



The Studio for Southern California History seeks to critically chronicle local history from a social and cultural perspective to recover overlooked histories of community and strife in the larger Los Angeles area to foster a sense of place and civic engagement.

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Resident Storyteller John Arroyo leads students for the Studio's first Walking Tour *Work at El Pueblo: An Historic Tour Tracing the Early Development of Los Angeles* in March 2005. Arroyo lead a fascinating exploration of El Pueblo and delineated how the Plaza was built in great detail. Following John Arroyo's tour was another exceptional Walking Tour led by Resident Storyteller James Rojas of Boyle Heights' Evergreen Cemetery in May. In addition to exploring the many famous and infamous residents of Evergreen, James traced how the past may be read through cemeteries and memorial markings. Fall 2006 Walking Tours include one on Little Tokyo and another one on Evergreen Cemetery and promise to be equally entertaining and educational.

**Dear Reader:**

Welcome to this inaugural issue of **proofs**, the quarterly newsletter for the Studio for Southern California History. Through this publication, we hope to highlight news and information of interest to our members and visitors. Over the summer the Studio continued to gather oral histories including those of legendary performer Leonard Bluett, art therapist Lucia Capacchione, longtime Los Angeleno political activist Tony Nicholas, and the life experiences of local judge William Beverly, among others. It is with the generous participation of these individuals that the Studio thrives and I extend my most sincere thanks to everyone who has donated an interview to the Studio for Southern California History over the past year.

There have been great additions to the Studio's team over the last few months including the hiring of Aimee Dozois to serve as its Creative Director and the addition of Dr. Laura Barraclough to our Advisory Board. Dozois comes to the Studio with an extensive background in digital and material art from print making to animation, and Barraclough serves as a Core Faculty member at Antioch University and has a keen eye to issues of social justice. We welcome both. As you read through this issue, be sure to save key dates for our upcoming Screenings, Walking Tours and Photo/Essay Competitions. We hope to see you soon at the Studio or at one of our events...

Sharon Sekhon

**Special thanks** to Karina Andrade, Laura Barraclough, Stephanie Christian, Lucia Capacchione, Aimee Dozois, Robert Drwila, Jen (Jen Zen) Grey, Janine Fron, Hillary Jenks, Nicole Padilla, Jason Stabile, Jennifer Stoeber, and Brian Yaeger for their contributions to this issue of **proofs**.

# News

## MY NEIGHBORHOOD & AROUND TOWN

On September 6, 2006 the Studio for Southern California History received a warm welcome by the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California and its President J.W. Wong and Director of Programming Eugene Moy. The meeting was held at Castelar Elementary School, located around the corner from the Studio. Executive Director Sharon Sekhon mapped the Studio's goals for the rest of 2006 and her hopes for a great partnership with the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California and screened the documentary *The Holiday Bowl History Project*. Sekhon also announced the Studio's new **90012: My Neighborhood** contest in which all residents from the 90012 zip code are invited to submit a short essay and photos explaining why their neighborhood means home. Top three entries will win a video iPod and all entries will be displayed at the Studio and on its website. For more information, visit our website at [www.socalstudio.org](http://www.socalstudio.org) or call 213-229-8890.

## Funding thanks to the California Council for the Humanities

The Studio received its first grant from the California Council for the Humanities and its Story Fund. This generous funding will go to support the Studio's September 23, 2006 Story Symposium as part of *Work in Southern California: A Retrospective* held at the National Center for the Preservation of Democracy.

## UCLA INTERNSHIPS AT THE STUDIO

The Studio's Internship Program is making its launch this Fall 2006 and is proud to report that the first phase has begun through the University of California at Los Angeles and its Center for Community Learning. Students choosing to intern at the Studio will assist in oral histories, creating and researching walking tours, and serving as mentors to LAUSD students working at the Studio.

## ANTIOCH UNIVERSITY WORKSHOP

The Studio will host a workshop on "Oral History and the Politics of History Telling" for Antioch University students enrolled in Dr. Laura Barraclough's Qualitative Research Methods: A Hands-On Guide to Socially Just Knowledge Production in late October 2006. This tutorial will include both oral history basics and an extended discussion of the strengths and perils of historical memory and using oral history as evidentiary support.

## T-SHIRTS FOR SALE

The Studio is now selling t-shirts as a fundraising tool. These attractive American Apparel tees come in two colors: silver and brown for men and red heather and brown for women. Each t-shirt is \$18.00, students and seniors will receive a \$3.00 discount. To purchase a t-shirt please call the Studio at 213-229-8890.

