

Mamdani terms the commonality of Africa (31) need be so important today as an intellectual subject. On the contrary, integrating Africa and/or its constituent parts into world history and development seems a more important project than ever. We need to beware African exceptionalism! I suspect, however, that Mamdani and I would largely agree on what is now needed — a democracy that is tied in to expanding opportunities for security, development and accumulation through the broad population whose rights cease to be arbitrary, key emphasis on the transformation of the African countryside and the democratisation of local government but in conjuncture with the creation of an effective and consistent national state system. “In the absence of a wider strategy of political change and social transformation, the empowerment of local communities can be of only limited and temporary significance.” (217)

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Radical Writing on Painted Walls

Anthony W. Lee, *Painting on the Left. Diego Rivera, Radical Politics, and San Francisco's Public Murals* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

When it comes to modern art of the Americas, perhaps no single artist has been such a constant point of reference and praise for liberal and leftist scholars than Diego Rivera. From such moderate assessments as those of Dawn Ades and Laurence Hurlburt to the explicitly leftist positions of David Craven and Alicia Azuela, art historians have viewed Rivera's monumental murals, their patronage, and their reception as touchstones for assessing the critical potential of art to participate in the major political struggles that occurred between the world wars. Such a tradition extends back to the heated and impassioned belief of contemporary writers in the twenties and thirties who saw cultural policy as part and parcel of left-wing political practice, however ambivalently such a position was embraced by the Communist Party and other factions of the left. (Trotsky's celebratory assessment of Rivera comes to mind as a prominent example.) Certainly there are other examples of critical artists before Rivera; but the complexity and contradiction of Rivera's work (not to mention the uproar that seemed to surround every mural he produced for capitalist patrons in the United States) continues to draw more attention to this artist than to others as a means of exemplifying how art can actually function within a broader radical political process. If there ever was an iconic leftist art production, then Rivera is your man to explore its potential and its limitations.

Or so it would seem. But Anthony Lee, in his new volume on public

murals in San Francisco, confronts this iconic status by firmly reinstating the social context of Rivera's contribution to the promotion of and discussion around monumental wall painting. Lee argues that it is not enough to assess Rivera in relation to the conditions that contributed to his murals, taking one's cues from his biography and his individual works. Rather, in Lee's text Rivera becomes only one component (albeit a significant one) of a much more complex chain of artists and critics that increasingly defined their aesthetic ideas in relation to the class struggle and labour politics of a divisive San Francisco. Lee successfully shows how artistic decisions were variably understood by a constantly shifting critical and artistic culture. In the process, he argues persuasively that the politically radical labour struggles developing in San Francisco during these years played a crucial role in the production of Rivera and others. Hence, his book firmly promotes the "social" in social art history: it locates the meaning of art in its conditions of production and reception, conditions that expand well beyond any narrow focus on form, iconography, or individual artistic biography to encompass the central political struggles of the day. For labour historians and cultural historians alike, Lee provides a refreshing, critical, and engaged interpretation of San Francisco murals in the first half of the twentieth century that reveals a moment in the history of the left in which both artistic and revolutionary ideas could be asserted simultaneously with confidence. Such a moment, Lee concludes, was artificially maintained by artistic discourse on and off the walls. This artificiality is what grounds Lee's resolve to examine critically the varying political effectiveness or ambivalence of the murals, Rivera's included. Lee's text thus helps to wipe the iconic slate clean, carefully dissecting what was and was not possible for radical artists and labour during the period of study. While it is a sobering and synthetic account, it is nevertheless one that points to artistic and political possibilities by analyzing their notorious if functionally limited integration.

Historically, the book spans the relationship between mural painting and left-wing politics in San Francisco in the first half of the twentieth century. Lee focuses on the major public mural commissions and discusses their production and reception as they were influenced by institutional and political events, above all the developing labour struggles including the Big Strike of 1934. Lee is explicitly interested in asking whether the mural projects and their artists had a political effect on local labour issues and radical groups or whether the link between painting and radical politics was more tenuous. Central to his concern is his functional definition of politics: "'Politics' ... is meant in the usual sense: the policies, ambitions, and concerns related to governance. I am little concerned with politics when it appears in art as a vague tendency or lyrical effect, still less with it as an unconscious act or as a structuring but largely untheorized ideological point of view.... The question [the artists] repeatedly asked themselves, and one I attempt to answer, was what ... the dialectic of art

and politics ... actually meant in mural practice.” (xviii) Such a straightforward presentation of his larger project governs the rigorous analysis of archival and visual material in Lee’s book.

