

Mission Gráfica

Founded by Rene Castro and Jos Sances in 1982, Mission Gráfica filled a void left by the collapse of the Mission Cultural Center's Graphics Department and the reorganization of La Raza Silkscreen Center into primarily an offset shop, which was renamed La Raza Graphics. In 1980 Sances, with years of commercial printing experience behind him and jobs at LRSC and in Concord, California, at Nelson Screen Printing (a commercial shop), he took a class funded by the CETA program and taught by Castro at the Mission Cultural Center. Castro was a Chilean exile who had been held in a concentration camp and tortured for two years by the Pinochet regime. Sances was from a Sicilian working-class family in Boston and, after deserting from the U.S. Navy during the Vietnam War, had moved to the Bay Area in 1978.

From 1980 to 1982 the two worked together on specific projects and slowly began to assemble the equipment needed to outfit a fully functioning screenprint shop. By 1983 they had formed Mission Gráfica, where together they worked fulltime as printers and teachers.

Known for vibrant color, bold text and artistic excellence, the posters produced at Gráfica were intended to serve the community. Much of the work was done for free or at a discount, and artists other than Castro and Sances were encouraged to participate in the production of their designs. The shop also turned out purely commercial work, including posters for events, exhibitions, and performances. The posters produced were always identifiable as Gráfica work.¹

Their reputation for high quality work and exceptional artistic design made them a community favorite with the myriad political and solidarity groups in San Francisco's Mission District. Their commitment to liberation struggles, ecology, the anti-nuclear movement, disarmament, and other local and grass roots community issues and organizations combined with the eclecticism of their work to make them totally unique.²

Michael Rossman called Mission Gráfica "the epitome of the social serigraphy movement itself, which has been dedicated to the most local service, yet internationalist in perspective; intensely ethnic in focus, yet inter-racial in cooperation."³ According to Rossman, by 1986 the shop was able to produce five hundred multicolor designs, at least three per week, with the aid of an automatic press they were able to purchase, "while [Gráfica's] artists developed technical mastery...and complex, distinctive styles...integrat[ing] elements from many graphic streams and reflect[ing] the rich diversity of the multi-ethnic community" they served.⁴

Castro and Sances maintained a welcoming environment for artists and activist printmakers, and many international and Bay Area artists used the facility to produce posters and fine art prints over the years. Among those who produced work and participated in the production at Gráfica in the early years are: Tirso Gonzales, Enrique Chagoya, Nancy Hom, Rupert Garcia, Ester Hernandez, Carmen Lomas Garza, and Nina Fichter (of the Dance Brigade). Artists came from Argentina, Mexico, Nicaragua, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, and Cuba, as well as European countries. Calixto Robles discovered Gráfica in 1986 and remembers it as a "place full of prints that filled several racks in the studio, with different images, some of them announcing a benefit for a social or political cause in the Mission, a poster for a Santana concert in Berkeley, or a business sign for a store in the neighborhood."⁵

Castro and Sances made posters for Bill Graham and a number of musicians he brought to the Bay Area, including U2, Rubén Blades,

Carlos Santana, and Willie Colón. Feeling that these associations were a distraction from the work he wanted to do, however, Sances left Mission Gráfica to set up a shop in Berkeley in 1988. There he



shared space with Scott Braley and the Fireworks Collective for several years.

In 1990 Calixto Robles, a Mexican printmaker originally from Oaxaca, began to volunteer at Gráfica, under Castro's direction, and in 1992 he became Castro's assistant. During this time Patricia Rodriguez, Yolanda Lopez and Ralfka Gonzalez produced a portfolio of posters. Some time later, when Mission Gráfica rented a Griffin etching press from Bolivian printmaker Flavio Ayala, etching classes were offered at the center and taught by Ayala. Alexandra Blum introduced a mono-print class in 1997 and taught it until 2006, when Russell Pachman took it over.