## SCREENINGS AT THE STUDIO

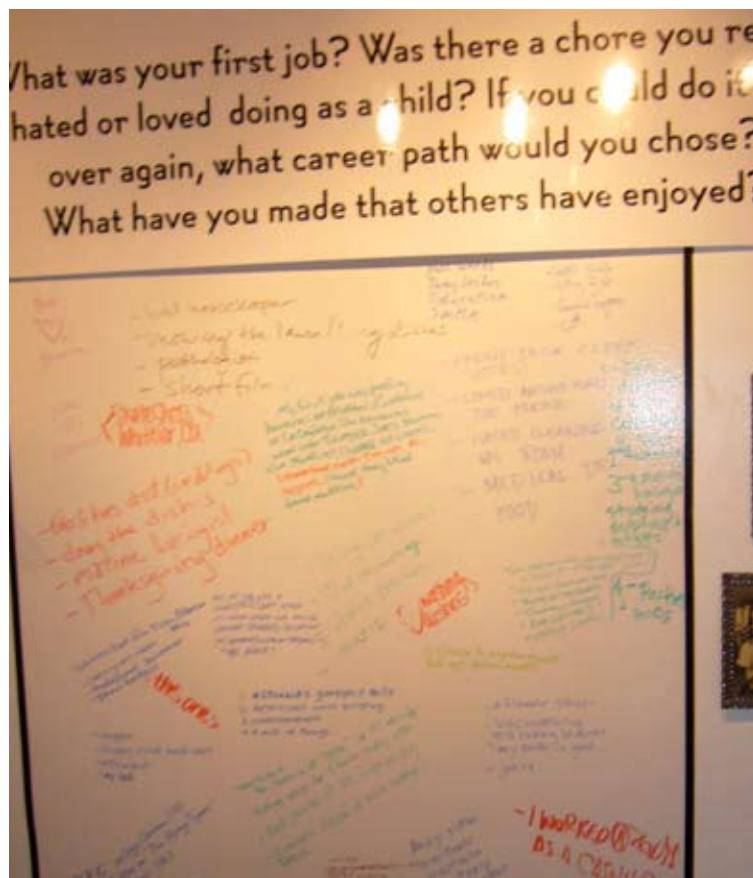
Beginning Thursday October 12, 2006, the Studio will host films and short readings related to Southern California history. These screenings will occur the second Thursday of every month. On October 12, the Studio will screen the 1983 film *El Norte* which documents the conditions forcing two Central American immigrants to flee to Los Angeles and the worlds they encounter in Southern California. Admission is free.



## HIGHLIGHTS FROM WORK

The Studio gallery was launched on June 24, 2006 with its first exhibit *Work in Southern California: A Retrospective*.

Above, the timeline for *Work*, complete with whiteboard space for visitor contributions. Below: following its participatory goals, visitors to the Studio respond on whiteboards to questions like: "What has work meant for you? What was your first job? Was there a chore you really hated or loved as a child, and What have you made that others have enjoyed," posed as part of the *Work* exhibit. The current exhibit features images from USC's Regional History archive, as well as oral histories and ephemera from visitors.



Museum of Latin American Art  
Jesus Rafael Soto Exhibit  
La Universalidad de lo Inmaterial

Jesus Rafael Soto is one of the founding members of the Kinetic Art movement, which began in the 1950's. Kinetic Art explores how a piece looks when you employ movement as a component of the work. It usually refers to sculptures or installments that have actual moving parts which are set in motion by either an internal force, such as a motor, or an external one, such as air or light.



While Soto's works that were included in La Universalidad de lo Inmaterial are not "kinetic" in the traditional sense of the term, they were all inspiring and unique at the same time. Rather than employing actual movement, his pieces achieve a sort of virtual movement, which occurs as the viewer moves from side to side or up and down in front of them. Soto believed that art without movement did not represent reality and therefore constantly strived to incorporate movement in his art.

Some of the pieces achieve this effect by utilizing layers of plexiglass one in front of the other, with each layer having parallel lines, all straight on one panel and all squiggly on the next, which gives the appearance of movement when walking past them. The larger pieces contain beautifully arranged painted dowels which give off a sort of shimmering, flickering movement as the viewer circles around them, as if the people and walls in the background were being watched on an old 8mm film projector.



The permanent collection at MOLAA is also very impressive in its own right. Although there are not many female artists represented, they do have a very diverse collection of paintings and sculpture from all over Latin America including Mexico, Central & South America, Puerto Rico and more. Fridays are free to all, so take advantage and enjoy. For more information, you can visit their website at [www.molaa.org](http://www.molaa.org).

Contributed by Stephanie Christian

# SCENES *from* MY NEIGHBORHOOD

Respondents were asked to submit 5 photos and approximately 500 words to describe their respective neighborhoods and what constitutes home in Southern California. Entries represent La Mirada, Whittier, Shadow Hills, Little Tokyo, and many others. For the complete and a growing compendium of entries, please visit the Studio's website at [www.socialstudio.org](http://www.socialstudio.org). We have excerpted a few here for your enjoyment.

**Michel  
Martinez:**

Michel submitted images from both Los Angeles and her current home in New York City. In Southern California she spends her time in Whittier, Brea, Chinatown, and, well, as she says, "this whole region."

whenever someone asks me where i'm from, i get a little flustered:

do i say where i was born? where i lived for the first half of my life? where i went to elementary school? high school? maybe they mean where do i live now? should i say where my family is from in mexico? or is that heritage and not what they meant at all...?

a seemingly simple question totally throws me, but to start the conversation, i usually say, "i'm from los angeles." it's concise and pretty honest, considering most of my life has been spent in and around LA, and it's somewhere that i know really well despite it being so large and amoeba-esque. in all seriousness, i consider this whole region my home. i've lived in a dozen different neighborhoods, and without hesitation would call many more "home."

For me, family and friends are home, not just an address or an intersection or a zip code. it's a bike shop in whittier, a catholic school in compton, a softball diamond in la habra, a university in los angeles -- and many, many more places -- where i have whole other families.

my neighborhood, my family, my home: these are words with meanings so fluid, so dear, that there's no way precise way to pin them down.

and i like it that way.



