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David Kunzle. *The Murals of Revolutionary Nicaragua, 1979-1992.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995. xvii + 203 pp. $75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-08190-1.

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Since the election of Violeta Chamorro to the presidency of Nicaragua in 1990, news of this Central American nation has all but disappeared from the pages of US newspapers and the sound bites of evening newscasts. David Kunzle reminds us in *The Murals of Revolutionary Nicaragua* that despite US media silence, the events of the 1980s continue to impact lives in Nicaragua, and the issues that were in the forefront then remain germane today. Kunzle traces the legacy of Nicaragua's recent past through the destruction of the murals that were created during the decade of Sandinista government. *The Murals of Revolutionary Nicaragua* is in a sense two books: the first a scathing indictment of those responsible for the destruction of these historical documents, and the second a visually stunning record of the rapidly disappearing murals. Kunzle has done a tremendous service to those interesting in the arts and in history by documenting these works and publishing what will likely be the final catalogue of this public art.

With a forward by Miguel d'Escoto Brockman, former Foreign Minister in the Sandinista government and a short opening essay, "A Suspended Dialogue: The Revolution and the Visual Arts in Nicaragua," by artist Raul Quintanilla, former Director of the National School of Plastic Arts and of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Managua, Kunzle does not pretend to be neutral in his approach to the topic of the murals or the Revolution. His views are unapologetically and stridently pro-Sandinista, to the point where the FSLN appears beyond reproach. In this respect, Kunzle's text occasionally comes up short, as he tends to gloss over the potentially problematic rather than risk presenting the Sandinistas in a critical light. An example of this occurs in his discussion of other popular arts of the era: "Another artistic institution that incarnated the spirit of international solidarity with Nicaragua was the 'Semana Comica.' This popular humorous and satirical weekly was notorious for its tongue-in-cheek (or -crotch) use of erotic photographs filched from Playboy-type US magazines…" (42) Kunzle's pedestrian crotch remark aside, I suspect that the large proportion of female Sandinistas did not agree that these images of tongues in body crevices "incarnated international solidarity." Regardless of one's views on pornography, to equate the appropriation of these images with "international solidarity" for t he cause is quite a leap. Although still an enormous stretch, I would argue that at best they perhaps demonstrate international MALE solidarity. Despite such occasional gaffs, Kunzle can be credited for consistently presenting his perspective in a most forthright manner. He also integrates his views with the voices of the Nicaraguan and Internationalist artists who participated in Nicaragua's muralist movement.

Although the connection between the two is not everywhere acknowledged, in Nicaragua as in most places, art and politics often converge. In an impassioned 75-page introduction, Kunzle traces the history of the muralist movement in Nicaragua. While Kunzle does not attempt to retell the history of Nicaragua's colonial and neocolonial past, he does provide some context for the art and the Revolution in which it is rooted. It is somewhat unfortunate that Kunzle does not capitalize more on this opportunity to familiarize readers with a deeper understanding of Nicaragua's history. Although a narrative history is understandably not his purpose in the book, a more substantive presentation of the nation's history could only contribute to the reader's understanding and appreciation of the artworks. Indeed, considering that the audience for such a volume is likely to be a fairly broad one, not necessarily well versed in Nicaraguan history, a closer examination – as brief as a few additional pages – would have significantly contributed to the work.

Kunzle does provide a basic outline of Nicaraguan history, including such notable events as U.S. "adventurer" William Walker's bid for the presidency in the nineteenth century and the invasions by U.S. Marines

in the early twentieth century. Reading this thumbnail sketch, it is difficult not to come away with a renewed sense of the ugliness of U.S. foreign policy. It would be pleasing if we could simply relegate the exploits of Walker and the invasions of U.S. Marines to the distant past and comfort ourselves with the assurance that things are now different. However, Kunzle's essay serves as a powerful reminder of the continuity of U.S. private and public sector involvement in foreign nations' domestic politics.

The history of the muralist movement in Nicaragua began in the wake of the 1979 victory of the *Frente Sandinista de la Liberacion Nacional,* or FSLN. Whereas the US government looked with menace upon the Sandinistas' triumph, the revolutionaries' victory was met elsewhere with cheers. Some of those who embraced its success were the "Internationalists," or foreign muralists and other artists who streamed into Nicaragua to create public art that would express the new vision of national identity. The dismantling of the U.S.-supported dictatorship of a Anastasio Somoza was seen as an opportunity to recover the national heritage after 500 years of colonialism, according to Kunzle. Although Kunzle is careful to point out that collaboration was the key to these public art projects, it is no less ironic that the new national identity –in its painted form, at least – was significantly foreign or "Internationalist" in its genesis and development. The first of the Internationalists who arrived were the members of the Felicia Santizo Brigade of Panama. This group had in the 1970s painted about 60 murals (which were sanctioned by both the Torrijos and Noriega governments) throughout Panama, many on army bases. [After the US invasion of Panama, most of these murals –threatening for their Marxist, anti-imperialist, pro-Palestine, pro-Sandinista themes –were destroyed.]

