

The art of politics

Artist's portrait of Obama being displayed in nation's capital

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Last fall, Rafael López's wife urged him to paint a portrait of then-candidate Barack Obama. (Nancee E. Lewis / Union-Tribune) -

The portrait, titled "Nuestra Voz," or "Our Voice," is being displayed at an inauguration-themed art exhibit in Washington, D.C. (Nancee E. Lewis / Union-Tribune)

Packing up last week before boarding a plane to Washington for the presidential inauguration, graphic artist Rafael López was still pinching himself.

When he picked up his paintbrush last fall to paint a portrait of then-candidate Barack Obama, he didn't realize he would be creating one of the lasting images of the 2008 presidential campaign.



Originally titled "Nuestra Voz," Spanish for "Our Voice," the portrait was first circulated as a poster by artists and grass-roots Obama supporters, then adopted by the campaign as a tool for fundraising and outreach.

With its bright yellow background and distinctively Latin American feel, it is the Spanish-language counterpart to Shepard Fairey's iconic red, white and blue "Hope" portrait, recently acquired by the National Portrait Gallery at the Smithsonian Institution.

On Wednesday, López prepared to fly with his wife to the capital for an inauguration-themed art exhibit, in which his work will be exhibited alongside Fairey's and that of other artists.

"It has been a wild ride," said López, who divides his time between his East Village loft and a home in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. "The last three months have been crazy, but really rewarding."

López, a native of Mexico City, is an accomplished artist whose work includes U.S. postage stamps, murals, children's books and editorial work, including for The San Diego Union-Tribune.

Last fall, he was already bogged down with other projects when his wife, Candice, asked him to paint her favorite candidate.

"My wife loved Obama's message from the beginning," he said. "She had been insisting that I do a portrait of Obama, but I kept telling her I was too busy."

She finally left him a note in his studio, insisting “please, do it for me.”

“We need to use the gifts we have,” Candice López said at home recently. She teaches graphic arts at San Diego City College.

Rafael López got to work, studying the way Obama appeared in speeches. In the portrait, he looks as if he's about to speak.

“I wanted to capture him as a dreamer,” López said. “He is about to open his mouth and say something really inspirational.”

Friends chipped in to get some initial posters printed, and Candice López lobbied fellow artists in swing states to distribute them. Before long, they attracted the attention of the campaign.

Prints of the portrait, retitled “Voz Unida” or “United Voice,” were sold along with other donated art through the Artists for Obama online store, which raised money for the campaign. They quickly sold out.

“What was really attractive to a lot of us about the Obama campaign is that they needed us,” said Yosi Sergant, a Los Angeles-based publicist who worked for the campaign and is among the organizers of “Manifest Hope: DC,” which will showcase original art by López, Fairey and others. “The creative community felt there was an open door for us.”

Sergant, who worked closely with Fairey to disseminate his now-famous piece, called López's posters “bright and uplifting and powerful. They don't feel like a traditional political piece in any way.”

Since the election, López has made additional prints of “Nuestra Voz,” including a sold-out limited edition of giclées and smaller offsets. He has also created a new portrait of the president-elect titled “Unidad,” or “Unity.”

The Lópezes, who are not official inauguration invitees, plan to celebrate in the street with other revelers tomorrow when the new president takes office.

After receiving hundreds of e-mails from Obama supporters, many of them Latino voters, López is glad he listened to his wife.

“I think some Latinos felt disenfranchised until they saw this image,” he said. “I like to dream that I contributed just a tiny little grain of salt to swing some of the Latino votes that were undecided.”

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