

Local Voices S3E5 - Susan Cervantes

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SPEAKERS

Francesca D'Alessio, Susan Cervantes

Francesca D'Alessio

By its most simple definition, murals are large paintings works of art on flat surfaces. From cave paintings to street art, murals have been used as another visual tool to narrate our stories and values, shedding light on social and political culture. It is a powerful method of communication used by artists to evoke emotion and elicit responses from all who walked past it. The streets in San Francisco are filled with a diverse range of murals that have become part of the landscape of our ever changing city. It affects our relationships with place, impacting our sense of familiarity and belonging. Not only do murals change the building that it occupies, but it can define the neighborhood it becomes a part of creating a sense of shared experience. The Mission District's Susan Cervantes is a pioneer of the San Francisco community mural art movement, and the founder and director of Precita Eyes Muralists. For over the last 57 years, Cervantes has continued to foster community collaboration, elevating the voices of new generations, and highlighting the importance of artistic process.

01:33 Francesca D'Alessio

So my first question, I just would love to know where it all began for you. When did you recognize yourself as an artist?

Susan Cervantes

Well, I probably recognize myself as an artist when I was in high school. I was very serious about it when I was in high school, and I had the opportunity to have like three art classes in my senior year. And I graduated when I was 16. I graduated quite early.

Francesca D'Alessio

Wow, from high school, like that's very early.

Susan Cervantes

It was because I went to summer school to complete all of my academics, so I could get out of high school sooner than later.

Francesca D'Alessio

Good for you. What was your drive, the freedom, the freedom of getting out of high school?

Susan Cervantes

Yeah, that part of it. And then also, I was focusing on art, and because my academics were out of the way, I had all this free time at school. So I was able to take two or three art classes a day, until I graduated. I was happy that my parents supported that plan. I said, I really would like to be out of school early. And I would like to go to a summer school and get all my classes behind me during the summer. And they said, Okay, that sounds like a good plan, and allowed me to do that.

Francesca D'Alessio

I wonder if they were worried you would drop out to pursue art, or, were they were probably so thrilled that you were on this accelerated path, as opposed to, you know, "forget high school, I want to make art."

Susan Cervantes

Well, that was part of that, but I also was chosen from my art classes to be one of the students to go to the museum school. And so I was doing that every Saturday, I would go there to be trained in painting. And then I would go to my teacher's studio. And one evening of the week we would do life drawing. So I was like doing life drawing when I was 15/16 years old. I was influenced by my teacher's work, who did these imaginary kinds of landscapes with figures, you know, in fields and barns and stuff like that with special kind of lighting. So I thought that the light was really important.

Francesca D'Alessio

I was gonna ask, do you remember, yeah, what was it that struck you about that imagery?

Susan Cervantes

I guess the psychological tones of it, the one thing he said to me was, you have to make original art. That meant to me like it had to be something from myself, not from something external. So even if I was doing a still life of a bowl of fruit or something, it was from my imagination. So that was an important lesson at that moment. So I remembered that from my original teacher, the museum school gives a scholarship to one student every year. And I happened to get this scholarship that had an exhibition of all the students' work, and they chose me to be honored with a scholarship. So I went to the museum library, and I looked up art schools, there weren't any that were giving degrees. My parents wanted me to get a degree, so there's only two places to go where you get a degree. One was in Philadelphia, which is the Pennsylvania Academy of Art which was where my museum teacher went and he was wanting me to go there. That takes you five years to get a B.A. They did the best to

where I looked at the California School of Fine Arts and you can go for four years and get a degree. And so my parents said, okay, you can go to California. I hadn't even turned 17 yet. But I think it was a little sad for my mom because she leaves me in a city, you know, by myself, you know, but I was just in my room. I was just painting every day. I could do a painting every day. I was there in the school, like 15 hours a day, painting. I would take up a whole corner of the studio and I was one of maybe 50 full time students. And I met my husband Luis, and he came to night school for painting classes and for ceramics, he was a ceramic sculptor, you know, but the night teacher would tell me and say, "Susan, you can't take up the space at night. You have to let my students come in and fill the space if they need it." I said it's okay. So Luis came and he, he parked himself right in my spot. And he was looking, I had all my paintings up around the wall. And he was looking at them. And so we got acquainted, and we were partners by that fall, November, like Thanksgiving, Thanksgiving was always like our anniversary.

