

## Flash: David Weldzius

November 21, 2015–March 5, 2016



No title, work in progress from the series "Estrada Courts, USA," 2015  
Courtesy of the artist

Estrada Courts is a public housing project in Boyle Heights, Los Angeles, constructed for the families of factory workers and returning servicemen in the 1940s. It is the site of numerous murals, many of which were designed and painted by residents. The Los Angeles-based artist David Weldzius has begun photographing the murals at eye level, thereby abstracting small sections, and printing them at one-to-one scale. He then applies oil paint to the monochromatic prints, producing a wholly new picture.

*Flash: David Weldzius* features one of these prints, still in progress as part of the series "Estrada Courts, USA."

**Joanna Szupinska-Myers:** What drew you to make a project based on the community murals of Estrada Courts?

**David Weldzius:** I learned of Estrada Courts last May, after moving to East Los Angeles. Driving westbound on Olympic Boulevard, I immediately noticed the murals. Speckled in a play of light and shadow cast from a nearby

eucalyptus tree, a painting of Che Guevara-cum-Uncle Sam slid past my passenger-side window. Index finger pointed out toward the street, the beret-clad revolutionary proclaims: "We are NOT A minority!!" I wondered what this place was.

Agnes Varda's *Mur murs* (1981), a documentary film that looks at Los Angeles mural art, provided some clarity and led to further discoveries. I located Willie Herrón's mural "The Wall that Cracked Open" (1972) on my iPhone and drove to its location behind a beauty salon in City Terrace to take a look. I was intrigued by the application of paint, the corrosion of the surface, the Sharpie and spray-paint tags playfully interspersed with Herrón's own markings, and the artist's nod to trompe l'oeil. Most importantly, I was intrigued by how the mural seemed to frame, manage, and imagine the dissemination of its own history.

This early research into muralism and the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles led me in myriad directions. I discovered early on, for instance, that Robert Alexander was the chief architect of the Estrada Courts project.<sup>1</sup> Alexander's firm had been called on to build Elysian Park Heights, another public housing complex that was slated for construction at Chavez Ravine. In 1959, the project ultimately was halted in order to build Dodger Stadium. I believe this is a telling case study insofar as it reveals much about settlement and expansionism, particularly the acquisition and annexation of previously unincorporated lands in the American West.

In working on a previous body of work, "News from Nowhere" (2014), I sought to activate a sequence of inquiries regarding land speculation and private property: Who has a legal right to occupy a grassy terrace, to own a bungalow or a glass house, and by whose injunction or authority? From a conceptual standpoint, advancing my scope to include public land, social welfare, and community living seem to make good sense.

**JSM:** The question of who has the right to occupy a space is an important point. When you found your way into Estrada Courts, how did you give yourself permission to use these murals in your contemporary art practice?

**DW:** It took some time to muster the courage to enter Estrada Courts and strike up conversations with residents there. On my first visit in May 2015, I asked a young man as he was exiting his unit, baby in tow, "Is it okay if I get a closer look at the murals?" His response was, "What do you mean? This is public land!" Nonetheless, I believe that many residents were suspicious of my motives. In the beginning, befriending youth proved easier than initiating conversations with older community members.

I decided early on that I would photograph sections of each mural in black and white. These sections would be enlarged to their original size, approximately 30" x 38 1/2". Because my film plane is always parallel to the mural's surface, I am limited by my own physical height and the vertical extension of my tripod. As a direct consequence, my photographs are frequently captured from my own eye level—the very surfaces that often evince tagging, wear, and corrective painting. The first mural that I photographed was Willie Herrón and Gronk's "Black and White Mural" (1973), completed several months after "The Wall that Cracked Open." Encapsulating the police violence that followed the Chicano Moratorium march of 1970 in a barrage of fragmentary reportage, "Black and White Mural" was one of the first works commissioned after Charles Felix commenced the Estrada Courts mural program in 1973.<sup>2</sup>

I am sensitive to the fact that I am, in so many ways, a stranger to this community, and have reflected extensively on my tenuous relationship to Estrada Courts throughout the evolution of my project. I am white and generally self-identify as "middle class." I do not speak Spanish. I grew up in a handful of planned suburban communities—places that, by and large, do not resemble Estrada Courts. Nonetheless, I am interested in examining the creative production of the local community where I now reside, and the efficacy of civic monuments and public art. I believe that public artworks can and should do more than reach a lowest common denominator. Unlike the public artworks that one might find in the Arts District directly across the Los Angeles River, where spray paint adornments by artists like Banksy and Retna are now common, the murals of Estrada Courts do not provide a convenient backdrop for selfies, and they do not invite real estate speculation or provide the opportunity for "urban renewal." To be sure, these artworks are not an accouterment for capital gains. By their very existence on public land, and the collaborative nature of their making, the paintings of Estrada Courts convey fervent social agency while eluding monetization. I have never made a public work myself, but am nonetheless stirred by an egalitarian spirit frequently conjured by their creation and preservation.

