

# MODERN PAINTERS

November 2006

Four decades  
of politics and art  
in Los Angeles



# We Dissent

BY FRANCIS FRASCINA

Even when it comes to art, the limelight that surrounds Los Angeles can blind you to the facts of the place. The prevailing myths of the city's art fall into a dialectic between, on the one hand, cool aestheticism and, on the other, lurid alienation. But political art, and artists making politics, have a long trajectory in postwar LA that continues into the present; here, *Modern Painters* traces that line. Art historian Francis Frascina examines a largely ignored past of intertwined art and politics in Los Angeles in the 1960s and '70s, while four artists who live and work in the city—Mario Ybarra Jr., Harry Dodge and Stanya Kahn, and Daniel Joseph Martinez—discuss recent projects that, in various ways, carry on a well-established (if less than well-known) tradition of LA *art engagé*.

Los Angeles has a mythical status as a city that is hedonistically indifferent to politics and social injustice, and where art is inspired by a "sunshine muse." But realities often disrupt this sunlit myth: recent examples include successful strikes in 2000 by some 8,500 janitorial workers and almost 7,000 transit workers, and the demonstration by half a million people earlier this year in support of immigrant rights. There are, of course, more notorious examples. Think of Watts, South Central Los Angeles, on August 11, 1965, the day of a violent police arrest and beating of a woman. Six days of riots followed, the result of pent-up resentment, leaving 34 dead, mostly shot by police, and more than 1,000 wounded. On March 3, 1991, Rodney King was brutally beaten by officers of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD). Despite a witness's video recording of the events, the LAPD officers were acquitted of wrongdoing on April 29, 1992. In the following three days, a tidal wave of assault, looting, and arson left at least 41 dead and about 2,000 injured.

Later that year, Adrian Piper produced her installation *Black Box/White Box*. Viewers moved between two "box" spaces that incorporated a television monitor playing the video of King being beaten by LAPD officers and sound tracks including Marvin Gaye's politically charged "What's Going On" and the voice of President George H. W. Bush on

sending National Guard troops into Los Angeles to quell the violent reaction to the King case verdicts. Piper is not alone in critically engaging the city's political facts; artists as diverse as Erika Rothenberg, the Center for Land Use Interpretation, Ruben Ochoa, Andrea Bowers, and Sam Durant have reacted against the mythology of the "sunshine muse"—not to mention efforts in other fields, such as Mike Davis's invaluable *City of Quartz* (1990) and David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001). These contemporary works have not been created in a vacuum. Instead, they build on an often forgotten yet vital substrate of political art and artist activism in Los Angeles in the 1960s.

The catalyst for much political art in the '60s was the war in Vietnam. During a weekend of major demonstrations in Los Angeles, on Saturday, May 15, 1965, artists organized a "White-Out" at most of the art galleries on La Cienega Boulevard to protest President Lyndon B. Johnson's escalation of the war. Shutting down the burgeoning art district would draw media attention and, perhaps, irritate those with financial capital who viewed the arts as a key part of LA's efforts to rival New York as a cultural capital. In the galleries, paintings on display were covered with white paper bearing a "Stop Escalation" symbol: a black ladder with STOP printed at its base. La Cienega Boulevard was plastered with the Stop Escalation signs. »

THIS SPREAD  
PEACE TOWER, 1966  
STEEL AND MIXED MEDIA,  
55 FT HIGH  
DETAIL AND INSTALLATION  
VIEW, LOS ANGELES  
PHOTOS CHARLES BRUTAN  
COURTESY THE J. PAUL GETTY  
MUSEUM, LOS ANGELES, AND  
SPACETIME CO.  
© HARRY FISHER

“Those driving from the galleries climbed the hill to behold a reminder that artists’ protests could deprive art lovers of cultural comfort.”

The next day, hundreds of artists in somber black dress held a silent vigil at the entrance to the new Los Angeles County Art Museum. Holding Stop Escalation placards, they handed out copies of the Artists’ Protest Committee’s two-page “We Dissent” advertisement, which had appeared in the *Los Angeles Free Press* on May 14 with the names of 171 signatories. The culmination of the weekend, Monday, May 17, was a “Happening/protest” in the galleries and on La Cienega Boulevard by an estimated 1,000 demonstrators, most carrying posters calling for an end to the bombing in Vietnam and for the UN to take charge. Artists and other protesters disrupted traffic by forming a wide line two blocks long, occasionally bursting into the chant “Stop the war.”

