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Hector Duarte

María Isabel Ochoa

In-betweenness is often the feeling described by many that leave their native country to pursue the “American Dream”. The 2010 census demonstrated an unparalleled population growth of Latinos in the United States, accounting for 16% of the overall population. Latinos have transformed this country beyond recognition, from labor markets, urban politics, and demographics to replacing African Americans as the largest “minority”. Turning over to the Midwest, Illinois in particular, the Latino population represents 15.8% of the state’s population, contributing to a 32.5% population growth over the past decade. The Latino population is constantly growing and is diverse: *Centro Americanos, Sur Americanos, Caribeños y Mejicanos*. In fact, Mexicans comprise the largest group in most states, like Illinois. Latinos have transformed Chicago’s metropolitan area in profound ways. An artist that has significantly contributed to this rapid change in Chicago is Héctor Duarte.

Duarte doesn’t have the, often self-inflicted state of *in-betweenness*. He doesn’t feel torn between the country he resides in, the United States, and the country he was born in, Mexico. Not at all. He proudly embraces and calls both his home, Caurio, Michoacán (Mexico) and Pilsen (Chicago). Born in 1952, he moved to Chicago in 1985 and has painted murals for the past 27 years. He has made his mark in many different spaces and often paints what he observes, the frustration of living in *dos aguas*.

Nuestra gente falls into the Anglo routine and often becomes a product. In reality, we’re all products of capitalism, the world’s engine. We’re just rented, like my father when he was brought over at age 19 in 1943 to work as a *bracero*. My father’s arms were rented, today is a different time pero es lo mismo.

He first visited Chicago in 1978 for the *Congreso Internacional de Muralismo* at the Congress Hotel. That visit changed his life, he later returned to practice what he had

learned at the *Taller Siqueiros* in Cuernavaca, Mex. He recalls:

That was a turning point for me as an artist. I had never seen murals on public walls, outside in the open. That blew my mind. I had to start painting similar murals. My first mural was in 1980 in Bordo Grande, Santiago Tangamandapio, Mex. It’s still there. Zapata raising up a machete with fire shooting out of it, similar to the *Grito de Dolores* piece with Father Miguel Hidalgo holding up the fire torch. In my piece, Zapata is holding up the machete [he laughs]. The owner of the little shack invited me to paint it so that the campesinos that worked nearby would be empowered.

Similar to his first mural, Duarte has continued painting to empower. He has made Chicago his workplace with many murals throughout the city, making it his canvas. He

would say that his art doesn’t belong in an art gallery; he’s very intentional about conveying a message that is not too obvious.

I want my art to survive time. It’s like poetry, to understand its value you must read it more than once. Every time you return, you will see something different and keep learning something new. You’ll be learning a different message all the time. It will never expire.



Héctor Duarte, art studio at 1900 West Cullerton Street, Pilsen, Chicago, 2012

While I have exhibited work in a number of different media, including prints, installations, and paint, my passion is mural painting. I prefer murals because more people are able to enjoy my work; I am not painting for the privileged or for museums. Don’t get me wrong, I have but that’s not why I paint.

My artistic goal in mural painting has been to continue the Siqueiros tradition of dynamic symmetry, which is a compositional method tying the structure of the mural to the physical architecture, taking into consideration the movements and perspectives of the viewer. This

method views mural painting as an organic activity that must be composed and resolved on the wall. I'm constantly learning from artists, some that I admire are: Roberto Matta, José Clemente Orozco, Wilfredo Lam, Joan Miró, and countless of others.

I don't like to reproduce, I just let it flow out. I tend to use bright colors—I attribute this to my Latin American origins, where the presence of the sun influences our view of color—but have a very broad palette. I use recognizable symbols and images that dramatize life to Latinos here in the U.S. These have included corn, images from the Day of the Dead, and the Loteria game as well as the heart, which has both pre- and post-Colombian religious significance and is something all people can identify with. I usually choose themes that deal with the local community in some way or themes that speak to all of us.

While I consider myself to be part of the Mexican Mural tradition and the Barrio Mural Movement here in the U.S., I also feel a strong obligation as a creative person to continue innovating. I am interested in taking the mural, which some people consider to be a static or even outdated art form, to new levels. I have experimented with using all six sides of the room, for instance, and have sought out new instruments with which to paint as well as objects that can change the viewer's perspective of the mural, such as mirrors or different types of light or paint.

Since I believe strongly that the technique to take the mural to new heights will be that practiced by Siqueiros, I have dedicated myself to teaching his methods to other muralists. Thus I like to work in collaboration—even though this can be a challenging process—and I have dedicated much of my time to teaching mural painting to young people.*

Duarte enjoys being out of the spotlight but is truly dedicated to teaching. He integrates his passion for both, painting and teaching, and is often found at his studio teaching youth. "You have to know where you came from", he'll say. As in *Gulliver's Travels*, he's constantly searching for his DNA. It's an immigrant's journey, in search for his identity.

*Duarte provided partial text from the Chicago Public Art Group.



Above: Héctor Duarte, art studio at 1900 West Cullerton Street, Pilsen, Chicago, 2012
Below: mural sketch of *Gulliver in Wonderland*, painted outside of artist's studio, Pilsen, Chicago, 2005

