

Community Art Centers in Los Angeles

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It's easy to find the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Just head for West Hollywood and look for signs that point the way. When you see flags flying over huge sculpture gardens and fountains, you know you're there. A few blocks away, you can't miss the galleries that dot the cityscape on La Cienega Boulevard. You'll see the "best" art, the masterpieces, art that sets or maintains the pace of the international art market. But is this really the heartbeat of art in Los Angeles?

Though our experiences at the Woman's Building, we knew of another art world in Los Angeles, tucked away in distant corners of the city, housed in abandoned county jails and old temples. In community art centers, the artists work together, sharing skills, showing their work to the neighborhood community, teaching art to young and old alike. These centers pulse to the beat of the people, providing access to art that is relevant to community life, reaching thousands of people who don't frequent the museum and gallery circuit. They challenge existing values and offer creative alternatives to the oftentimes impersonal and isolated milieu of the "high art scene."

So, on a bright Monday morning, we packed into the car, checked out Thomas Brothers map for Brooklyn Avenue in East Los Angeles, and headed for **Self Help Graphics and Art, Inc.** Founded in 1972 by a visionary nun, Sister Karen Boccelaro, it brought art and cultural awareness to some 59,000 young people and adults in East Los Angeles.

Linda Vallejo, an energetic young artist who runs the Zapotlan Silkscreen Studio and works as an instructor and "rover" at Self Help Graphics, gave us a tour of the large building, packed to overflowing with materials, art work and equipment. The work, combining ancient and contemporary images, was colorful and exuberant. A monumental statue of the Virgin Mary hovered over a sea of posters, masks and sculptures from the yearly El Dia de Los Muertos (Day of the Dead) Festival, and ancient indigenous ceremony that welcomes the spirits back for a day-long celebration of life. We passed large photo panels full of pictures of community people: the grocer down the street, somebody's cousin, and instructor's family.

Linda explained that classes and workshops are grounded in research on the symbols, ceremonies and legends of different cultures. Originally, Self Help Graphics focused on the rich heritage of the Hispanic peoples. While this is still a major focus, they are expanding to include instruction about many cultures. Through the public schools' Multi-Cultural Program, the instructors teach art skills with a focus on cultural themes. As they compare cultures, they help to bridge the gaps between children of different ethnic backgrounds.

The backbone of the Self Help Graphics outreach program is the Barrio Mobile Art Studio. Fully equipped with printing and darkroom facilities, this custom-designed van travels to parks, schools and centers, teaching art skills to the community.

Self Help Graphics plans to open a commercial print shop and extend their outreach through expansion of the Barrio Mobile Art Studio. They welcome inquiries from people interested in volunteer work or apprentices with artists, and are currently accepting applications for another staff instructor.