



Every Mural Tells a Story

DEBBIE
KOPPMAN





Every Mural Tells a Story

DEBBIE
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For Marci Benson, in loving memory

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ARTIST STATEMENT

Over the last 18 years I have created over 40 exterior public art murals—painted, mosaic-tiled, and photographically reproduced on vinyl—in the San Francisco Bay Area cities of Oakland, Hayward, San Pablo, Milpitas, Palo Alto, and Alameda. These works are on public school sites, public buildings, community centers, park buildings and libraries, PG&E and Caltrans sites, as well as on the façades of various businesses and services, including two markets, one bar, one restaurant, one Martial Arts Studio, one Catholic Church, one Car

Transmission Repair Shop, three affordable housing residences, and one Buddhist Temple.

Common themes run through all of my work. I have been inspired by the folk art, music, and dance of many cultures of North and South America, Africa, and Asia; intentionally or not, these rhythms and spirits find their way into my imagery, whether the work is specifically representational or not, and in spite of the fact that oftentimes there are many other people involved in the process of creation.

Transformation of ordinary materials and environments is another theme crucial to my work, which might be constructed out of broken tile and salvaged mirrors, or pieced together collage-like drawings and paintings. The piecing together of disparate ideas, cultures, images, and physical materials provides a metaphor for rebuilding, reconfiguring, and reimagining previously unremarkable public spaces.

My work in the public sphere is also driven by the intention towards finding connections to culture, history, and particular inhabitants of specific spaces, so that viewers may feel drawn in by the art presented in their communities. I am completely moved by the response of community members' interest in the process of creating art, and by their willingness to engage with artists. I am energized by the realization that large numbers of people care deeply about art, when it impacts their neighborhoods, their spaces, their lives, and their own possibilities.

Photo of Debbie Koppman: Alain McLaughlin





Dimond Neighborhood Murals

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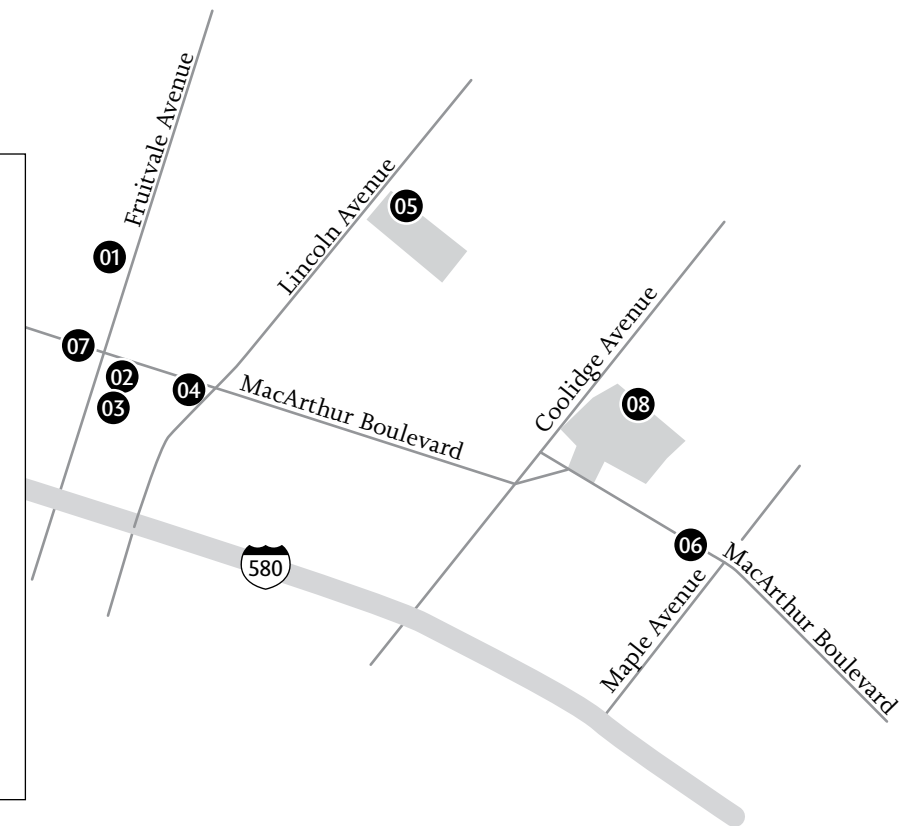




Photo: Debbie Koppman

Photo: Debbie Koppman











P.G. and E.

