



UCLA Law School's Riseborough Mural:

ITS LIFE, DEATH AND REBIRTH AS A COFFEE MUG

BY SCOTT HAMILTON DEWEY*

ON SEPTEMBER 23, 1969, a fifty-foot-long, nine-foot-high mural — then the largest at UCLA — was unveiled on what had been the large, blank western wall of the Main Reading Room on the ground floor of the UCLA Law Library. The artist, Canadian-born, Los Angeles-based muralist Douglas Riseborough, said he liked to “work big” and paint large, dramatic murals. His work included a 125-foot-long portrayal of modern civilization’s impact upon the indigenous peoples of Amazonia for the 1964 World’s Fair in New York City, a four-story mural in Honolulu, and a mural for San Francisco’s Hilton Hotel. As the *Docket*, the law school’s student newspaper, reported, in the mural’s three panels, “Riseborough attempts to depict the tensions, anguish, and contradictory messages both of the established order and of those demanding change.”¹

The mural began as a dinner party joke. Long-time and much-loved UCLA law professor Jesse “Duke” Dukeminier, who in addition to teaching and writing casebooks on real property law, also had a substantial art collection and a longstanding mission of getting more art onto the law school’s walls, first met Riseborough at a party and commented, “We have a wall that is just crying for a Riseborough mural. But, of course, we can’t afford you.” Riseborough replied, “I’ll do it. It will be my gift to UCLA.”²

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The mural’s three panels each offered the artist’s vision of a burning social issue of the day. According to Dukeminier, the leftmost panel, “The Journey,” depicted the Civil Rights movement and “the Black man breaking out of the heritage of slavery to demand equality.” The rightmost panel, “The Ceremony,” concerned “violence in contemporary society and the rebellion of the young” — apparently inspired particularly by student radicalism and the Vietnam War protests on college campuses nationwide that reached a crescendo during 1969. “Regeneration,” the central and most visually dominant panel, “includes symbols of modern technology and departing cultures in addition to three large figures who bring a unifying force to the mural.” Dukeminier explained, “Through them Riseborough reaffirms the need of each generation to reevaluate the past and bring to its times justice through law.”³

Also reflecting some of the heightened environmental awareness of the day, particularly in Los Angeles with its trademark atmospheric problems, Riseborough painted the mural on linen canvas with acrylic paint, “which is believed to be able to resist smog,” so that the mural “is expected to last for centuries.” Riseborough noted that he hoped to “convey something of the condition of our society,” adding that “when you’re a flea on an elephant’s back it is difficult to be objective about the elephant.” So after talking with many law students about their concerns regarding law and life in general, he withdrew to the forests of British Columbia for four months to reflect on the project and try to approach it objectively: “I wanted to be that flea jumping off the back of the elephant. Love and peace to you all.”⁴

From its unveiling onward, the bold, dramatic mural always remained both impactful (not always in a posi-



Photo of the Riseborough Mural.

FROM THE UCLA SCHOOL OF LAW PHOTO ARCHIVES

tive way) and controversial. The *Docket* reported, “The applause greeting the mural’s unveiling on September 23, 1969, seemed to indicate that the students were pleased. One student exulted, ‘It’s big, it’s beautiful, and it’s dealing with contemporary issues that affect our daily lives. More than that, it’s ours.’” Another law student declared, reflecting pride along with perhaps more than a little of the smug self-importance and self-righteousness that sometimes accompanied late-1960s student radicalism, “That’s it — that’s the whole damn story People will get more out of our mural, than say from the murals of the Sistine Chapel, because up there is our heritage, our sweat, our blood, and the struggles that still confound our daily lives.”⁵

Not all observers were so kind. The mural’s unveiling was a significant enough local art-world event to draw the attention of long-time *Los Angeles Times* art critic William Wilson, who commented at length:

