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John Valadez mural says 'Welcome to Long Beach'

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(<http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/.a/6a00d8341c630a53ef014e8aaca8c6970d-pi>)*This post*



has been corrected. Please see note at the end.

John
Valadez

(<http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/.a/6a00d8341c630a53ef014e8aaca976970d-pi>)

acknowledges that his new mural in downtown Long Beach sends a very different message

about urban living than some of the provocative paintings he made earlier in his career.

Back in the 1990s, an L.A. Times writer described Valadez as the author of "a body of work that reflects on racial conflict, sexual ambiguity and existential uncertainty."

Well, that was then. Valadez's latest mural, which adorns the new Gallery 421, an assertively upscale 291-unit apartment complex on West Broadway just north of Ocean Boulevard, is aglow with nostalgia and goodwill. It depicts a cheerfully idealized version of downtown Long Beach filled with a happy, rainbow-colored crowd and a radiant beauty queen waving under ochre-streaked skies, where both a blimp and the Spruce Goose cavort.

At the top of the two-panel mural, a flock of pelicans, rendered on laser-cut aluminum extensions, soar outward toward the viewer, approximately 6 to 18 inches from the wall, creating a 3-D effect. The mural's southward-facing panel depicts the now-vanished Rainbow Pier, a popular fishing and rendezvous spot in bygone days, which Valadez's fanciful re-creation populates with flapper-era strollers.

Speaking by phone following last Thursday's dedication ceremony, Valadez said he hoped the mural -- which is 60 feet high and 18 feet wide, starts about 10 feet off the ground, and faces Broadway at the intersection of Magnolia -- could serve as a kind of gateway into the city's revitalized downtown.

"It's such a nice visual spot, when people come off the 710 Freeway into the city of Long Beach," he said.

Valadez said his conception of the new mural was tinted by fond childhood memories of taking the Red Car line to Long Beach with his mother. "I remember the sounds and smells of the Pike," he said, referring to the area's amusement park, "smelling the popcorn and the coconut oil."

Frank Suryan, chairman and CEO of Lyon Communities, the project's developer, said the mural and a small art gallery-like space inside the apartment complex are part of an initiative by the Long Beach Redevelopment Agency to foster more cultural spaces in the city's downtown.

"We needed to do something that was unique to Long Beach and was done very tastefully, and John just nailed that," Suryan said.

Under a joint venture with Lyon, the Museum of Latin American Art in Long Beach will host four different pocket art exhibitions each year in the new space at Gallery 421, Suryan said.

Born in Los Angeles, Valadez was part of a group of pioneering Chicano provocateurs who shook up L.A.'s art establishment in the 1970s and '80s. After earning his bachelor of fine arts degree at Cal State Long Beach in 1976, he went on to a painting career that has landed his work in the collections of LACMA and other museums. His figurative-realist murals have enlivened the Federal Building in El Paso, Texas; the Junipero Serra State Office Building in downtown Los Angeles; and the Santa Ana Federal Court Building in Santa Ana.

Historically, Valadez said, murals have been used as a buffer against urban blight, but also to articulate a spirit of communal pride. "As I get older," he said, "I really want to try to have people connect."

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The New Chicano Movement (<http://articles.latimes.com/2005/jan/09/magazine/tm-chicanoart02>)

-- Reed Johnson

Photo: John Valadez posing beside his new mural in downtown Long Beach. Credit: Miguel Vasconcellos

(Updated at 3:55: An earlier version of this post identified the Pike as a hotel. The story has been corrected identify the Pike as an amusement park.)

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