

## HOME &amp; FAMILY

PETER MAIN - STAFF

# These walls have a voice

Lower East Side artists use the sides of old buildings to express beauty, sound warnings, celebrate friendship

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On New York City's Lower East Side, a mountain lion smiles at passersby . . .

. . . a landlord shoves his arms - all eight of them - out of the windows of his limo . . .

. . . and Columbus's tall ships cross a Caribbean-blue sea - heading for booty.

These murals pull at the eye - and sometimes the conscience. And they're very much part of the dizzying landscape of the neighborhood called Loisaída by its residents. That's "low-eess-side-a" - "Spanglish" for "Lower East Side." Loisaída is a place where it's hard to find a blank wall.

In a neighborhood torn by gentrification, as well as poverty and drugs, the walls, mainly of abandoned buildings, have become a way for its young artists to speak out and create something they consider beautiful. Their intention may be to memorialize a friend, show concern about an issue, give a warning - or just celebrate something as simple as a name, or love of a color like cherry-red or neon-green.

And where these murals have gone up, other changes have occurred. On rubble-filled lots neighbors have planted gardens with names like Jardín Eden and Jardín Bello. The lots quickly fill up with sunflowers and corn, religious statues and old office chairs, birdhouses and barbecues. And sometimes drug dealers move away.

"People protect the murals on their blocks," explains Dave Bennett, a carpenter who lives on East Sixth Street. "Once I was just leaning

against their windows, [and someone shouted,] 'Hey, get away from that wall!'"

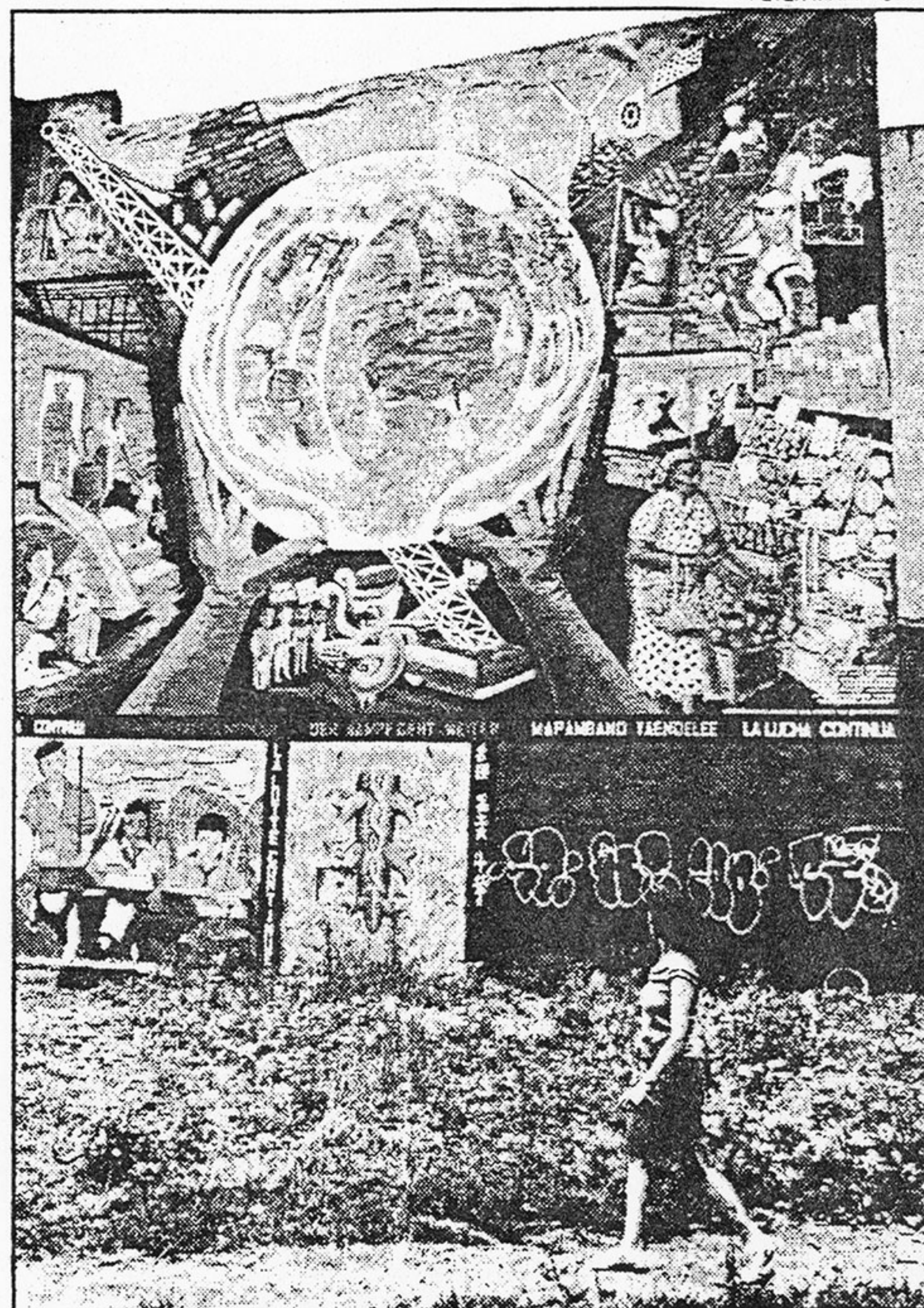
"There's almost no graffiti on the murals," says Kristen Reed, a young painter, who has collaborated on several murals in the area. "That shows respect. Once I heard there'd been a little graffiti on a mural I did of 11 neighborhood kids. But by the time I got there, it had already been cleaned up."