Shortly thereafter, artists targeted a cultural segment more directly implicated in the war. On June 26, 1965, artists picketed the RAND Corporation in Santa Monica because the think tank provided ideas and overseers for the management and escalation of military operations. Corporation employees were so perturbed that on July 7 they

entered into a closed debate with artists Irving Petlin, Larry Bell, Leon Golub, Lloyd Hamrol, and Craig Kauffman; playwright Michael McClure; poet Robert Duncan; art critic Max Kozloff; and Annette Michelson, a critic and soon-to-be contributing editor of *Artforum*. On August 3 of that year, a public “Dialogue on Vietnam” was held at the Warner Playhouse on North La Cienega Boulevard between RAND “experts” and members of the art community including Golub, Kozloff, and Petlin. Twice the auditorium’s capacity turned up; to accommodate the overflow, organizers set up a loudspeaker in the adjacent parking lot to relay the conversation from inside.

The high point of these LA artists’ activities came on February 26, 1966, with the dedication of the *Artists’ Tower of Protest*, or *Peace Tower*. The site-specific project at the junction of La Cienega and Sunset Boulevards was inaugurated with speeches by Petlin, ex-Green Beret Donald Duncan, and Susan Sontag. It was designed to protest the escalation of American military activity in Vietnam and to remain as a beacon of dissent until the withdrawal of American troops. The yellow and »

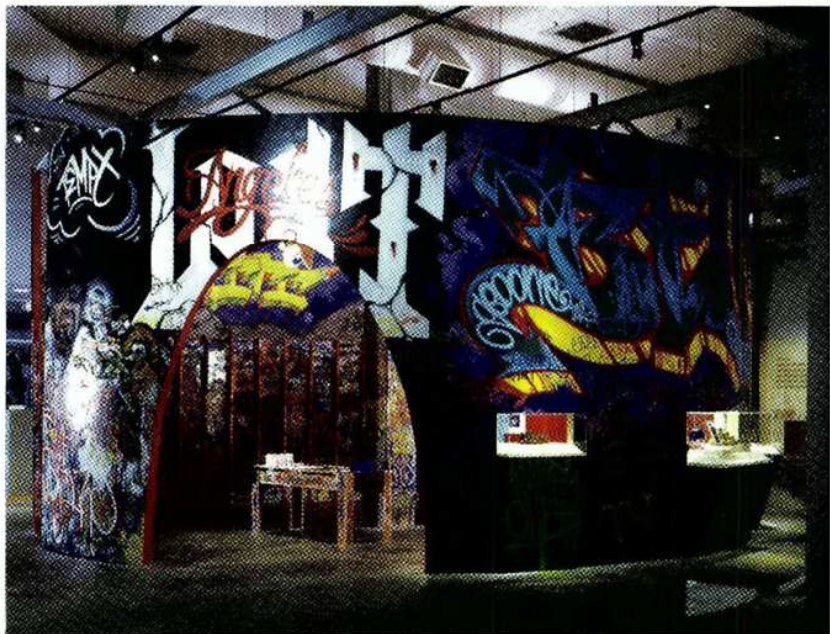
**MARIO YBARRA JR.  
ON THE BELMONT TUNNEL**

I first went to Belmont Tunnel, just west of downtown L.A., when I was 16 years old. It seemed like a fun, rule-free zone, where all these other teenagers were gathering to paint their names and do graffiti. Seeing this old tunnel was mysterious. It was so dark you couldn’t see all the way through. By the time I went there, it had been built up as a mythical place. I only visited it a few times, and I knew there was a generation that had a stronger affinity for it than I did.

The Belmont Tunnel was known as *the yard*: people would come there from other parts of the country to see quintessential L.A. graffiti art. When I heard that developers were planning to tear down the walls, I felt like something important would be lost, and I went to several council meetings with Belmont Art Park United, a group of concerned people—graffiti artists, ball players, urban historians—who tried to petition for the site to be declared a landmark. When the Los Angeles County Museum of Art approached me to do a project, I decided I wanted it to be about the Belmont. I am not a local councilperson or a lawyer, but an artist, and I have access to institutions, and can use the museum as a platform to preserve the memory of the Belmont.

In London they have the Speaker’s Corner in Hyde Park, where people can soapbox and speak their mind. That’s what the Belmont was. I remember seeing paintings in 1994 protesting Proposition 187, a law that would prevent people who didn’t have citizenship from having access to education and health care.