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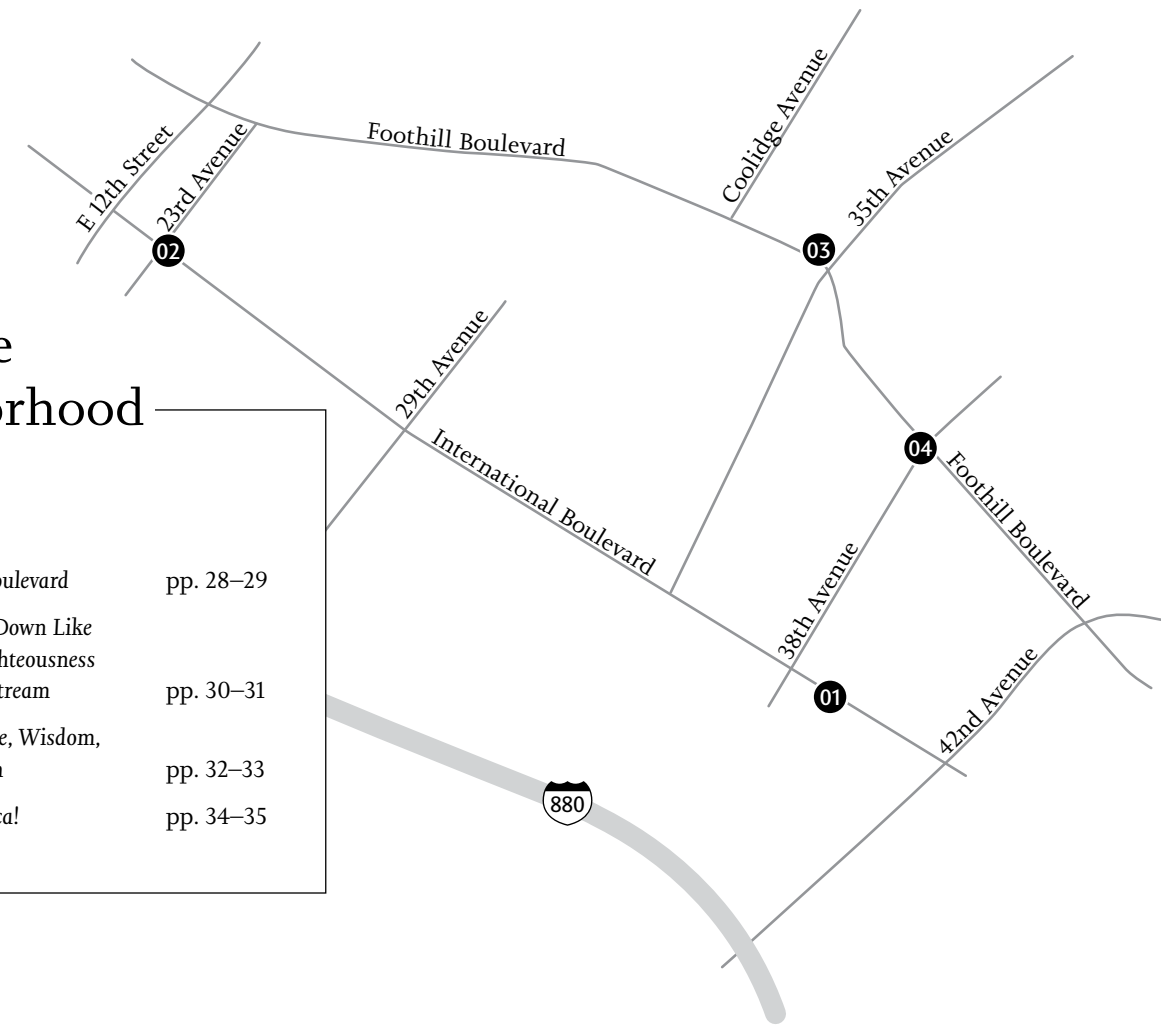