Francesca D'Alessio

Oh, that's so romantic. Do you think he fell in love with your paintings first?

Susan Cervantes

Probably. He was in a space. And then he saw me and then he saw the painting. So it was really wonderful to meet him, you know, been a part of my life for more than 44 years. We have three sons. And so he's, he's painting, too, but he was a sculptor. He did this monumental play sculpture. When I first met him, and I met him in the pot shop where they were doing ceramic art at the school, he was just an amazing artist.

Francesca D'Alessio

How wonderful, what a partner. That's incredible. Yeah, I keep thinking if the school gave you all that space, because they knew you would be changing the landscape of the city. You know, I think they knew you would come and bring color and joy and beautiful murals to the city. And so they gave you as much space as you needed. And I think your husband probably picked that up too.

Susan Cervantes

What's strange is that, you know, I had all different kinds of jobs at the art school and one of them was working with the dean and curator of the Diego Rivera gallery, and there was this curtain in there that actually hid the Diego Rivera mural. And I was told that it was covered because in 1954, by the former president of the school, because it wasn't contemporary enough. I was working in the gallery and I was trying to take a peek and there was a monumental painter Norman Irving, who makes the biggest paintings I've ever seen, made, reached 20 feet tall and 10 feet wide. It was like this fantastic, mechanized society, the rich, indulging in all all of their richness and mechanisms and power and just in repeating forms that gave it a rhythm and a movement. Pretty amazing. But he was inspired by the Mexican muralist and he said, Susan, you have to go to Mexico and see the Mexican muralists. He inspired me to consider doing that I never imagined but because Luis was from Mexico, his family was originally from Mexico. He and I went to Mexico a few times. And it was important for Luis to like, find out more about his own roots, his own heritage as well. So we did we finally did get to go see the great Mexican muralists in Mexico City. That was in 1968.

Francesca D'Alessio

Wow. And is that the first time that you really felt the power of the mural? I mean, the 20 foot one that you've kind of peel back the curtain, is that the first time or had you been painting large beforehand?

Susan Cervantes

Well, I was always inclined to paint large and Luis would make me the largest canvases possible like 10 feet by 5 feet, or sometimes triptychs with those measurements.

Francesca D'Alessio

Wow.

Susan Cervantes

I really wanted to paint something beyond my periphery. So I was inclined to do that. I never imagined you know, painting murals. That was when the mural movement hadn't even started. When I did the first mural in the Mission probably in 1965 for the Coffee Dawns it was on 22nd and Valencia, but Coffee Dawns, you know, the guy wanted a mural on his wall and he was living next door. We used to patronize, you know, his place for food and stuff. So I'll just give you some food if you know and come up. So it was the first mural and it was about a subject that was a little controversial, it was about Custer's Last Stand, because the owner was say, "Where did all these Indians come from?". So what I did is I made it so that all the Indians were really pouncing on on the Custer's army and in really destroying them but in a kind of a cartoon kind of a way.

Francesca D'Alessio

I love your work I can imagine. Yeah. How long was that mural there for?

Susan Cervantes

It was there for several years. It wasn't destroyed, just covered with paneling. And then someone else took over. And then they wanted to change the paneling. And then they saw that there was a mural under there. And so they contacted me, we're gonna have to paint out this mural they said, okay, whatever. So that was much later on.

Francesca D'Alessio

I mean, I can't imagine the Mission without your murals. So it's really exciting to hear the first one that you painted. I mean, that's such a cool story.

Susan Cervantes

Yeah, but no one even knew that it was there, not maybe until 1971-72, there's maybe a handful.

Francesca D'Alessio

And why is it that to go so big, you know, what is it that drives you to paint such you know, life sized imagery?

Susan Cervantes

I wasn't planning on that, I got involved with a group of women muralists in the early 70's, the Mujeres Muralistas.

Francesca D'Alessio

And this is after you've returned home from Mexico, right?

