles Fine Arts Squad. Together, they were instrumental in negotiating a mural commission for the Paris Biennale in 1971.

Another highly successful and immensely popular early mural commission of the Los Angeles Fine Arts Squad was *The Isle of California* (see page 27), completed in 1972. An image of ironic wit, it is a surrealistic forecast of a disastrous earthquake that sends California floating out into the Pacific Ocean. The year before, the Los Angeles Fine Arts Squad created a mural called *Venice in the Snow*, which was to become a landmark in Venice, California. With incredible realism, it depicted the beach community and its well-known local characters, all covered in snow — something that never happens in Southern California. Now obscured by an apartment house built inches away, *Venice in the Snow* is still a local landmark to

community residents who peek sideways between the two buildings to see it.

Another surrealist mural artist is John Wehrle, famous for his 1976 mural on the De Young Museum in San Francisco which depicts the city and the freeway overtaken by wild animals, including some endangered species. Wehrle also graced Venice, California, with his own version of *The Fall of Icarus* (see page 92). This mural shows a drive-in theater overgrown with weeds; on the screen is an image of a floating astronaut, simultaneously witnessed by a cowboy on horseback and an angel in the back of a pickup truck.

For these early murals, longevity was not an issue. The paintings were treated as performances and were allowed to disintegrate. The early murals of Venice have faded dramatically, and now artists are using a silicate-based paint that is much more durable than the quick-drying enamels used in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Although the colors in the early murals of Venice have faded to shadows of their original intensity, the enigmatic and surrealistic images, with their juxtaposed reality, still suggest an investigation of the notions of time and place which is unique and enduring.

Terry Schoonhoven's most recent work, *City Scape* (see page 46), is a contemporary skyline which includes references to classical architecture, and can be seen in downtown in Los Angeles from the Sixth Street Overpass of the Harbor Freeway. Schoonhoven picked the site for pedestrian viewing, and the mural can be seen easily as you walk along Sixth Street toward the freeway.

John Wehrle's most recent mural, *Galileo, Apollo, Jupiter* (see page 74), which can be seen in downtown Los Angeles on the Hollywood Freeway between Broadway and Spring Streets, depicts a classical Greek temple orbiting Jupiter.

"Wall painting is the oldest of the arts," says Wehrle. "It's really only a short step from the caves of Lascaux to the freeways of Los Angeles.

"I like working with an art that lives where it's created. Each location has its own character, its own problems, its unique audience. I like doing paintings so large that they engage the periphery of vision, the primitive part of the eye that bypasses the cerebral cortex. Think of them as scenes from an epic film that the viewer completes in his mind. The painting provides the clues — you solve the mystery."

Another young visionary muralist, Kent Twitchell, began painting photorealistic portraits on a grand and magnificent scale on huge exterior walls in Los Angeles in the early 1970s. His *The Freeway Lady* (see page 62), a portrait of television actress Lillian Bronson, is located just off the Hollywood Freeway near Alvarado Street as you travel north. The most popular of Twitchell's murals, it was painted as a monument to the elderly. Twitchell researched books of faces at the Screen Actor's Guild in Los Angeles, looking for an image to resemble one of his two great-grandmothers. Lillian Bronson resembled both. After spending a month with photographs and layouts and sketching the mural, Twitchell spent two months painting the image, using acrylic paints which dried fast and held up beautifully.

The Freeway Lady was completed in 1974 and became a famous guardian of freeway travelers. But construction of a new motel in 1981 partially obscured the mural, allowing only the top half to remain visible. Then, late in 1986, a San Francisco-based sign company persuaded the owner of the building to allow an advertisement to be placed over the mural. *The Freeway Lady* was whited out early one Sunday morning and overpainted with the words "Your Ad Here" and a phone number. So many people called to complain that the phone had to be disconnected. What followed was the emergence of The Los Angeles Mural Conservancy, an organization founded by citizens and arts groups throughout the city to preserve and maintain Los Angeles murals — an art form that is precious, unique, and indigenous to Los Angeles. *The Freeway Lady* is currently being restored.

Kent Twitchell's immense portraits have a slightly surreal quality, perhaps due to the suggestive familiarity of the faces he chooses. It is well known that the commonest things become strangely uncommon when removed from their normal context, and it is in part because of this that Twitchell's work is so dramatic. Twitchell's *The Holy Trinity with the Virgin* (see page 118), which can be seen on the west wall of the main building at the Otis Art Institute of Parsons School of Design in Los Angeles, portrays TV series heroes as contemporary versions of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and God.

"I had been doing underground religious art," Twitchell says, "and I decided to paint an even more overt item on the west wall of the Institute. It was inspired by Massaccio's *Holy Trinity with the Virgin and Saint John*, a 15th-century altarpiece we studied in class. I dropped St. John and used local models whose presence would add meaning to the title. Jan Clayton posed as the Virgin. She was the Emmy Award-winning mother on TV's 'Lassie' in the mid-1950s.

