**Headline:** Artists Spark a Challenge to Gentrification in Oakland

**Teaser:** The new documentary “Alice Street” explores an iconic mural project, the high-rise that covered it up and the communities it catalyzed to action.

By April M. Short

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**[Article Body:]**

“Love, arts, music.” These three words are painted in capital letters across the top of the “Universal Language” mural in downtown Oakland, California. The people and scenes that make Oakland an iconic hub of diversity and culture appear below these words. A monarch butterfly sits on the shoulder of a Native American drummer; African dancers beam, mid-sway; martial artists hold positions; heroes of Chinese-American immigration history peer out from black-and-white photographs; change-makers hold picket signs, fists raised. The activists and artists who have shaped the city smile across the building’s walls. But no one can see any of them anymore, after developers built a luxury condominium blocking the mural from view in 2019.

The painting of the mural began in 2013, and it was originally located on the walls surrounding a parking lot at the intersection of Alice Street and 14th Street—a site where longstanding communities of color continue to face displacement and gentrification. The mural depicts the diverse stories of culture, diaspora and perseverance. When it was completed in 2016, the mural was celebrated by the communities it represents, for uniquely capturing the cultural stories of Oakland. After it was covered up, the mural became a symbol of the impacts of gentrification—and it catalyzed an anti-gentrification community coalition into action.

A new documentary film, “Alice Street,” directed by longtime Oaklander Spencer Wilkinson, tells the story of the mural, the people it represents, and the community efforts borne of its removal from public view. The 70-minute film was recently admitted into the Newport Beach Film Festival, where it is set to premiere in the second week of August (the festival was rescheduled from April to August due to the COVID-19 pandemic).

“The beauty of public art is that it’s in the public, and it becomes a way in which people gather. It also has a message that everyday people can be exposed to, whereas galleries and museums can sometimes be exclusive places,” Wilkinson says.

Wilkinson previously directed the documentary “[One Voice](https://www.onevoicedocumentary.com/#overview),” which tells the story of the Oakland Interfaith Gospel Choir. He began filming the mural artists at the project’s inception, while living on Alice Street. Wilkinson says over the five years of filming the mural project, the story grew unexpectedly. What was once meant to be a feel-good story about a unique piece of public art came to speak to the power of art amidst cultural adversity. He says the way the mural was removed from public view felt like a metaphor for the larger issues of gentrification and community displacement.

“The backdrop of the reality of living here is the gentrification that Oakland is experiencing,” Wilkinson says. He explains that the costs of renting or owning a home in Oakland have skyrocketed, especially in the last 15 years, “resulting in massive shifts in the demographics of Oakland, particularly impacting low-income people of color. … Here we are in 2020. And it’s like … you can’t even recognize downtown from what it was.”

Oakland was [named](https://www.eastbayexpress.com/CultureSpyBlog/archives/2014/12/17/oakland-named-the-most-diverse-city-in-america) the most diverse city in America in 2014, and is now in [second place](https://www.usnews.com/news/cities/slideshows/the-10-most-racially-diverse-big-cities-in-the-the-us?slide=10) by U.S. News’ ranking and [eighth place](https://wallethub.com/edu/cities-with-the-most-and-least-ethno-racial-and-linguistic-diversity/10264/) according to WalletHub. Oakland has been at the epicenter of the nation’s [gentrification crisis](https://ibw21.org/gentrification/overview-of-the-crisis-of-gentrification-in-black-america/). The encroachment of wealthy, expensive development coming from outside is effectively [displacing](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/jun/01/from-black-panthers-to-bbq-becky-the-displacement-of-black-oakland) many of the city’s longtime residents, and [communities of color](https://patch.com/california/martinez/bay-area-gentrification-displacing-communities-color) have been hardest hit by the trend.

“Alice Street” opens with a poem recitation by Destiny Muhammad, a recording/performing artist, as she stands on the downtown Oakland intersection where the mural was painted. Following a credit sequence that shows new building projects in the works, along with overlaid graphics that spell out the rising rent and property costs throughout the city, viewers meet the two muralists responsible for “Universal Language”: Chicago-born aerosol artist Desi Mundo and Chilean studio painter Pancho Pescador.

Several scenes in the “Alice Street” documentary show how, rather than just drawing from a personal vision or images they imagined the mural’s neighbors might enjoy, Mundo and Pescador visited the people they wanted to paint. In particular, as the film shows, they held meetings with the residents of Hotel Oakland Village (a nearby senior living community, housing primarily Chinese immigrants) and asked people living there how they wanted their cultures and histories depicted. They also spoke in detail with members of the Diamano Coura West African Dance Company and other groups who rehearsed and gathered at the historic Malonga Casquelourd Center for the Arts, which sits right across the street from the mural’s location.

As shown in the film, the Malonga center’s existence was threatened with displacement in 2003 by then-governor Jerry Brown (at the time it was named the Alice Arts Center) and has more recently received noise complaints from new downtown neighbors.

Mundo says the “Universal Language” project and its aftermath had a significant personal impact on him as an artist.

“This piece is so meaningful to me in terms of how it was created and how we engaged the community, and the response that we got from it,” he says. “This type of work of deeper engagement is something that I want to carry on. I want to continue to create these very in-depth pieces for the community for as long as I can.”