Lee begins this analysis seemingly far from the radical politics of leftist artists and activists by focusing on the first major public mural commission in post-earthquake San Francisco, the thirty-five murals at the Panama Pacific International Exposition. While murals had existed in the city before the 1906 earthquake, virtually all of these murals had been destroyed by the fire that had followed the cataclysmic event. Further, the number and complexity of the design scheme as coordinated by New York-based artist Jules Guerin made these murals a focal point of critical discussion and attention, thus raising them to the new claim of being truly “public art.” It is the construction of this public (as opposed to the actual audience) in the press and the presumption of a public by specific artists that interests Lee here. In analyzing this public, the author begins to lay out the major issues and tensions in San Francisco that will be contested territory for the next forty years of art making and politics. “I suggest that the ambiguous but palpable order at the fair – the ‘harmonious effect’ of prescribed colors and compositions in the murals – had its corollary in another order outside the fairgrounds proper. It arose from a political struggle during San Francisco’s reconstruction, when specific patrons – the exposition’s – sought to use large-scale painting to advance their partisan view of governance and social welfare. The murals became ‘public art’ because of their relationship to that partisan effort, thereby beginning a decades-long accommodation of artistic and political practices.” (3) While Lee pushes the transparency of imagery to politics here, he convincingly argues that the subordination of the individual artists to the architecture of the fair meant that the murals were incorporated into the architectural program but also the ideological projections of the patrons. The murals became decorative supports for the architecture which in turn framed the usual display of commodities and technologies at world expositions.

But however tame the murals at the fair were, they nevertheless formed a particularly crucial precedent for the reception and production of art subsequent to the closure of the fair and the end of World War I. Crucial to Lee are two components of this developing history: first, the introduction of a mural curriculum at the California School of Fine Arts, a relatively new school designed to create a generation of home-grown talent to rival the usual importation of artistic culture from other cities in the East; and second, the rise of new patrons in the city who extended their notion of corporate control to include the idea of corporate “responsibility” towards the culture of the city. Both the development of artists trained in muralism and the potential for a market came from the popular reception and discussion of the proper role of murals or public art for a modern city that began with the success of the murals at the fair. So prior to Rivera’s arrival in San Francisco, the city already had:

one of the few institutionalized mural programs; a dominant critical line on the importance of murals – they were essentially decorative or were meant to flow smoothly with and support their architectural setting; a small but growing artistic population of muralists including the two leading figures of Ray Boynton and Maynard Dixon; and a number of patrons ready to use muralism to legitimize their beneficence and ratify a dominant municipal culture.

Rivera's arrival in 1930 changed the terms of the critical debate and introduced a prominent new group of patrons, and it was with these changes that murals in San Francisco began to become more closely linked to left-wing politics and labour struggles. Further, Rivera introduced a significant new aesthetic, one that did not emphasize the decorative or subordinate role of muralism to its architectural environment. Lee analyses these new developments by looking at Rivera's two major commissions of the *Allegory of California* (1930) in the elite space of the City Lunch Club at the stock exchange and the *Making a Fresco* (1931) in the San Francisco Art Institute. As much as his later work in Detroit under Ford or his mural in New York for Rockefeller, these projects immediately presented the contradiction of a leftist artist painting for decidedly capitalist patrons. It was in the context of debates around the content, form, and patronage of the murals that very different constituencies began to lay claim to public art.

Lee is at his best when he brings together the ideological, aesthetic, local, and international conflicts that accompanied Rivera's murals, especially his *Allegory of California*. In a thorough review of the popular and critical commentary, Lee identifies how the descriptions of Rivera even before he arrived tended to the anti-radical and racist, attitudes that came into conflict with Rivera's work and experience in San Francisco which emphasized the importance of ethnicity and leftist politics. Rivera thus pointed to factors which the newspapers in their boosterism for the rampant capital development in the city were not eager to acknowledge. As the Depression had begun to hit the city, anxiety was expressed in many quarters about the multiethnic immigrants coming to the area and concomitant fears of competitive labour markets. Rivera and his mural stirred up renewed and racist concern about the effect "outsiders" had on a local economy in crisis.

But Rivera was more than a cipher for general debates on an unstable labour situation. Artists and gallery owners also publicly voiced their concern about the lack of opportunities for local artists and the development of an art proletariat labouring in a decorative style in the extreme economic conditions of the Depression. Rivera, for them, represented not only an outsider but also an artist connected to the elite who were denying a livelihood to local and increasingly radical artists. True to the contradictions in his own biography, Rivera became a focus of Red-baiting from liberal and right-wing constituencies, putting the trio of patrons led by businessman Albert Bender in the precarious position of defending Rivera's commission to local art

constituencies and against the criticisms of, among others, the strongly reactionary Hearst press. As a result, Rivera the artist could be folded into various rhetorical caricatures: Rivera the migrant Mexican peasant worker, Rivera the class traitor, Rivera the tool of the capitalist, Rivera the “Communist” bearer of Bolshevik revolution. Lee convincingly shows that these debates defined the meaning of art to San Francisco as much as any specific output by the artist himself.