Artistically the work is a gravy-brown stew of past styles. The figures, drawn with extreme competence, closely resemble works by Luca Signorelli, Michelangelo, and the Mexican muralists Orozco and Siqueiros. Their symbolic postures are stiff, stagy. Part of the time they look like amateurs playing the nude scene from “Hair,” part of the time like the ponderous, self-consciously noble heroes of Ayn Rand, and just as fictional. Composition is almost psychedelic in complexity. Parts keep popping off the surface. The total picture fails in visual coherence, tempo or conclusion. That, however, doesn’t seem to be the point. If this mural has a style at all it might be labeled Heroic Adolescent Idealism style. It is [a] kind of urban folk manner that can also be seen, varied, in the so-called psychedelic poster, in a large mural on Sunset Blvd’s Aquarius Theatre and youth-exploitive clubs and boutiques. Riseborough’s mural does what adolescents often do. It speculates fuzzily about the future while holding firmly to a safe, conservative past.⁶

Wilson added wryly, “Usually the style stops when the adolescent goes away to college. I hope Riseborough’s picture inspires young lawyers to practical action while we wait for its handsome Apollo to stride into the city and dispel poverty, smog, violence, and bad traffic with a flex of his divine biceps.”⁷

The big, bold Riseborough mural dominated the UCLA Law Library for almost three decades after its installation. As the *Docket* reported in 1985, “Anyone entering the UCLA Law Library for the first time simply can’t ignore it. The 9’ x 50’ mural has inspired, assaulted, enlightened or stupified [sic] observers since its unveiling in 1969.” The article concluded, maybe slightly apologetically, “Perhaps the mural is dated. Still, its reflection of the past does not prevent present and future observers from learning from it and reacting to it, at least as long as the smog-resistant acrylic endures.”⁸

Indeed, it may well have been inevitable that a big, bold mural, created and installed in 1969 at the very height of the student rebellion and counterculture and reflecting the sentiments and passions typical of those times, would come to be seen as dated, even comically or uncomfortably dated, as both the nation and the American legal profession veered sharply away from the radicalism of 1969 and back toward conservatism from the late 1970s through the 1980s, a tectonic political shift symbolized by the election of arch-conservative former California governor Ronald Reagan as president in 1980. At any rate, the chorus of criticism and complaint regarding the mural, which started with art critic Wilson’s gentle mocking of the grandiose, adolescent hippie-dippy-ishness of the mural and its underlying concept, swelled during the 1980s and 1990s while the mural’s defenders seem to have dwindled in number.

The growing drumbeat of hostility toward the Riseborough mural surfaced in 1990 only semi-humorously in a *Docket* editorial column by two law students. The

column appeared as part of a regular feature called “Right Angle,” reflecting conservative students’ views and issues. Entitled, “Dean Prager, Tear Down This Wall!,” the column invoked President Reagan’s famous challenge to Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev regarding the Berlin Wall in the 1980s:

The subject of this column should be patently obvious to anyone who has ever set foot in the law library. We speak of the large, dark, brooding monstrosity which dominates the main reading room, fostering fear and loathing in the breasts of those who are forced to look upon it. Instead of the quiet, studious atmosphere which ought to be associated with the library at an institution of higher learning, our reading room makes an all-out frontal assault on the sensibilities of everyone who dares to enter. Those expecting to see the faces of past deans hardened in oil for the edification of future generations instead are catapulted into the gaping maw of late-60s hippie radicalism at its most gruesome level. The deans are there, indeed, but they hang on a facing wall of the room. The[y] look rather subdued, and perhaps embarrassed by the sight they face day after day.

Of course, we are talking about the mural which covers the wall over the “aviation law library” on the west side of the main reading room. If they had to put a mural in the library, they couldn’t have found a better spot. However, something about this one is disturbing. Obscure artwork from which one has to try to divine some meaning is nothing new, but perhaps personal artistic statements are best left to the community at large rather than a taxpayer-funded university. To say that the subject matter of this work is dated is to state the obvious. Of course, artistic philistines such as the authors are probably missing something that is perfectly clear to the tortured artistes among the law school community, but really, do already harried students have to be subjected to this kind of moody, self-righteous pseudo-political “statement?” People reading this article, for example, can put it away. Short of avoiding the library and committing academic hara-kiri or wearing blinders, there is no way to hide from the presence of that thing in the library.

