Diego Rivera murals in San Francisco—Mostly hidden and obscured

Change the World or Go Home by Alejandro Almanza Pereda

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In May 1931, during his extended stay in the United States, Mexican artist Diego Rivera painted a mural, *The Making of a Fresco Showing the Building of a City*, now located in a gallery named after him at the San Francisco Institute of Art (SFAI).

Change the World or Go Home, an installation by Mexico City-based artist Alejandro Almanza Pereda at the SFAI, is a piece that obscures Rivera's mural celebrating labor. Almanza's visually minimal work seems to be making the complaint that other Mexican artists are unfairly hampererd by the enduring popularity of Rivera's socially-themed murals.

Pereda's choice to obstruct Rivera's piece with his scaffolding seems to highlight some of the present cultural difficulties, both in terms of the ability of the American public to have access to the Mexican muralist's work and the generally poor and socially indifferent environment in global art circles.

Rivera's murals were a pioneering example of public art on social themes in the 20th century. Rivera studied in Europe and learned the traditional Italian technique of fresco, where paint is applied into freshly laid plaster and effectively becomes the wall. He returned to Mexico with this technique and gradually incorporated traditional indigenous imagery into his own unique style.

His first murals in Mexico in the 1920s represented complex themes from Mexican history, social life and revolution. The Mexican, and especially the Russian, Revolutions were major, life-shaping events for him. Rivera became a member of the Mexican Communist Party, and eventually a supporter of Leon Trotsky's struggle against Stalinism. Despite his well-known views, he was highly sought after by certain prominent business figures in the United States, as well as museum officials, for the overwhelming beauty and power of his murals.

He encountered numerous obstacles and difficulties in the United States in the early 1930s. Most notoriously, his monumental 1933 mural *Man at the Crossroads*, at New York City's Rockefeller Center, was destroyed by Nelson Rockefeller when Rivera and his assistants refused to remove an image of Lenin. Yet his work directly influenced a range of American artists in the 1930s, inspiring both murals and paintings.

With so few examples of Rivera's work in the US, finding oneself in a city with one of his murals is a rare pleasure. Detroit is most fortunate in this regard, because Rivera's monumental *Detroit Industry* murals at the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) are on public display and easily accessible. In 1931, Rivera made six portable fresco murals for the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. These were stored or dispersed, hidden from public view for 80 years, before a MoMA exhibit in 2011 presented them again. Yet in that show, only five panels were presented because the sixth has been lost, and with the close of the exhibition the works again partially disappeared from public view.

The aforementioned Rockefeller Center mural in New York City was destroyed, resulting in Rivera losing a commission in Chicago. The reportedly remarkable "Portrait of America" mural painted at the New Workers' School in New York City in 1933 is no longer on view.

San Francisco is home to three intact Rivera murals (a fourth, smaller work is at the University of California, Berkeley), but at present, those works are all, to one degree or another, less than easily accessible to the public. In the financial district, Rivera painted his first mural in the US, *The Allegory of California*, at the City Club of San Francisco, an elite social club. Information online indicates that the mural can be viewed from 3 to 5 p.m. daily, with permission obtainable from the security desk. However, arriving on a Saturday and requesting permission to see the mural, this reviewer was told that a wedding was being set up in the club space and access was not possible. Such events at the City Club can prevent access at any time. *Pan American Unity*, a typically varied and complex composition treating life, economy and politics throughout the continent, is located at the City College of San Francisco. Viewing hours for the public are limited to just a few per day, Monday through Thursday only. For a weekend visit, the mural is out of view.

The third mural, *The Making of a Fresco Showing the Building of a City*, is at the SFAI, a private art school with many notable instructors and alumni. William Gerstle, the

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president of the school in 1930-1931, was instrumental in getting Rivera permission to enter the US for the first time.

Entering the gallery, one confronts a large structure of fluorescent lighting located directly in front of the work, *Change the World or Go Home* is by Alejandro Almanza Pereda, an artist in residence at SFAI. His piece resembles building scaffolding, with light tubes taking the place of wood and steel. Each tube has wiring for power, which falls loosely and accumulates into a tangle of wires toward the bottom of the structure. In a daytime viewing, the lights were not on.

To the extent that the viewer can peer through the tubes and wiring, the Rivera mural reveals warm, nuanced, transparent brushstrokes of tempera paint that follow his own unique style of beautifully contoured lines. That is, the flowing, curvaceous definition of his human forms is not only defined by a contour line around a figure, but by every stroke of the brush that makes up the form, and we can see the record of those marks. His images are arresting from afar, and reward the viewer up close.

The most striking difference between Almanza's piece and the Rivera it partially obscures is the strong visual imbalance between a painted image and a ready-made structure.

Even if we are to accept the validity or purpose of deliberately constructing a structure in front of a mural, Almanza's piece does a poor job of integrating itself. Rivera's work depicts mural painters on scaffolding that forms a grid containing nine squares, with four prominent vertical lines, which organizes the mural. Almanza places in front of that a structure with six vertical lines that do not relate to the lines in Rivera's piece, and also have x-bracing to further obscure the painted image.

That structure is not especially appealing or interesting. The tubes are ready-made and unvarying; they are cold and easy to overlook. If light is supposed to be a part of the piece, it was not apparent, as the lights are often turned off since the gallery is mostly open during daytime hours. The visual metaphor of using lighting to re-examine or look through another work is obvious, but through this material and composition, what exactly has Almanza prompted us to re-examine?

His ironic lament, based on the title, seems to be that contemporary Mexican artists are constrained to creating socially conscious work because of Rivera's influence. Meanwhile, the SFAI's description of the installation is filled with the jargon-filled phrases, cynicism and narcissism that is a feature of the present-day official art world.

It states that "we have been looking at Diego Rivera's ass for 84 years," saying it is "closest to our eye" and that "of course, this was the artist's intention." The sheer stupidity of this statement is proven by the fact that Rivera's self-portrait within the mural places him high on the scaffold, some 20 feet above any viewers eye. The entire lower level, showing planners, architects, and workers is closer and the center group of architects is the natural focal point.

The statement concludes that "for Almanza, Rivera is a catalyst for the ongoing instrumentation of Latin American identity and artistic practice" and that "if Rivera is a limiting screen through which we understand Latin American art, this is an opportunity to add a new screen."

The complaint here seems to be that Rivera remains the towering figure of Mexican art. In the smug and apparently bitter view, Rivera's work is about himself, not the world around him. The SFAI gallery text even refers to him as "the imperious Rivera."

This is turning things upside down. In fact, so much contemporary art work, including Almanza's piece, is narrowly (and tediously) focused on art processes themselves, or, ironically, on the status of the artist. Rivera's work is powerful because it often captures the grand drama of human events in a way that is both widely appealing visually, accessible and yet not a caricature.

An artist who is troubled by the "limiting" factor of Rivera's art, and aims to tear it down, is demanding the right to be as self-absorbed and trivial as his contemporary counterparts elsewhere! Almanza is clearly not interested in making work that could speak to broader themes of modern life and the public. He is a representative of the aspiring Mexican upper-middle class, desirous to take its place in the world, free from the heritage of anything connected with revolution or socialism.

This isn't simply a question of form: i.e., that Rivera used representation while Almanza or other Mexican artists would like to be conceptual, abstract or more experimental. Nothing is to say those forms cannot speak to the wider world—the question remains, does that even interest the artist? (That said, a bulk order from the lighting department at Home Depot placed in front of a compelling painting is probably not a means of winning most people over.)

What other cases are there of an artist deliberately interfering or obscuring another's work? And, if so, is Rivera the artist with a body of work to disrupt?

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