THE SPADE, ACCORDING to artist and former East Los Angeles gang member Fabian “Spade” Debora, is the craftiest card in the deck, the card that “takes all. The spade is a subtle and powerful symbol.” From that childhood insight, gleaned growing up in one of Los Angeles’s most violent public housing projects, came the graffiti tag Debora began spreading around his Boyle Heights neighborhood at age thirteen. From the tag came membership in one of East LA’s oldest street gangs. And from the gang came entry into an archetypal story about Los Angeles, America’s so-called gang capital, where an estimated two hundred fifty street gangs claim more than twenty-six thousand members. Debora already featured in another LA story. His parents emigrated from Mexico—his mother crossed the border from Juarez to El Paso in 1975 expressly to give birth to Fabian in America, he told me—and came to Los Angeles seeking opportunity. His father dreamed of starting a construction business, his mother of opening a beauty salon. They ended up in Aliso Village, one of two Boyle Heights public housing projects built in the 1940s, which at one time were patrolled by eight different black and Latino gangs and plagued by the city’s highest gang-related murder rate.

Debora’s story, with his expulsion from Catholic school in eighth grade, his felony arrests and serial incarceration, his methamphetamine addiction and his suicide attempt on the southbound lanes of the Golden State Freeway, might have made an unremarkable addition to LA’s compendium of gangland hard-luck tales. Except that Debora’s particular story took a turn one day in the mid-1990s when a Jesuit priest, after successfully intervening with Debora’s probation officer, drove Debora to the warehouse art studio of Wayne Healy, one of the founding members of Los Angeles’s Chicano art movement and an internationally recognized muralist. Debora apprenticed with Healy and, after a few relapses into his old life, blossomed as a painter whose depictions of what might be called gangster redemption now sell for thousands of dollars to entertainment executives.
and southern California philanthropists. Debora paints in a loft overlooking downtown Los Angeles and works as a substance abuse counselor at Homeboy Industries, the nationally renowned gang-intervention program founded in the early 1990s by Father Gregory Boyle, the Jesuit priest who intervened so astutely in Debora’s story.

Twelve thousand gang members pass through Homeboy Industries’ doors each year and many go on to experience dramatic personal turnarounds. So far as I know, only one has gone on to join the small club of American painters whose work profoundly changes the way we see life in a major American city. Debora’s paintings ostensibly depict cholas and cholas in various states of crisis and exaltation. Their real subject is Los Angeles, more particularly the surprising religious vitality of an American cultural capital populated overwhelmingly by devout international migrants. Just as New York’s a century ago, LA’s immigrants have coped with life in a foreign land in part by constructing an immense religious infrastructure that remains surprisingly invisible to most native-born observers. Though Los Angeles is home to America’s most populous Catholic archdiocese, a sprawling network of Pentecostal churches and mosques, and Buddhist temples that are among the largest in the western hemisphere, the city remains mostly caricatured as a la-la-land of subdivisions and celebrity gloss. Fabian Debora paints a different LA, an LA where the hardships of migrant life are softened by the nearness of God and where the conflict-ridden story of immigration reveals itself as a determined search for redemption. It’s a surprising vision born of Debora’s own hard-won state of grace.

You haven’t heard of Fabian Debora. Few people have outside a small circle of Homeboy Industries’ devotees. His paintings have been exhibited at a few university art galleries and on the walls of Homeboy Industries’ adjacent Homegirl Café, a self-spawned business where former gang-affiliated women serve gourmet Mexican food to a power-lunch crowd from nearby downtown high-rises. Debora has solo-painted or worked on nearly a dozen murals in Los Angeles, including one adorning the exterior of the chapel at the Eastlake Juvenile Detention Center, where Debora himself once served time. Buyers typically discover his work while attending fundraisers at Homeboy Industries, which counts among its backers celebrities such as Anjelica Huston and Martin Sheen. Until 2009 Debora painted “in my kitchen and living room, wherever I have space in my apartment.” That year Ruben Islas, an affordable-housing developer in downtown Los Angeles, attended an exhibit of Debora’s work at Homegirl Café. Islas bought a painting entitled Mi Madre de Los Angeles, a trompe-l’oeil depiction of a mural in which the cloak and clasped hands of the Virgin of Guadalupe seem to meld into the form of a tattooed gang member’s muscular back [see Plate 1]. “Where do you paint?” Islas asked Debora. The next day Islas “walks me into Rosslyn Lofts [a century-old high-rise recently renovated
by Islas’s company] and shows me this beautiful warehouse space overlooking downtown LA,” Debora told me. “He says, ‘Here’s the key, take care of the floor and continue blessing us with beautiful imagery.’”

