

# Activists Are Fighting to Preserve Highland Park’s Remaining Chicano Murals

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June 20, 2018



Highland Park locals held a vigil for an erased mural in November  
*Restorative Justice for the Arts*

After John Zender Estrada’s Aztec warrior mural was painted over, the community rallied

June 20, 2018 Ethan Varian Art

Not long after the Highland Park music venue Mr. T’s Bowl closed in 2014, one of the neighborhood’s most beloved Chicano murals mysteriously disappeared from the building’s back wall.

The mural, which depicted an Aztec warrior lying prostrate before two men joining hands in solidarity, was painted by Los Angeles artist John Zender Estrada in 1993 to help bring together the Highland Park community at a time when it was suffering through a rash of gang violence. When Estrada learned that the property owners of Mr. T’s and the adjacent Highland Swap Mall were putting the buildings up for sale in 2015, he wanted to make certain the mural, called “Culture and Peace,” would be protected.

“The real estate companies had assured me that because the new businesses were going to be sort of groovy shops, that the art was going to be cool,” says Estrada, who was born in South L.A. and lived in Highland Park in the '90s. “They said that the mural was not going to be touched or removed. But two years ago, after they opened up, the mural was gone.”

In response, Estrada and a group of community activists, are working to restore and preserve the area's remaining Chicano murals, which they see as a vital part of Highland Park's cultural identity and heritage.

Almost a century old, the Mr. T's building was home to a speakeasy operation and bowling alley before morphing into a gritty rock club in the early '90s. After the sale, the new owner leased the Figueroa Street property to L.A. nightlife company the 1933 Group, who refurbished the lanes and opened Highland Park Bowl, a vintage bowling alley that pays homage to the building's Prohibition-era history.

While the mural was erased around the same time the buildings were sold, exactly who was responsible for painting over Estrada's work is unclear.

Both the building's current owner, Cyrus Etemad, and the real estate agent who sold the property, Patrick Dilanian, say they do not know who erased it. Etemad adds that he remembers seeing the mural before it was removed, but that he doesn't have access to the wall on his property because the owners of the neighboring Highland Swap Mall building erected a fence around a section of the parking lot where the wall is located. The area is now a private parking lot reserved for creative office spaces located on the top floor of the old Swap Mall building, which also houses HomeState Tex-Mex Restaurant and the Artform Studio.

A representative for the 1933 Group reiterates that Highland Park Bowl doesn't have access to the wall and doesn't know who painted over Estrada's art. A representative for the adjacent property owners, Red Car Properties Ltd., acknowledged the fence but says the company has no information about what happened to the mural.

The mural was not registered with the Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs, which would have required the property owner to alert Estrada 90 days before removal, according to the department.

To raise funds to repaint the mural and help restore other Chicano murals in the area, a group of local activists going by the name Restorative Justice for the Arts have launched a GoFundMe campaign and have begun rallying the local community. In November, the group organized a vigil in a public parking lot a few blocks from the former location of Estrada's mural for a graffiti wall that was erased by the city last year. Dozens of Northeast L.A. residents, including some driving a caravan of classic lowriders, attended the event to show their support.



Cars at November's vigil

Ethan Varian

Brenda Perez with Restorative Justice for the Arts says the removal has created a rift between community members and some local officials.

“They’re creating a manufactured narrative of what they want Highland Park to look like and be presented as,” Perez says. “These murals that tell our story are not as appealing to the new people who are coming in to Highland Park.”

A group of artists collaborating with [Avenue 50 Studios](#) in Highland Park are in the process of securing a \$5,000 contract, overseen by Cultural Affairs and funded by councilman Gil Cedillo’s district, to restore a collaborative mural at Avenue 61 and N. Figueroa, which has been “grandfathered in” for registration as a vintage mural under the city’s Mural Ordinance.

Estrada has also approached Cedillo’s office to find a new location to repaint his original “Culture and Peace” mural. He says that although Cedillo’s field representative has been responsive to his requests, his impression is that the office has been focused on commissioning works by higher-profile L.A. artists.

According to Cedillo spokesman Fredy Ceja, the councilman’s office recently commissioned a piece by influential Chicano artist and Boyle Heights native Frank Romero, which will be located on a public wall near the same lot where Estrada’s mural was erased.

“As for working with Mr. Estrada, or any other artist on the Department of Cultural Affairs qualified list, we are open to entertaining proposals,” Ceja wrote in an email.

As Highland Park continues to be transformed by the forces of gentrification, Estrada worries

that other murals could be in jeopardy as more buildings are sold and new businesses enter the area. He aims to contact local property owners to strike agreements concerning existing murals and to register the pieces with Cultural Affairs to ensure that he'll be contacted if any new owners decide to get rid of them in the future. That way he can utilize a specialized mural-removal technique to recover the art and re-apply it to a new wall.

Ultimately, he hopes to facilitate a dialogue between the city, local businesses, and community members to find ways to preserve Highland Park's mural heritage.

"We have to create a win-win scenario for everybody," he says.

*Correction: This article has been updated to remove a quote from Felicia Filer, public art director at the city's Department of Cultural Affairs, that referred to a different wall in Highland Park. A section has also been amended to clarify the nature of the \$5,000 contract for mural restoration.*

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