In December 1994, Castro left Gráfica for a one-year trip to Latin America, leaving Robles in charge from January 1995 until December 1996. The Mission Cultural Center didn't rehire Castro on his return, so, in his own words, "I stayed on, producing works and teaching, with the support of several artists, including: ArnoldoX, Sharon Shawn, and Gonzalo Hidalgo. We offered free linocut and wood carving classes to high school students, as part of the after school program."⁶

Mission Gráfica entered a tumultuous time in the mid-1990s. Juan Fuentes remembers:

In 1996 or 1997 Calixto Robles invited me, along with other artists, to a meeting in the Mission to discuss the state of Mission Gráfica. Rene Castro had taken some time off and returned to find he had been removed from his position as director of Mission Gráfica. It was a very unsettling time at the Mission Cultural Center. Internal political struggles resulted in the board of directors taking over the management of the center. They had closed Mission Gráfica, and artists from the community gathered to demand it be reopened. La Raza Graphics Center had moved into the MCC, only to disband shortly thereafter.

When Fuentes, a San Francisco-based, Chicano master printer, took over the directorship of Mission Gráfica in 1997, the production of posters had significantly decreased. Many of the political and community organizations of the 70s and 80s were gone, and many could not afford the high cost of disseminating information through posters. With the rise of the new electronic media, it was cheaper for these organizations to do the work in-house on their personal computers. In response to the decline of screenprinting and the rise of material and labor costs, Mission Gráfica transformed itself into a printmaking studio with a strong educational component. Classes were offered through Horace Mann Middle School and Drew Preparatory High School, and there was a free drop-in class for high school students. Along with these classes Gráfica also offered classes in mono-print, etching, relief and screenprinting for adults. The other significant change was the use of water-based inks for posters and classes, a more people-friendly medium and much safer for youth.

Calixto Robles worked alongside Fuentes, teaching as well as producing community posters and prints to promote the center's programming. Several screenprint portfolios were produced, including collaborations with artists and poets, and a print portfolio of nine women titled "Nueve Mujeres."

Many screenprinters and four collectives had roots at Mission Gráfica. The San Francisco Print Collective addressed

issues of housing, homelessness, and gentrification, and Talleres Populares 28 de Junio, El Caracol de la Mission, and Colectivo de Gráfica Villa-Zapata first worked at the taller. Jesús Barraza is a notable example of the kind of artist who took screenprinting classes at Gráfica and went on to found his or her own shop.

Juan Fuentes and his coworkers initiated a gallery at Mission Gráfica, "Galeria Zapatista," to showcase Mission artists and to support the struggles of the Zapatistas and the people of Oaxaca. In 2001 members of the workshop started to archive the large collection of Mission Gráfica posters and prints with the help of professional archivist Gianna Capecci. She was able to begin the process and to train Gráfica's intern Mariana Garibay. More than four thousand posters have been cataloged thus far.

Juan Fuentes organized two major exhibitions focusing on the work of Mission Gráfica. The first was for MCCLA's twenty-fifth anniversary. Drawn from the wealth of subject matter the workshop addressed over the years—issues relevant to Native Americans, Latin Americans, and the local and international community—more than seventy-five posters filled the gallery demonstrating Gráfica's vibrancy and devotion to the movement and the community. The second exhibition, in 2006, was part of the Chicano Visions exhibit at the de Young Museum. The Mission Gráfica component, "Chicano Encounters," centered on the culture within San Francisco's Mission District, addressing issues of identity and social and political struggles within a global context.

Fuentes left his position as director of Mission Gráfica in 2007. Marsha Shaw is now coordinator, and Calixto Robles, after two decades of commitment, continues to teach screenprinting classes at Mission Gráfica.

Text provided by Jos Sances, Robbin Henderson, Juan Fuentes, and Calixto Robles. Photos by Marsha Shaw, 2011.

Notes

1. Pequeño, Valerie, and Harney, Brenda. 1987. "Radical Art: Mission Gráfica," Arts and Entertainment, Mendocino Arts Center (April 1987).
2. Hayes, Andrew. 1987. "Mission Gráfica: René Castro and Jos Sances Are the Artists who Run San Francisco's Leading Silk Screen Print and Design Workshop at the Mission Cultural Center," *Third Rail 8* (1987).
3. Rossman, Michael. 1987. "Speak! You Have the Tools! Social Serigraphy in the Bay Area: 1966-1986." Gallery publication. De Saisset Museum, Santa Clara University, 1987.
4. Ibid.
5. Calixto Robles, email to Jos Sances, May 7, 2012.
6. Ibid.