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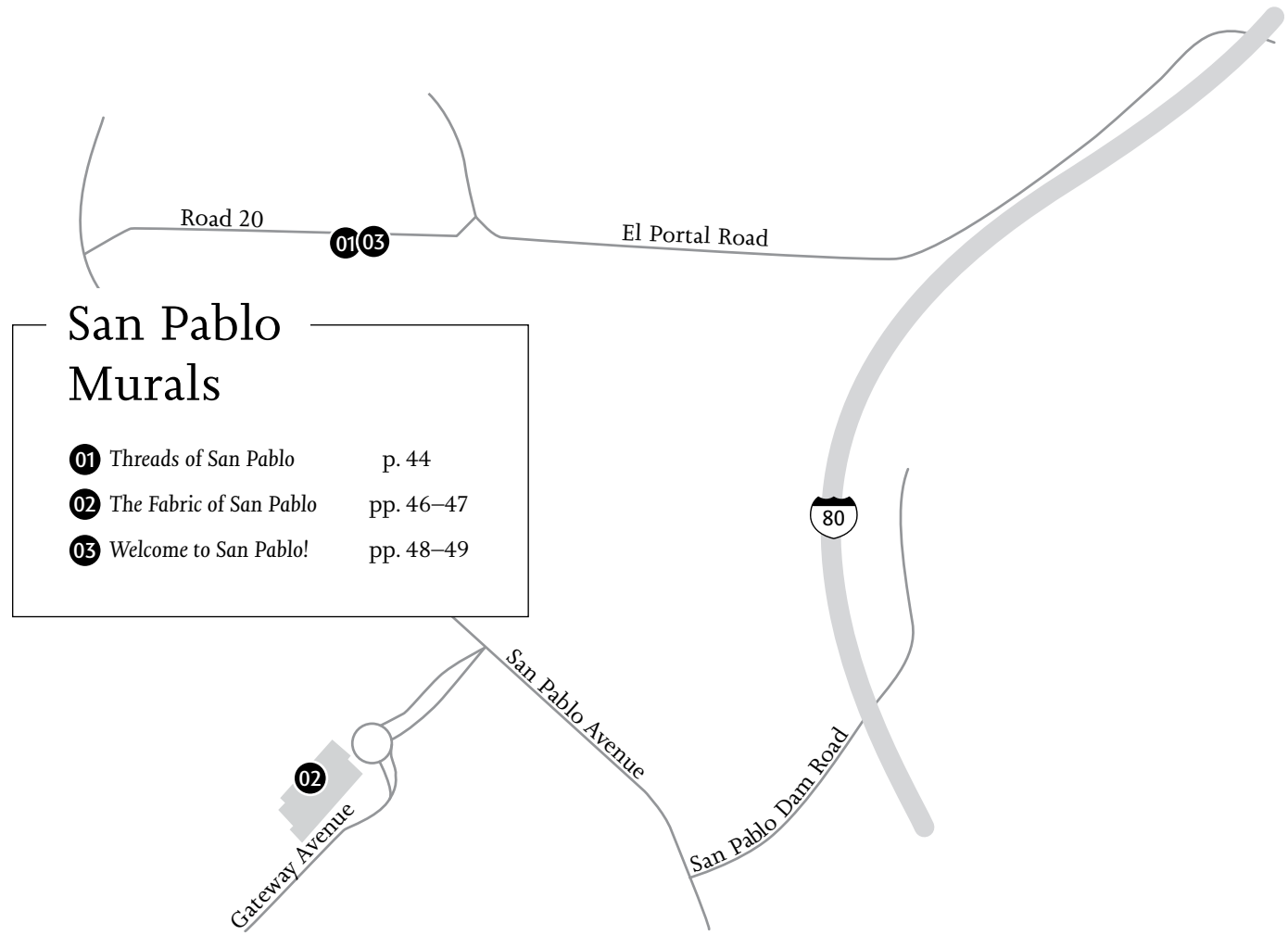