*Front yards are the souls of homes...*

***Karina Andrade: Home, Sweet Home!***

The curb appeal and diverse styles are what transform a neighborhood into a home. Taking a walk around a neighborhood becomes an adventure full of visual entertainment. I do believe people's personal experiences and environment shape their personal tastes, and this is reflected in their front yards and homes. Their ethnic background, childhood experiences, and the people around them influence the vegetation, garden arrangement, and paint color of their homes. Front yards are the souls of homes and a house is transformed into a home, each of them with its unique characteristics.

The beautiful "pink tree", as I called my next door neighbor's tree, makes the block feel warm and colorful. The contrast of pink flowers against the California sunny blue sky is breath taking. Broken windows are just a reflection of the tireless ball games played by the young children in the neighborhood. Spanish architecture exemplifies the influences of the Californian Missions, adding great historical value to the homes. Fully upgraded residences are an example of the enormous amount of growth in the real estate market that has occurred in the last two years in California. A front yard filled with fruit trees, benches, and a piggy bank riding a garden tricycle is just one more example of the colorful and distinctive aspects that transform my neighborhood into a home, sweet home.

*Everything I Needed to Know About Life,  
I Learned from Living in a  
Senior Mobile Home Park*

by Stephanie Christian

Life Goes On – I moved in with my Mom after my Step-Dad, Larry, passed away 2 years ago. It helps her to have me around and it allows me the opportunity to go back to school full-time. We live in a senior mobile home community. Because there are many elderly people who live in our neighborhood, dealing with the deaths of people we care about is an everyday occurrence. One thing I have learned from the residents is how to remember those you care about who have passed on but to not let that interfere with you continuing on and living your life. The small wreath hung on the white trellis is only put out when someone in the park passes away. This same area is also used to post activities that are happening in the park on that same day, such as bingo, bunco and social club activities. Whenever I see the wreath as I'm driving through the exit on my way to school, it reminds me that life does go on when you lose someone dear to you and it's important to make the most of it.



**Country Living, Shadow Hills** In the city of Los Angeles, there are four neighborhoods where you can legally keep a horse or other large livestock on your own property. I grew up in one of these neighborhoods, Shadow Hills, in the northeast San Fernando Valley, from 1987 to 1996; and I returned to study the neighborhood for my doctoral dissertation from 2001 to 2006. I approached the dissertation project from a rather critical angle that analyzed how questions of “lifestyle” and “heritage” justified land use policies that, I have argued, reproduce systemic racial and class privilege. Nonetheless I continue to love the place where I grew up, to think deeply about how it shaped my character, and to bemoan the changes that have taken place there. Submitted by Laura Barraclough

*more scenes from my neighborhood*

HOME IS LITTLE TOKYO by Hillary Jenks

“Home is Little Tokyo.” I know, because the mural on the wall of the Japanese Village Plaza says so. But I don’t know only because of that. I know because this is a place that is loved, even though many of those who love it do not live here. You can see that love in the care that went into the mural, painted by 500 individuals and organizations over three years, and the images it contains: dancers, workers, activists, elders, and children.

This is a place where people refuse to throw away their past. They hang on to old buildings, polish them up, and put them back to use instead. Across the street from the mural, the “chop suey” sign bathes First Street in kinetic neon, pointing hungry pedestrians to dishes new and old at the reopened Far East Café. A man at one of the cloistered wooden booths inside says, “When I bring my grandchildren next week, that will be five generations of my family to eat here.”

It’s not just the buildings – the stories are passed on too. Walk north along the former path of Central Avenue, with the old Nishi Honganji Buddhist temple on your left and the new Japanese American National Museum on your right, to the Go for Broke Memorial. In the middle of a hot, bare parking lot is an elderly man who seems to be waiting for you. He will walk around the stark black circle with you and tell you his story, how the 442nd Regimental Combat Team rescued the “Lost Battalion” in Italy or the top-secret exploits of the Military Intelligence Service in the Pacific. He asks nothing in return, except that you remember.



## Prof. Jen Grey (aka Jen Zen)

explores the changing role of the **Artist**  
& her profile at the Studio for Southern  
California History



Two images from the Studio's current exhibit including an inset of a mural done for the Veteran Affairs Hospital in Long Beach and her more recent digital work integrating fire and ice.



It is easy to pick out the paintings in this show that were not part of my public mural work. No one would want life-sized fire paintings in a hospital. Maybe that's why I did them. As a free spirit, I became increasingly interested in the private rather than public experience, the mysterious rather than the obvious, the rare and elusive as opposed to the common. When seen in person at life scale, the compositional infrastructures in the fire works create surprising optical illusions. Fires seemed to flicker and float in space, literally moving with you into the real world. Very metaphysical and inspiring, albeit unsettling.

Too bad, you can not experience these special effects by looking at the little studies posted in the show. My current work in cyber-space (also not presented in the show) is an outgrowth of the fire paintings and the drawings I did with the flashlight gloves I invented (which you can see in the glass case). These are presented as artifacts, together with my favorite paint brushes, and the "I am Proud to be a Union Member" pin that my Dad gave me... all artists should have one... well, great Dads, and Unions.