I wish Debora were better known. The light he sheds on immigrant LA is important not simply because it corrects tired clichés about the city but also because, for better or worse, Los Angeles’s immigrant experience foreshadows the future of an increasingly international America. Studies show that immigrants, especially those from Mexico, Latin America, Korea, and other parts of East and Southeast Asia currently feeding into Los Angeles are more spiritually engaged than their native-born counterparts. Already American Catholicism, Pentecostalism, Buddhism, and Islam—in short, the religious landscape of an industrialized nation unusual for its high degree of religiosity—are all being refashioned, and not only in LA, by waves of migrants who in many cases represent the sole source of growth for otherwise languishing religious institutions. Fabian Debora is an artist who comes from and understands this new immigrant urban religious landscape. He works without the blinders rendering immigrant LA—and by extension immigrant America—largely invisible even to other artists and intellectuals supposedly sympathetic to migrants’ cause. He’s not hung up on the culture wars; he doesn’t anguish over his identity; he sees LA beneath its scrim of tacky sprawl. He paints a city saturated with spiritual vitality, where, if you look hard enough, you can find even the meanest mean streets thrumming with the presence of God.

Fabian Debora is a trim man of medium height with a carefully tended black mustache, black hair pulled into a pony tail, earrings in both ears and eyes that retain an element of watchfulness even when he laughs. Debora seldom laughs when discussing his art. His face relaxes only when he returns to the company of other homeboys employed at Homeboy Industries. Both times I met him he wore standard-issue cholo attire: immaculately pressed baggy jeans, white undershirt, oversized black-and-white-striped collared shirt and Converse All Stars free of scuffmarks. We spent most of our time together discussing his latest series of paintings, called Childhood Memories, an ambitious attempt to rehabilitate public perception of the housing projects where Debora grew up. Debora spoke with urgent intensity about the paintings, explaining each in two steps. First, he described the real-world occurrences inspiring particular canvases: a friend’s decision to leave the gang life; a chance sighting of a carwash held to raise money for the family of a slain gang member. Second, he pointed out moments of transcendence captured in subtler painterly details: smoke rising to heaven from a burning cityscape; clouds above a streetlight signaling the presence of God. He rarely looked at me as he spoke. He seemed almost to talk to himself, wrestling
with a barely submerged awareness that words were inadequate to express his vision.

In fact it was this Childhood Memories project that first piqued my interest in Debora. I happened to encounter him last summer while talking to members of what Father Greg Boyle calls his council, a group of nine Homeboy Industries employees who help make day-to-day decisions required to run the organization’s myriad programs, which include job placement, substance abuse counseling, anger management classes, domestic violence counseling, a wholesale bakery, Homeboy Silkscreen (T-shirts with the motto: “Nothing Stops a Bullet Like a Job”), and an onsite tattoo removal clinic staffed by volunteer doctors. At the time I was researching a magazine story on Boyle, and I wanted to hear from Homeboy veterans why this organization in particular had proved so effective for them. Out of the blue Debora told me the story of how Boyle set him on the path to becoming an artist.

“I first knew Father G at the age of ten,” Debora said, though I hadn’t asked him this question. (Homeboys call Boyle “G” or “Father G.”) He proceeded to explain how he’d survived what he termed a “demolished” childhood in Aliso Village, the housing project adjacent to Dolores Mission Church, where Boyle was pastor at the time. “I drew,” he said. “Drawing gave me peace of mind.” One day when Debora was in the eighth grade at Dolores Mission Catholic School, the school attached to Boyle’s parish, a teacher caught Debora drawing in class. The teacher snatched away the drawing and ripped it up. Debora, in a rage, threw his desk at the teacher. Debora was expelled and sent to see Boyle, who told him he couldn’t do anything about the expulsion. Still, Boyle said, he was sorry to see Debora go. Debora’s artistic talent was already known at school. Each year he designed the Virgin Mary banner hoisted during celebrations of Our Lady of Guadalupe. “Fabian, I want you to do something for me,” Boyle said to Debora. “What, G?” Debora answered. “Go home and draw something for me,” Boyle said.