Photo: Laurie Polster





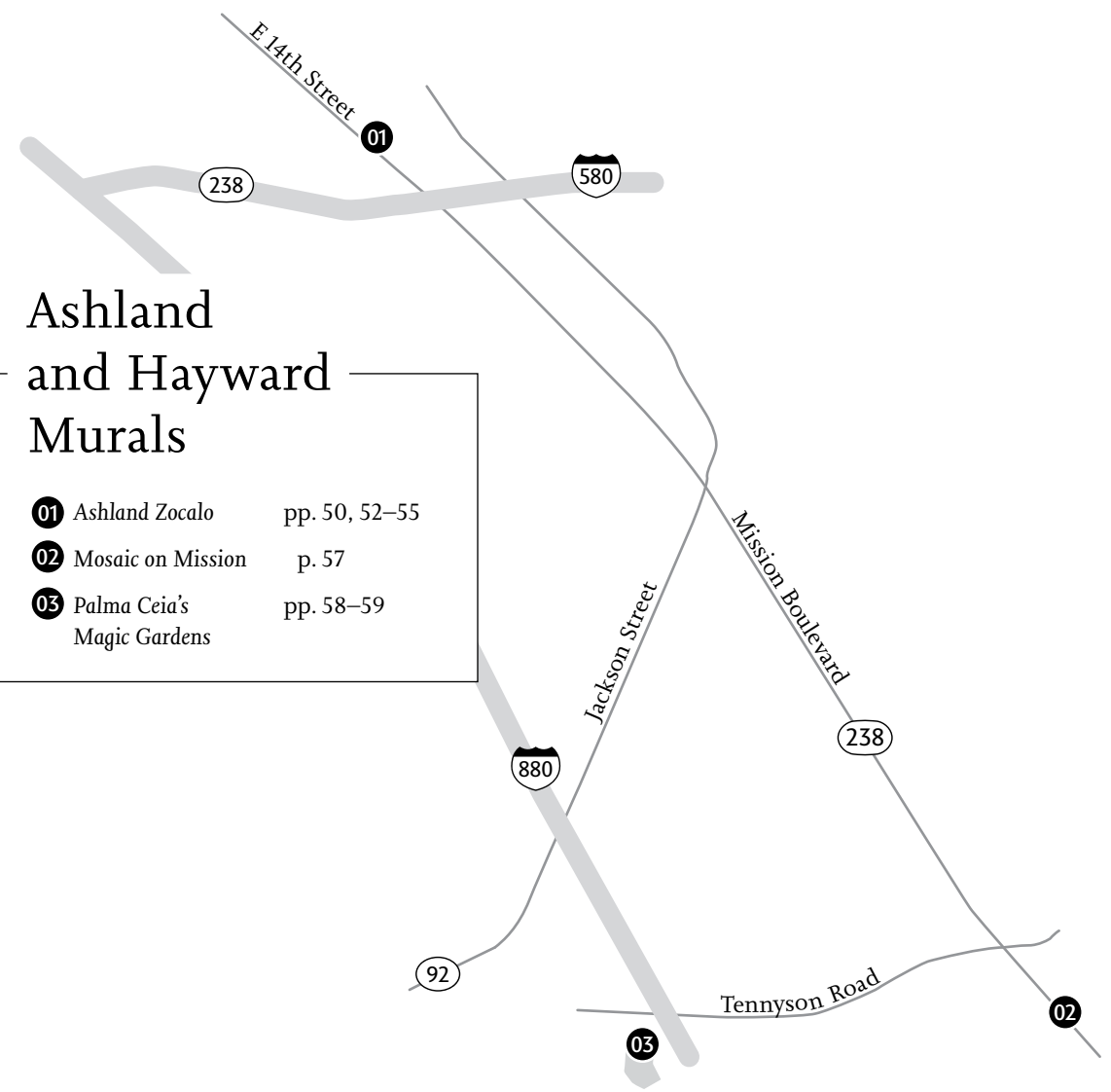






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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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To Julia Koppman Norton and Andy Norton, thank you so much for your never-ending love and support.



MURAL CHECKLIST

DIMOND AND LAUREL NEIGHBORHOODS



p.02

Dimond Library's Magic Carpet, 2020

mosaic tile, 4' x 5'

3565 Fruitvale Avenue, Oakland, CA

Funded by the Friends of the Dimond Library and Karen Long

I was invited by the head librarian, Sarah Hobson, to work with her staff to create mosaic tile designs for two sides of a massive pillar forming part of the structure of the building. The original designs included many elements of favorite books, mostly those read to children. Due to bureaucratic issues, the original designs were scaled back; what remained was a native Monarch butterfly referencing the migratory nature of living beings, along with multiple references to this library's native seed collection.



p.05

Sausal Creek to Thailand, 2016

mosaic tile, main piece: 2½' x 15',

tall piece: 10' x 2'

