

IS THIS THE WAY TO CHANGE TIJUANA'S IMAGE?

Nothing can prepare you for the sight of a naked woman as tall as a six-story building. Not even in Tijuana. But there she is. From across a canyon crammed with whitewashed homes, clotheslines, and billboards, she greets you—one arm raised like the Statue of Liberty, hips undulating, breasts proudly bared. Locals call her La Mujer Blanca de Tijuana (the White Woman of Tijuana). But her true appellation, according to the statue's creator, 38-year-old self-taught artist Armando Muñoz Garcia, is *Tijuana*.

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politics of Mexico. Walk through the modest hillside colonia where La Mujer Blanca stands (off the beaten path for tourists, unless they are headed to the airport by way of downtown), and you will see them—housekeepers, cooks, mothers, community leaders—on porches, in kitchens, in their yards.

But why is she painted white, and not the brown of mestizo Mexico? “White represents purity,” says Muñoz Garcia. “It contrasts with nudity. It contradicts the stereotyping of Tijuana’s history and of our women.”

Jorge Osorno, a professor of architecture at the Ibero-American University in Tijuana, agrees. If the statue were painted a realistic brown, he maintains, “people here

might feel a bit insulted to see [her naked] in public.” In any case, he adds, “La Mujer Blanca may look white, but [judging by her features] she is mestiza.”

Whatever the reason, local residents seem comfortable with the statue. “Why should I be bothered by nudity?” asks one local woman, Angelina Diosdado. “It looks very nice.” Still, when Muñoz Garcia sought financial assistance from the municipal Casa de la Cultura, he was turned down. “They said, ‘How can we help you? The citizens are going to be all over us if we help support a work that is naked,’” Muñoz Garcia reports.

As a result, Muñoz Garcia was forced to hang a large SE VENDE (for sale) sign next to La Mujer last fall. After spending nearly two years scavenging materials and building his statue, he was broke. Still awaiting

tercer milenio (Tijuana, Third Millennium).

Mexicans are fond of monuments. Usually, however, they build them to honor dead heroes or sacred national events. Muñoz Garcia, a Tijuana native, had something else in mind: a symbol that would improve the image of his much-maligned border town as it enters the twenty-first century. "People visit our city, they leave garbage, they just trash it," says Muñoz Garcia. "They have these stereotypes in their heads—that Tijuana is dirty, that we are a city of prostitutes. So they don't care." His statue is meant to change all that.

Why a giant woman? "Tijuana is like a woman," explains the artist. "A woman having children. It keeps growing and it needs nourishment." Besides, it's the women from the *colonias populares* who form the backbone of the new neighborhood



salvation, the artist currently lives inside the statue, where he has installed a small kitchen and a cramped loft furnished with only a mattress. He'd like to see the eighteen-ton monument moved to a more prominent place in Tijuana, such as one of the *glorietas* (traffic circles) in the heavily traveled River Zone, as some residents have suggested on local radio talk shows.

Wherever she stands, La Mujer Blanca may well be the perfect symbol for Tijuana's future, entwined as the city is with U.S. politics and the Free Trade Agreement. "In Tijuana, a second *mestizaje* [mixing] is coming," says Professor Osorno. "Those who were mestizos once, in the interior of Mexico, they come to the border and they are mestizos again. This time the mix is with Americans." So why shouldn't La Mujer Blanca stand proud?

—Lawrence Herzog