So graffiti was what brought me there, but as I began the project and met other people involved in the fight for Belmont’s preservation, I learned more about the site. It turns out Belmont was part of LA’s first subway, which only ran for a mile. People used it the



most during WWII, but once cars went back into production, and people moved farther out, it went out of business, in 1955. The other interesting thing about Belmont is its relationship to immigrants. At the center of the yard was a flat field, and in the '80s, when there was a large influx of southern Mexicans and Central Americans, they brought a version of the Mesoamerican ball game *tarasca* to that area of LA and built a field for this game to be played at Belmont. It was the only site in the US where this would be played, so men from all over the US who had emigrated from the state of Michoacán would come there to play.

With my project at LACMA, I tried to explain the history of the site through artifacts that I collected. The Belmont has three histories:

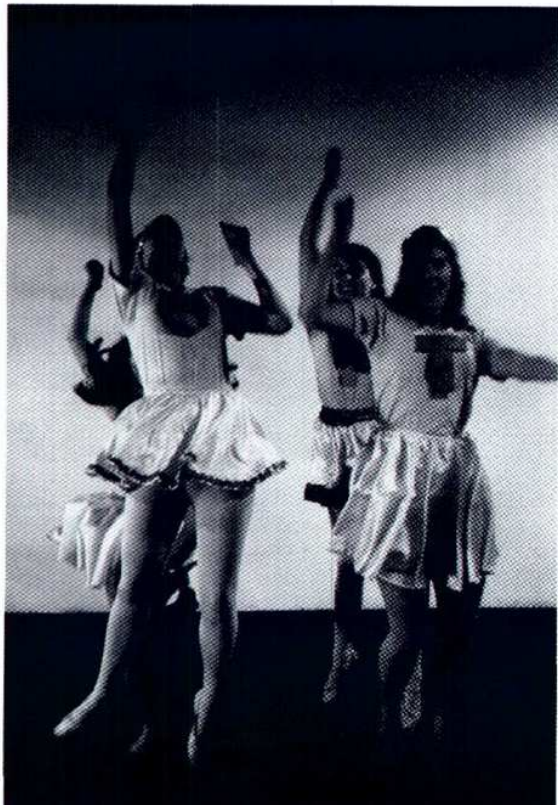
train history, graffiti history, and ball-game history. I went to the tunnel with a pocket knife and found a spot on the wall where water had leaked behind the paint so there was a bubble. I cut an 8x10 inch paint chip, getting as close to the concrete as possible. It was a quarter of an inch thick, and there were several hundred layers of paint, like the rings of a sequoia tree. Graffiti artists started painting there in '83, so one layer could be the '84 Olympics, another could be the '92 uprising, another could be the O.J. case in '95. The chip is really beautiful, grey on one side, bright colors on the other. I brought this to the museum and told them it represented about 20 years of history of Los Angeles. That was the starting point for telling the story.

MARIO YBARRA JR.  
*BELMONT RUINS*, 2006  
MIXED MEDIA  
DIMENSIONS VARIABLE  
INSTALLATION VIEW  
LOS ANGELES COUNTY  
MUSEUM OF ART  
91010, 081011'S  
COURTESY FARTIST AND ANNA  
REYNOLDS GALLERY LOS ANGELES

purple tower, designed and built under the direction of sculptor Mark di Suvero and architect Kenneth Dillon, stood some 58 feet high. It was surrounded by 418 works by individual artists, each two feet square and attached four-high on a continuous 100-foot-long billboard wall that stretched in a U-shape behind and on either side of the piece. La Cienega Boulevard drops down steeply from the T-junction to an area known as Gallery Row. Those driving from the galleries climbed the hill toward the tower to behold a reminder that artists' protests against the Vietnam War could deprive art lovers of cultural comfort.

The dedication of the *Peace Tower* merited a front-page display in the *Los Angeles Free Press*, a local radical alternative newspaper. *Artforum* ignored the tower, however, even though its offices were just down the hill (above LA's home of vanguard art, the Ferus Gallery) and its editor, Phil Leider, was active in the Artists' Protest Committee. "Art" and "politics" could be conveniently separated, then, according to editorial agendas. In 1974, Peter Plagens, who wrote often for the magazine in its early years, published *Sunshine Muse: Contemporary Art on the West Coast*. In it, he followed prevailing orthodoxies that art and politics do not mix, omitting the seminal activities of the Artists' Protest Committee in 1965 and 1966. Making Plagens's attitude all the more curious, in December 1972, he published in *Artforum* a dystopian counter to the image of Los Angeles as the unproblematic product of a 1960s consumerist dream. The article, titled "The Ecology of Evil," discussed how the sprawling growth of freeways fed the advertising-induced boom in car culture.