Susan Cervantes

When we visited Mexico, there was a purpose in our visit, get more culturally in tuned with that culture. So we were just on a cultural pilgrimage at that time, and didn't think about it coming back. And of course, two or three more years went by before you start to see any murals at all. And I was just painting all the time. You know, I needed to get one semester of tuition which was only what, 200 and something dollars at the time. But that was a lot of money at that time, people were making \$1.25 an hour. So this guy said, if you can beat me on this chess game, I will pay your tuition. Thinking that I wasn't going to win, of course. So I got there, and I really concentrated and I beat him. And he paid my tuition. I went through school and I got scholarships after that. Then I had my first son in 1969, I was following the Mujeres Muralistas and they knew that I was a painter. So they invited me to work with them on a on a mural, one of the murals that they did, and I saw how wonderful they worked collectively sharing the themes, the ideas, their contribution to the idea then the composition. And there was four or five of them, you know, and they did it so well. I thought, well, this is really fantastic way to work with other people. And you're working on something that is public that's accessible to everybody, not in a gallery, not in a museum, though, that really inspired me. And I thought, well, we really need this to be in our community at Precita Valley Community Center where I was volunteering my time, because I had my first son. So I started volunteering my time. And I was doing preschool art and after school art for kids and doing adult painting classes in the evening. And so my friends from the Mujeres Muralistas, Patricia Rodriguez and Grace El Acquario, they said, Fine, we'll get a workshop starting there. So that's what happened. We started the first workshop at Precita Valley. And I ended up directing it and we installed it on the front facade, and it was the first multicultural mural in the Mission. It was painted and designed by about 17 participants of very, very diverse group of people. So that was my first experience doing that.

Francesca D'Alessio

That's amazing. I love this story. What is the process? Like, you know, I mean, how do you creatively collaborate and compromise with 17 other artists, what is the process like of getting the design out? And, you know, what does that even look like? I mean, do you all kind of come with drawings, and you combine them or you all draw together? What is the process of working with a collective?

Susan Cervantes

Yeah, we do with many different sized groups. Basically, it's the theme is the theme that bonds everything together. So if everyone's drawing around the same theme, it's not gonna look really crazy to have a theme, we have everybody draw out their ideas. And some people have never painted or drawn before, that's fine, too. We include what everyone's ideas are, then once they draw them out, we put it away. And by memory, everybody remembers what each other has done. And we make it a list of all the images. And then we'll see how they're all interrelated. And then they have a big piece of paper, they can start to make a composition. And they can decide how they're going to tell the story left or right, middle out, whatever, wherever they want, whatever the focus is, and the whole group decides where everything's going to go, and how the story is going to be. Oh, and that's the way it's always been done.

Francesca D'Alessio

It's so beautiful, because it's very cohesive, you know, the work that I've seen of yours till such strong narratives, they're always beautiful cohesive, you know, to think that you have all of these multiple different brains and create creative process all combined is amazing.

Susan Cervantes

It's good because people don't don't know at the beginning how it's all gonna how all these different ideas gonna come together. But we start with there's a magic that happens.

Francesca D'Alessio

Yeah, you make it seem easy. And this is not easy. This is absolutely magic.

Susan Cervantes

And then the main thing is that everybody can see themselves in it. The last thing you say is "Can everybody see themselves and see their parts in here?" And they say yes. And so we know that that is the composition that we should stay with. And so then we bring back a scale drawing, after all the research and development we show if this what you like, is this what you want, and we show them first. And they say, yes, this is what and usually it's even more enhanced, they just can't believe that all these things were put together and say, I didn't think my thing was very good. But when you put everybody else around it, it looks great.

Francesca D'Alessio

I love that, that's true in so many facets of life. Really, that's so beautiful.

Susan Cervantes

You know. So that's how the process the process works. And that's a really True community mural process that we practice and share with the communities that we serve.

Francesca D'Alessio

Oh, extraordinary. And then what is the application process? Does the community all come out to watch every brushstroke you put on the wall? And how many muralists do you have engaged in actually putting it up on the walls?

