
August 12, 2007

ART

Cybermural: The Web as the Wall

By **CAROL KINO**

LOS ANGELES

THE neighborhood is changing,” the multimedia artist Juan Devis said as he walked through Boyle Heights in East Los Angeles, “and I wanted to record that change of scene by the folks who live there.” So began his Web project “Departures.” Part digital mural, part social documentary, part travelogue, it can be seen on the Web site of the public television station KCET, where Mr. Devis is a new-media producer.

Since it went up about a year ago (kcet.net/explore-ca/departures), “Departures” has won international, national and local digital-media awards. It also has strong ties to art history, especially that of California. With its pumped-up colors, a focus on everyday lives made heroic and its status as an essentially public artwork, “Departures” strongly suggests a new twist on the Los Angeles muralism of the 1970s, a movement born from the Chicano civil rights movement when Mexican-American artists like Judy Baca, David Rivas Botello and Willie Herrón adapted the Mexican muralist tradition for their own time.

When Mr. Devis first arrived from Colombia in 1993, Boyle Heights was “a beehive of gang activity,” he said. But he often spent time there because it had “things that made me feel comfortable,” like the restaurants serving “the best goat in town” and Spanish spoken on the streets.

Founded as an affluent white suburb in the 1880s, Boyle Heights soon became a proverbial working-class melting pot. It was the first port of call for successive waves of newcomers to Los Angeles: African-Americans, Jewish immigrants, refugees from the Russo-Japanese War, the Mexican Revolution and the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, which drove many Japanese-Americans south. Since the 1970s the neighborhood has been predominantly Latino, evident in the vibrant murals that grace many of its housing projects, restaurants and stores.

By that point it was also encircled by freeways, which has kept it somewhat frozen in time. But now Boyle Heights is on the verge of change, as a new Metro line opening in 2009 will reconnect it with the rest of Los Angeles.

Mr. Devis, 36, began his journey into the neighborhood in May 2006, equipped with only a camera and what he called his rules of travel: “always travel as a tourist, even in your own city”; “get lost”; and “talk to someone you don’t know.” After about a month of getting to know the locals and taking casual scouting shots, he returned with a video camera, sound equipment and his associate producer, Bijan Rezvani, to record more formal interviews.

At first glance “Departures,” which they created with Digitaria, a San Diego-based design firm, resonates like an old-fashioned photographic panorama. Click on an image, and travel along three blocks of East First Street: the Latino gay and lesbian hangout Redz Bar and the [Benjamin Franklin](#) Library, the first branch of the city’s public [library](#) system; past Homeboy Industries, a group that helps ex-gang members build new lives; to the elegantly turreted Boyle Hotel, which began life in 1898 as a luxury hilltop inn and is now a dilapidated residence for mariachi musicians.

On closer inspection, though, this streetscape turns out to be a photomontage. It conflates both sides of the street into one and is punctuated with out-of-scale, out-of-place details: the cross that marks the First Street Pool and Billiard Parlor, the boxer wrapping his hands outside the First Street Boxing Gym, the cracked sidewalk littered with cigarette butts that looms above the locally fabled burrito joint Al & Bea's. Near the Golden State Freeway overpass Jose Torres poses against a painted version of his store, Torres Closeouts; this is actually a detail of a painting by Diego Cardoso that hangs in a nearby cafe.

Mr. Devis represented the street in this fashion to suggest the experience of discovery. "When you're walking down a street, you are selective," he said. "You frame things, you zoom into something, depending on your interests." He also took pains to present many of the sites from different angles, "to break the perspective you normally get on [Google](#) maps." And he chose to structure it as a walking tour, he said, "to trump the idea that in L.A. you cannot walk, that in L.A. there are no communities."

At many points the panorama deepens into three dimensions, through hot spots that lead to slide shows, audio interviews, historical photographs and literary quotations about the experience of place or travel. (A sample, from "A Walker in the City" by Alfred Kazin: "All my early life lies open to my eye within five city blocks.") Most interviews include multiple soundtracks (about half in Spanish) and each is accompanied by a video portrait that depicts the subjects standing still as the world continues to move around them.