The protests and political art surrounding the Vietnam War went hand in hand with other examples of political dissent and politicized art in and around Los Angeles; many of these artist-activists participated in the *Peace Tower*. Wallace Berman produced nine issues of his *Semina* from 1955 to 1964. Each "magazine" was a different format of collated images (including photographs and artworks), poems, and papers, which were glued and assembled and placed in a folder or envelope. *Semina* could not be purchased or requested; it was simply posted to you as an attempt to resist the realm of commodity and conventional cultural consumption. In America after 1945, few possibilities existed for acts of »



## HARRY DODGE AND STANYA KAHN ON MAKING COMEDY IN A TIME OF WAR

Our video *Can't Swallow It, Can't Spit It Out* focuses on two characters. A guy with a video camera (who never appears on screen) is staking out locations around LA trying to "catch some action." Early one morning, jammed behind a shrub outside a hospital, he starts stealing shots of a character we call "the Valkyrie." She's wearing a green polka-dot dress and a little plastic Viking helmet with built-in braids and toting a big yellow foam cheese. She struts around, clearly miffed about something, dabbing a very bloody nose. When she notices she's being recorded, she stomps over and threatens the guy.

At first the Valkyrie doesn't want to be filmed, then of course she can't seem to leave the cameraman alone. They end up wandering around LA together. He's looking to catch some figure of authority abusing power, a Rodney King scenario, but he never gets anything except blank institutional exteriors and scrubby, deserted spaces. The video does have an air of paranoia and vague emergency, mostly coming from things the Valkyrie says—a lot of violent memories, or fantasies, or hallucinations.

For us the piece operates on multiple levels. For one thing, we were shooting it in the third year of the Iraq war, and it is basically a portrait of civilian anxiety in a time of war. We tried to capture or translate the feedback loop of grief and paralysis that people are feeling, which here takes the form of someone bumbling through public space and trying to establish a sense of agency as a citizen. And failing, basically: there's a hint of the cameraman as the impatient Left. Since we're in Los Angeles, the public spaces that you see—in Pasadena, Long Beach, Highland Park, downtown, East LA—are banal and evacuated. There's a desolation associated with public space here, and the geography keeps there from being much street culture, obviously. We shot in a lot of corporate zones, where the architecture denotes the closure to the public that corporations enact.

At the same time, we're not too self-serious. Which brings us back to the Valkyrie. She's kind of a double, or even triple, entendre. Is she a person who works at the county fair or a theme park? Can she, as a Viking type, be a symbol of Anglo war imperatives? And is

LEFT  
CUNT CHEERLEADERS,  
FEMINIST ART PROGRAM,  
FRESNO STATE COLLEGE,  
1970  
CAY LANG, VANALYNE  
GREEN, DORI ATLANTIS,  
AND SUE BOUD  
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND FILMARTISTS  
ARCHIVES



ABOVE  
HARRY DODGE AND  
STANYA KAHN  
STILLS FROM *CAN'T SWALLOW  
IT, CAN'T SPIT IT OUT*, 2006  
DIGITAL VIDEO, 26 MIN, 5 SLC  
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND FILMARTISTS  
ARCHIVES

there this hazy possibility that she might be an actual Valkyrie, come to usher spirits of slain heroes to Valhalla? She's always exerting pressure on the cameraman. Partly she's just being a pain in the neck—and we hope funny—with her constant questioning, and goofing around, and her "You should have been there for that." But at the same time she's always asking him an implicit question: that if I'm a Valkyrie, then you're a hero? Are you up to the task?

You can catch almost anything with a video camera, or so the idea goes, and the American public has a voyeuristic desire to see violence play itself out in the mundane. In *Can't Swallow It*, we wanted to dead-end that cultural hunger. We don't deliver excitement, unless you consider eating donuts exciting. (And we do.) In the end the Valkyrie talks about the violence she's witnessed personally: a Vietnam vet having flashbacks in her backyard, her mom's boyfriend getting stabbed. The spectacle the cameraman ends up capturing is her lived experience, once removed by memory.

cultural resistance either to consumer society or to the rapacious art market, particularly acts that also created transgressive pleasure for artists. *Semina* was against "the American way," which to Berman and his community meant corporate anonymity and the military preparedness to wage war behind the iron curtain or the bamboo curtain.