Local merchants, ranging from plumbing supply dealers to supermarket owners, have encouraged talented kids by commissioning them to paint murals on their stores. Payment is generally made in cans of spray paint, but it's a way for their work to be seen - and perhaps for them to get other jobs.

That's how Chico, the 23-year-old rising star of the neighborhood, got his first break. He and his partner, Score, painted a whimsical subway car filled with wild animals on the side of J. B. J. Pet Shop, on the corner of Eldridge Street and Houston. That job led to other opportunities, both artistic and educational.

Artmakers, which is devoted to promoting public art, and Charas, which sponsors numerous community arts programs, including Adopt-A-Building, are responsible for much of the large-scale muralmaking. The two organizations teamed up to sponsor the community's most ambitious painting project: a series of 24 murals, painted by 30 artists, called "The Struggle Continues."

"We put out a call for artists, and a jury of local people selected them," says Eva Cockcroft, Please see WALLS next page



A section of 'The Struggle Continues,' a four-block-long series of 24 murals combining the work of 30 neighborhood artists

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who conceived the idea for the project and also coordinated it.

"We decided on three themes: gentrification on the Lower East Side, apartheid, and self-determination for Central America. There was some fighting over the political content - but also tremendous support."

The four-story-high keynote piece, on Avenue C, features an octopus-armed landlord, an evicted Asian family huddling under an umbrella, and children dancing in a crystal ball - all in the colors of tropical fruit. And the rest of the murals wind out from it in a riot of styles and

color, wrapping almost four blocks.

"See? Second from left? That's my friend, Junior," Manuel Rodriguez says proudly as he points to the most popular mural of the project. Painted by Kristen Reed and Robin Michels, "The Final Judgment" shows Loisaída residents Junior, Ralph, Victor, Carmen, and Esperanza sitting on a jury alongside well-known figures like South Africa's Nelson and Winnie Mandela.

"The Struggle Continues" took months of fund raising and preparation, dozens of volunteers - and enormous cooperation. In contrast are the young artists who work pretty much spontaneously, only needing the cover of night, a wall, and some cans of spray paint.

Like Chico. At 15, he would head for the subway yards at midnight with his friends, where he'd paint his name big enough to cover a whole car. But after

**'I like to perform for the kids, to amuse them . . . and to show them there's another way.'**

- Chico, muralist

getting in trouble with a policeman, who gave him a break, he and his friends decided to call it quits.

Lee, a street artist whose work Chico admired, encouraged him "to try something more like art" on walls and showed him how to get different effects.

And now Chico's commercial work springs out from the sides of pizza joints and truck dealerships - and his more personal work from the walls of abandoned buildings.

"Think Twice, Crack Kills," announces an ominous mural of his on Avenue B. Next to it, in a lighter vein, he's painted a leprechaun-like figure clutching paintbrushes and the words "If Graffiti Is A Crime, Let God Forgive Us."

It's not only Loisaída residents who

have taken notice. William Reynolds, an art professor at the Fashion Institute of Technology, got Chico into a program called Taste of College, in which Chico received his high school diploma. Professor Reynolds then offered him a college scholarship.

La Mama Gallery has exhibited his paintings. And the manager of the housing project where Chico lives with his mother - though initially angered by his "tagging up housing property" in protest of plumbing inadequacies - gave him a workshop and a full-time job.

Though Chico still prefers walls at night "for the privacy," he sometimes works during the day. "I like to perform for the kids," he says, "to amuse them . . . and to show them there's another way."

Some of them have already found it. At Charas, which sponsors a muralmaking class, children six years old to 15 are busy working on a mural of their own.

Their teacher, painter Maria Dominguez, says, "I asked the kids, 'What do you like best about the countries your parents are from? And what do you like best about it here?'"

In their mural, they answered her: E.T. flying on a fish above palm trees, pools of water, and their own words sprawling across the sky.