Of course, criticism which does not propose viable alternatives is only so much hot air. So We could offer the wall to the “power painter” people as an advertisement. They could film a before-and-after commercial in the library, in exchange for a small fee which could be used

to offset the current computer costs extorted by the library. If the school of archaeology has a museum, they might want to cart the thing off and store it somewhere. Our progeny would thus be spared the cost of having to dig it up, and “the message” would be unsullied by all that dirt, and be that much clearer to eager students to come. Lastly — and who says we lack the courage of our convictions — we, Dan Young and Murray Robertson, do hereby offer to the UCLA School of Law our time and effort to paint over the mural, in consideration for not ever having to look at it again. If the school will buy the paint, we’ll give up a Saturday and put the west wall of the main reading room out of its misery.⁹

Although it is difficult to tell precisely what proportion of the law school student body may have agreed with these two witty, sassy young conservatives, there is no doubt that “the thing in the library” gradually came to be seen by much of the law school community as something of an embarrassment, and more serious discussion of its ultimate fate — removal — began to surface. For instance, in 1993, at a Student Bar Association Town Hall meeting mostly concerned with budget problems, student fee hikes, and loan forgiveness, the subject of the planned “new” law library came up, as did the banishment of the specter of the “old” library. The *Docket* reported, “As for the library’s mural, Professor Dukeminier, who was involved in the original selection of the artist, has stated that the law school is free to remove it. It will be offered back to the artist in accordance with California law.”¹⁰

Whether or not the mural ever was indeed offered back to Douglas Riseborough, it remained, and remains, in the possession of the UCLA School of Law. The mural’s brief epitaph appeared in the October 1998 edition of the *Docket*, amidst gleeful celebration of the opening of the “Darling New Library.” Toward the end of a largely humorous student column offering some serious and other non-serious statistics regarding the new library and the improvements it represented over the old, the author noted, “Number of panels of the controversial old mural removed from the Reading Room and placed into basement storage, to be ‘rediscovered by another generation’: Three[.] Approximate percentage of UCLAW students who voted for removal of the mural from the library: 65%.”¹¹

Thus, the Riseborough mural, with its acrylic paint intended to last through centuries of display, met a fate more like that envisioned by the conservative columnists in 1990: a removal to basement storage somewhat analogous to their proposal for removal to an archaeological museum, and a type of cultural whitewashing conceptually similar to the physical painting-over

they recommended. A (counter-)cultural product from 1969, expressing socially critical and even perhaps at least quasi-revolutionary sentiments, found itself increasingly unwelcome in the neoliberal law school. Like the musical *Hair* to which it was (somewhat invidiously) compared, the Riseborough mural fairly quickly became unfashionably dated. Like Yale law professor Charles A. Reich's (in)famous book, *The Greening of America*, which extolled the radicalism of the late 1960s and early 1970s and envisioned a future built on that foundation, and which was thus very much out of step with the new conservatism of the 1980s, Riseborough's mural also came to be seen as a wrong turn to be hidden away. The mural may have fit the décor and color scheme of a late-1960s, early-1970s America, but it was increasingly out of place in a post-Reagan America.¹²

Yet as with so much other rightly or wrongly discarded cultural baggage, it also remains to be rediscovered and, perhaps, reconsidered.¹³

AFTERWORD: COMMODIFICATION AND COMEDY-FICATION OF THE RISEBOROUGH MURAL

In March 2008, the "Law Library's Riseborough Mural Mug" was offered at auction for \$40 as part of the annual fund-raiser for PILF (UCLAW's Public Interest Law Foundation). The item description read,

Perhaps you love it, perhaps you dread it . . . but you'll never forget it. If you remember the library mural that haunted and inspired your studying at UCLAW, you'll regret passing up this treasured item. If you don't remember the mural refresh your memory [here there apparently was a hyperlink to a photo of the mural that no longer works]. This is a limited-edition coffee mug, emblazoned with the Riseborough mural. You can't find this limited-edition piece of law school history anywhere else.¹⁴



