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On a blustery day in Seaside, California, muralist José Ortiz teeters twenty feet in the air on a scaffold, brush in hand, painting the face of a child beneath the eaves of Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary School. Six cans of paint swirling with shades of blue—robin's egg, cerulean, white with the merest tint of sky—balance beside him on a piece of plywood. On the ground, his protégés, 22-year-old José Nolasco and 21-year-old Josué David Rubio, paint the lower portion of the wall in yellow hues of maize, mustard, and marigold.

Bold color overlays and soft tonal gradations are characteristic of an Ortiz mural, as are mythic figures and dramatic shapes, humble people and wild animals—all composed with a surrealism that blends the cosmos with the Earth, trees, and sky. Fittingly, this particular mural depicts Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. alongside Rosa Parks. Each is rendered in striking blues, yellows, and greens; the pair stands behind cross-legged children reading books. An oak tree sprawls in the background. A partial solar eclipse hovers beneath the apex of the school's roof. The school mascot, a black panther, leaps from the wall in repetitious lines of motion.

"The wall has been my teacher," says Ortiz, with a humble, dimpled smile. Clean-shaven, with thick, dark-brown hair, the self-taught artist has a youthful countenance that makes him appear younger than his forty-eight years. His clothes and shoes are speckled with a rainbow of paint flecks. Though he started this mural like all his other murals—a pencil sketch on paper—empty spaces always appear during the painting, he explains. And so, in filling the spaces, "we let the wall speak. It's kind of like allowing the wall space to dictate to you."

The King Elementary mural is one of approximately seventy-five Ortiz murals that enliven public spaces throughout the Salinas Valley and the central coast. Ortiz created these works with apprentice artists from the nonprofit organization he founded in 1992, Hijos del Sol, which means "Children of the Sun" in Spanish.

Since its inception, Hijos del Sol has provided free studio space, tools, and mentorship to hundreds of at-risk youth in East Salinas—one of the most poverty-stricken communities in California. Located behind the state's so-called "lettuce curtain," the farm-working community comprises mostly immigrant families, many of them undocumented. Ninety-six percent of the population in East Salinas is Latino; seventy-four percent live in low-income households, and nearly eighty percent have limited English proficiency. The streets of East Salinas are rife with gang violence, and the region has one of the highest homicide rates in the nation. Hijos del Sol gives young people an alternative to the streets, offering them the space and opportunity to express themselves and develop skills through art.

"We're giving space for young illustrators, builders, and designers," says Ortiz. "It's important [for them] to have a space to explore their feelings and imagination without fear. More than anything, we provide the tools and environment that allow for that creativity."

Ortiz started Hijos del Sol because he knew what it was like to be an artist without a place to work. The grandson of a Tepehuane medicine woman, Ortiz was born in the high mountains of the Sierra Madre in Durango, Mexico. His mother was the first in his family to travel to the city and learn Spanish. Because of racist sentiment against indigenous people, his family was often the target of discrimination, and they were frequently displaced. They became nomads, traveling North to the border between Mexico and the United States. When Ortiz was five years old, his mother left him in Mexicali while she crossed to el otro lado—the other side—to work in agricultural fields in the U.S.

After his mother left, five-year-old Ortiz began working to earn pesos in the streets of Mexicali—playing instruments on street corners, jumping on car hoods to wash windshields while drivers idled their engines in long lines, waiting to cross the border. Ortiz also waited, hoping he would see his mother again. While he waited, he discovered art.

"I started sculpting in Mexico," he recounts. "I used mud to make little whistles, animals, and people. I just molded them together." The first time he "met the pencil," he was in a church where Catholic nuns fed street children. One sister handed him a tiny pencil and scrap of paper, and he started to draw. After that, the urge to express himself through art—the urge to create—began to grow. He began sketching on any surface he could find.

"There is a term in Spanish—sin quietud. I was inquieto," which translates in English to 'restless,' he explains. "I had something I had to do. I found my outlet in art."

Ortiz carried this inquietud with him when at age ten he crossed the border to meet his mother in California. He worked with her in the fields, traveling alongside her as she followed the crop harvests that moved with the seasons. Still, he dreamed of becoming a painter. By the time he reached adolescence, he'd started applying paint pigments to canvas. But he and his mother were constantly on the move, living in garages or crowded homes with multiple families.

"I was always looking for a place to paint," he remembers. "I carried my canvas everywhere. I had nowhere to paint, so I discovered walls."

It wasn't until he'd graduated from high school and started attending the University of California, Santa Cruz, that Ortiz saw an art studio for the first time. When he saw the space, the tools and the raw materials, he felt like he'd found his home. He'd always known he wanted to be a professional artist, but he realized then that he also wanted to find a way to provide the opportunity for other young people like him—artists without workspace, artists sin quietud—to do their work.

Before meeting Ortiz at age eleven, Rubio, one of the apprentice muralists working at King Elementary, had created art only with crayons. "You have all these ideas in your mind, but you don't have the tools," he says, his fingers gilded with yellow paint. "[Oritz] introduced me to brushes and paints and canvas. Having the chance to work with all that stuff, I felt like I was valued. I had everything in my hand; it all depended on me to create something."

As before, Hijos del Sol still functions as an after-school art studio. But, as students such as Rubio and Nolasco have grown to become skilled artists, the program has also grown to teach art in the schools, participate in community events, such as an annual Día de los Muertos exhibition, and create public works of art on commission, such as the many Ortiz murals that grace Salinas, the Monterey Bay region, and beyond.

While Ortiz and his protégés work on the mural at King Elementary, the colors of the painting seem to change as rain swirls from the sky then disappears, the tones brightening as the clouds part to reveal a stream of sunlight. "That happens with the overlay of colors," says Ortiz, explaining how his apprentices mixed 150 different shades of paint that they have applied to the wall in layers. When the light shifts again, the mural comes to life as its colors transform.

Children spilling out of the school stop to gaze at the images in the mural. A mother who has come to pick up her child pauses, too, watching the artists at work, watching the pictures metamorphose beneath the artists' hands.

Just like the walls speak to him as he paints, Ortiz hopes that his murals speak to people living in the community. "It's not just pictures, but a conversation you [engage in] with the images and symbols," he says. "Murals are bigger than us. Maybe they can touch somebody, and make them feel like they are in connection with something greater."