As Debora recounted this story, sitting in Boyle’s cluttered Homeboy Industries office (Boyle wasn’t there at the time, just two other members of the council), the room suddenly fell quiet. I became startled by Debora’s intensity. “He found what I was capable of doing,” Debora said. “To know that, to tell me to go draw something.” He trailed off. Then, still unasked, he told me he was at work on a new series of paintings he called Childhood Memories. The series was to be a depiction of Aliso Village and its partner housing project, Pico Gardens, as they existed before the city’s housing authority razed them beginning in 1999 and replaced them with a development of mixed-income townhomes. The projects, Debora said, were always despised and now they’re gone. “But I want to bring them back from memory.... Art is the closest thing you can get to the
essence of God. You’re surrounded by gangs, drugs, violence. Then you paint... and it takes all that away.”

Needless to say, I was intrigued by this former gang member speaking so fervently of art’s restorative powers and embarking on an effort to enshrine in memory a part of Los Angeles no one, not even the people who lived there, ever expressed much affection for. Debora’s own description of his Aliso Village childhood, with its beatings from his heroin-addicted father and gang members pummeling him unconscious on his way home from school, sounded harrowing enough. I later looked up old clips from the *Los Angeles Times* and found that while some residents spoke fondly of their sense of community in a place where everyone was equally poor and equally crammed into the highest-density public housing projects west of the Mississippi, most agreed with Socorro Munoz, whose nine-year-old daughter Daisy slept on the floor out of bullet range after a thirteen-year-old neighbor was shot and killed in 1995 by members of Cuatro Flats, a gang that has patrolled Boyle Heights since at least the 1930s. Said Munoz: “We live here because we don’t have the resources to leave.”

Why, I wondered, would someone want to memorialize a place like that? Earlier that day a client newly arrived at Homeboy Industries named Eddie Gomez also told me he was an artist. Gomez said he had just been released from the California Institution for Men in Chino after serving a five-year sentence for robbery. He said he was thirty-six, raised in Aliso Village, and had joined Cuatro Flats as a teenager. He showed me a sketchbook of what appeared to be renderings for tattoos. He told me he’d painted some portraits in prison. He said that after a lifetime of serial incarceration he at last truly intended to “change my way of living.” “I’m educated. I’m an artist,” he repeated. I asked him what kind of job he’d come to Homeboy to find: “Whatever’s open and available to me,” he replied.

Many convicts discover art in prison. As Gomez himself told me, “being in a cell thirty-two hours a day, it’s like you think a lot.” Debora, I sensed, was different. He spoke with assurance and purpose about what sounded like a unique and powerful artistic project. I wanted to see those Childhood Memories paintings. A few months later, shortly after the series had its debut at a gala opening at Homegirl Café, I met Debora there for a viewing.

The title Childhood Memories is something of a misnomer. There are few children in the series, and the more Debora told me about the genesis of each painting the more I realized none of them depicted an actual datable incident from his own life. A rendering of a street-side shrine to a slain gang member entitled *Rest in Peace* turned out to be a composite still life melding details from a photograph Debora took while out doing errands one day with an arrangement of flowers and votive candles he set up on his kitchen table [see Plate 2].
depiction of Converse high-top shoes dangling from a telephone wire was entirely symbolic. Yes, Debora said, he and his friends had thrown their own old shoes onto telephone wires growing up. But the painting, entitled Convicted All Stars, was meant to dramatize mainstream society’s perpetual misunderstanding of inner-city youth [see Plate 3]. Visitors to Boyle Heights assume dangling sneakers are gang markers, Debora said, sites where “gang members congregate...or sell drugs. But when I grew up in the eighties and our shoes wore out we’d say, ‘I bet I can throw it higher!’” The shoes embody the precariousness of childhood in a place always vulnerable to paranoid caricature.

In other words, the point of the series wasn’t to say, “Here are Fabian Debora’s childhood memories.” The paintings reflected a more thoughtful effort to salvage images from the inner city past and reintroduce them not as emblems of urban dysfunction but as moments of grace or redemption. The shoes, the street-side shrine, even a semi-abstract assemblage of Boyle Heights street signs marking various boundaries of gang territory [see Plate 4], were re-imagined as expressions of youthful innocence, community commemoration and geographical nostalgia—“the beauty of Boyle Heights,” as Debora termed the street-sign assemblage. Or, as another homeboy at the series’ opening said to Debora upon viewing the street signs: “Damn, dog, that’s a bad-ass painting. I used to kick it on Evergreen.”

