

# Painting a truer picture

**NATALIE SKOWLUND** explores a Colombian city's artistic reckoning, while authorities and tourism threaten to obscure the truth

GUSTAVO PIMIENTA LOST his son, Marcelo, 15 years ago. Time has ticked by, but the wound left after his son was murdered in Medellín, Colombia, may never heal.

"To have to bury a *muchacho* [young man] is very difficult," he said, as he gazed at a photo of Marcelo, who is pictured with his arms slung around his toddler son and a panting dog.

Marcelo, a 23-year-old rapper in the Comuna 13 area of Medellín who went by the nickname MC Chelo, used his music to advocate for peace and an end to violence. He was assassinated in 2010, joining a list of rappers and artists threatened or killed for daring to speak out against the violence and inhumanity they witnessed in this impoverished part of the city.

"He'd say that a child of art is one child fewer in the war," his father told Index.

Medellín, one of Colombia's largest cities, was once considered the "murder capital of the world" due to drug-fuelled conflict. Comuna 13 suffered particularly high rates of violence due to its prime location along a drug trafficking route.

A controversial 2002 state military campaign, Operation Orión, aimed to take back control of Comuna 13 from guerrilla groups. The operation and its aftermath resulted in hundreds of civilians being forcibly disappeared.

Locals insisted for decades that the

remains of their loved ones were hidden in La Escombrera – literally "the dump". Mothers searched for their children, calling for justice with little attention from authorities.

In the years after Operation Orión, Comuna 13 began to see a boom in artistic expression. Seta Fuerte, a graffiti artist from Bogotá, arrived about a decade after Orión during what he called a hopeful "springtime" in Medellín.

"People started to paint, they started to rap, and they started to dress however they wanted," the artist, who asked to use only his alias due to potential safety threats, told Index.

Art became a way to reflect local memories and tell truths that challenged the status quo. But illustrating the area's tragic stories wasn't easy.

"There isn't a single home in this area that doesn't have any dead," he said. "You'd come, you'd paint, and every day you'd return home with a broken heart."

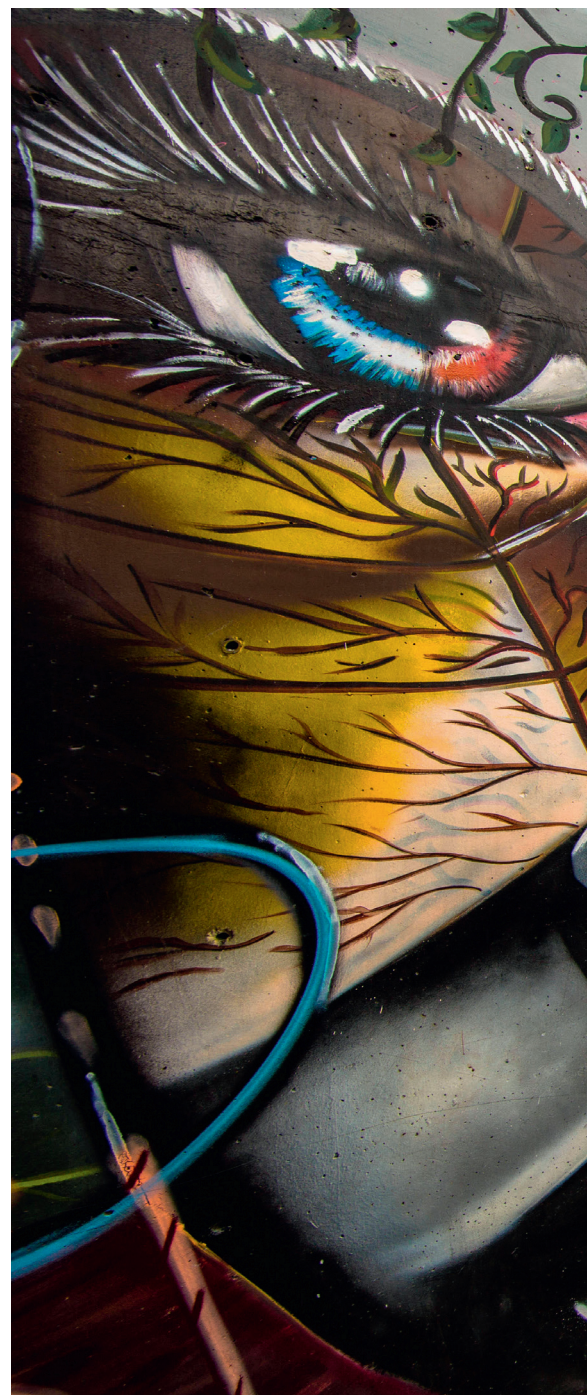
Creating art also put people at risk. Between 2009 to 2012, 10 rappers from Comuna 13 were assassinated, and visual artists were no safer.