Lydia Hernandez, a social worker, stands before the door of Redz, as passing cars cast shadows against the scene. "Boyle Heights is a very magical place," she says, in an accompanying audio track. "Sometimes it seems like a novel come to life."

Officer Rene Chavez poses staunchly by the tiled walls of the Hollenbeck Community Police Station, which serves Boyle Heights. "They are hardworking people, they are first-generation Hispanics," he says, "and they're very pro-police in this area. That's why there's a long waiting list for this department."

Anthony Nelson, manager of the community theater Casa 0101, recounts a recent dream: A glitzy new shopping mall has just opened in Boyle Heights, and he's helping [Tom Cruise](#) shop there for a leather jacket. His co-workers laugh. "That's the great thing about Boyle Heights," says Eddie Padilla, the theater's artistic director. "It's a lot of small-owned family businesses."

Visually the project seems clearly inflected by European modernism, starting with Dada and Surrealist photomontage. While editing, Mr. Devis said, he sought inspiration from Walter Benjamin's 1928 book "One-Way Street," a stream-of-consciousness meditation based on objects encountered in an imaginary Parisian street.

There is also the influence of film. To Rita Gonzalez, a curator at the [Los Angeles County Museum of Art](#) who works on many of its contemporary Latino art projects, "Departures" suggests the "city symphony" films of the 1920s, movies that limned the patterns and rhythms of urban life, like Walther Ruttmann's 1927 "Berlin: Symphony of a Great City" or "Manhatta," a 1920 paean to New York by the painter Charles Sheeler and the photographer Paul Strand.

"I think it's a fusion of muralism, of street photography, and of different cinematic traditions documenting street life," Ms. Gonzalez said of "Departures." "It's a real hybrid."

The project's cinematic sensibility makes perfect sense, because that's where Mr. Devis started out. Raised in Bogotá, where his mother was a social worker and his father, Fernando Devis, was a postmodernist painter, his first love was movies. That interest eventually brought him to North America, to study film at Emerson College in Boston.

In his senior year Mr. Devis won an award that allowed him to make his first feature, “The Petty Curse of Having This Body” (1993) a silent art film about two enslaved Colombian women who liberate themselves by murdering their captor. The award also brought him to Hollywood for what turned out to be a short-lived development job at Warner Brothers. “I hated the system,” he said. “I just didn’t understand it.”

In the years since, he has moved between the commercial and the nonprofit worlds — making documentaries, writing plays and movie scripts — with brief detours for a Spanish-language television job and a master of fine arts degree in directing from the California Institute of the Arts. Along the way he began working with digital media and the Web. “It’s just another tool now that we use to produce art,” he said.

Most of his Web projects have produced art from cooperative community ventures, like a game he created with Latino high school students (tropicalamerica.com). “I really believe that the experience of working collaboratively makes people realize they can be producers,” he said.

In 2005 KCET, the main public television station in Los Angeles, revamped its Web site to include original content, to show the local residents that it was “not only a vehicle that is talking at people, but talking with them,” as Mr. Devis put it. He is now in charge of producing that content; “Departures” is the pilot for a larger initiative to allow different communities in Los Angeles to create their own panoramas, with the station providing technological support. Early next year KCET is to present the first two projects, one created by a class at Locke High School in Watts and the other by a community group in the Little Armenia section of Hollywood.

Mr. Devis’s walk through Boyle Heights ended at Mariachi Plaza, which by mid-afternoon was filled by musicians in churro suits, chatting, strumming guitars and eating food from paper plates as cars drew up and band leaders negotiated the evening’s engagements. He waved to a few, then pointed to the view. Just blocks down the hill, beyond the Santa Ana Freeway, stood the skyscrapers of downtown. “When you stand here,” he said, “you almost feel Boyle Heights owns the city.”

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