Mundo founded the [Community Rejuvenation Project](https://tinyurl.com/ycjvtzul) (CRP), which is a public art and an artist advocacy nonprofit that refers to its work as a “[pavement to policy](https://tinyurl.com/ybue2r2a)” organization and supports the creation of public art by and for the local multicultural community members. CRP works for [equitable development](https://tinyurl.com/ydhhwgmb), or the mitigation of the negative impacts of development, by bringing all relevant stakeholders—including the businesses and residents most often disenfranchised by development—to the table for development policy conversations.

CRP is also a member of several artist advocacy groups in Oakland, and works to amplify art and artists operating outside of “gentrification narratives” and other “longstanding practices of inequity,” as written on its [website](https://tinyurl.com/ydhhwgmb). “CRP is in favor of multicultural solidarity, ensuring that community stakeholders have a seat at the table, and working with both private developers and city officials and staff to ensure long-term outcomes which increase baseline equity and community participation in decision-making processes,” the website continues.

Mundo says the CRP began with the simple idea of going into communities and painting in a way that allowed artists to express themselves while benefiting the community. Over time, the project grew increasingly focused on policy and community advocacy.

“We were thinking about things like, how do artists maintain their political power? Because we are change-makers, we are culture-keepers, and when we speak up on things, people listen,” Mundo says. “We can create movements around that, and we have to find ways for the artists to stay in control of their creative destiny, so to speak.”

Mundo notes that the arts can be public toolsof gentrification—for example, the corporate-backed murals painted on an upscale development called Wynwood in Miami, as detailed in an In These Times [article](https://inthesetimes.com/article/21732/street-art-murals-corporations-advertising-los-angeles-muralism-graffiti) in 2019. Or, they can be tools to combat it.

“You see this mural in Oakland and a lot of the murals in Philadelphia and elsewhere as tools of acknowledging and preserving and enriching the existing communities,” Mundo says. “Public art can be used for both ends. So, having the conversations with communities within the art community about: what are you doing here, what’s your goal, how are you representing folks, how are you making things that tell stories about the places you’re at, and is it recognizable? How we are speaking to each other about this is really important.”

He says the CRP, while working in tandem with Wilkinson, wants to use the “Alice Street” film to facilitate that dialogue and create proactive steps to combat gentrification. They’re working to develop a curriculum around the “Alice Street” film that could be used in schools and other venues.

“A lot of the gentrification conversations you have in communities are these kind of sad, reminiscent conversations like, ‘It was so cool, and then they built this coffee shop and all these people moved in, and now we had to move our scene away,’ or whatever. And there’s no conversation about the actual things that we *can* do.”

Wilkinson says one of the reasons he chose to make the “Alice Street” film was the powerful community-galvanizing impact of public art.

“The rallying force that it played in bringing people together to demonstrate and to fight against this market-rate condominium and [the] impacts it would have on the neighborhood showed the power of the art to kind of catalyze people and become something that people can rally around,” he says.

Part of the film’s story follows various movements built by artists to fight against gentrification. The film shows how a coalition of artist-led efforts and organizations joined forces to fight against gentrification. The film follows the coalition of organizations in their effort to shift citywide policy to include the voices of artists and community organizations in city conversations about development and the future of Oakland.

Wilkinson says one scene in the film that stands out to him in particular is the scene that tells the history of the Malonga Center.

“It’s a scene that’s told through archival material and the artists painting the building, telling the story of how they joined together to fight being displaced,” Wilkinson says. The scene shows how the very same artists are the ones forced again to take to the streets in the most recent fight to be part of the conversation shaping Oakland’s future.

“One of the characters in the film, Carla Service, says, ‘We didn’t march to City Hall, we danced.’ It just kind of shows the power of using cultural arts, dance, drumming, to make an impact. And ultimately they fought and won, to stay in the building. And again, using those same tools, the artists were able to fight for community benefits and, and won significant benefits.”

The film takes viewers into meetings between members of the coalition, city officials and developers. CRP member Eric Arnold explains in the film how the activists were successful in their strategy to hold developers accountable for millions of dollars in concessions for lower-income community members, including 90 affordable homes. Using a similar strategy, the same coalition members secured funds for local arts groups in 2019, through the Henry J. Kaiser Convention Center [redevelopment project](https://www.kqed.org/arts/13861121/kaiser-auditorium-redevelopment-proceeds-with-permanent-affordability-for-arts-groups).

The coalition’s negotiations with developers and the city secured funds for both the Malonga Center and a new mural to replace the “Universal Language” mural, which is set to go up on a wall of the Greenlining Institute, located in downtown Oakland, close to the original mural site. Mundo said he spent the early weeks of social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic outlining ideas and sketches for the new replacement mural.

Wilkinson says if the “Alice Street” film could leave audiences with one takeaway, it would be the power of culture.

“In this case, it would be the way in which two diverse communities came together,” he says. “Right now I think we need stories of unification and people crossing boundaries to find common struggles. If anything, I hope that the story can help to inspire people to do that, too. To unify with people who live across the street, to find those common struggles and use the culture and the arts as tools to decipher what you need in your community.”