But what of the mural? The *Allegory of California* is a massive and fragmented work that combines the various industries and histories of California, all seemingly unified by a nude female allegorical figure broadly modeled on the California sports star Helen Wills Moody. In his careful attention to the image – and Lee is systematic in unpacking the complicated formal maneuvers and iconographical details of the artists he covers – he shows how the serpentine composition never jells. That is to say, the images of workers participating in mining, agriculture, and technology fill the composition completely but never convincingly come together to form a whole. Local critics accustomed to a very different kind of mural attempted to describe its decorative effects but came up short in an analysis of the content, pointing to segments of the whole but not a synthesis of the parts. For Lee, this indicates the success of Rivera’s agenda, for while the artist was painting in a private space, he was not about to choose a subject and form that naturalized an ideology of a harmoniously working landscape, benevolently organized by capital. Rivera instead emphasized conflict and ambivalence. The artist painted a thoroughly worked natural world that has no “nature.” That he chose this subject at a time when California was seeing a consolidation of agribusiness, a control of ethnic migrant workers, and a nostalgia for a rural past only accentuated his overt if subtle critique. (One might compare this mural with, e.g., the works of José Maria Velasco, one of Rivera’s teachers who painted grand vistas of the harmonious union of Mexican nature with Mexican exploitation of the land. Velasco’s images have no such signs of conflict or uncomfortable juxtapositions and, in fact, rarely even get close enough to their subjects to show a worker.) As indicated in Lee’s footnotes, Rivera was not the first to mark the tension between a natural world and a capitalist one, and in this sense he followed a broader critical tradition extending from Constable’s landscapes of England during enclosure and the Impressionist depictions of an urbanized Paris. San Franciscans accustomed to different views of nature and mural techniques had no critical vocabulary with which to thoroughly analyze this image. As a catalyst for future work, the mural transformed large-scale painting in the Bay Area.

By the time Rivera left town after the completion of his second mural, *Making a Fresco* (1931), critics and audiences alike had seen a definite shift in muralism as a public art. Rivera’s role was still ambivalently discussed, but other factors more completely linked his work and others to growing radical

constituencies. By the early thirties, critics were commenting on the increasingly multiethnic audiences at art shows and that these audiences were also from different classes. Leftist cultural critics coming together around the new leader of the local Communist Party, Sam Darcy, as well as the continuing responses from the right could both begin to construct this new audience as a “public.” Darcy’s policy of a united front well before such a policy was consolidated internationally in the Popular Front and attempts to achieve space for artists to contribute to the CP agenda meant that leftist artists began to scrutinize Rivera’s murals and their techniques in order to adapt them to their own attempts to communicate with the working classes. Agitational imagery began to appear in CP publications, union pamphlets, and additional mural locations. These new attempts taking off from Rivera came together with leftwing labour politics in the city in one of the most famous and successful confrontations between labour and capital in San Francisco, the Big Strike of 1934.

The history of the Big Strike from the point of view of the labour organizers and unions involved is well known. From May to July, striking workers formed a coherent mass and virtually shut down commercial activity in the city, controlling activity down to which groceries could stay open. With Darcy and Harry Bridges, radicalizer of the local International Longshoremen’s Association, in the lead, labour demanded wages and control over working conditions that capital was unwilling to meet. Culminating in massive demonstrations and the funeral for two workers slain in the so-called Battle of Rincon Hill, the strike showed the strength of a united front as well as its fragility as the strike collapsed under political and economic pressure from the managerial elite. But important for Lee is that this major strike effort also had a significant cultural effect. Specifically, in the year of the strike, some of the most prominent left-wing San Francisco artists were simultaneously involved in radical politics and the completion of the murals in the newly opened Coit Tower. “The remarkable feature of 1934 was that working-class dissent created the conditions in which the leftist Coit Tower murals could be painted and read. The links between the tower and the waterfront strike were simply too dangerous to ignore.” (159) While one could debate how “dangerous” a mural can be, Lee nevertheless details how the controversy surrounding the strike actions and the mural imagery forms a significant component of the history of the left and culture in the interwar U.S.