How many Riseborough Mural Mugs were made, and what they sold for at auction, remains unknown. ★

ENDNOTES

1. "Mural Reflects World Tension," *Docket*, Sept. 24, 1969, 2. Alec Nedelman, "The Real Truth About the Law Library Mural," *Docket*, Feb. 20, 1979, 9; Chris Cervenak, "Library Mural: Justice in Artform?," *Docket*, Oct. 1985, 4. Old editions of the *Docket*, the student newspaper of UCLA School of Law from 1956 to 2004, are available online at https://escholarship.org/uc/uclalaw_

docket. The *Docket* reporter referred to the World's Fair in New York City in 1963, but *Wikipedia* lists the World's Fair being in New York City from 1964–65, although Riseborough may have painted the mural in 1963 in preparation for the event. See "World's Fair," *Wikipedia.org*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World%27s_fair; *Wikipedia.org*, "1964 New York World's Fair," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1964_New_York_World's_Fair. As of fairly recently, Riseborough is still living and painting murals between Los Angeles and Sonora, Mexico. See Anders Tomlinson, *Doug Riseborough*, <http://alamos-sonora-mexico.com/tag/doug-riseborough/> (dated 2013; last visited Mar. 9, 2015).

2. Nedelman, 9. Regarding Professor Dukeminier, his relationship with students, and his missionary work directed toward adorning the law school's walls with art, see, e.g., "Docket Dicta: S.F. Relations," *Docket*, Nov. 23, 1965, 2; "Duke's Art Collection May Adorn Law School," *Docket*, Feb. 24, 1969, 1; photo with caption, "In February Professor Jesse J. Dukeminier became the first professor in the law school's history to win a UCLA Distinguished Teaching Award," *Docket*, May 19, 1976, 2; "Not Just Another Boring Law Professor — The Duke," *Docket*, Apr. 10, 1980, 6-8.

3. *Ibid.*, Cervenak, 4.

4. Nedelman, 9; Cervenak, 4.

5. Nedelman, 9; Cervenak, 4.

6. Nedelman, 9 (paragraph structure in original has been collapsed in quotation), quoting from William Wilson, "Riseborough UCLA Mural Accents Youth Appeal," *L.A. Times*, Sept. 28, 1969, D6.

7. Cervenak, 4.

8. Cervenak, 4. Students are shown studying under the imposing mural in "Library Overbooked During Bar Review," *The Cross-Examiner* [a short-lived replacement for the *Docket* during the mid-1970s], Apr. 1974, 1.

9. Murray Robertson and Dan Young, "Right Angle: Dean Prager, Tear Down This Wall!," *Docket*, Sept. 1990, 5.

10. "SBA Holds Town Hall Meeting," *Docket*, Mar. 1993, 1.

11. Cara Horowitz, "Our Darling New Library: A Statistical Breakdown," *Docket*, Oct. 1998, 1.

12. Charles A. Reich, *The Greening of America*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1970. Regarding the critical reception of and conservative backlash against Reich and his book, see, e.g., Rodger D. Citron, "Charles Reich's Journey from the *Yale Law Journal* to the *New York Times* Best-Seller List: The Personal History of *The Greening of America*," 52 *N.Y. L. School L. Rev.* (2007-2008): 387-416; "The 50 Worst Books of the 20th Century," *Intercollegiate Review*, Jul. 12, 2014, <https://home.isi.org/50-worst-books-20th-century> (a conservative, anti-Marxist, anti-radical publication listed Reich's book among its least-favorites).

13. UCLA law librarians note that patrons still sometimes ask whatever became of the mural.

14. See "PILF's 'Bid the Blues Away' Auction — Law Library's Riseborough Mural Mug," <https://apps.law.ucla.edu/pilfauction/default.aspx> (last visited May 9, 2017).