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O N T H E L I N E

Developer Whitewashes Mural

San Francisco



Colorful murals adorn industrial buildings, apartments, and businesses throughout San Francisco's Mission District. The mostly Hispanic community is proud of its artists, so there was an outcry last summer when one of its well-known murals disappeared overnight.

The mural, almost four stories high and half a block long, was painted on one side of a triangular building at 17th and Treat. Designed by Jesús "Chuy" Campusano, who died in 1997 at the age of fifty-two, it was a bold series of swirling circles, triangles, and other intersecting geometric patterns of green, red, gold, and purple. In 1986, the city of San Francisco commissioned Campusano to design the mural for \$40,000. Nicknamed "Lilli Ann" for a garment factory which at one time occupied the building, the painting was worth about \$500,000 before it was defaced.

But the work disappeared last July when the building's new owners covered it with a layer of white acrylic sealant. The Robert

J. Cort Family Trust, which bought the vacant building two years ago, has spent \$1.5 million renovating it. Cort, an attorney who has bought and sold numerous San Francisco properties over the years, says the wall had to be sealed in order to protect it from water seepage. Cort's wife, Vera, says the trust "didn't do anything maliciously."

With the mural blotted out, the wall space would be available for advertising or the company logo of the new tenants (a multimedia game company), according to the Cort Trust lease.

Latino artists and community activists viewed the whitewashing as insensitive to the rich tradition of mural art in the Mission. In response, a group of agit-prop artists held a mock funeral march for Lilli Ann.

Campusano's children and Elias Rocha, who painted the mural from Campusano's design, sued the Cort Trust for \$500,000 in damages and won an order blocking the trust from further tampering with the wall.

In December, U.S. District Court Judge Martin Jenkins ordered the Cort Trust to hire an

art conservator to determine if the mural could be restored. A restoration could be done, says Brooke Oliver, an arts and entertainment attorney who represents the Campusano family. But she adds that it is a tricky, costly, and time-consuming process.

Oliver was jubilant over Jenkins's decision. "Without the order, it would be gone forever," she says. Further legal wrangling will determine whether the plaintiffs or the Cort Trust will pay for restoration or removal to another location.

There's a touch of irony in the battle to save Lilli Ann. Campusano stood apart from other muralists who work mainly in the social-realist tradition. "People tell me I'm anti-muralist because there are no flames and chains," he said in a 1988 interview. But those crazy nonrepresentational swatches of color sparked quite a fire in the Mission.

—BOB ARMSTRONG