



## Oakes Mural Reflects the Present and Future

BY JENNIFER Y. CHO

What can be described as 21 by 21 feet that conveys a sense of vibrancy and colorful excitement? The artist is Juana Alicia and the project is a mural that Oakes College has commissioned. A mural, in case the reader is unaware, is a large scale painting depicted on a wall or building. The location for this project is the wall of the student activities room in the Oakes administration building.

What makes this work compelling and unique is that it was the fruit of collaboration between the Oakes community and the artist. Juana Alicia — a well known Chicana artist from San Francisco and visiting professor to UCSC — initiated an open dialogue with members of the Oakes community after being commissioned to design a mural for the college. The open dialogue of shared ideas served to facilitate a mutual understanding of who we were and how we as a college viewed ourselves. As the process of the mural unfolded, so did the necessity of defining ourselves as a college and to address increasing attacks on the value of multiculturalism, theme dorm housing and efforts to diversify the student population. The result has been a potent depiction of contemporary issues that Oakes College and society as a whole must face. The complexity of the mural and the weighty issues it addresses echos the real life intricacies of cultural pluralism or the more popular buzzword "multiculturalism."

The mural is scheduled for completion in June. Already almost half completed, the painting has taken on urgent form and meaning. In keeping with traditional mural painting, the colors are bold and vivid, as is the subject matter. This artistic representation which portrays

Oakes as a microcosm of the larger society is exciting, complex and disturbing. The mural may seem strangely out of context with the general UCSC campus given that diversity is more proclaimed than an actual reality. It is a perturbing fact that minority enrollment and retention remain deplorably low and that the vast majority of minorities are affiliated with Oakes and Merrill Colleges. Oakes College has often been referred to as "the Ghetto," revealing in part the pervasive negativity and suspicion in regards to diversity and students of "color."

First and foremost, diversity is defiantly celebrated within the mural. Without apology, the mural depicts a vast array of people from various ethnic and minority groups (by this I mean oppressed minorities such as gay and lesbian individuals as well as ethnic minorities and educational underclass). The University is portrayed as a meeting ground for interactions among the various groups and the catalyst for the "unmasking" of each others' facades; that is, literally taking off our masks and seeing each other and ourselves as we really are. Within the mural, Alicia uses the image of cracking earth, an image invoking memories of recent earthquakes to convey a sense of tension and great disturbance. Indeed this disturbance can in part echo the crisis the University faces in the issue of lack of diversity and increasing attacks on the value and necessity of multiculturalism. If affirmative action, which has always faced bitter opposition, is the successful funnel through which cultural pluralism is occurring, why does the muralist portray all too hauntingly huge gates guarding the interior of the University shutting out a vast number of people? Could the mural be an accurate interpretation of how the gates of education are being shut on

students of color, the economically disadvantaged and politically disenfranchised while student activists and other freedom fighters are desperately trying to keep those doors open? Who are the people and the forces causing those doors to close in? The mural depicts turbulent images reflected on the walls of the gates the violent obstructors to equality and opportunity: the Klan, neo-Nazis and skinheads to name a few. Some members of the present administration of government as well as the face of a UC Regent are portrayed in the background as questionable agents who may well be contributing to educational exclusion.

But the mural does not rest with the depiction of mass injustice and despairing inequalities of present society. Like any meaningful work of art it does not just offer us a representation of the way things are, but a vision for the future as well. The mural portrays people who are fighting back and honors those who have dedicated their lives to causes that have aided humanity in search of freedom.

Protesters, activists and students are portrayed as cutting through barbed wire and frantically trying to keep the doors of the University open to those who need and want the chance. Over the ominous gates that reflect atrocities of the not too distant past such as the lynchings of African Americans, terrorism of minorities, military dictatorship and neocolonialism in Third World countries, there stands a bridge. It is a bridge of hope and light, interlaced with the "Ollin" symbol — the Aztec symbol for movement and change. On this bridge stand leaders, artists and political activists of enormous courage who have propelled and inspired movements for change, those to whom the Oakes theme dorms pay tribute. There stand gay and civil rights activist Harvey Milk, poet and playwright Jenny Lim, writer Maxine Hong Kingston, civil rights leaders Malcolm X and Betty Shabazz, Jewish writer Eli Wiesel, feminist painter Frieda Kahlo and farm union organizer

Dolores Huerta. At the center of this bridge stands the "Taino man" in illumination, an ironic representation and tribute to the indigenous Native Americans of this region who had the grave misfortune to discover Columbus on their shores. Totem poles stand high above the mural overlooking the ocean in which the Statue of Liberty stands with her back turned against us. Off in a distance are hints of Columbus — foreboding ships from far away seas seeking to dominate and subjugate the indigenous people. The imperialist tradition continues in the not too distant lands of Guatemala and El Salvador.

In the center of the mural, an illuminated Stephen Biko, as a South African freedom fighter, is opening the book of knowledge to students while an activist to the right is holding up a sign that proclaims, "Education is your right." The portrayal of the University as a place of learning is a theme central to this mural. Perhaps this mural is asking us to address the inequalities and injustices which have become the complacent givens in the education of the masses and the need for students to, as Adrienne Rich proclaimed, "Claim an education." Above these interactions, an owl symbolically flies overhead toward an arresting image: Frieda Kahlo lovingly holding a dove, a symbol of peace.

Students are invited to view this work in progress at the Oakes administration building on the second floor. There are a variety of ways to participate in the process while it moves toward completion such as photographs, documentation and perhaps painting itself. Several students — Angel Alhambro, Luz Cervantes, Victor Cervantes and Sal Tiscareno — have been instrumental as apprentices to the artist in painting this large scale mural. The objective of this work to be a collaboration between the artist and the community has become a much valued reality.

Jennifer Y. Cho is a senior psychology major at Oakes College.

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