The Oakland Renaissance: A Blessing for Some

By Eric K. Arnold

On February 4 this year, a long-dormant block on Oakland’s 14th Street came alive as throngs of people—newly-elected Mayor Jean Quan and City Councilmember Desley Brooks among them—flowed out the doors at the Joyce Gordon Gallery for the opening reception of “Aerosoul 2,” a Black History Month event honoring African American urban calligraphers and style writers (otherwise known as graffiti artists).

Down the street, another gallery owned by Gordon was showing blown glass art by Aziz Diagne and further down, the recently reopened Events Center was holding a live rehearsal by the youth group, Pop Lyfe.

At the same time, just over a mile away, members of Oakland’s international street dance phenomenon, Turf Feinz, were wowing astonished crowds with gravity-defying moves at the Oakland Museum. And in the Uptown district, a large crowd had gathered to view a 100x100 foot projection installation known as the Great Wall of Oakland. Just south of that, public art and music performances, gallery openings, and burlesque shows were engaging hundreds at Oakland’s monthly Art Murmur.

“That was Oakland. That was diversity,” Gordon later said, proudly. “There were young Blacks, young whites, Latinos, Asians, families with babies in strollers, seniors like myself. It was truly a gumbo. It was a good mix. And that’s what we want to see all over.”

These dynamic happenings were all part of the First Friday events, the most visible symbol of Oakland’s arts-driven cultural renaissance, which has altered perceptions of a town long associated with high crime rates.

“The energy right now in Oakland around the arts is really exciting,” says Evelyn Orantes, Cultural Arts Developer for the Oakland Museum of California (OMCA). Since its re-launch in 2010, OMCA has become the hub for Oakland’s arts resurgence—its forward-thinking, multi-faceted programming, a magnet for both local residents and out-of-towners. “We showcase the richness of our community,” Orantes says, which in turn brings “positive energy” to Oakland.

Gordon agrees. The First Friday art walk, she says, has had a positive effect on economic development overall because “after the openings, everyone’s at the restaurants, or at the clubs.”

Oakland Links Arts to Commerce

Oakland has always been home to a large number of artists and grassroots arts organizations but has historically been overshadowed by the San Francisco arts scene. With the emergence of the Art Murmur (featured in the Wall Street Journal, among other publications), Oakland has found its own niche in the national arts scene.

Arts funding in Oakland is directly linked to economic development initiatives, such as redevelopment. According to Steven Huss, the city’s Cultural Arts Manager, the $1 million that the city invests in its cultural fund, leverages between $11 and $14 million annually. Hess believes the total economic impact of arts in Oakland is significantly higher, but says his office currently only tracks “nonprofit arts and culture organizations and their audiences,” so that figure doesn’t reflect the economic impact of the city’s public art program or for-profit arts businesses.

“City funding,” Huss explains, “allows organizations to find matching monies to produce and gener-
ate a lot of private spending on the arts in the city, [which in turn generates] ancillary spending on food... parking... travel and other entertainment.”

Because of its sizeable artist community, Huss says, Oakland has a “policy of awarding 51 percent or more of contracts to Oakland artists. We usually exceed that. It’s been 60-75 percent in the last few years. I don’t know of any other city that requires so much to be spent locally.”

In addition to supporting over 100 non-profit arts organizations through its cultural fund, the city also has a public art program whose 2011 budget ear-marked over $843,000 for streetscapes and other projects aimed at improving Oakland’s image. That figure includes $64,000 for improvements to Cesar Chavez Park, located in the heavily Latino Fruitvale District; $75,000 for the West Oakland Teen Center, which serves a predominantly African American demographic; and $100,000 for a walkway at the 17th St. BART entrance—a gateway to the mostly-white Uptown business district—completing a project whose cost over two years totals $700,000.

Murmurs of Discontent Among the Excluded

The Art Murmur, which started in 2006, was part of the “10k” initiative launched by former Mayor Jerry Brown in 1998 to bring 10,000 new residents to Oakland. Although the initiative was not entirely successful (vacancy rates in some parts of the redeveloped...
Area have been as high as 40 percent) the influx of new residents, combined with a burgeoning nightlife scene anchored by the restoration of the historic Fox Theater and the edgy hipster appeal of the Art Murmur have made the Uptown district an identifiable symbol of a “new” Oakland—less “Chocolate City,” more “multi-culti” melting pot.

Despite a 25 percent dip in its African American population over the last decade, Oakland remains extremely diverse compared to other cities in the Bay Area, in California, or the United States. Seventy-four percent of Oakland is non-white, with Blacks making up the largest ethnic population (27 percent), followed by Latinos (25 percent), and Asians (16 percent), according to the most recent U.S. Census.