At least, that’s what Debora told me. To be honest, I needed some convincing, especially after viewing one of the series’ largest and most ambitious paintings, a wall-dominating canvas depicting a young homeboy in the courtyard of Aliso Village, the public housing project where Debora was raised [see front cover]. To my eye the painting appeared purely confrontational. The homeboy at its center loomed large, slouching so close that only his shaved head and undershirt-clad torso made it into the frame. I’ve often thought of Los Angeles as a place where beautiful light falls on ugly buildings. Here not even the light was beautiful. The projects, whitewashed two-story brick buildings bordered by overgrown bushes and crisscrossed by the shadows of telephone wires, were bathed in the harsh, actinic light of late-summer Los Angeles. The shadows were sharp, the washed-out sky above uninviting. The gang member stared at me while casually pouring a can of beer on the ground.

Perhaps sensing my skepticism that such a dispiriting image could convey a redemptive spiritual message, Debora tried to explain. “This is a form of prayer and meditation,” he said. “If someone passes away they often pour liquids for the dead homie. See, Aliso Village was destroyed by the city of LA to gentrify it. They think they’re getting rid of the gang problem but they’re not. They’re breaking up families. There are antique ways of the Mexican people there. There are good memories in those projects. Now they’re dividing people, sending them all over. This gang member represents prayer and meditation for the whole projects, every family, kids, children. Not just homies.”
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I looked at the painting a second time. I still didn’t see prayer and meditation. I saw a beaten-down gang member pouring beer on the ground as if the place he lived was little better than a drain. I thought of the effects of poverty in places like Aliso Village, where, according to research conducted in the mid-1990s by University of California–Irvine anthropologist James Diego Vigil, only one third of households included a member with a wage-paying job, the average annual income was just under eleven thousand dollars, nearly two-thirds of households received public assistance, and one in ten families was involved with gangs.

Most of all I thought of Debora’s own story, his father Humberto’s turn to drug dealing when construction jobs evaporated and his mother Maria’s inability to prevent her husband from sampling and then becoming addicted to the heroin he sold. Father Greg Boyle has said, “The truth about gangs is it’s all about a lethal absence of hope.” That was certainly true for Debora, even after he got a taste of the artist’s life and tried to leave his gang, only to find himself at the age of thirty-one once more living with his mother (his father had died by this point) and tending to twin addictions to alcohol and methamphetamines. Debora reached that particular chapter in his biography later during the morning we met after we’d finished looking at his paintings and sat down at a café table by a window to talk about his life. It wasn’t until he recounted one particularly harrowing passage that I at last began to understand what he was getting at with the image of the beer-pouring cholo.

The story began one fateful afternoon when Debora retreated to his mother’s attic to smoke meth. His mother, who’d vowed to evict Debora the next time she caught him getting high, unexpectedly came home. Suddenly Debora turned phobic. The attic rafters seemed to close in on him. Seeking an escape with the whacked-out logic of a drug addict he “busted a hole in the drywall and dropped into the living room,” nearly landing on top of his terrified mother.

“Mom called me every name in the book. I ran out of the house. I’m thinking, I’m guilty. I’m shameful. I’m a worthless piece of shit. I hear voices: ‘You don’t deserve to live.’ ‘No piensas eso!’ ‘No, kill yourself.’” Debora ran toward Hollenbeck Park, a four-block-long stretch of greenery with an artificial lake adjacent to the Golden State Freeway (Interstate 5). He passed Hollenbeck Junior High and Roosevelt High School, his alma maters, ran down a grassy hill, and jumped in the shallow lake. “I saw the freeway. I heard the music of the cars calling to me.” He sloshed across the lake and climbed an embankment to a four-foot retaining wall along the southbound lanes of the freeway.

“I was walking the wall like a tightrope-walker. No one called out to me but I’m hearing voices: I must climb down. I climb down and let go and my knees hit my jaw. I cut my tongue. Blood’s streaming out of my mouth. Voices are streaming out and I ran across the freeway. First lane, second lane, third lane, going for the center divider. I have to get to the center and I saw a turquoise
Suburban coming toward me and it felt like moss under my feet and glue. Everything is silent. The voices are silent. My soul is ready to leave my body. I looked at the grill of the truck, the smile of the bumper. It looked like a demon.”

Debora paused to take a call on his cell phone. While I waited for him to resume his story, I looked over at the beer-pouring cholo a third time. A tag on the wall beside the painting gave its name: Por el Amor de Dios. For the love of God. At last I understood. The cholo stands before the onrushing demon, the wrecking ball aimed at the projects behind him. He doesn’t panic. He doesn’t resist. His face is worn out, its asymmetrical features almost resembling an icon of Christ on the cross. Like Jesus, or at least like a priest ministering on behalf of Jesus, the cholo confronts the hostile forces arrayed against him not with violence but with an offering. “Grieve with me,” he seems to say. Given that invitation, the viewer can’t help but identify with this despised place. Suddenly the painting didn’t look confrontational to me. In the colorless walls, the crisscrossing wires and the priest-like folds of the cholo’s oversized T-shirt I saw what no one expects to see in LA gangland: the love of God.