"Me and almost all graffiti artists have had a gun to the head at some point," Seta Fuerte said. "Depending on what you say and how you go about it, you can also risk your life."

Over time, life began to improve in the commune. In 2011, the government invested in outdoor escalators to help people get up and down the area's steep hills, and local street art began to attract interest from outsiders.

Groups of tourists arrived – in trickles at first, and then in hordes. Tour guides explained the stories behind the art and the political context, also selling a message of transformation and rebirth in the commune, aligned with the identity Medellín sought as a city.

But as the years passed, murals faded and narratives changed. New art replaced the old, and with it subtle changes in the tenor and messaging. Where early street art often depicted allusions to its violent past, new art



ABOVE: Murals began to emerge in Medellín's Comuna 13, dealing with painful events in the city

began to focus on diluted scenes of animals and nature.

As tourist numbers began to rocket, local gangs took notice and began to





CREDIT: John Seagle / Alamy

extort tour guides, artists and vendors, and manoeuvre drugs and child sex trafficking not far from the tourists. Kiosks were set up to cater to tourists' whims for Pablo Escobar T-shirts and cheap beer, often obscuring the murals that had once been the reason to visit.

"It worries me that at some point it will have lost the spirit from which it all began," Seta Fuerte said. "That the important stories will stop being told, that it will become merely decorative – that the memories will be lost." But the truth will be set free. →

Almost all graffiti artists have had a gun to the head at some point





LEFT: Street art in Comuna 13 soon fell victim to commercialisation, with the meaning behind the artwork obscured in place of more palatable messages, as seen here in 2024

## There isn't a single home in this area that doesn't have any dead

→ Last December, the first human remains were exhumed from La Escombrera. Bodies recovered included those of a 20-year-old woman who led a youth sports group and a 28-year-old disabled man who worked as a street vendor.

In January, graffiti artists, victims and activists took to the streets in Medellín to paint a new mural reflecting the recent exhumations in La Escombrera, including, in bold yellow letters, the phrase “*Las cuchas tenían razón*” (“The old ladies were right”).

The mothers who'd long pointed to the dump as the burial site of their loved ones had finally been proven correct – two decades after their search began.

A day after the mural was completed, a plain grey wall stood in its place. Medellín's mayor Federico Gutiérrez had told workers to paint over it, reasoning that the mural's creators were seeking to foment hate and political division.

But the message was not suppressed for long. Activists and artists soon returned to paint the mural again, this time much larger. In cities across Colombia and around the world, others took to the streets to re-create the mural or paint related messages, and the

phenomenon began to appear across social media.

Max Yuri Gil Ramírez, director of the Institute of Political Studies at the University of Antioquia and a former member of Colombia's Truth Commission, said there was some irony in the city's initial decision to erase the mural and its loaded message.

“Sometimes attempts to make a memory invisible propel it to spread further and become more ingrained,” he said. “There can't be an ‘official’ memory – there shouldn't be an official memory. There must be many memories, multiple memories.”

Gustavo Pimienta, the father whose son died in 2010, said there's no question as to why art like that must be protected and preserved.

“So that the people remember, *madrecita* [my dear],” he said. “So that the people remember.” ✕

*Natalie Skowlund is a freelance journalist based in Colombia and the USA*

54 (01) : 46/48 | DOI : 10.1177/03064220251332625

RIGHT: Artists take part in painting the Digging the Truth mural in January 2025 after a similar one was erased by authorities



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