

Art and Cake, October 18, 2017

Ken Gonzales-Day at the Skirball Cultural Center  
*Surface Tension: Murals, Signs, and Mark-Making in LA*  
October 6 - February 25, 2018

By Jody Zellen



Ken Gonzales-Day's exhibition documenting over 140 street artworks in Los Angeles is more than a history of Los Angeles Murals. By entitling the exhibition *Surface Tension: Murals, Signs, and Mark-Making in LA*, Gonzales-Day calls attention to the changing culture of street art and the tensions that arise between artists, communities and authorities when attempting to decorate myriad surfaces of the city.

Upon entering the exhibition space, viewers are forced to step on a floor-based map of Los Angeles dotted with numbers that pinpoint the locations of a large grid of wall mounted photographs. The map provides a way to chart the locations of the murals while simultaneously exploring the relationship between areas both densely and sparsely populated with this form of street art. A handout reproduces the map and includes captioned thumbnails of Gonzales-Day's photographs, presenting the name of the artist and the date (when known), as well as the location of each photograph. While the majority of Gonzales-Day's photographs are displayed as a large grid filling one gallery wall, others were selected (and printed larger) to represent some of the dominant themes— cultural identity and history, relationship to advertising and the street, celebrities, as well as the presence of signage and artworks on surfaces other than walls.

During fifteen months of research and photography, Gonzales-Day created thousands of images, often returning over and over again to the same location to document changes as new paintings replaced old. He noticed that in some locations the murals were sacred and protected from graffiti, vandalism and overpainting by the community, whereas in others the illustrations were constantly changing. Issues of displacement and gentrification also become apparent,

especially in areas like the downtown arts district where a large proportion of murals are commissions rather than clandestine activities. Sometimes Gonzales-Day presents isolated details while other times he frames the mural in relation to the street and signage that surrounds it, as if to say this artwork is about the people who live here.

It is extremely satisfying to compare and contrast the photographs, noticing details and thinking about context. And when there are moments of recognition— it is likely that most viewers have encountered some of the murals in their day to day life— the scope of the project resonates on a personal level. Gonzales-Day's exhibition is not meant to be a comprehensive archive of murals, signs and mark-making in Los Angeles, but rather a snapshot of visible street art at this moment in time. The exhibition is as much about cultural history as it is about location. It traces the visual voice of the people of Los Angeles from neighborhood to neighborhood from the 1920s to the present, illustrating various themes, voices and attitudes and how they have changed over time.

While it is impossible to view the installation and not think about the early LA murals by artists such as Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros, what gives this project its resonance and power is the diversity of styles and voices it represents and the way it provides access and encourages exploration.

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