The Art Murmur has been a big part of Oakland’s rebranding—touted on the city’s website as part of its “Sustainable Oakland” initiative. But it has also created different Oaklands when it comes to cultural arts and economic development.

According to Elena Serrano of the East Side Arts Alliance (ESAA), the nonprofit collective that produces MXJF, the festival received just $2,000 in city funding in 2010—barely enough to pay for park rental and police. ESAA had to come up with the remaining $28,000 needed to produce the festival, which is $8,000 more than what the organization receives from Oakland’s cultural fund program for a whole year.

On the other hand, Art & Soul has an annual budget of $650,000—90 percent of which comes from “admissions, concessions, booth fees and sponsorships,” according to Samee Roberts, Oakland’s cultural arts and marketing manager. “We are operating a successful small business/enterprise within a government bureaucracy, which is quite unique and a formidable task,” she adds. The 2010 festival website lists hotels, a winery, McDonald’s, and a commuter transit program among its major sponsors.

“If the city’s response is that the Malcolm X Jazz Festival should be corporate-sponsored, corporations go where the money is,” says Serrano. “Everything cannot be based on wealth. There have to be some other priorities that drive action.”

ESAA’s priority is to “build a sense of unity and community” in the neighborhood by offering “world-class art,” supporting youth development, and inviting neighborhood vendors and nonprofits to participate in the MXJF. The highest ticket price for an ESAA event is $10; many events are offered free.

“If the cultural arts are only used as a tool to generate wealth, cities like Oakland run the risk of creating a system of haves and have-nots, which only exacerbates existing problems. Producing numbers to justify the allocation of cultural funds to redevelopment is one thing, but “how do you measure community health?” Serrano asks.

“We don’t generate a huge amount of revenue,” admits Serrano. “However, what we do [produce are] young people who have some sense of how things work in their city or in the world and have invested in their own talent in making things better, if you can measure that. That’s a good return on the city’s investment.”

Photo: Aerosoul Art Exhibit, Joyce Gordon Gallery in Oakland, California.
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a backlash among long-term residents upset by the gentrification of their neighborhoods, and ethnic artists who feel excluded.

The official Art Murmuer website map (http://www.oaklandartmurmur.org/) lists galleries from Telegraph and 48th down to Broadway and 22nd—effectively confining the Murmur’s boundaries to the North Gate/Temple and Uptown districts—neighborhoods where gentrification has been the most prominent.

Gordon, who sits on Oakland’s Cultural Arts Commission, says African American artists have rarely been featured in First Friday showings. When they do exhibit in Uptown galleries, it is on off days.

Still, Huss characterizes Uptown as “a really good success story,” and hopes that the momentum will carry over to other parts of the city. His statement speaks to a common perception in the artist community that in the last decade, much of the city’s attention around the cultural arts has focused on funneling resources to the redevelopment zones at the expense of poorer and more ethnically-diverse neighborhoods.

There is a dichotomy in “the way the city funds things in the neighborhoods, as opposed to things which are being used to create more wealth [and] tied to economic development,” says Elena Serrano, a founding member of the East Side Arts Alliance (ESAA) collective, a nonprofit arts organization based in the San Antonio neighborhood.

The reality of Oakland is that “the neighborhoods, specifically our neighborhood, deep East Oakland, West Oakland, are so far away from being hubs for economic development,” Serrano says. “We feel like our track is being completely ignored.”

Art, but No Money in the ‘hood

Oakland’s Refa One, an African American graphic designer and aerosol artist who co-curated the “Aerosoul2” exhibit, says that it has been a struggle to get city funding for art in the ‘hood. In 2010, Refa received a $20,000 commission through the Community Economic Development Agency (CEDA) to do a mural along I-880 facing the freeway. But when he approached city officials for funding to do a project of that caliber in his neighborhood, which is full of urban blight and does not have any edifying or uplifting imagery, they could not spare the resources.

“City officials say they want Oakland to change [but] they do not invest in these neighborhoods for artists to bring about that change,” says Refa.

His point is well taken. The controversial and divisive civil litigation against street gangs in North Oakland and Fruitvale pursued by the City Attorney’s office has cost upwards of $750,000 (with “mixed results,” according to Mayor Quan). But Refa claims that two murals he and other artists created for free at 14th and Campbell—a West Oakland “hotspot”—had the same intended effect: to curb drug activity and increase the perception of public safety.

“This corner was a highly-contested drug zone since the 1980s,” Refa explains. “People have been shot and murdered there. Lots of drug traffic, gambling... very disruptive to the neighborhood. There would be 40 dudes there in a dice game. I didn’t want to come home some days because I knew at that corner by my house, it was gonna be drama.”