3430 Fruitvale Avenue, Oakland, CA

Funded by the City of Oakland, Cultural Funding Program

I was approached by the owner of this business, Dimond Café, to enliven their storefront and entranceway floor with patterns reflecting their native Thailand and Laos.



pp.06-07, 12-15

Dimond's Hidden Jewels, 2011

(collaboration with Amanda Lockwood)

acrylic mural, 10' x 60'

Farmer Joe's Marketplace

3426 Fruitvale Avenue, Oakland, CA

Funded by the City of Oakland, the DIA, Oaklandish, Farmer Joe's, and private donors

There was a foundation offering funding to highlight the "history of the architecture, flora, and fauna" of each of the seven districts in Oakland. I invited Amanda Lockwood, who was also teaching art at Sequoia to create a project with me, we applied, we did not get that funding, but with our design we managed to slowly obtain other funding. Diana Tam, the owner of Farmer Joe's promised me this wall, and waited two years for us to pull it together. We had our students creating observational drawings of the architecture, flora, fauna, and residents of the neighborhood, taking them on field trips, and referencing historical photographs. We used the hundreds of drawings they made as inspiration as we painted. The children then came to visit us at the wall, and I feel they all recognized their contributions and felt that their drawings had been included.



pp.08-09

ALAMEDA

Welcome Home!, 2021

acrylic murals, three walls; each: 8' x 21'

Rosefield Village, City of Alameda,

727 Buena Vista Avenue, Alameda, CA

Funded by Alameda Housing Authority

The request was for designs for the entryway of this new affordable housing development which would reflect something of the mood of Alameda, which would be welcoming and feel inclusive to a broad range of new residents. I was hesitant, thought by the way they had worded the call that they were looking for traditional landscape with some sailboats, and I decided to go with a proposal that honored their request while being something I wanted to paint. And surprise! They chose me, with my very abstracted "boat" shapes, "suggesting" the water, the hills, the bridge, all while subtly referencing multiple cultures. I had the great pleasure of painting this project while many new residents were moving in, and I was very grateful to get a lot of praise and appreciation.



pp.10-11, 16-17

DIMOND AND LAUREL NEIGHBORHOODS

I Love Dimond, 2014

3 panels—center acrylic, flanked by mosaic tile:

10' x 36', MacArthur Boulevard and Lincoln Avenue, Oakland, CA

Funded by the City of Oakland, the Dimond Improvement Association, and private donors

I met with community members, asking for items, images, and memorabilia important to them for their personal and/or cultural significance, to be included in the "fabric" of this mural honoring the Dimond neighborhood. Among many items, there is a turtle brought by a Native American neighbor, a Lebanese dress brought by another, a Lithuanian doll, a Buddha, a German pretzel, a Jewish star, African patterns, and *I Love Dimond* written in seven of the languages spoken by people in the Dimond.



pp.19-21

Enchanimals!, 2016

(created with 350 students, based on their drawings)

mosaic tile, height variable to 6' x 350'

Sequoia Elementary School

3730 Lincoln Avenue, Oakland, CA

Funded by OUSD, in collaboration with the City of Oakland

Students worked on paintings creating invented "combine" animals. I chose about 30 of these drawings to enlarge on an enormous wall behind the basketball hoops. Students worked all year tiling these animals and I finished the background, mostly alone, in a marathon tiling spurt spanning almost 350' over a time period of about six weeks, at which point I left Sequoia after 18 years.



pp.22-23

DIMOND AND LAUREL NEIGHBORHOODS

Dimond River Flows to Maple, 2019

mosaic tile, 8' x 36'

2901 MacArthur Boulevard, Oakland, CA

Funded by the City of Oakland, District-at-Large

This mural sits on one of PG&E's local substations. The image is meant to be an abstract representation of water, loosely connecting to our nearby Sausal Creek, and loosely connecting to the clean energy supplied by PG&E. The designs reference multiple cultural patterns representing local residents, which I had solicited at a community event. Students in Shardie Ezell's Art Classes at Bret Harte Middle School tiled the squares, which I then reassembled and installed.



p.27

DIMOND AND LAUREL NEIGHBORHOODS

Phoenix Rising, Bret Harte Rising, 2007

acrylic mural, 13' x 25'

