

"WORKING WITH OTHERS MEANS SEEING THINGS IN A NEW WAY."

A conversation between Precita Eyes founder Susan Cervantes and her son, Luz de Verano, looking back at decades of local history and community art in the Mission.

Susan: My name is Susan Cervantes and I'm a founding director of Precita Eyes Muralists. I'm an artist and arts educator. And a muralist, of course. I do community mural art over the past 40 years.

Luz: My name is Luz de Verano Cervantes. I'm Susan's son. Luis is my father. I've been a part of Precita Eyes Muralists since it was founded in the '70s. And I've been painting murals and studying art with Susan and Luis since I was very young.

My dad had a studio in the front of the house, near the entrance. My mother had a studio space close to the kitchen. It was a big Victorian Edwardian storefront. It used to be a bakery. It had high ceilings and it had windows with a big communal table in the middle. It was organized chaos, works in progress, materials everywhere, different kinds of projects and ideas on the wall, easels, sketches, three or four different drawing tables....

There were mural painters, but they weren't necessarily organized into a group yet. I remember our first arts classes were at the Precita Valley Community Center. There was a space they were using. They had panels that Luis built against one wall. And they had a studio workshop there to design a mural. And I can remember when that was ... the '70s. What mural was that? The Masks of God, maybe? I was 10 years old. And that was the beginning of what I considered the beginning of Precita Eyes. Yeah.

Luz: Many people know you as a mural painter. I remember that growing up there was a time before mural painting when Susan was more of a studio painter, painting a lot of oil paint. Then all of a sudden there was a transition in your life, from studio painting to mural painting. Do you want to talk about how that happened?

Susan: Thank you, Luz, for bringing that up because not a lot of people know about my personal work. Before I started getting involved with the mural movement here in San Francisco Mission district, I was a dedicated painter for over 12 years, painting oils, as you say. At the beginning of my painting career, I was doing more figurative things, but everything was from my imagination. Then there came a point where I couldn't finish a painting -- which was kind of odd because I used to paint a painting a day, a whole painting a day! Then all of a sudden, I just couldn't do that. What am I going to do? Well, I could start from the center of the canvas start, and from the center of myself, and work out from there and just accept whatever came up into my mind.

It was kind of like a rebirth, because at the same time, I was starting to get involved with the *Mujeres Muralistas*, who were doing murals in the neighborhood. I thought it was really great to see women doing monumental painting.

Luz: *Luis was experimenting with the acrylic paints. But you started painting murals with acrylic paints. How did that happen?*

Susan: Luis and I always shared a studio with each other. He was a painting with oils when I first met him. But he found out about these acrylic paints innovated in Mexico and available from a little store here in the Mission district. The original formula is from Jose Gutierrez in Mexico. Jose Gutierrez is considered the original innovator of the acrylic formula. He was hired by one of the great Mexican muralists to develop paints for murals.

Luis was painting with acrylic and I looked at it and said, "This is terrible stuff. I'm still an oil painter. I'll always be an oil painter." But when I got involved with the *mujeres* and we were painting the Paco's Tacos mural, which was the first one I did with them, I noticed that they were using house paint or something weird. I asked them if they knew about Politec. And they said, "No, we don't know anything about Politec." "It's acrylic paint from Mexico," I explained. "And there's a guy over on 14th Street who sells it."

Why don't we try some of it and see what it's like?" So they started getting it and they were like, "Oh my God, this is so good."

From then on, in the early 70s, everybody started using it. It made a big difference for everyone to have this wonderful material to paint with.

We had our meetings on Thursday nights for mural painting. Whenever there was a mural, your dad was always there. And of course he was on the Board of Directors, too. And he was a co-founder. But he had his own work as well. He was a sculptor and a painter. A wonderful person and artist. He was working full time as a custom mattress maker at McRoskey Airflex Mattress. He did that for 46 years or something.

Your dad and I designed and planned at least one mural together. It was a portable mural called "Celestial Cycles." He also designed the "Cross of Quetzalcoatl," which is at San Francisco State.

URBAN YOUTH ARTS PROGRAM

Susan: Urban Youth Arts class started from around 1985, when we started to see these little throw-ups on the walls. It was tagging to some people, but they had some skill. It's different than *cholo* graffiti. I thought it was interesting, another form of mural art.

I was curious as to who was doing it. And I realized that they weren't going to let you know who they were because they were doing it without any permission. Eventually I started to make contact with some of the kids around here who were involved. And I thought that I would like to start a Youth Arts workshop, a program for them to come hang out and share their ideas and develop their own ideas in a safe place.

Of course, they're all shy of any kind of institution or anything. But they started coming in. I started to get to know the graffiti community writers -- they call themselves writers. They would come in and do little workshops, little demonstrations, sharing their black books with the students. Like Zest would come around, or Fury would come around. Youth who were involved in that would come around and peek in to see what was going on. It was all free.

It was a free space, open space, an open studio for anyone to come through. There was really no instruction. You could just sit around the table and draw the tagging you wanted. We had grants from the city to do graffiti murals, based on the fact that it was considered writing and messaging.

Luz and Monte and Suaro were all involved in graffiti art. And they were all very good at it. At times, you guys would come around to the class, as well.

Eventually we started to do our festivals. We had our Mural Awareness month festivals, which started in the early 1990s. We used to engage youth in our festival. But they were still concerned about being recognized, because kids were being criminalized for having even a marker in their pocket. They really didn't want to be that public or that visible because they'd get turned in.

We had our first festival in the Precita Valley Community Center. We had it inside. We had a panel discussion with all the best writers in the city: Dream and Spy and Estria and Crayon, all those guys. We had sheets and sheets of butcher paper all over the gym. Kids would come in. It must have been a hundred or 200 kids inside, all tagging and sharing each other's books and drawing in each other's books. It was really nice.

