

Murals of Malaquias Montoya

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Malaquias Montoya has used his "art of protest" to champion farmworkers, oppose the Vietnam War and fight the death penalty. Now he is using it to inspire California kids in rural towns like Elmira, Knight's Landing and Dixon.

Montoya's latest project -- a 12- by 40-foot mural at Beamer Park Elementary School in Woodland -- was completed Thursday.



Maria Alvarado is a UC Davis student in Chicana/o studies professor Malaquias Montoya's class who is creating art at Beamer Elementary School in Woodland. (Claudia Morain/UC Davis photo)

"It's nice to give a gift, brighten up a school, tell a story," said Montoya, a professor of Chicana/Chicano studies and art and art history at UC Davis. "It's a way for the university to give to schools that are always under-funded, particularly in the arts."

Among the most prominent living Chicano artists, Montoya's work is in the collections of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum in Chicago, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and more than a dozen other museums, libraries and universities.

The Beamer Park mural is the 13th that Montoya has created since 1991 at schools in Yolo and Solano counties. Like its predecessors, the new mural's theme was originated by students at the school, the design was fleshed out by UC Davis students in Montoya's Mexican and Chicano Public Art class and the project was overseen and finished by Montoya.

The theme -- a celebration of farming, ancestry, community, dancing and dreams -- represents values the Beamer Park kids hold dear.

A "dual immersion" school, Beamer Park provides instruction for all students in two languages, Spanish and English. In the 2005-2006 school year -- the latest statistics available -- more than 75 percent of the 408 students were Hispanic, half were designated as "English-language learners" and 63 percent were classified as socioeconomically disadvantaged.

Shelly Wickwire, principal of Beamer Park Elementary School, said the mural project has increased students' pride in their school.

"They can see it reflects them," Wickwire said. "It's really a vibrant addition to our school. It's been a dream come true for us."

For many of Montoya's students at UC Davis, the opportunity to help schoolchildren express their aspirations and celebrate their heritage is a dream come true as well.

Melanie King, a UC Davis senior who grew up in rural Kerman, outside Fresno, has taken Montoya's mural class three times.

"I used to think where I grew up was kind of lame," says King, who is Japanese-American. "Studying Chicano art and Chicano history, I realize there's art in everything we do, and beauty in these rural Central Valley areas."

The cultural anthropology major hopes to return to Kerman -- where her high school did not have an art teacher -- and find a job in arts education.

"I've learned that art isn't just an unobtainable thing that only cultured people in cities can have," she said. "Muralism is a very important art form because it's open, something for everyone in the community to see, not just in a museum."

After meeting with the Beamer Park kids in April, Montoya and his UC Davis students came up with a "narrative" for a mural inspired by one of the elementary school's favorite folk songs, "De Colores," which celebrates color in spring, birds and rainbows.

"De Colores reminds us of the magnificence and the strength that is found in the fusion of cultures and races," the narrative says. "Likewise, our mural celebrates Woodland's acceptance of multiculturalism, which derives from its origins, its rich traditions and a united community working together to create a better future."

Done in outdoor acrylic paint and sealed with a weatherproof varnish, the mural features ballet folklorico dancers, a tree representing knowledge and roots, and Lego blocks representing the building of a new future.

For the past couple of weeks, Montoya has worked on the mural for five or six hours a day, five days a week. His UC Davis students joined him during class on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Montoya was born in Albuquerque, N.M., and raised in the San Joaquin Valley. He was brought up in a family of seven children by parents who could not read or write either Spanish or English. The three oldest children never went beyond the 7th grade, as the entire family had to work as farm laborers for their survival. After his parents divorced when he was 10, Montoya's mother continued to work in the fields to support the four children still remaining at home so they could pursue an education. Montoya graduated from UC Berkeley in 1969.

He went on to become one of the founders of a "social serigraphy" movement in the San Francisco Bay Area in the mid-1960s, and used his art in support of various social causes.

On his Web site, <http://www.malaquiasmontoya.com>, Montoya writes that he has dedicated his life to "informing and educating those neglected and exploited peoples whose lives are at risk in milieus of racism, sexism and cultural oppression."

To view a video in which Montoya talks more about his childhood and elaborates on his views on art and social change, visit <http://frontiers.ucdavis.edu/2a.html>.

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