This show emphasizes my work as a Mural Director, which helped people define their roles within the immediate community. Working in collaboration with students and patrons prepared me for my current, more internationally recognized work in the new virtual world (but that's another story). I founded and directed the CSULB Mural Program for ten years, 1989 – 1999. Ultimately, the purpose was to create a more satisfying public environment, to enhance social identity and well being in community life. Teamwork was required to solve the technical, esthetic, artistic and political challenges. This promoted core community values: Trust, Respect, Commitment, Compassion, and Excellence.

Students in the program produced dozens of murals in hospitals, libraries, day care facilities and other public spaces. The 12 story project illustrated in this show is a delightful narrative created in a series of stairwell landings. The Empire State building is being climbed by "Baby Kong". On the top landing you can see him grabbing a banana from the spike of the building, and in the basement, a giant banana peel lies on the sidewalk. On one landing, you can see his big foot (in a Kongress sneaker), but the blind lady feeding birds is clueless. Each landing has its story, a pleasant way for hospital personnel to lighten the burdens of their day.

The program ran its course. A lot of people benefited, and many of the projects are still enjoyed to this day. The students who did the projects moved on to work as professional artists and teachers, people prepared with a much better understanding of how to work effectively in society. I moved onto a split existence: as Prof. Grey, teaching "old school" values in more traditional Drawing and Painting courses, with an emphasis on Life Drawing; and, as JEN ZEN, the cyber-ego working in the experimental virtual world. Tradition: Innovation.

# SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA – SO CAL – CALI What does it mean?

written for the Studio of Southern California History, 2006

by Nicole Renee

politics - sun - traffic - people - beaches - palm trees  
- films - color - music - trends - culture - ethnicity -  
language - Little "Everything" - A Melting Pot

boyle heights - east l.a. - Hollywood - Compton - Cren-  
shaw - watts - the towers - dodger stadium - chavez  
- ravine - rose bowl - down town - the o.c. - Hollenbeck  
department - Lincoln park - E.L.A.C - Salazar park - the  
silver dollar café - mariachi square - little Tokyo -  
union station - evergreen cemetery - china town - olvera  
street - alameda - sunset blvd. Hollywood & vine - Hol-  
lywood bowl - the Hollywood sign -  
Holiday Bowl - Whittier Blvd. - freeways - the projects

## The City of Angels

The #1 pest of California & #1 non-Californian who loved  
southern California Carey McWilliams - 1943 Zoot Suit  
Riots - 1946 Mendez v. Westminster - Sleepy Lagoon - Peo-  
ple v. Zamora - National Chicano Moratorium March - Big  
Wednesday - Marisela Norte & her poetry in motion - Dolo-  
res Huerta - Cesar Chavez

## City of Angels

El Rio de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los  
Angeles de Porciuncula, the river of Our Lady the Queen  
of the Angels of the Porciuncula. 1965 Watts Riots - as-  
sassination of Robert Kennedy - counter culture - the  
doors - youth culture - style & flare - gangs - dance  
halls - memories of el monte - angel baby - pachucos -  
zoot suiters - vato - veteranos - white fence - evergreen  
- lowriders - hell's angels - Mongols - Edward James ol-  
mos - Estrada courts - chicanas - the classic - salesian  
high school - boys & girls club

El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Angeles de la  
Porciuncula, the town of Our Lady the Queen of the Angels  
of the little portion 1992 L.A. Riots - break dancing  
- electric boogalio - jocks - L.A.P.D - gangster rap -  
dr. dre - NWA - snoop - tu pac - homies - private school  
girls - bikers - surfers - skaters - the Z-Boys - Duke -  
tattoo freaks - old timers - "wet behind the ears" wanna  
be's - raves - clubs - free shows - No Doubt - activism  
- Ozo - Aztlan Underground - Rage Against the Machine  
- yes, even Black Eye Peas...pre furgi - Santana where it  
was all learned from - champions - USC v. UCLA - Lakers  
- Tiger Woods - Mark McGuire, Jason Gambi & Nomar Gar-  
cia-Para - Julie Foudy - Matt Leinart - Jackie Robinson  
& Ricky Romero - Janet Evans - Lisa Fernandez - Reggie  
Miller - Misty May - NCAA Football Champs - NCAA Softball  
Champs - NCAA Baseball Champs...GO TITANS!!!!

## City of angels

Good or bad, angels have been watching over this land for  
many, many years  
When all else fails  
Look up, take in everything around you  
Witness history in present time  
Never forget, angels, past & present, are forever walking  
side by side  
Where ever Southern California may take us.



## Uneven Ground

by Jennifer Stoeber

Despair gathers strength  
in the dusty yellow curbs of Baja,  
battling the hope  
that flows in bloody rivulets  
between the chipped grey stone  
of its streets.

There is honesty here  
in this running wound,  
which hides itself in the  
sparkling chimeras of California,  
where the concrete remains  
so cheerfully smooth—  
until unexpected puddles bloom  
in the sanitizing rain,  
and sink holes  
swallow  
late-model Hondas whole.

# CEASE FIRE:

## Recovering Your Inner Child

By Janine Fron

*“If you can love your Inner Child, you can love everyone.”*

CEASE FIRE, directed by award-winning Iranian filmmaker, Tahmineh Milani, premiered in the U.S. on July 7 at Music Hall 3 in Beverly Hills, and on July 14 at San Francisco’s Presidio Theater.



Capacchione with her maternal grandmother.