Susan Cervantes

Well, in a lot of cases, once we have the design approved, then we can prepare the wall and transfer the design onto the wall. When we're working with like in a students sort of situation, we can have those students actually practice trying to enlarge their parts. And that works. And the artists are ultimately responsible for making sure the transfer goes on. Well, we have what's called a community painting day where everybody comes out and begins the painting begins the mural, we've done that so many times with hundreds of people, sometimes we have three or 400 people at once and on really large scale projects. So we never know how many people are going to come out. I think one of the last ones was the General Hospital barricade where we had a couple of 100 people, I remember when we did the barricades around the Asian Art Museum, when it was being built, we had about three or 400 people.

Francesca D'Alessio

Wow, wow. You know, there's, it's so there's so much to all of this, you know, there's so much to unpack, I think you're incredibly brave, right to have, because ultimately, the mural lives forever. And so to be able to pull 400 people together and have them all participate and have a beautiful image at the end is really powerful. Because you get a lot of people have a lot of fear around art, you know, and they say I'm not an artist, I don't know how to do this, I you know, and they bring so much insecurity to making art. And so I imagine that you're able to empower them, make them comfortable enough to choose the colors to get their hands dirty to get involved. So there's like a layer there that I you know, give you a lot of credit for making people feel comfortable and getting them to participate. And then setting them up for success that in the end, the art is so beautiful. You know, the work that you leave the murals on the walls are so stunning and so joyful and colorful and have such strong narratives, that you're able to give people that gift that they were part of that. It's really it's beautiful, I give you a lot of credit.

Susan Cervantes

Well, thank you. I mean, a lot of it is transformative. A lot of people they don't expect the process to make them feel bonded the way they do with the various it and it leaves them with a thought that they can transform their lives. They can make their lives better, not not just as artists, but just as people working with other people not being afraid to share their emotions and their ideas with other people as you've given them that opportunity. So then once you give someone that humanity of using there, giving them that always reminds me of a third grader who comes up to me after we finish the mural says thank you for giving us our imagination. I feel like you might say, Well, you've always had it. And it's just terrible that our education system does not encourage that from the very beginning from from birth to encourage your your being who you are, and let the you know your imagination and your mind and your emotions and everything be free and in control of yourself. So that's what

hooked me is the fact that this is as as life changing, but to see the cultural genocide that we have had present for generations. So I felt like this is a way that I could least give back.

Francesca D'Alessio

Yeah, the most important lesson that you can give somebody and you've also given them they're part of a larger more beautiful process too you know, there's a self importance when you work with 400 people and you can find the color that you painted on this larger, beautiful piece. I know all of it is so empowering.

Susan Cervantes

It's very rewarding to feel that way. You know, when everybody when you get into the middle of the project and everybody's sitting still, and they're like, focused on what they're doing, you feel this harmony go through the whole group.

Francesca D'Alessio

Right? And then it translates into the art, I mean that that harmony then translates into the final piece. Do you ever get nervous before a piece starts? Because you're wonderful. I mean, you really sort of let it be, you're not a control freak, you are very open minded, and let the journey sort of happen. Do you ever get nervous when you're when you're about to embark? And you don't really know what's going to happen?

Susan Cervantes

No, I don't think I do. I mean, I just think of the possibilities, being able to visualize I mean, to have a vision that it can happen, you know, that's in it, in it. And it does happen. And it happens all the time.

Francesca D'Alessio

Yeah, I've talked to so many different artists that you have influenced in such strong ways. You know, we actually, we just worked with Twin Wall Murals, and they sing your praises. And, you know, it's just a wonderful thing. I mean, you make it seem sort of easy, and you're so humble, but you are a legend, and you've had such influence on so many incredible artists, you know, there's sort of this ripple effect that happens, I think, from that original mural, you made the ripple effects throughout the universe, that you've inspired different artists, for generations, it's really powerful. Art is therapy, art, is community building art is, you know, you don't know what relationship somebody will build with art from the exposure you've given them. But my understanding is that that little seed has grown and blossomed in so many people. So it's really wonderful. But I would love to talk about Precita Eyes a little bit more, because I think that's sort of the ground zero, the home base of all this amazing work. And it's in the heart of the Mission. I mean, I can't imagine the Mission without Precita Eyes and the incredible work that you do.