"For Christ I asked Billy Gray to pose. He played the small son in the science fiction classic *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, and *Jim Thorp* as a boy. But mostly he starred in the acclaimed 'Father Knows Best' during his teens in the 1950s and 1960s . . . Billy was the ideal model for Jesus, being the son of the Father who knows best.

"For God the Father, Los Angeles had only one citizen qualified for the role. Since no one had ever seen his face, I chose the Lone Ranger, Clayton Moore."

The effectiveness of mural art relies to some degree on the theme of exaggerated contrast and extremes, and for mural artists this often means taking chances, jeopardizing the comfort of accepted conventions, and confronting what has not been done. Kent Twitchell, Terry Schoonhoven, John Wehrle and other superrealist mural artists embrace these concepts to create evocative works that stir our senses and beg for recognition. Each of us, having seen one of these murals, is left longing to see more.

Realist mural painter Tom Suriya evokes our powers of recognition and recall in a humorous and painterly manner. *You are the Star* (see page 120), a mural on the wall of an art deco commercial building in

the heart of Hollywood, portrays an audience composed of movie stars gazing out at you — Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, Clark Gable, Charlie Chaplin, Marlon Brando — even E.T. As you look at this mural you, the viewer, become their center of attention. *You are the Star* is painted in an almost naive style that captures the likenesses of these favorite personalities and expresses a true affection for them, for their movies, and for days gone by.

"The response of countless individuals to my work has made it all worth the effort," Suriya says. "To see a smile on the face of someone viewing one of my murals has been my greatest reward."

The inclusion of numerous details and an affectionate attitude characterize many other murals throughout Los Angeles. Restaurants and other commercial buildings abound with murals, many anonymous, that celebrate life and utilize decorative painting techniques (see pages 16 and 44). Usually commissioned by the owner of a building or a resident business, these murals are often whimsical and light-hearted, and provide a charming change of pace that enlivens the neighborhood and entertains the viewer.

The Olympic murals on the freeways have a more dramatic effect (see page 119). Commissioned for the 1984 Olympics, sponsored by Cal Trans, California's Department of Highways, and designed and executed by accomplished mural artists, the Olympic murals are a tour de force of creative gusto and a visual embodiment of the lengths to which artists will go to express themselves and to make their art visible. Painted amid a jungle of freeways, clouds of sooty exhaust, and extremely precarious working conditions, the Olympic murals are a tribute to the vigorous expression of public art which exists in California and to the many accomplished artists who for years have been working in this genre.

"The wedding of public art and freeway walls in Los Angeles seemed like a marriage made in heaven," said Bob Goodell, Cal Trans Art Coordinator. "Using freeway walls for murals immediately expanded the viewing audience 1,000-fold — mostly delighting viewers, but occasionally infuriating them."

The brainchild of muralist Alonzo Davis, the Olympic murals were commissioned by the Los Angeles Olympic Organizing Committee and are meant to be seen from the fast lane as one enters downtown Los Angeles. Alonzo Davis and Kent Twitchell selected eight other muralists in addition to themselves to paint murals in a line from City Hall to the Coliseum for the 1984 Olympic Games. Each artist chosen had been creating murals for many years and had remained committed to the art form whether or not money was involved.

"The possibility of bringing together ten of the best public muralists in America on one project for an Olympic audience was beyond my wildest dreams," said Goodell.

The Olympic murals were an exhibition of street art by those who had developed the genre: Glenna Boltuch Avila, Judy Baca, Alonzo Davis, Willie Herrón, Frank Romero, Terry Schoonhoven, Roderick Sykes, Kent Twitchell, John Wehrle, and Richard Wyatt.

Creating the Olympic murals was an enormous undertaking and a sometimes harrowing experience for the artists. Each of the ten artists had to get permits from Cal Trans to begin work. Sketches were submitted for approval to the Los Angeles Olympic Organizing Committee, which financed the murals under the Los Angeles Olympics Art Fund (LAOAF).

To conform to safety standards set by Cal Trans, artists had to wear hard hats and vests and learn to use hand signals. Five of the artists had to erect concrete safety barriers at their own expense. Working hours were regulated, and work was not permitted during rush hour. Freeway sites were selected according to locations that were least distracting to the motorists and safest for the artists. In spite of all these precautions, one artist's pickup truck was hit by a car; another artist narrowly escaped injury when a palm tree near his mural caught fire.

Some of the mural walls stretched over 300 feet wide and up to 20 feet high — an enormous physical task to paint. The murals took more than a year to complete, and while they are an ever-present reminder of the 1984 Olympic Games, they also provide continuous visual excitement for motorists, and in their sheer monumentality and chutzpah represent the spirit of the city of Los Angeles.