Within a few weeks of its Tehran release, CEASE FIRE, or “Atsash Bas” in Farsi, broke all box office records in the history of Iranian cinema, and received a warm review locally from Variety. This groundbreaking film is based on Dr. Lucia Capacchione’s art therapy and watershed book, *Recovery of Your Inner Child*. Dr. Capacchione is the daughter of Connie Capacchione, whose treasured oral history of growing up in Little Italy (present-day Chinatown), and working as a local seamstress is the centerpiece of the Studio’s inaugural exhibition, *Work in Southern California: A Retrospective*. Dr. Capacchione is a second-generation American and resident of California. She coined the term “Inner Child,” is the best-selling author of 13 books and was one of the first Head Start directors in the U.S. She is the proud mother of two daughters and four grandsons.

CEASE FIRE is a romantic comedy of accidental therapy and empowering recovery starring Iran’s acclaimed actors, Mahnaz Afshar (Sayeh Yousef) and Mohammad Reza Golzar (Golzar Yosef), featuring Atila Pesini as the psychiatrist (inspired by Dr. Capacchione). With fast-paced dialogue delivered by these seasoned performers with equal parts of sharp wit and sensitivity, their interpretation of a young professional couple on the brink of divorce paints an intimate portrait of life as a series of negotiations with one’s Inner Child at play.

“I have the intention to show all different and universal scenarios of couples with marital problems and how their insecure and unprotected inner child/children, who is suffering from ancient cultural and traditional belief system ACTS OUT and prevents them from enjoying an apparent modern life,” explained Director Tahmineh Milani.

Critical moments include the heart of Dr. Capacchione’s book, realized as Golzar’s cathartic renderings of his Inner Child on a white board, as he reenacts the childhood cat-and-mouse games he also played with his wife while they are separated. As described in Dr. Capacchione’s book, “The Inner Child is constantly trying to get our attention, but many of us have forgotten how to listen. When we ignore our true feelings and gut instincts, we are ignoring the Inner Child.”

Much can be learned from this film with regards to the nature of contemporary relationships, showing how dual-careers and barriers marked by gender stereotypes can impact a marriage, indeed common ground when it comes to domestic life in this Century, the world over. “This film demonstrates that our Inner Child work translates across cultural, political and religious lines,” said Dr. Capacchione. “In spite of our differences, deep down, we are all the same.”

CEASE FIRE is in its ninth week of screening at the Music Hall in Beverly Hills, and has become a topical greeting in Tehran, during a time when there are discussions over the media channels of war with Iran among our U.S. and western leaders. Tahmineh Milani was inspired to make this memorable film by her long-time Iranian-born friend, Sohelia Noorbakhsh, who works as a Marriage and Family Therapist in Southern California. During Milani’s 2005 visit with her friend, Noorbakhsh was studying with Dr. Capacchione, and raved of the progress her clients were making as a result of their Inner Child work. Noorbakhsh’s enthusiasm for Dr. Capacchione’s book helped to bring CEASE FIRE to life. She also worked as Milani’s script consultant on the dynamic therapy scenes, in which the troubled couple’s marriage is retold with animated flashbacks, from their first meeting to their potential parting of ways.

“The film shows our commonalities, but it goes further than that. Like the title, CEASE FIRE, it holds out the promise of hope,” said Dr. Capacchione. “The message is clear: There is another way to relate to each other.”

# Pelota

*Editor's Note: This article was originally written in September 2004, while the debate over the Belmont Tunnel/Toluca Yards was still in full swing. Two years later, the site is no more. While community groups eventually succeeded in declaring the actual tunnel an historic site, it did not save the urban park as intended. Developers simply built around the area; it will remain fenced off and completely closed to the public. As of late 2006, the art-covered walls have been completely torn down, META development's Northwest Gateway Apartments are near completion, and the rich culture that had formed around the yards exists only in memories and stories like this.*

The alluring smell of grilled meat and the sounds of shouting and laughter waft through the chain-link fence, inviting passers-by to peer into the yard lined with walls of graffiti. On this particular day, the area is bursting with a large community picnic. There is what looks like a game of handball being played while crowds of spectators, including women with small children, socialize; more than half intently watch the game before them.

# Tarasca:

The enormous hole in the ground where this scene takes place almost every weekend is the Toluca Subway Yard, located along Second Street under the Beverly Boulevard overpass near downtown. It is somewhat of a graveyard, holding the remnants of the Pacific Electric Railway trolley system, also known as the "Red Cars."

Almost 80 years ago, the location was used as the entrance and repair yard for the city's first subway. It now seems crazy to think that at this time, L.A. was widely considered to have the best public transportation system in the country. With the rise in popularity of the automobile in the 1920s, downtown traffic jams slowed the trolleys and delayed their tight schedules. To avoid the congestion and bypass downtown, the company built the mile long subway, beginning at the Belmont Tunnel near Glendale Boulevard and ending at Hill and 4th Streets. This line ran for 30 years, from 1925 until its unfortunate dismantling in 1955.

Since then, the yard has become an undesignated community park, where graffiti artists utilize every cement surface as a canvas for their work and the packed dirt ground is used as a court for the handball game known as Pelota Tarasca.

Local residents view the game more as a social activity rather than a sport and play Pelota Tarasca on weekend afternoons for fun instead of competition. Surrounding the game is a picnic-like atmosphere where food is prepared; everyone talks while drinking cerveza and children run around playing tag or throwing rocks at each other.