Susan Cervantes

Well, it's always been part of our life here. Like I said, we've lived in the mission for 60 years, we've always been here. When we take people on tours of the murals. In the early days, there was like this handful of murals. But

we wanted people to understand the history where they come from indigenous people to the great Mexican muralist to the contemporary mural movement here, and who's responsible and why they're doing that, and what it all means. So we were, when I started, little, little throw ups, graffiti tags, throw ups, I said, this is a new form of mural, who is doing this, and was documenting it and started to see and find out who was doing it and, and gave them the space to come to and share their ideas about graffiti, gave them a simple,

Francesca D'Alessio

That's so beautiful, because at that time, those kids were being criminalized for making these murals, so wonderful for you to embrace it and recognize it as an art form

Susan Cervantes

That was important to me to do that. There was also you know, I had teenage sons at that time, they were, you know, I think one was put in custody, because he had a fat marker on him. If you had a marker in those days, you were busted. And you would go, your parents had to go pick you up and say, you know, try to keep you from doing that again. But, you know, all my sons, I think, have had their thing with the graffiti movement. They're all artists, and they all do fantastic work, but it influenced a whole generation of people. Time is when they were communicating with each other in that way, style. And I, I thought that that was very important.

Francesca D'Alessio

It's so important. Yeah, you know, and at that time, too, I mean, there was it was sort of an untrained skill. And you can see who is better than others. I mean, there was sort of this internal competition amongst graffiti artists. So what a gift for you to then embrace them and give them training. And, you know, it's such a one because it's such a beautiful art form that is only starting to get that credit recently,

Susan Cervantes

Not knowing at that time, what your impact is, you know, I can see perspective, you know, that it had an impact and importance and was an outlet for a lot of youth that were being criminalized. So we would find the sanction permission, places where they could actually practice this art with a spray can. And then of course, we started the Urban Youth Arts Festival 24 years ago, which we build walls in the park, and then we provide the spray paint and they can spray all they want with their images, and it's just gotten better and better. Now, we're sharing that internationally. We had our online International Festival last year because of COVID. But now this year, we're probably going to do both at this. Hopefully, I hopefully live in online. So yeah, definitely is for the youth especially, to have that outlet. You know, having access, giving everyone access to, to art in some form, whether it's in a graffiti form or in traditional form, it's changed a lot of people's lives. And you don't really realize how big a reach it has been. Until people are like, contact you 20 years later and say, Oh, my gosh, I just had to get in touch with you and tell you that you completely changed my life, my way as a homeless man. And you gave me an opportunity to paint on this wall. And it changed my life so much after that, that I just needed to like, let you know how much a better person that I am today.

Francesca D'Alessio

And for that one email know that there's 1000 people that did not send an email that that just feel that you know, yeah, that's so wonderful. Do you have a favorite mural that you've made? I know, that's a loaded a loaded question.

Susan Cervantes

It's pretty loaded. I mean, all of them are your babies, you know, you love them all. But I mean, the one that sticks out, probably, for me and many other people is the Women's Building mural. That one was very unique, very unique collaboration with myself and six other women artists. And, you know, it's been, what, 26 years now since we completed it. And it really made it a unique kind of bond between us because we meet almost every month, we've been meeting. We've been meeting every month since the beginning, since we finished the mural.

Francesca D'Alessio

What was that process? Like? I mean, that is a huge building. And that mural is so it's so revealing, it's so honest, I mean, that is it is defined San Francisco, that building.

Susan Cervantes

Well, we all contributed different parts. And I guess the part that I can, you know, contributed most to the woman at the top on the 18th street side, the woman giving birth. Now she's not giving birth, actually got a six month fetus inside of her belly, but she's sort of the goddess of light and creativity. And she's got her hands raised with the sun coming through. And behind her is a butterfly wings with representing rebirth, which is sort of like the rebirth of the women's building, because they just finished paying off the mortgage. When we did the mural. That's sort of what it was celebrating. And then her birth waters, you know, the fish, and then the birth waters turned into the fabric. So I did all the flow lines and so that the names of all the women could be put on the flow lines of the fabric fabric from over 36 countries that were done by women, we have over 500 names that are painted on the flow lines between the fabrics. On both sides of the building the hands, the Rigoberta Menchu, which is from her kitchen, Maya tribe, the Kuan Yin, Goddess of compassion, and so much more. Those are just some of the elements I focused on the most.