Then we decided to have it outside. But we made it into a very tight little maze. You couldn't see from the outside what was going on inside. We provided the spray paint. You had to register in our Urban Youth Arts class to get a can because you can't have a can unless you're over 18 years old. We had people register to get a can of paint and spray whatever they wanted on the walls that we built.

You and Suaro and Monte all participated in that for many years. You helped build the walls and Suaro would do the floor plan. It was amazing. Each year, the maze opened up and got bigger and bigger, and spread out over the whole park and to individual walls.

We'd have at least 200, 300 young people come and participate. We started to add other activities, great performances -- rapping

and Youth Speaks and Loco Bloco, bands, dancers, all kinds of performance, activities for little kids. And community painting walls, so people could paint with a brush and do traditional painting, as well as all the other people doing spray painting.

This has been impactful. It's been more than 23 years now that we've had it. This past year, it was virtual. A couple thousand people tuned in. It was a two-day program with people from other countries and workshops for youth. And all the old school writers from San Francisco and our staff.

Because of the pandemic, now we're all tuned in to each other online. Thank goodness for that -- that we have that connection through Zoom, which is amazing. Although I still am annoyed with it.

Luz: I could riff off of the youth arts thing a little bit. I remember that before graffiti became a real movement, a youth movement out of New York, San Francisco had its own thing. And the Mission district had its own thing. It was more of a Latino *cholo* neighborhood. It was pretty rough. We had the projects a block away. We had the barrio: we were Barrio Precita, and there was Barrio Hampshire and barrio York, every two blocks, a barrio. Lowrider magazine was real popular, and cruising up and down the streets every weekend with the lowriders. Everybody had to have hairnets and winos. If you were a young boy in the Mission, you had to be a *cholo*, that was pretty much the way it was.

EL ESKELETO DE GARFIELD PARK

I remember Susan and other artists from Precita Eyes painting in Garfield Park, It was 1980 and not exactly a safe place for people from outside the neighborhood. There was a part of the mural that had been tagged a bunch of times with a skull in a hat, smoking a joint.

They painted it out. And a couple days later, the guy painted it back into the mural. He were making a statement, putting his own tag on the mural, letting them know that he was there, that this was his neighborhood.

Susan decided to integrate that image into the mural itself. And it never got tagged after that again. It was one of those things where a light bulb goes off in your head: We're in somebody's neighborhood. We are from the neighborhood, but it's a community mural. What does that mean to us, and how do we include that?

Susan: That particular tag -- you saw it everywhere. *El Eskelito*. We painted it out because we were going to grid the wall and transfer the design. And he came back even the next night. I looked at it and thought, "Well, he's persistent. Let's just leave it up and see if it might fit into our design somewhere, somehow."

Everybody thought I was crazy, but when we laid out all of our design, it happened to fit very snugly under the giant octopus. We had designed a coral reef underneath that, with a hidden pyramid. It seemed to me that it all fit together. So let's leave it there. So we did.

Then one day I was almost finished with it when I felt this tap on my shoulder behind me. I turned around and saw this nice tall, handsome, young Latino guy.

And he says, "I just want to tell you that I think that you painted it really well."

"What's your name?" I asked him.

"I'm Jesús. I'm the one who drew the image on the wall."

"Thank you very much, Jesús," I said. "Glad to meet you."

And he never did another *eskelito* anywhere. It had an impact on him, and it carried through. He respected it so much that I respected him and his expression of himself.

About 30 years later, I was painting at the Mexican Museum and somebody says, "Hi, Susan, remember me? I'm Jesús. from Garfield Park."

"Oh yeah! What are you doing here?" I replied.

"I'm working for Yerba Buena Center for the Arts -- and I'm going to protect this mural for you, too."

Luz: It's interesting because instead of painting out the mural, you decided to keep this intrusion from a random stranger trying to

make their mark on the wall. It was like an *aikido* move -- instead of using force to block it, why don't we integrate it into our artwork and create something new that includes them? I think that's an interesting way you approach your artwork. You always said that what we do is about creating a voice for the people in the neighborhood. I think that goes back to your philosophy of painting.

Susan: We do all these workshops and not everybody has time to come and participate in them. But they'll see us painting and we'll add something if they ask, if we can. Sometimes they want to come and paint, and we'll say, 'here's a brush, fill this in, don't be afraid.' They can't believe we're actually letting them paint. And they shy away."

Luz: That's part of the process. I think it's an important part of the mural work you do. There's a distinction between being a studio artist and being a community muralist. It's definitely not entirely artist-driven. It's by the people who are non-artists, who are contributing the ideas and actually painting the mural and finishing the mural. The artist is there as a guide, in a way, to get the message or the voice of the community on to the wall.

Susan: I felt comfortable with that, that I could share these skills and knowledge with other people. It didn't mean that they needed to be painters or go through the same process I did, but that they're given an opportunity to be part of the creative process.

Luz: Precita has guided so many young people into discovering art for themselves. Part of that is being a teacher. I think you're a really good teacher.

Susan: What we emphasize is collaboration and being respectful of each other's ideas and effort. Everybody has a different level of experience. You need to respect that. We find a way that everybody can see themselves in the design that comes out of it.

So many people I've worked with have been transformed by it. Of course, you don't know that at the very beginning. But then you see the changes in people, and how they evolve and the impact it

has when they work together and create something beautiful and different. Because by yourself -- you're just yourself. But when you put yourself with other people, you're creating something you never imagined when you started. And that's where transformation begins -- the person starts to see things around them in a different way.

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