The Aztec ballgame, Ullamalitzli, dates back 3500 years. Derivations exist throughout Mexico and Pelota Tarasca originated in Michoacan, Mexico, where many of the players hail. The rules are fairly simple. The game is played with a worn-down tennis ball and an almost-80-yard court; a line drawn in the dirt separates the two sides. There are four players to a side, and one team, which acts as the serving team, serves the ball from the middle of the court. The ball is allowed to bounce once before the other team returns it and the ball is volleyed back and forth until someone either misses, lets it bounce twice, or hits it out of bounds. Each time the ball is dead, the team that didn't screw up gets one point and the winner is the first team to reach 12 points. It is a lot like tennis, except there is no net and the players use their fists instead of a racket. To be able to hit the ball all the way down the court, the players hold a stick or a small bone clenched inside their fist to strengthen their hand.

Unfortunately, the weekly event may soon have to relocate.

A company called the Meta Housing Corporation announced earlier this year that it is planning to build a 260-unit low-income apartment complex in the Toluca Yard.

With its graffiti covered walls, some consider the yard urban blight, while others like the recently formed Belmont Art Park United (BAPU) see the area as both a historical and artistic site. BAPU is currently petitioning the city council and preservation groups to save the yard by turning it into an art park. In mid-September 2004, BAPU submitted an application to the City of Los Angeles Cultural Heritage Commission to consider the site a historic landmark.

However, the city may find the need for low-income housing more important than community recreation. The ball players say they will play there until the gates are locked and construction on the apartments begins. If that happens, they will be hard pressed to find somewhere else to play in downtown's concrete jungle.

by  
Jason Stabile

# BURNING STAR: MUSICAL ACTIVISTS IN THE ANGEL CITY

by Jenny Stoeber

For the members of the Los Angeles based hip hop/soul collective Burning Star, the notion of political action is as rich and as varied as the individual cultural and sonic strands that intertwine to form their music. From penning overtly political lyrics for songs like "Victory," to volunteering with the Hollywood Teen Community Project, to rocking the stage for both the anti-war efforts of the Answer Coalition and the Bands Against Bush LA rallies, the seven-piece band walks it like they talk it and refuses to have it any other way. Prince Yashua Alvarez, Burning Star's MC and newly minted solo artist, argues that as musicians, "you have the ability to speak to masses of people. . .and when you have that type of power I think it is almost abusing that power to just do it for the sake of saying I got a gun or I got this chain or I got this thing, instead of giving answers to the problem, instead of using your power to promote change. That's one of our main motivations. You don't need these things to be a powerful person or a beautiful person."

Alvarez describes his own political consciousness as crystallizing early, tracing it back to the example and influence of his parents in the 1960s and 70s. His mother and father—a Vietnam vet—took him as a small child to political rallies in what is now called Salazar Park. He recalls the intense feeling of being one of thousands in the midst of a mass political action. "I looked up and the Brown Berets were marching," remembers Alvarez. "That stuck with me. A group of men in uniform, just connected, of one mind and disciplined." This image of community building and positive political collectivity has driven Burning Star forward since their inception in 1998.

Since then, the band has steadily been building a strong southern California following, playing regular dates at Nappy at the Roots, the Temple Bar, and the Little Temple and collaborating with other Angeleno acts like Ozomatli, the Black Eyed Peas, and Quetzal, of which Burning Spear keyboardist Quincy McCrary is also a member. Currently, the band's members are pursuing various solo projects—a hip hop joint for Yashua and a rock-oriented release for Khalfani White among them—while their latest full-length recording is under consideration at Jeepney Music, the new Silverlake record label owned by apl.de.ap of the Black Eyed Peas.

Although the band's philosophy of live performance has its roots in the politics and music of the 60s and 70s—especially War, Stevie Wonder and Bob Marley—there is no doubt that Burning Star is facing the political realities of our contemporary moment. Alvarez, a registered voter, struggles with the fact that our government is run by rich, powerful people who are removed from the everyday struggles of communities of color. However, in spite of his skepticism, Alvarez argues that "this year I am going to vote whether I believe it is going to change anything or not, so I can say you know what, I voted, I took that step regardless of where it goes because of how Bush won the last election."

## 'Touch & Experience'

By Brian Yaeger

Born in the 70's, I was in the first generation to get to play on "the big rock" in Westwood Park. While other icons of those formative years have disappeared like the pony rides where the Beverly Center is now situated, I've always been comforted that one monolith would endure. I vividly remember the day I overcame my fear of the steeper and faster of the two slides. I sat at the top, tiny legs dangling over, gripped with terror. After minutes of hesitation, I discovered the short ride was fun, not dangerous. The creation has been an invaluable tool of excitement, imagination, and self-discovery for three generations. I had always looked forward to bringing my kids to the park (you know, in the event I have them some day.) Imagine my horror when I found it currently fenced off, sitting in complete silence. The "rock" is actually the functional sculpture titled "Touch and Experience" created by Helen Walter Gerson in 1977. (continued on page 11)

While the war with Iraq—and the half a million children currently suffering starvation there—weigh heavily on Alvarez's mind, so does the current state of domestic affairs here in the states: "here in America people are dying, people are poor, starving, without medical insurance. How can you go anywhere else if your home isn't right? ... It doesn't matter if you are in America and you have freedom, if you're starving, you're starving." In many ways, Alvarez feels that what we are engaging in is a war for America—especially concerning who gets to define what this America is all about. He argues that while this country is usually described as "a land of opportunity," we must empower ourselves to question "who is this opportunity for? What opportunity is there?"