After the murals were painted, the dope dealers told him, “We respect what y’all trying to do, we gon’ leave this block.” And they did. Proof that community-oriented cultural arts projects can effectively
support youth development and public safety efforts.

Refa’s experience is paralleled by that of graffiti artist Desi, whose nonprofit organization, Community Rejuvenation Project, has created a series of murals—both commissioned and illegal—promoting peace and nonviolence in high-crime areas throughout West and East Oakland. Desi secured permission from a building owner and CEDA funds to do a mural at 41st and International Boulevard, in the heart of the Fruitvale District, where graffiti often marks the presence of Norteno street gangs. Over the course of several months he led a team of artists, including aerosol legend Vulcan and numerous neighborhood youth, to create the approximately 4500 sq. ft mural on the side of a Smart & Final building. One key focus of the Community Rejuvenation Project, Desi says, is to further the notion of cultural arts districts and arts corridors throughout Oakland with concentrated works in a specific area, such as the Funktown Arts District they created with murals within a one-block radius of Park Boulevard.

Desi points to the closure of the Parkway Theater and its adverse effect on local business. CRP’s murals on the Parkway’s building and in surrounding areas, he claims, “bring that neighborhood back to life.”

ESAA’s Serrano warns against an overly-bureaucratic view of cultural arts that is weighted toward the economic bottom line. She would rather talk about the other bottom line—community health. “That’s where the return on investment is. That’s where our strength is,” she says. Serrano is also wary of creating a cultural divide along racial, economic, and class lines. “I don’t want the city of Oakland to act like arts and culture is some dessert that not everybody deserves,” she says. “Everybody deserves art and culture. Everybody comes from culture.”

Despite Some Discontent, Mindblowing Changes

“Gentrification is always a charge that’s leveled at any place that artists move into and improve, then get priced out of,” says Huss. “We’re very mindful of the fact that it sometimes seems like all of the focus is on Uptown/Downtown. But we’ve always been funding all corners of the city where there are any arts groups. And [we] want to start to diversify that too.”

However, Huss concedes that securing city funding for art projects is somewhat dependent on the ability of artists and arts organizations to negotiate bureaucratic procedures and protocols and work within the guidelines and inherent limitations of established programs. “There are a lot of exciting ideas which don’t always fit into what we do.” But it is evident from current and future projects being funded that diversity and outreach to underserved communities are part of the plan. The panels that parcel out arts funding “are very keen [on] things that relate to social justice,” Huss says, “we really want art to also make an impact.”

An example he points to is a cross-disciplinary food justice project conceived by activist-artist
Favianna Rodriguez, which is “all about educating the community in the Fruitvale district about healthy eating and buying locally.” Another project, conceived by artist Rennie Young, is an oral history archive at an East Oakland library, which grew out of a public art commission for a stained glass window. Huss also hopes to work with ESAA on an art park in the San Antonio district. The city is in the process of drafting a 10-year plan for cultural arts development, which will involve organizations from all over Oakland, he says.

Unfortunately, Governor Brown’s proposal to slash redevelopment funds from California’s cities—ironic, given his use of those same funds to steer millions of dollars into Uptown—threatens to kill many proposed streetscape projects in Oakland’s underserved neighborhoods and could also have a ripple effect on arts funding overall.

Also unknown at this point is whether Mayor Quan’s administration will approach the marriage of arts and economic development with emphasis on establishing cultural arts districts throughout Oakland—as per her campaign slogan, “Block by Block”—or whether a lion’s share of resources will continue to be funneled into areas with newer and wealthier residents. At present, there are some hopeful signs. The 14th street corridor is quietly transforming into a cultural arts district that could soon rival Uptown as an entertainment destination. The emergence of new nightclubs, restaurants, art spaces, and cafes on and around 14th, in close proximity to existing centers like the Malonga Casquelord Center for the Arts, has created an increased sense of vibrancy and the once-deserted streets now have foot traffic after nightfall.

D’Wayne Wiggins, a founding member of pioneering neo-soul group Tony Toni Tone and Oakland community activist, recently signed a multiyear lease for the Events Center, which he plans to rename The House of Music. Wiggins envisions a multiuse space housing a café, restaurant, dance studio, music studio, historical and cultural archive, and live performance space. Such a venue fits perfectly into the progressive notion of equally upholding both arts and economic development in Oakland to create true sustainability. “We’re gonna make that street so hot!” he says. “This change which is going on now is blowing my mind.”

To Wiggins and others, the mix of new energy with Oakland’s historical contributions to the arts represents not just a cultural renaissance, but a cultural revolution.