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Hector Duarte: The Peaceful Fighter
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Hector Duarte: The Silent Fighter

Hector Duarte only speaks with his paintbrush. When we interviewed him, Duarte told us that it is not his job to instruct others on how to view his murals. Instead, it is his job to provide a mural or a work of art for his audience to *have* something to interpret. Hector was once painting a mural on the National Museum of Mexican Art when people started coming up to him crying. They embraced him and thanked him for giving them a voice through his artwork. Duarte had never spoken to these people; all he did was provide the framework for them to come to these conclusions. The vibrant reaction that these people displayed was the sign that Hector, the silent fighter of his community, was doing his job.

Hector Duarte's journey is seeded in humble roots. He was born in the state of Michoacan, Mexico, in a small town called Caurio. Duarte tells us that, "this town [Caurio] has less than 2,000 inhabitants. It is very small. It could be that one is born and one dies...a young person comes back from the United States, especially California...or it could be that one is born there and is brought over to the United States. The number of people there [in Caurio] almost never changes"[1]. Duarte's strong vision of community could have been influenced by his early life, given how tight-knit Caurio was. Hector then moved to a town called Samora at age 6, and he was raised there until he was 25. He spent some brief time in Mexico City at an art academy, but it was at this age that Hector told us that, "I had an opportunity to study at what was called *El Taller De Siqueiros*. Siqueiros was one of the three most important muralists in Mexico (Siqueiros, Rivera, and Orozco), and once he died, his wife and his

[1] Duarte.

brother-in-law opened the workshop in his name four years later. They gave an opportunity to 30 artists from various states in the republic, and that's how I got into muralism"[2]. Duarte spent a year painting there, and it changed his life. Since age 20, he never worked again; he only painted. This experience secured his "destiny", which led him to Chicago. Hector never gave thought to coming to the U.S., but when he was studying at *El Taller de Siqueiros*, Hector told us that, "there was a conference for muralists right here in Chicago. The professor who taught me how to paint murals in the 'Siqueiros style'...I used to work in his shop after school. He told me that if I could pay the plane ticket, he would take care of food and housing because he had friends in Chicago. That's how I found Pilsen and Casa Aztlan"[3]. Duarte saw people painting the walls and thought this would be a great way to practice. He fell in love with the neighborhood, and although he returned briefly to Mexico seven years later to work on some projects, he has been in Pilsen for almost 35 years since he came in 1985. Hector has left his mark in Pilsen through his murals while also becoming a voice for Pilsen in its struggles over the past 35 years.

Duarte mentions that there are several ways to paint a mural. One of the most common is fresco painting, which involves painting over a fresh mix of cement. This technique was used by Europeans and Renaissance painters in ancient times. The big three muralists from Mexico used to paint in this fashion, but in recent times, they started to use oil-based paint and spray, which has become known as graffiti. Duarte told us that, "since I started a little later than them [the big three muralists], I use the acrylic style. I used to paint with oil painting, but I started to leave it behind over here because with the weather, you have to paint with oil inside...the air conditioning is circling that

[2] Duarte.
[3] Duarte.

same air and people becomes poisoned with that their whole lives"[4]. Duarte did not want to deal with these secondary effects, so now, inside and outside, he uses polymers in accordance with the acrylic style, which has become more chemically specialized. For *Gulliver in Wonderland,* the mural painted on his studio and house, he also used the acrylic style. However, he learned to use a technique by Siqueiros called "polyangularity", translated to multiple angles. This method takes into account the movement of the spectator in front of a mural and makes the mural more complete from any given angle. Overall, Duarte advises any artist to wash his or her mural with a wet rag and with soap in order to preserve it. This way, toxins and dirt that cover the mural can be eliminated, and the mural is in a position to be retouched at a later date.

When Duarte creates a mural, he feels that he has a "double mission". Hector says that, "the mural should be free for everyone, and the other mission is that....it is better if the mural has a message, tells a story, or narrates or interprets a historic moment"[5]. Hector feels that the mural is a great way for history to express itself. He uses the example of the Aztecs, Romans, and Egyptians, explaining how their art forms told a story about each individual culture as well as the time period each one was present in. In this way, we can mark our moment in history, enjoy it, learn from our human past, and grow from it. Hector's own work is symbolic. He said to us that, "All of my work has a hidden message...a message behind every image and symbol. I do not necessarily have to give this to my audience digested, like a cereal, already prepared. You just drink it and that is that. You did not have the pleasure of chewing it...finding out what it tastes like and all its juices"[6]. Duarte thinks that art should be enjoyed through all of its colors and lines and then can be interpreted. Even if people do not know

[4] Duarte.
[5] Duarte.
[6] Duarte.

the meaning of a certain piece, it can reach them through their senses and allow them to enjoy it, like music. By going through this process, one can learn how to read art. Even Hector said that he struggles to understand some pieces of art, and he is always in constant dialogue to understand artwork better than he did before. He hopes that his art emits the same response from its viewers, and they can learn to find meaning through his work in a unique way.

Work Cited

Duarte, Hector. Personal Interview. 27 April 2019.