Lee tells the almost daily developments of the Coit Tower commission and the strike actions in breath-taking prose. The artists had prominent leaders in two immigrants to the city, Victor Arnautoff and Bernard Zakheim. Arnautoff supervised the work on the tower and the mural program was conceived by Zakheim. Since the patrons held a censoring power over the project, they believed that the promotion of local artists in the heart of the Depression could be controlled and used effectively to promote a generic civic pride and,

simultaneously, provide economic relief. While Zakheim originally proposed direct references to the economy in crisis, the patrons toned this down to more generic themes of California: agriculture, city genre scenes, and landscapes or seascapes of the Bay Area. But as Lee shows these themes quickly changed once the artists began to paint the walls and the strikers increasingly controlled the streets. Filling their walls in the way of Rivera, artists packed the scenes with disjunctive images of classes uneasily jostling each other in the street, in the library, and on the docks. But it would be wrong to assume that all murals projected a unified point of view. Even those by Communist artists did not necessarily follow the explicit program of the CP. Rather, Lee's point is not about a transparency between ideology, politics, and art: "The visual language of radicalism emphasized details and parts over narrative consistency or compositional unity. It resembled the pastiche – its references applied in bits and pieces, its (dis)organization marked by 'the mere presentation' of disparate figures and objects. In the language of radical murals, parataxis and metonymy rule.... The discontinuity of critical realism seemed to offer an arena for working-class self-emancipation, freedom from the constraining order of illusion." (157) Coit Tower represented the possibility of breaking away from predetermined orders and ideologies, not the least of which were those representing the powerful economic and political elite.

But of course such a subtle history of the relationship between painting and radical politics depends on certain kinds of documents, traces of discussions, biographies, or reviews that make the "(dis)organization" explicit and can be related to the visual traces decipherable in the images themselves. In every mural, Lee does not have this same kind of evidence, and it leads to certain parts of his text where he puts an undue weight on the images to serve as a replacement. This can be seen, for example, in Lee's discussion of Zakheim's subsequent murals for the University of California medical campus in the city (1936-1938). By this time, the united front of the Big Strike has begun to collapse and would further collapse after the Hitler-Stalin Pact of 1939 and other moments in the dissolution of the left in the late 30s. Nevertheless, Lee argues that Zakheim continues to promote a leftist agenda, even without the support of an actual leftist political base. Here he argues that Zakheim's murals of the history of medicine in California are influenced by Orozco and his series of murals for Dartmouth College. "The shift from Rivera to Orozco as model signaled Zakheim's own political investment, for of the two Mexicans, Orozco seemed the mural painter most actively trying to give pictorial form to an orthodox Marxist theory of history." (176) Well, maybe. To state that Rivera might not be an equally valid model for chronologically vast mural work would be to ignore his significant work in Mexico where he constantly projected huge spans of history, analogies between Aztec oppression and European oppression, etc. The images themselves do not provide absolute evidence for this artistic and, in Lee's terms, political shift.

But such are the limitations of an image-based art history in relation to the social history of art. Lee argues well in trying to interpret these gaps and lacunae in the historical evidence, and certainly does a good job in using the images for his defense. If some of the interpretations seem pressed, that makes the argument subject to further review and discussion by scholars. He is to be commended for attempting the difficult task of making sense of a clearly contradictory and complex history.

In essence, Lee's sweeping saga is emblematic of stronger currents in contemporary social art history. The social for Lee is a complex term, combining biography, iconography, institutional history, political history, and labour history, all with an attention to explaining how and what painting precisely meant at a given place and given time to a specific audience. That he takes as his subject the crucial period in U.S. labour history of the pre-World War II era is no coincidence. Rather, this period still has resonance with leftist and labour debates to our own day. Lee's text thus contributes to the problems and possibilities with which such leftism has to contend. Part of the remnants of this leftist moment is the continued deification of Rivera as an all-important artist. Few would disagree that Rivera was significant. But Lee gives us new material and a new context in which we can place the production and contribution of Rivera. As such, his text thoroughly debunks the notion of an iconic leftist "master" and instead shows the artist to be part and parcel of a much more complex, much more contradictory, and hence much more realistic moment in the cultural and political production of the left. These are actions and politics from which we can still learn.

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Fascinating Fascism in North America

Angelo Principe, *The Darkest Side of the Fascist Years: The Italian-Canadian Press, 1920-1942* (Toronto: Guernica Press, 1999);

Philip V. Cannistraro, *Blackshirts in Little Italy: Italian Americans and Fascism, 1921-1929* (West Lafayette, Ind.: Bordighiera Press, 1999).

Much of the Italian-American community (both academic and lay) remains fixated on the problems generated by HBO's television series, "The Sopranos," and the pervasive image of supposed Italian-American criminality. Less attention has been paid to another phenomenon, more disturbing even if more circumscribed by time: the Italian American community's support of Mussolini and fascism. Today, one can walk into a shop in New York's Little Italy and