Bret Harte Middle School

3700 Coolidge Avenue, Oakland, CA

Funded by OUSD, Bret Harte Middle School

Initially, I worked with Wendy Brubaker's art students at Bret Harte Middle School to create two related dragon-themed murals at ground level. This perpendicular wall required scaffolding, and so we didn't invite students to join me. We did, however, invite them to contribute drawings to the theme, which was inspired by the idea of the phoenix, a mythical bird which rises out of the ashes. Bret Harte was being reinvigorated as a school community at this time; drawings the students made of positive things happening at Bret Harte were included in the massive wings of this creature. Sharon Higgins, a dedicated parent responsible for much of the rejuvenation of the school, became my friend as she helped me paint the mural.



pp.24-25

Jazzin' It Up at Soon's Lounge, 2018

mosaic tile, 10' x 17'

3449 Fruitvale Avenue, Oakland, CA

Funded by the City of Oakland, Cultural Funding Program

This mural is on the façade of what had been a kind of run-down "dive" bar on Fruitvale Avenue. In cooperation with the bar's owner, I created a design which connected in color to contiguous original Art Deco tile, playing with the idea of "jazz" to spruce this corner up.



pp.28-29

FRUITVALE NEIGHBORHOOD

Traveling on International Boulevard, 2018

acrylic mural, 18' x 80'

Transmatic Transmission

3901 International Boulevard, Oakland, CA

Funded by Visit Oakland; supported by the Unity Council

Visit Oakland put a call out to artists working with community groups to create murals highlighting the history of Oakland neighborhoods. My tireless friend at the Unity Council, Maria Sanchez, always keeping a keen eye out for business owners willing and interested in having murals created on their properties, introduced me to Gil Alonso, the owner



pp.28-29

of Transmatic Transmission, and together we came up with a theme of highlighting the history of transportation on International Boulevard, just as a new Express Bus line was in the works through AC Transit. From our conversations, I came up with a design which included the original cable cars, the nearby trains, and examples of American cars from every decade. Gil's passion is restoring old cars, so several of the depicted cars were from his personal collection. I "researched" the look of the cars, and was very pleased that knowledgeable car aficionados could recognize which ones they were, by make and year, information I couldn't hold onto even weeks after painting them.



pp.30-31

Let Justice Roll Down Like Waters, and Righteousness Like a Mighty Stream, 2020-21

(collaboration with YEP and 20 summer interns, additions created in the summer of 2021 with 10 more high school interns)

mosaic tile, 2 perpendicular walls; each: 6' x 50'

YEP, 2300 International Boulevard, Oakland, CA

Funded by YEP-Youth Employment Partnerships

This project was initially created during the summer of 2020, which as our first summer with the COVID-19 pandemic, was no joke. I spent a huge part of my time just putting up big orange cones, trying to keep my teens six feet apart from each other and from me. Normally I am very good with facial recognition, but masks kept me on my toes, as I never actually saw the faces of some of my participants. I was given a broad theme of "social justice" to work with, and I chose this quote for the abstract possibility it offered to suggest the "mighty stream." Our interns researched relevant quotes



pp.32-33

relating to either social justice or just wisdom in general, were invited to glaze these onto tiles, and included them into the "waters." The project was extended on both ends in the summer of 2021. I had surgery for a broken wrist just a week before we started, forcing me to become a more efficient supervisor, without the ability to do too much "hands-on" demonstrating. Brett Johnson was a great volunteer, reaching high for me when I was unable.

A Place for Peace, Wisdom, and Compassion, 2022

acrylic mural, 24' x 65'

3440 Foothill Boulevard, Oakland, CA

Funded by the City of Oakland, Cultural Funding Program-Neighborhood Voices, and True Buddha Vijaya Temple

This beautiful temple in the heart of the Fruitvale sits on a huge parking lot shared with Midas, an Auto Service Center, and was plagued with graffiti, trash, and multiple car crashes. The Temple's leader recommended the commissioning of a mural; the community reached out to collaborate with the near-by Spanish-speaking Unity Council, who in turn reached out to me. After gathering with multiple community members I created a design which would reference the natural world, and which would also highlight some common imagery and design threads between the predominantly Chinese community of the Temple, and the predominantly Latino neighborhood in which it is sited. Stacey Steele became a new friend as she volunteered to work with me on the highest and most scary parts of this mural. Marci Benson, my dear sweet cousin, spent a great deal of time with me on this as well. Carlos Cartagena primed the wall, sealed the wall, and built the platform we needed for the lift.



