



Up Close and Personal
with *Angeleno* Artist

ALFREDO DE BATUC

BY DENISE LUGO

PHOTOGRAPHY BY NIKKI TORRES

Internationally recognized *Angeleno* artist Alfredo de Batuc was born in Sonora, Mexico. During his youth in Mexico, de Batuc attended the Roman Catholic Seminary for three years. The artist states that "After three years of intense application and near daily revelations, my cup ran over with matters divine, and I returned to the company of sinners." There is no art tradition in his family, yet as a young child, his family "discovered" and acknowledged his artistic abilities. His Fine Arts training was accorded at the Academia de Artes Plásticas where de Batuc was soon participating in art exhibits, doing illustrations for a poetry journal, organizing a cinema club and among various other activities, acting on stage. "While searching for a larger stage, I left for Mexico City at the age of 25," he continues. "But in a roundabout route ended up in Los Angeles, California, where I finally settled."

Culturally, the artist identifies himself as a Mexican, yet since he has lived most of his life in Los Angeles, he has been acculturated into the American way of life, never forgetting his strong Mexican legacy, which is at the roots of his art. He is quick to point out that he is not a "Chicano" artist because he did not grow up nor live within the "Chicanismo" pluralistic cultural life style. Rather, de Batuc identifies with "Lo Mexicano," incorporating it with his L.A. art style. Nevertheless, on the artistic level, he is more interested in the public recognizing him as an Angeleno who paints from his heart—A heart that has endured much more than just adhering an artist status in a city that until recently appreciated only "Anglo" mainstream artists.

For almost a decade now, de Batuc has lived in the historical area of downtown L.A., in the same building which earlier housed the studios of Chicano artists John Valadez and J. Michael Walker. He looks out of his window and in one direction views the City Hall—made famous in the Superman films of yesteryear—and in another direction, down Broadway to the Million Dollar theater, which now serves as a church to the crowds of new generations of *Latino Angelenos*. It is in this studio that artist de Batuc paints the laughter, tears and everyday cries of the city. Looking out of the window at night at what was a daytime noisy, thriving landscape of downtown L.A. is like stepping outside to see and sense the urban silence of the evening as it becomes a ghost-town.

Like the early *Angelenos*, de Batuc continues to create and give breath to the cultural life of Los Angeles, contributing to American art a unique sense of "Western" art rooted and encapsulated within the "Hispanic" Spanish, Mexican and Chicano cultural sensibility. It is the woven artistic dream of his Mexican legacy and contemporary American art that formulates a newfound appreciation of Los Angeles art. Moreover, it is important to note that de Batuc's work is part of the bigger L.A. art scene.

In the 1960s, when American art historians took a serious look at art being created by *Angelenos*, the attention was centered only on Anglo mainstream artists, the Ferus Gallery and the L.A. funk art scene. Now, current interest in Los Angeles art is finally causing an unavoidable awareness that *Latino* and *Chicano/a* artists must be considered as part of the Los Angeles and California cultural production within the United States.

Furthermore, de Batuc's art symbolizes the American cultural experience that bridges and reiterates California's early Mexican foundations and documents his personal on-going art contributions of "Latinismo" (American artists of *Latino* cultural background who live in the United States). The artist notes, "I illustrated a series of children's books about the California missions. For two years I did penance, like a captive in a 'Felliniesque' art factory that manufactured paintings."

In 1976, de Batuc started to work at the Self-Help art studio artist's collaborative, creating flyers and prints. As the artist notes, this early work did not deal with his "personal demons" of low self-esteem, which he attributes to his many years at the Seminary as a young teenager in Mexico. These personal demons showed up within his personality in the form of deep depression along with sins of self-destruction. As his

worked progressed, he dealt with them through his work, often in "Goyaesque" like visits with his own "demons within."

In the late '70s, de Batuc's work took an important turn. His "Women at Night" painting series reflected the innate Western magic and myth, the psychical energy associated with the earth and incongruous landscapes usually associated with the cosmic and universal metaphysical elements, all within the roots of the American Southwestern art. Like the magical teachings of Carlos Castañeda's Don Juan, his paintings looked within the ancient Mexican transcended energy that glowed from within his painted canvases. The painted women in the canvases of this period seemed connected to the earth which possessed this native power, a connection also reflected in his contemporary thematic work of various recycled variants of his "Olmec" work.

In de Batuc's own variant of the "Olmec Head"—the historical prototype sculpted heads found in Southern Mexico, often weighing up to 25 tons, representing warriors and/or rulers—the artist paints with explosive bright colored brushes. This is his own take on the Olmec giant warrior in his personal vision of the magical symbol of the sun.



Since 1992, one of the most important and recurrent symbolic and thematic elements in his contemporary work is the image of a fish. The artist prefers that the public create its own association instead of seeing his (the artists') fixed rational.

The association with fish in de Batuc's paintings is that they are never single; they are social beings usually traveling in groups. Further, there is not a fixed type of fish. Importantly, the artist places one fish usually at some perspective level alongside of the Los Angeles City Hall. At times, these surreal elements are multiple reflections of community, regional and national pride. Is the artist commenting on the importance of Los Angeles as a "high-brow/fine artist center" that counters New York as the hub of art-making within the United States?

As the sun sets within Broadway and the Million Dollar theater in downtown Los Angeles, Alfredo de Batuc takes his script, puts it under his arm and walks into his studio eagerly awaiting tomorrow. It's just another day in which he will take us to one more of his "Felliniesque" dreams on canvas. ☺