Aside from the ideological content of their lyrics that directly addresses these issues, the political power of Burning Star is deeply embedded in the sound itself. Their unique mélange of hip hop, soul, reggae, and Latin rhythms works to remind audiences that one of the most important socio-political functions of music is its ability to provide us with a space to dream. Alvarez remarks that Burning Star enjoys "doing music that makes people feel good. For some people it is meditation, you know? It's therapy to listen to some music that they can really feel, because we live in a time of nuclear arms, starvation, and war. . . for that moment if they transcend beyond this world, it shows them that there is good in this world."

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She lunched with Walt Disney who asked her to help illustrate his next project, "Alice in Wonderland." She studied yoga under Indra Devi whose students included Hollywood's elite such as Gloria Swanson. Helen Walter's move to Los Angeles from her native New York in the 1940's exemplifies the benefits of being a free spirit.

"It was a statement," declares Gerson, an alert and sweet octogenarian with freshly applied pink lipstick. The lipstick applicator is brought out frequently and she is decked out in a beige, butterfly-collared blouse, brown corduroy sweater vest and tan pants. The outfit, like the sculpture itself, is from the decade it was created. "I felt it needed to be done. Play equipment was just metal at that time. Because of the rounded edges (on the sculpture,) kids felt it was soft and fun... I know I made so many happy. And it's made their parents happy to see their kids happy."

Today, despite any bad incidents, the sculpture is quarantined, neither able to be touched nor experienced. It was red flagged because it failed to meet current public safety guidelines.

Chuck Holbrook, Safety Engineer for the Department of Recreation and Parks, said, "This sculpture is a wonderful piece. It's served the community well. And now we look at it as a liability. Unfortunately, we are in such a litigious age right now and the City of Los Angeles (faces) so many law suits."

Holbrook believes the piece can be modified, but points to empty coffers. The key issue for the modifications is funding. Gerson, committed and charitable to the end, has offered to match the funds needed.

"She is one of the sweetest ladies I've ever met," Holbrook said of Gerson, assuring that as much as anyone, he would like to see the piece reinstated as a piece of play equipment, but that his "hands are tied with state requirements at this time."

An art student whose main discipline was drawing, Disney asked Walter to work on the studio's animated take on Lewis Carroll's classic. But she soon abandoned commercial art and continued freelancing. Whether in the form of drawing, sculpting or dancing, she has always been captivated by movement. Stillness is not her forte.

It was while fossil hunting that she met Grant Gerson. They were married to for 25 years and had one son and two grandsons. The two of them purchased 18 acres of land in remote Malibu, which has since been developed into the 120-acre Calamigos Ranch. Her home is replete with fossils and folk art from around the world including Aztec relics, Russian icons and Chinese antique rice chests.

The Gersons created a Western camp for children that taught the junior cowboys and cowgirls not only ranching, but complete well being including art, grooming and etiquette.

In 1977, Mrs. G, the name kids and Calamigos staffers call her, created "Touch and Experience." It was installed in Westwood Park, which the Department of Recreation and Parks opened a year earlier.

Also in 1977, Free Arts for Abused Children (FAAC) was created. FAAC is a nonprofit that utilizes art to heal abused and neglected children. Gerson actively lends her talents to the agency to this day. She is a stellar fundraiser, and donates the use of the Ranch for events for the disabled including Foundation for the Junior Blind.

Most of Gerson's valuables perished in a fire that blazed through Calamigos Ranch in 1979. She salvaged one of her most prized possessions—the scrapbook containing notes and drawings she has received, mostly from kids and city officials, over the years. The gist was that the opus celebrated youth and tapped into their sense of exploration and discovery.

In a letter to Gerson from Dr. Fay Van Der Kar-Levinson, a psychologist and child development expert, dated December 29, 1977, Dr. Levinson wrote, "The uniqueness of this sculpture is that...each of us can explore this artwork in our own way. I have observed that children who explore the sculpture experience a sense of mastery and control over their environment. These feelings...may be a great aid in helping children respond effectively to life's threats and stresses."

Reached by phone, Dr. Levinson reaffirms that the sculpture improves children's discovery, self-esteem, and sensory exploration, including the benefit and perils of risk. "Children, (especially those with disabilities,) could enjoy it in a real kinesthetic sense."

Perhaps another letter to the sculpture's creator put it better. "It makes me want to go there and think about everything," wrote 11-year-old Lizzie Bernstein in an undated note, "because I just can't be sad or scared or mad there. It's a place to go alone or with God."

The clinical assessment of the artwork reconfirms what Mrs. G aims to achieve through her art, and her charity, in her own aesthetic terms. "She's a quintessential woman," says Gwen Kirk of her longtime friend Gerson. "She's an artist, a benefactor, an entrepreneur and maternal." Gwen and her husband Lew met Mrs. G through FAAC and have been fundraising with her ever since. "It's not that she gives thousands and thousands of dollars," adds Lew, "but she gives her time. To give your time and your efforts is probably the most valuable thing."