pp.34–35

FRUITVALE NEIGHBORHOOD

Fiesta at La Finca!, 2017

acrylic mural, 17' x 80'

La Finca Tortilleria

3801 Foothill Boulevard, Oakland, CA

Funded by the City of Oakland, District 5; supported by the

Unity Council

Maria Sanchez of the Unity Council found me this opportunity, and it was a pleasure to work with Adrian Rocha at this long-standing Oakland family business. I was asked to create a design which would connect with their keynote product—tortillas. I played with the idea of a Mexican fiesta, with “papel picada,” a Mexican spinning top, a piñata with candies. They requested the addition of the Mariachi band, and we had a project design.



pp.40–41

GOLDEN GATE NEIGHBORHOOD

A Quilt of Many Colors, 2021

(collaboration with Laurie Polster)

acrylic murals, two panels, each: 8' x 25'

Sister Thea Bowman & Percy Adams Jr. Residences,

6400 San Pablo Avenue, Oakland, CA

Funded by the City of Oakland Cultural Funding Program

and the City of Oakland, Green Walls, District 1, and St.

Columba Development Corporation as a Ministry of St.

Columba Church

We were invited back to St. Columba church to work across the street; residents of the sister community, partially owned by the Catholic Church, had watched us working on the church, and expressed an interest in having their residence similarly adorned. We invited residents to draw, talk, and imagine with us. After spending time with as many of the residents as we could, we came up with a theme of a colorful quilt, referencing both a common activity of the residents, as well as a metaphorical idea of the piecing together of disparate pieces or people to form a community.



pp.42–43

The Fabric of St. Columba, 2019

(collaboration with Laurie Polster)

acrylic mural, 8' x 85'

6401 San Pablo Avenue, Oakland, CA

Funded by the City of Oakland, District 1,

and St. Columba's Church

We worked in collaboration with Father Aiden and his Parish Council to create a welcoming, plant-suggestive space filled with energy and color, based on the Adinkra patterns of Ghana which form part of the visual identity of this community.



p.44

SAN PABLO

Threads of San Pablo, 2016

mosaic tile, 3 panels, height variable: up to 10' x 17'

San Pablo Community Center

2450 Road 20, San Pablo, CA

Funded by the City of San Pablo

After I installed the first two murals at the Community Center, I was invited to create a proposal for the following three panels, which sit high above on a wall which is visible to the street. For these murals, I was able to extrapolate some imagery used in the first two murals, to create three panels based in the abstracted patterns of the cultural patterns of the early inhabitants of San Pablo. From left to right: Ohlone people, Mexican people, Chinese, Portuguese, and African-American people.



pp.46–47

The Fabric of San Pablo, 2020

mosaic tile, 13' x 24'

1000 Gateway Avenue, San Pablo, CA

Funded by the City of San Pablo

This project opportunity came about as the City of San Pablo was designing a brand-new City Hall. There was a general consensus among several people I had previously worked with, along with a large number of staff, that it would be terrific to have me also design this new project. I was again asked to create an image which would be reflective of the history, architecture, landscape, and culture of San Pablo. I used some imagery from the previous murals (*Welcome to San Pablo!*) thought about the landscape, and got additional inspiration from new construction, along with images posted on the City of San Pablo website.



pp.48–49

SAN PABLO

Welcome to San Pablo!, 2015

mosaic tile, two panels; each: 9' x 12'

San Pablo Community Center

2450 Road 20, San Pablo, CA

Funded by the City of San Pablo

The City of San Pablo had a gallery for many years, whose director was Anne Pinata. I had two shows at the gallery in what was the original City Hall. Later I went to talk about the possibility of showing work with my friend Luz at the brand new community center located nearby. While visiting, the director of the center, Melody Ocampo, showed us the exterior spaces awaiting not-yet-chosen public art. “Say something!” Luz urged! From that visit, I was invited to design all of the five mosaic murals installed at the Community Center. The first two were specifically highlighting the history, architecture, and culture of San Pablo, based in historical photographs put together in a book published by the Historical Society. Teens in the after-school program at the Community Center worked with me to create the border tiles.



pp.50, 52–55

ASHLAND

Ashland Zocalo, 2024

mosaic tile, 3 panels: (1): 4½' x 14½',
(2): 4½' x 5½', (3): 4½' x 9½'

16640 E. 14th Street, San Leandro, CA

Funded and organized by the Trust for Public Land, in collaboration with Hayward Area Recreation and Park District

Ariella Levitch (*The Trust for Public Land*) and I spent some time at REACH Ashland, a community youth center several blocks away from the site of this new park. We organized a couple of book-making workshops, one inside an art classroom, and then another one, out on the lawn. I showed our participants how to make very simple 8-fold origami books, we set out markers, other drawing materials, and gluesticks, along with boxes of random papers and collage supplies. We gave the participants the following prompt:

Tell us a story about...