The enormous scale of the Olympic murals, and the tremendous publicity surrounding their production, brought to the public an awareness of the processes through which public artworks can come into being, as well as an appreciation for the complexities of their production. The result of such public-access art activity is a growing public enthusiasm, and the art itself is a visible symbol of a commitment to the development of an urban aesthetic.

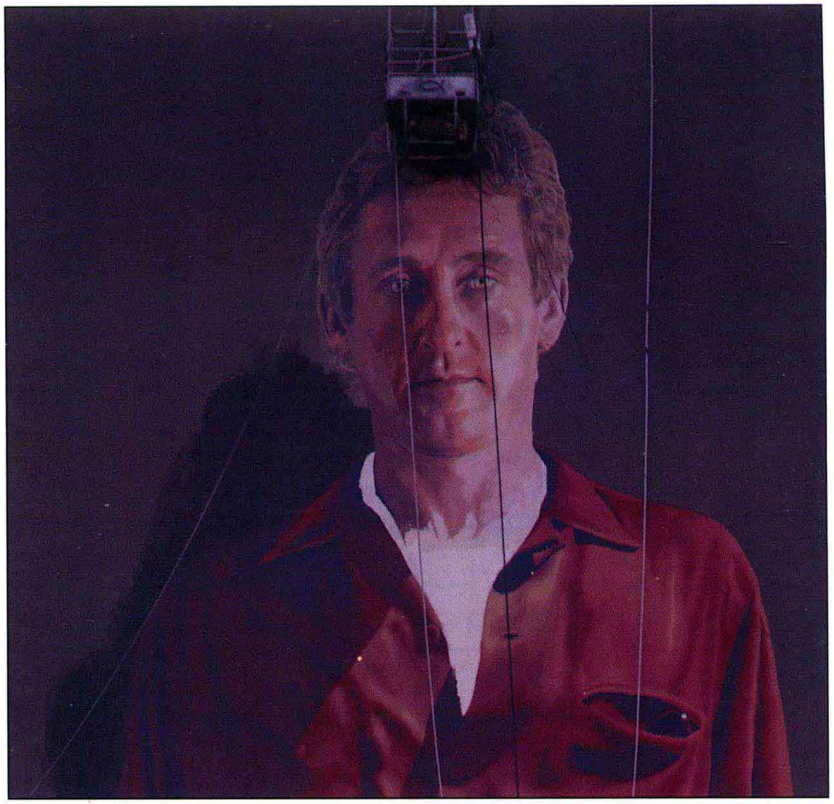
The benefits of an artistically enriched public environment are numerous and far-reaching. Murals, more than many other art forms, bring into focus the dynamics between artists and their communities. Whether they be "bandit" murals, done surreptitiously overnight on public walls without permission, or highly structured works of public art which take months of planning and elaborate financial structuring, these images affect us all.

We realized in creating this book that certain omissions would be unavoidable, and we knew that it would be an impossible task to include every mural we have seen. Some murals, because of their locations, were too difficult to photograph. Others disappeared or were painted over before we could return to photograph them. Many beautiful walls are not included here because their images cross the fine line between murals and graffiti, and that is another matter, another book entirely.

Our desire is to bring to you, the viewers and the readers of this book, a contemporary exhibit of this fascinating and enlightening wall art — multifaceted, larger-than-life images available for everyone to see and to enjoy. This book is a tribute to the vitality of mural art and to the many talented artists who are its creators.

— BETTY MERKEN

THE MURALS



Ed Ruscha Monument. Kent Twitchell, 1978-1987. Hill Street and Olympic Boulevard, Los Angeles.

"Ruscha reminded me of McQueen. Seven years after my first monument I selected Ruscha as a symbol of the L.A. art world. I had never met him — I sent him a note telling him what I wanted to do. He came to my studio in early 1978 for a photo session. I liked him very much and was glad my instincts had chosen him. We discussed L.A. and I found out that I share many of his feelings. I don't know of a better symbol for L.A. art.

"I painted his head in 1978 but I didn't like the results. A couple of years later I asked Ruscha to pose again. This time I carefully lit my subject as I have with every project since. The Ed Ruscha Monument *is actually Ruscha's head in 1980 and his body in 1978.*

"I had seen the wall and sketched it about two years before it was made available to me. It was just one of those magic walls anyone would like. Relatively on its own, not dwarfed by other structures, not minimized by ads all around it, and it was surrounded by flat, low parking lots, acres of cars to tower above.

"I want him to appear timeless, beyond fads or fashion . . . I had trouble with colors fading. I mixed colors from studying the baroque palette, warm glowing skin tones, etc. Within a year they would go cool, the yellows dropping out. I painted the new face one more time and again it cooled in a year. Now I'm using a very highly pigmented paint made for me in Australia."

— Kent Twitchell