Westwood Park's first director, Robert Tanowitz, penned Gerson to extol the creation. "A wonderful aspect about the sculpture is all children can use it...They all can feel, touch, and explore with all the senses they have."

Gwen reiterated this fact, stating, "Every time we've gone out there to see it, it's just covered with children."

No one can dispute the need for safety regulations. But unlike manufactured climbing apparatus, Mrs. G's sculpture was created by her own hands and ingenuity, intended to invoke the same sense of imagination in kids. That is something that cannot be legislated. It could not foresee a future where "Risk Managers" assess its usability.

Unlike infamous lawn darts, the installed sculpture provided 27 years of wholesome recreation without a single reported incident. Are kids today are less resilient than they were one, two, or three decades ago? Or are parents and guardians more sue-happy today? I suspect the impetus for increased regulation is an afterthought to lack of proper supervision by overly litigious parents in most cases. City officials surreptitiously nodded in consent, but overtly must take the taxpayers' interests into account, especially when checkbooks have been desiccated by the economy.

The Department of Recreation and Parks purchased the piece from Mrs. G for merely the cost of materials, \$165,000 in 1977. "I don't want to bring it back here," she said, referring to her al fresco studio. "It belongs in the park." Gerson shelled out the expense to have the sculpture bronzed so "Touch and Experience" will be preserved indefinitely in part by the Smithsonian. Save Outdoor Sculpture! (SOS!) is a joint project of Heritage Preservation and Smithsonian's National Museum of American Art. If the sculpture is allowed to remain in Westwood Park, Mrs. G's creation and desire for kids' freedom of movement on the exciting, functional sculpture will live on for generations to come.

# Upcoming Events at the Studio

September 23: Story Symposium for Work in Southern California History at the National Center for the Preservation of Democracy at 111 N. First Street in Little Tokyo.

October 12: First Screening at the Studio for Southern California History. As part of the current Work exhibit, the Studio will be screening *El Norte*. The film will begin promptly at 7:30.

November 4: Hillary Jenks leads a tour of Little Tokyo as part of the Work exhibit. This 90 minute tour will begin in front of the National Center for the Preservation of Democracy (address above) at 10:00 a.m.

November 9: Screening at the Studio of *Real Women Have Curves*. The film will begin promptly at 7:30 p.m. Admission is free but reservations are suggested.

November 18: Walking Tour of Evergreen Cemetery led by Joe Walker and Steven Goldstein. This 90 minute tour will begin in front of the Cemetery

December 1: Due date for entries for 90012: *My Neighborhood and Los Angeles Women: A Record of Experience*.

December 14: Screening at the Studio. TBA

December 22, 2006: *Work in Southern California: A Record of Experience* ends.

All dates are for 2006 events. Studio events are free but reservations are required. To RSVP for an event, send an e-mail to [rsvp@socalstudio.org](mailto:rsvp@socalstudio.org) and note which event and how many people who will be attending. You may also call 213-229-8890 to reserve space.

The Studio for Southern California History is located at 525 Alpine Street, Suite 103.

Hours: Tuesday - Saturday, 12 - 6 p.m.

Metro: Gold Line Chinatown Stop, 2 blocks

We are directly across from the Hop Li restaurant in between Friends Electronics and an employment agency in the first block. Metered street parking and an inexpensive lot at Hill and Alpine for \$3-3.50.



## Call to All Southern California Middle School and High School Students

### Photography & Essay Competition for Los Angeles Women: A Record of Experience

The Studio for Southern California History is now accepting entries from middle school and high school students in the Southern California region responding to the theme of **Los Angeles Women: A Record of Experience**. Themes to explore include: labor, family, education, career, activism, social justice, community, mass media, friendship. LA Women seeks to explore the perception of women in the context of real-world experiences, revealing a diverse population set apart from traditional stereotypes.

Each student entry must include a photograph taken in Southern California that corresponds to the Los Angeles Women theme, along with 500 - 1,000 word essay that interprets the image. Seven (7) first prize awards of one \$250 United States Savings Bond. The deadline for submissions is December 1, 2006. Each submission should include the following information:

- Photographer's Name
- School Currently Attending
- Home Address (Number Street, Apt #)
- City, State, Zip code
- Home Phone Number
- E-mail address
- 500-1,000 Word Essay
- Photograph with title, location and date

Each submission must contain an original, analytical or interpretive photographic image that has not been formally published elsewhere. Photographs should be a minimum size of 5" x 7"; film transparencies must be in 35mm format (no glass); digital images must be no less than 300 dpi. If submitting by mail, digital entries should be sent on a CD-Rom. Group and/or joint-projects cannot be accepted. One entry per person. All entries will be judged anonymously and will become property of the Studio for Southern California History and will be included in the Studio for Southern California History's programming and digital archive. Winning submissions will be highlighted at the Studio's bi-annual Story Symposium, a conference and forum highlighting our current programming. Your submission must be postmarked, or your email dated, on or before the contest deadline December 1, 2006. Submit entries electronically to: [photocontest@socalstudio.org](mailto:photocontest@socalstudio.org). Entries may be mailed to:

- Los Angeles Women Photo/Essay Competition
- The Studio for Southern California History
- P.O. Box 86651
- Los Angeles, CA 90086



[www.socalstudio.org](http://www.socalstudio.org)

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