- Your dreams for your community
- The history of Ashland
- A time you had fun outdoors
- Someone important to you
- Anything you want!

Participants jumped right into this activity; when they finished their books, we went around taking pictures and interviewing them. From these visual and spoken responses, I gathered some common themes from which to create the designs for the park:

- pathways: literal and metaphorical
- nature, park, amplification of what's in the park, protection of nature
- butterflies: literal and metaphorical; transformation
- patterns, weaving: literal and metaphorical; weaving a community together



pp.50, 52–55

- Ohlone, baskets, weaving, natural world, seasons, native plants, native animals
- rainbows, love, peace; acceptance for all, tolerance, people free to be themselves
- cycles, greens, women

All three sets of the preliminary proposal drawings came out of these common themes. The three sets were presented to the community, both online, and also in person at a Day of the Dead event at REACH. People were invited to respond, to give feedback, and to choose their favorite. Happily, all the drawings received favorable responses; two sets were almost tied for first-place, so I decided to “weave” the two designs together, incorporating elements of each.



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HAYWARD

Mosaic on Mission, 2023

acrylic mural, 6½' x 12'

29505 Mission Boulevard, Hayward, CA

Funded by Meta Housing

Veronica Rigobon, a project manager at Meta Housing found me through the City of Hayward's website, and gave me free reign to create an abstract design which would “pop-out” for the front of this new building. The limitations I was given were to not “match” the building, and to include a lot of bright orange. It is rare that I am given this level of open possibility, and still the design had to get approved by what I understood to be a fairly large committee. I offered them a large number of possibilities, and I was never asked what I thought any of the drawings might be alluding to. This final image might suggest “guardians,” or “sentinels,” hopefully welcoming residents home.



pp.58–59

HAYWARD

Palma Ceia's Magic Gardens, 2017

acrylic murals, 4 walls, each: 8' x 60' x 30'

Palma Ceia Park, 27600 Decatur Way, Hayward, CA

Funded by the City of Hayward and Hayward Area Recreation and Park District

This large, lumbering, almost defunct building sat in front of a playground in front of an elementary school, had been badly tagged, and was an eyesore in an otherwise very pleasant park. My original idea was to simply try to visually incorporate the building into the park by covering it with a kind of overgrown garden with impossibly big plants. To that I was asked to incorporate images of native animals, so I added oversize hummingbirds, a fox, a deer, a Monarch butterfly, a couple of owls, an eagle, and a dragonfly. The park is now in the process of being renovated.



pp.60–61, covers

PALO ALTO

Stepping Out to the Beat of California Avenue, 2021

digital prints on vinyl, 4' x 361', 61 panels, each: 4' x 6', Temporary fencing at Jacaranda Lane, California Avenue District, Palo Alto, CA

On display August 2021–Summer 2022

Funded by the City of Palo Alto, Public Art Program

This temporary project was designed to mitigate the ugliness of a construction site. The company installed 4' x 6' plywood boards along the outside perimeter of the site, and four artists were invited to create designs for murals which were then (in my case) photographed, digitized, and printed onto vinyl panels. The beauty of the fact that the project was temporary was that it didn't need to go through any design review process. We were asked to connect our images to the California Avenue neighborhood in Palo Alto, so I did so in a very loose way. These images honor and celebrate the lively and diverse energy generated by the California Avenue District, by the long-term residents and small-business owners, by the Stanford University students, and by the numerous and varied people arriving daily by train. Abstracted characters walk, run, dance, prance, float, and somersault through colorful and animated spaces, evoking syncopated rhythms and playful choreography. The thrilling thing was that the completed piece, made of 61 panels ran 361', an entire city block! Parts of the piece live on, hanging on the fencing in my driveway, and on the fences of various family and friends.