Sculptor Melvin Edwards assisted di Suvero in building the *Peace Tower*. His work between 1963 and 1967 included a series titled *Lynch Fragments* (Edwards has continued to add to this body of work through the present day). The *Lynch Fragments* evoked modernist welded forms, but instead of abstract shapes Edwards used elements that implied histories of racist lynching, including shackles and chains. Each sculpture was conceived in the traditions of African masks hung on walls. Thus, they transgressed modernist convention (at the time championed by Clement Greenberg and his followers); protested colonialist appropriation of artifacts plundered from people who became part of the slave trade and displayed in Western ethnographic collections; and foregrounded histories of racist entrapment, torture, and murder in the US. In the mid-1960s, Edwards traveled to New York with examples of his *Lynch Fragments* in hopes of gaining gallery attention, but he returned to Los Angeles rejected. In a different aesthetic vein, Betye Saar produced works in LA, such as *Black Girl's Window* (1969) and *Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (1972), that imported concerns with black identity into a West Coast assemblage style, using images of racist stereotypes and the Black Power salute. Both Edwards's and Saar's work unfolded in an era of new black icons—the Black Panthers, Muhammad Ali, Angela Davis—gaining national and international prominence. When Davis, hounded by the FBI, was arrested in Los Angeles (eventually to be acquitted), Aretha Franklin offered to stand post for her.

Judy Chicago extended the collectivist experience of the *Peace Tower* and forged models in Los Angeles of making the personal political. She established feminist art programs at Fresno, north of Los Angeles, and at CalArts, in Valencia, in 1970 and 1971. These radical educational »



ABOVE  
KAREN LECOCC  
LEAH'S ROOM, 1972  
PERFORMANCE VIEW,  
WOMAN-HOUSE, LOS  
ANGELES  
COURTESY THROUGH THE  
FLOWER ARCHIVES

LEFT  
WALLACE BERMAN  
SEMINA 9, 1964  
X-CEL MEDIA ARTIST'S  
PUBLICATION, 5 1/2 X 3 7/8 IN.  
COURTESY WALLACE BERMAN ESTATE

#### DANIEL JOSEPH MARTINEZ ON HAVING ROOM FOR DOUBT

One of the reasons California, and Los Angeles in particular, are challenging and unusual places is their persistence in conjuring a multiplicity of ideologies that appear to take concrete social form. Los Angeles projects an elastic quality, like that of images or a rubber band; it can snap back and forth from the politically radical to the politically conservative. The ideology of each blurs to the point where no one can tell the difference between the two, much less notice that the language and discourse produced by these positions only pretends to move, never escaping confinement with its own mirror image.

Faced with a world more fantastic than anything in any gallery or museum, dominated and defined by absurd wars that threaten to rage without end, what could be more delusional than claiming that contemporary art has the capacity to create social change? It's not that I doubt the sincerity of any artist who makes work that is politically or socially relevant. What concerns me is the consensual lie we live in together, pretending that what we make as artists has any political value outside the artworld, when in truth these so-called political manifestations are displayed in galleries and museums, bought and sold for the artists' and institutions' profit, benefiting no one else. A classic argu-

ment of neoliberalism suggests that preaching to the converted is worthwhile; I don't believe it. I find neoliberalism as ineffective as neo-conservatism, with both serving only to pacify the guilt and regret of this country's history at the expense of new ideas that could move us forward. As much as I will argue for the genuine capacity of art to affect who we are as human beings, I can only observe that we have neither the strength nor the courage to commit ourselves in any way that is politically substantive. Who among us is willing to sacrifice for the benefit of others the lifestyle we have come to enjoy from living in an empire?

Fear, not hope, abounds when one believes hope no longer exists. In less comfortable conditions, the opposite holds true. I recently returned from a two-week stay in Cali, Colombia, where I was invited to teach a class at an artist's space called Lugar a Dudas. The name translates, provocatively, as "room for doubt." Artist Oscar Muñoz and gallery director Sally Mizrahi have created an aesthetic and political oasis, a utopian reality where need and risk of the highest order go hand in hand. The art center attempts to fill the black hole at the heart of the city, whose infrastructure has collapsed and whose populace is brutalized by endless cycles of violence. Muñoz and Mizrahi have used their own resources to purchase a building and create a program that includes exhibitions, lectures, film screenings, library and computer resources, and a residency program and classes

“Memories of political art on La Cienega Boulevard are overshadowed by contemporary celebration of artworld excesses not far away.”

programs transformed the possibilities for women seeking to establish, work with, and circulate nonpatriarchal imagery. The results often involved collaborative artmaking and humorous inversion of male fantasies (for example, the Cunt Cheerleaders). Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, herself on the faculty at CalArts, extended opportunities for female artists in the region, most notably with 1972's *Womanhouse*, an installation-event in a house in residential Hollywood renovated by the artists and their students. In *Womanhouse's* one-month run, almost 10,000 people visited, with the works on view including Chicago's famous installation *Menstruation Bathroom*.