**JSM:** I'm curious about your process and how it relates to these concerns. Describe some of the key decisions you made to achieve these still in-progress works, and what questions still remain for you.

**DW:** By framing the mural's surface at a close proximity, I can play a delicate balancing act, suggesting certain

pictorial elements while sidestepping an impulse to recast the narratives that the mural evokes. To be clear, I am not interested in re-appropriating another people's history. Several weeks into photographing, I revisited Craig Owens's brief essay "The Indignity of Speaking for Others"<sup>3</sup> and ruminated on the efficacy of social documentary tradition, particularly a liberal-progressive strain of altruistic photography developed at the onset of the Great Depression. Photographing on black and white film, I want to cite these narratives—histories of, mostly, white allies constructing sympathetic representations of another people's struggle—without supposing, as [Karl] Marx did in his assessment of the French proletariat, that "they cannot represent themselves, they must be represented."<sup>4</sup>

Regarding formal process, my photographs are printed with monochrome pigments on a thick watercolor paper that has been primed with gesso. In my studio, I use oil paints to tint, highlight, or redact pictorial elements present on the mural's surface. Providing an additional register of information, and thereby suggesting a subsequent accumulation of markings beyond those that I captured on sheet film, I hope to create both a critical dialog and formal tension between hand-inscribed paint and mechanically-reproduced inkjet pigments. For example, working fluidly between photography and painting, I can juxtapose an actual dab of paint with a photograph of a paint dab. Ultimately, I see my chromatic markings as prudent accompaniment to the countless markings, inscriptions, and indices of corrosion which, over the past several years, have slowly accrued on the painted surfaces.

For the work exhibited here, I photographed a mural that has alternately been titled "Indian Profiles" and "Native Americans." This mural is believed to have been designed and painted by a young Estrada Courts resident in 1974.<sup>5</sup> I am interested in this work insofar as it expresses the concerns of an artist who lived at the site of its realization. In this case, my own paint markings attempt to match the pigmentation present in the original mural.

After our initial conversations, when we decided to exhibit the untitled work based on "Indian Profiles," I was enthusiastic by the prospect of showing an artwork that is unfinished. I believe that there is a provisional character to many of the murals at Estrada Courts. Likewise, I perceive my painted photograph to be a malleable ground—in this installation, pinning it to a museum's wall for several weeks, then bringing it back into my studio to be added to or reworked.

## Notes

- 1** For more information about Robert Evans Alexander, see Burt Folkart, "R.E. Alexander; One of Nation's Top Architects," *Los Angeles Times*, December 2, 1992 ([http://articles.latimes.com/1992-12-02/news/mn-1120\\_1\\_r-e-alexander](http://articles.latimes.com/1992-12-02/news/mn-1120_1_r-e-alexander), accessed November 28, 2015).
- 2** Marcos Sanchez-Tranquilino, "Space, Power, and Youth Culture: Mexican American Graffiti and Chicano Murals in East Los Angeles, 1972-1978," *Looking high and low: art and cultural identity*, University of Arizona Press, Tucson 1995, pages 55-88.
- 3** Craig Owens, "'The Indignity of Speaking for Others': An Imaginary Interview," *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1992, pages 259-262.
- 4** Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," 1851-52 (<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire>, accessed December 2, 2015).
- 5** The Mural Conservancy of Los Angeles cites the following details about the muralist and mural: Sandy (Resident Youth), *Untitled (Native Americans)*, 1974, Acrylic, 32 x 24 feet, Located at Estrada Courts, 3384 ½ Hunter St, Los Angeles, CA 90023 (<http://www.muralconservancy.org/murals/untitled-native-americans>, accessed December 2, 2015).

**David Weldzius** (born 1980 in Evergreen Park, Illinois) is a contemporary artist based in Los Angeles. His work has been exhibited at David Kordansky Gallery, LACE, and MAK Center, among elsewhere. In 2012, Weldzius was an artist fellow with the Terra Foundation of American Art in Giverny, France. For his recent exhibition *News from Nowhere* at Cohen Gallery, Los Angeles, Weldzius brought together a series of photographs, drawings, and historical documents that reflected on three regional sites: El Alisal, built by Arts & Crafts enthusiast Charles Lummis in the 1890s; the Case Study House No. 22, built by Modernist architect Pierre Koenig in 1959; and Chavez Ravine, a Mexican-American community that was leveled in 1959 to make way for Dodger Stadium. *Flash: David Weldzius* is the first solo museum presentation of his work.

**Flash! contemporary art series** features single works made within the last year. The series is organized by Joanna Szupinska-Myers, CMP Curator of Exhibitions, at the California Museum of Photography at UCR ARTSblock. *FLASH: David Weldzius* is the eleventh exhibition in the series.