Francesca D'Alessio

So stunning. And it's so thoughtful. Do you ever I mean, every mural you've done, I feel like there's so much deep meaning every brushstroke feels very thoughtful and very intentional. Do you ever get a chance to explain these murals, every detail and every thoughtful piece that you've put in? Or do you just leave it up to the viewer to sort of internalize and because you know, the Women's Building now has this beautiful book, and so I could read about each piece of it. But you have murals, too, that I'm like wondering, and my brain goes wild, and I go down the rabbit hole of what I think you must have been meaning.

Susan Cervantes

Well, I think every mural has a narrative and has a story, we actually write them down, we offer them to the people who are using the building, whether it might be a school or community center or health center or something, they have the narrative. Sometimes they post the narratives, but basically people don't have access

to those narratives unless they do some research, you know, that you want people to like just kind of take in what they can perceive of the work and come up with their own interpretation. You know, and but of course, you know, once they do know the story, they look at it even deeper. Why that's why our tours are so important because people just go by they don't really think about it. When they take our tour and they get a real live person artists to take them by and describe what the meanings of it is. They say that it changes everything the way they look at murals.

Francesca D'Alessio

You know you have a beautiful quote on your website I wanted to ask you about, so on your website there's a quote stating "Precita Eyes is art for the people. Precita murals are thought provoking and really speak to issues of class struggle, racism, oppression and other relevant issues to communities of color." I just would love for you to speak to that I just feel like that needs to be included into this podcast somehow.

Susan Cervantes

Yeah, it can be the murals, maybe they look very beautiful. But if you start looking at it closely, you can see the deeper meanings. That's what we're trying to do. Also, we show the diversity, because we have a lot of people working on it. It's not just one person. And the themes can be all different kinds of things. I mean, we did one around AIDs we did one is on Market and 16th Street is still there, we have many different ones with different issues that have come up in the community. So I think it's really a great testimony to hear that people can see the depth of the work, and not just think of it as just a beautiful painting.

Francesca D'Alessio

And I love the themes come from the community, too, and that you've always been solicited. I mean, that's such a beautiful thing. There's an element of spirituality in each of your pieces. I don't know if you can speak to that. I feel like it's beyond words. You know, I don't know if you can articulate what that is. But I feel like that comes through you as an artist, like you have a beautiful spirit that then is just transformed onto the wall. But I don't know, maybe it's not something you think about how would you address spirituality in your work?

Susan Cervantes

Well, it's interesting that you something that's been following me since I was a student, that they can't talk about it, because it's too spiritual. That's my personal work, you know, but, you know, yeah, I think that it does mean a lot. And if I can share that, if I can convey that to people or makes it have them feel that without saying anything, you don't say, We have to do something spiritual, it just comes out, it gets, because everyone, everyone has that inside of them. They already have this knowledge, you know, that's been given to them from their ancestors, and so if you give them that freedom, it comes out. And I'm just here to like, you know, guide them. It just makes perfect sense. And if we can convey any of that kind of spirit from each of the individuals that participate, then that's going to shine, and it's going to be good. It's going to give all of us more light than what we already have.

32:36 Francesca D'Alessio

“People in communities have concerns and it is important that they have a voice. Public Art gives people that voice, it gives them visibility and the hopes and dreams of their community,” Susan Cervantes. Cervantes has been an inspiring leader, co creating and collaborating with local artists and community members in so many ways, transforming their lives through the creation of murals. She brings people together to help them tell their stories, and fill the walls with subjects and themes that reflect who they are and who their communities are. Next Monday, please join me as I have the opportunity to speak with conceptual artists and longtime friend of the de Young museums, Catherine Wagner. We will hear Wagner share her practice and her history creating public artworks, her nuanced and her innovation. I'm Francesca D'Alessio and I oversee the public programs initiatives here at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, and I'll be your host for this series. Please visit our website [deyoung.famsf.org\programs\localvoices](https://deyoung.famsf.org/programs/localvoices) to find our transcripts for these episodes. And to be sure to subscribe to the museum's email newsletters to learn more about what's going on here at the de Young.