A friend of FSLN leaders Tomas Borge and Ernesto Cardenal, Jose de Jesus "Chu Chu" Martinez, a Nicaraguan who had become a naturalized Panamanian, arranged for the Felicia Santizo Brigade to paint murals in Nicaragua. The military themes of these murals are evident in the reproductions in *The Murals of Revolutionary Nicaragua.* A mural from the Nicarao Community Center in Managua depicts an angry mob of men and women–some armed with rifles and others with knives–looking down at a prostrate National Guardsman. A dagger hovers just above his throat, and his eyes are white with horror. Other murals by the Felicia Santizo Brigade adorn long walls, crowded with gun-toting figures, reclining corpses, and noble portraits of those revolutionary predecessors who require simply one name: Lenin, Sandino, Che.

The Panamanians were but the first of many artists from abroad who came to Nicaragua in the years after the Revolution to express their solidarity with and share in nation's new political climate. Among the names that dot the book are Germans, Chileans, Italians, Argentines, and the occasional Estadounidense. While the international feel of the murals is apparent throughout the catalogue, Kunzle insists that it is the Nicaraguan experience that they depict on the walls of government buildings and along the schoolyards. Indeed, Kunzle asserts, it is the symbiosis of these "Internationalists" and Nicaraguan artists that lends to the Nicaraguan muralist movement a uniqueness in the history of muralism. Some of the murals do appear to be non-Nicaraguan interpretations of the Nicaraguan experience, idealized and romanticized. But ultimately the stylistically international taste of many of the murals does not drown out the strong Nicaraguan flavor of the subject matter, and the murals by children and communities offer a good contrast to those of the trained artists.

The high militarism of the murals created by Panama's Felicia Santizo Brigade, while not exceptional, is certainly not an integral aspect of all of the murals. In contrast to images like that of a hooded man being tortured in a jail cell, other murals prominently feature doves, religious imagery, and the lush rural landscape. Mothers and fathers nurture and play with children. Beneath the tree of knowledge, a boy learns to write while a girl waters the tree and a nearby woman strums a guitar. People pick coffee, harvest vegetables, and learn to read. A series of murals at the Esteli Medical Center show doctors caring for the wounded and women giving birth, breast-feeding round babies. Youthful faces and babies abound in the murals, perhaps a reflection of faith in the future. However, it is ultimately impossible to make any sweeping generalizations about the content or style of the murals. We see here a wide range of representational and non-representational art, primitivism and modernism, explosive and sedate uses of color. The subject matter may be idyllic or brutal. The approximately 300 murals (most in and around Managua), are as diverse and complex as the many people who created them.

The destruction of the murals is Kunzle's primary concern in making this record of them and the movement. Indeed, Kunzle addresses the destruction of the murals even before giving us their history, and he repeatedly returns to this concern. Kunzle correctly views the murals not exclusively as monuments to the Revolution

but as historical documents, and his grief at their destruction does not differ from the distress of the historian who finds documents crumbling from neglect. The difference of course is that in the case of the murals, the destruction is intentional. After Chamorro's victory, the murals began to disappear, often the victims of deliberate government action. Kunzle's book is a tribute to the murals but also an indictment of those who have worked to rub out the past and rewrite history by eradicating the evidence.

Kunzle likens the loss of the murals to the cultural genocide that followed Columbus' arrival in the New World: "In a sense, time has stood still: no more than in Columbus's time is it regarded as wrong to destroy the art, the symbols, the dignity of the political enemy of the moment." (23) While some will certainly take issue with this analogy, Kunzle's overall concern is a valid one, as these visual records of Nicaraguan history are destroyed in "clean-up" campaigns that rely on black paint. Kunzle does not hesitate to censure by name those individuals responsible for the obliteration of the murals. Throughout his text, Kunzle cares little for polite diplomacy and is refreshingly straightforward in articulating his antipathy for those parties responsible for the murals' destruction.

The destruction of the murals predates Managua Mayor Arnoldo Aleman's war on them, however. New York-born muralist Janet Pavone, who arrived in Nicaragua to participate in the muralist movement in 1985, aptly notes: "The Right values our work more than the Left. The enemy, by attacking it, at least recognizes its power and importance." (24) Pavone's statement underscores the sad truth – neglect, vandalism, and careless placing of benches and other obstructions have also ravaged the murals and (at best) hidden them from view. Public indifference, while not somalicious as a coat of black paint, can net the same result.

Kunzle's book is not just another attractive coffee-table book, to be occasionally and casually glanced at. By touching on history as he inevitably does, and demonstrating the highly political nature of the genesis and annihilation of the murals, Kunzle seeks to involve us all. While the destruction of the murals in Nicaragua is largely an overtly political act, far more subtle but equally insidious destruction occurs daily in our own streets. "Murals in the streets of Nicaragua, like those in most countries of the West, are hostages to a philistine indifference to immediate surrounding, to an aesthetic blindness, to a contempt for visual hygiene that tolerates the worst in architecture, commercial billboards, and street litter." (24) Kunzle's collection of photos is an important record of Nicaragua's murals and history as well as a wake-up call to all of us.

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