Shortly thereafter, the Woman's Building opened in the former Chouinard Art Institute near MacArthur Park in 1973. Until 1991, it provided Los Angeles with a base for producing, displaying, and analyzing art engaged with women's identity. Related to this project, and to the countercultural examples of Berman's *Semina* and the alternative press, feminist art publications and journals flourished from the 1970s onward. In New York there was *Heresies*; in Los Angeles there was *Chrysalis*. *West-East Bag (WEB)* was established in 1972 across five states and 12 nations to connect feminist groups with newsletters, a slide registry, and other means of sharing information. This groundwork prompted the development of alternative archives to record histories neglected by mainstream galleries and museums. In Los Angeles, the Center for the Study of Political Graphics currently holds more than 50,000 posters engaged with historical and contemporary movements for social change. New York's Political Art Documentation and Distribution, an activist art collective founded in the 1980s, is now, ironically, housed in the library of the Museum of Modern Art.

Today, the site of the Los Angeles *Peace Tower* is occupied by a small strip mall and parking lot, with little to remind passersby of its radical history. One recent reminder did take place, however, at the 2006 Whitney Biennial. There, a new *Peace Tower*, made by Mark di Suvero and Rirkrit Tiravanija, included the work of some 180 artists in a protest against the American war in Iraq, on the 40th anniversary of the original tower. The critique of the artworld produced by the site-specific character of the Los Angeles *Peace Tower* was lost with the location of the 2006 version, literally sited deep within the bowels of one of New York's primary art institutions. Placed in a courtyard well below sidewalk level, only the upper portion of the tower was visible from Madison Avenue. As Martha Rosler wrote this May, this "anti-war tower" ended up in "the museum's moat"—a fitting choice of words, implicating the figurative moat surrounding cultural institutions whether in New York or Los Angeles.

The fate of the 2006 *Peace Tower* in New York is a lesson in cultural containment. It could be regarded as an institutionalized deflection of the historical lessons of the LA *Peace Tower*. Memories of political art at the junction of La Cienega and Sunset boulevards in 1966 are overshadowed by the celebration of artworld excesses, such as the Getty Villa in Malibu, and the billion-dollar Getty Center not far away. Here, the sunshine muse reigns only a short car trip from Mulholland Drive, the symbol of "noir" at the heart of Lynch's film. Los Angeles is still regarded by its detractors as a sunlit mortuary where you can rot without noticing it. Fortunately, artists and activists continue to produce evidence that the realities and histories of the city are not totally dominated by a choice between the myths of sunshine and noir.

BELOW LEFT  
STUDENTS AT LUGAR  
A DUDAS, CALI, COLOMBIA,  
2006

BELOW RIGHT  
DANIEL JOSEPH MARTINEZ  
BEAUTY IT RUBS AGAINST  
ONE'S TONGUE IT HANGS  
THERE HURTING ONE  
INSISTING ON ITS OWN  
EXISTENCE FINALLY IT GETS  
SO ONE CANNOT STAND  
THE PAIN THEN ONE MUST  
HAVE BEAUTY EXTRACTED,  
2006  
SITE-SPECIFIC WALL  
PAINTING, 10 X 35 FT  
COURTESY LAKARI, LOS ANGELES

that bring visiting international artists to Cali. While this all might sound familiar to us in the United States, Lugar a Dudas is the only place of its kind in Colombia. Everything that the space offers is free of charge. I would argue that no such institution exists in the United States, acting in such good faith and without ulterior motives.

What worries me is that so much gain is to be made from so-called political art, with careers and fame built on mannerisms that claim a political pedigree. These works regurgitate familiar rhetoric and offer cozy answers so everyone can feel warm and fuzzy and sleep at night. It has been said that people should not be afraid of their governments but governments should be afraid of their people. Similarly, there was a time when artists led the discourse in art—before it became an industry—and art and ideas were dangerous.

