

Observations on the

Lilli Ann mural
by Chuy Campusano
2030 Harrison Street
San Francisco

My observations on the structure and the current state of the mural, as well as the attempts, to date, to transfer it, are based upon my own on-site examination of the painting and the building, as well as several conversations with Anne Rosenthal, the conservator of paintings and murals, who wrote a five-page report on the mural. I also viewed a videotape of Nathan Zakheim's procedures to remove the paint from the wall of the building.

I did not myself undertake any solvent testing or mechanical attempts, to reverse the white overpainting of the mural.

OBSERVATIONS

My understanding of the current situation with the *Lilli Ann* mural follows. The information on its background is somewhat sketchy and comes from various second-hand sources:

An enormous abstract mural was executed in 1986 on the south-facing wall of a building at the corner of Harrison and 17th Streets. It was designed by an artist who was employed in the *Lilli Ann* Building itself. The source of funding for the execution of the painting appears to have been a city agency and/or a grant. The painting was apparently not commissioned by the previous owners of the building. It is not known whether or not the artist did most, all, or any of the actual painting, but apparently a study or "maquette" for the large-scale work exists.

The painting comprised originally vibrant colors, many of them primary colors. It became a landmark in its neighborhood. The colors faded noticeably while they were in southern exposure for thirteen years.

The mural was recently covered, by the building's current owners, with a white layer of acrylic paint in an attempt to seal out the moisture which has damaged the interior spaces of the building.

The surface upon which the mural was painted consists of a variety of textures. These variations are now quite pronounced since the color has been eliminated and only the texture remains, as in a minimalist canvas. The wall appears to be a combination of cinderblocks-and-mortar, a rough stucco, and an extremely uneven series of patches of a plaster-like material. There is no obvious surface preparation beyond the wall itself as it existed before the painting was undertaken, to the best of my knowledge, although cross-sections of the paint might prove otherwise. The wall also obviously suffering from problems of porosity, suggesting that the support was, or is crumbling or otherwise

deteriorating. My observation of various rooms inside the building suggests that this is the case. Such leakage was also, I understand, the reasoning behind the owners' application of the white paint as a sealant.

The paint itself, I understand from reading Ms. Rosenthal's report and from observing the results of her cleaning tests with organic solvents, is bound with some sort of drying oil, like the medium of traditional oil painting. It is thinly applied, and the variety of textures of the wall are evident in spite of their being covered with the painted design. There is no evidence of an original protective coating over the paint, although the existence of this layer would require further research, both historical and analytical.

TESTS TO UNCOVER THE PAINT

My observation of tests to remove the white "sealant" coating suggests that visual recovery of the mural in its previous state is possible. The range of solvents utilized by Ms. Rosenthal to separate the acrylic surface covering from the underlying oil paint yielded a fairly satisfactory option for paint removal. Most of the colors could be uncovered with solvent cleaning, but certain colors, particularly the red, were sensitive to all organic solvents tested. These discreet areas cannot be cleaned without removing some original paint.

TESTS TO PHYSICALLY REMOVE THE PAINT

Using the archaic Italian "strappo" technique in which the paint layer is "ripped" (a literal translation) from its support, Mr. Zakheim made several attempts (videotaped) to remove the paint layer and, in some cases, part of the plaster support, from the areas of the mural executed on cinderblock. Tests exposed the paint layer to extreme trauma in order to dislodge it from the support, although the test areas were protected by at least two layers of facing materials. My understanding is that Mr. Zakheim attempted tests both in the cinderblock area and in the smooth plaster area, but not in the "patched" areas of the wall. I believe that he tried, in separate attempts, to remove only the paint, and to remove the paint and the plaster. His tests were marginally successful, but required a great deal of force against the painting. I did not observe on the videotape the success of the removal of the facing in order to judge the state of the paint layer after the "strappo." The subsequent, necessary, step of attachment of the removed paint onto another support was not fully explored.

My observation of the process, via videotape, left me with the distinct impression that the paint could not be removed without serious damage to the painting. It is likely that the pounding process pulverized the paint. I cannot conceive of recreating the support, which is a mass of contradictory textures, in order to receive the paint once it has been removed, tidied up, and re-adhered. Even a mold of the exact texture of the wall, if it could be fabricated, would be receiving a shattered and altered paint layer pieces together like a jigsaw puzzle.

BACKGROUND ON THE TECHNOLOGY OF MURALS

"Strappo," along with its cousin "Stacco," are rarely used methods of transferring a painted design from one support to another. Historically, they have been applied to soundly executed traditional frescoes, that is, wall paintings that are a part of the building because

they are bound with the plaster of the wall itself. Such techniques are undertaken as an extreme measure because of structural instability of a building, for example, after the disastrous floods undermined many painted walls in Italy in 1966.

Contemporary murals are guided by no historic principles of technology like traditional frescoes. There has been a great deal of experimentation in the twentieth century with mural techniques, a movement guided by the great Mexican muralists Rivera and Orozco, who used synthetic media experimentally in an attempt to insure stability for outdoor wall paintings.

No standard technique has, however, replaced *buon fresco* or true fresco, which is painted into the wet plaster of a wall. Fresco itself is only as sound as the wall that is painted upon, and interior frescoes have survived far better than exterior ones. The only truly lasting outdoor murals are those derived from the tradition of mosaics, i.e. those composed of colored stones or tesserae of glass.

Contemporary outdoor murals, when composed of a paint layer upon a dried wall, of whatever material, are vulnerable and subject to change from their exterior environment. To the best of my knowledge, there is no consensus, artistic, legal, or ethical, about the accepted longevity of a mural that is exposed to the elements. Owners of the buildings that display such murals, or the artists themselves, usually make case-by-case decisions regarding the state of the painting, and whether or not the right moment has arrived to either repaint the mural or to replace it, because its appearance no longer represents the artist's original intent.

CONCLUSIONS

The *Lilli Ann* mural is like countless other outdoor paintings in that it has undergone change during its exposure to the elements for the sake of the pleasure of the public. Had it not been painted over, some action would have inevitably been taken to revise it at some point in the future.

Because the artist himself had, apparently, little hands-on participation in the application of the paint, it seems to me that the material fact of the paint itself is not the most important factor to consider. The degradation of that paint, and the support that it is painted on, further substantiates my feeling that attempts to recover the original paint are a waste of time.

It is not unusual for contemporary artists to value the concept, rather than the execution, of an artwork. Sol LeWitt is a case in point; his wall drawings and paintings are sold as a concept and executed by assistants. They are regularly painted over and re-executed when a property is sold, for instance. Similar re-painting happens on the walls of galleries who show LeWitt around the world.

It seems to me appropriate that creative thinking be used when considering the matter of the changes that the *Lilli Ann* mural has undergone and what various attempts might be taken in order to respect the artist's intent. Recovering the temporary paint that was applied to a deteriorating wall in 1986 does not seem appropriate.

J. William Shank
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