Debora ended his phone call and told me he was currently working on a series of paintings of women who had left gang life and found a new direction. “You see Alicia?” he said, pointing to a woman preparing tamales behind the café counter. “Now she’s sober, with a job and children. I’m painting her in a peaceful setting with a violent background.... I call it Peace over Violence.” I remembered that one of the first things Debora had told me when we met that morning was that he had recently returned to Los Angeles from the city of Los Altos, an affluent suburb south of San Francisco, where he had led a three-day art seminar at a Jesuit retreat center. To stimulate discussion he had brought with him twenty drawings commissioned from second graders at Dolores Mission School. Debora told me he’d asked the students to draw how they saw God. Then he asked the assorted teachers, writers, and other artistic types at the retreat to pick a drawing and describe the thoughts and feelings it inspired. For himself, Debora said the drawings reminded him of his own youthful love of art. “I reminded myself of the gift I was blessed with and I reminded the kids of their gifts,” he said. At the retreat he “did a slide show. I told my story, how art really saved my life.” If the beer-pouring cholo was Debora, or a composite of Debora’s childhood gang-life memories, then the cholo’s gesture of prayer and meditation was also Debora’s gesture, a way of telling the world that, at least in East LA, a work of art can reveal the face of God.

Ordinarily artists who choose Los Angeles as a subject do not describe their work as touching the divine. The customary rhetorical gesture of most art about Los Angeles is a cool dismantling of the city’s glamorous facade. From David Hockney’s bright, empty, domestic still-lifes, to Edward Kienholz’s ugly car-
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culture sex in *Back Seat Dodge ’38*, to Catherine Opie’s bleak 1990s series of photographs of freeways and mini-malls, artistic interpretations of Los Angeles have tended to deliver a similar message: there is less here than meets the eye. The message is usually subtler than William Faulkner’s description of LA as “the plastic asshole of the world,” but the animus is there.

The animus is not wholly directed at the city. The artistic disappointment Los Angeles engenders owes much to LA’s perceived role as a stand-in for everything that went wrong with America’s cities after World War II ended and the era of the car, suburbia, and mass consumer culture began. If, as Wallace Stegner once claimed, California is like the rest of America, only more so, then Los Angeles has come to be considered the most more-so part of California. It is the emblematic wrong turn in the history of urban America, the place where America’s late-twentieth-century city-making sins—the abandonment of walkable neighborhoods and mass transit, the embrace of cookie-cutter sprawl, white flight, fast food, drive-thru’s—had their origin and most potent expression.

No place in America tilts as far from Jane Jacobs’ vision of the Good American City (read: Greenwich Village before it got expensive), and so artists, especially artists who feel most culturally attached to New York, have felt duty-bound to undermine the city’s incessant self-mythologizing.

That goes for Chicano artists, too, the artists most influential in Fabian Debora’s apprenticeship. The Chicano art movement was largely born and nurtured in East Los Angeles and yet the movement’s members have frequently sought to bite the hand that fed them. With good reason: Los Angeles in the late 1960s, when seminal Chicano artists such as Wayne Healy, Leo Limon, Judy Baca, Gronk, and the other artists in the East LA art collective known as Asco (Spanish for disgust or nausea) began working, was wholly hostile to the city’s large but as-yet politically dormant Mexican and Latin American population.

Chicano art today still chews over the blatant racism and hypocrisy that has long marked much of white Los Angeles’s (and America’s) stance toward Latinos. Vincent Valdez, arguably the most famous young artist working today with roots in the Chicano art movement, made his mark in 2000 with *Kill the Pachuco Bastard!* a seething canvas depicting the 1943 Zoot Suit Riots that erupted near downtown Los Angeles between American servicemen on shore leave and zoot suit-clad Latino youth. In 2007 Valdez again drew headlines for *El Chavez Ravine*, a custom-built low-rider truck whose entire surface Valdez painted with the tumultuous story of Chavez Ravine, the historic Mexican-American neighborhood northwest of downtown Los Angeles forcibly cleared in the late 1950s to make way first for a proposed public housing development and subsequently for a baseball stadium to house the recently transplanted Brooklyn Dodgers. Valdez’s signature image of Los Angeles is arguably *Burnbabyburn*, a 2009 triptych depicting the city glittering at night while in the background
flames engulf the surrounding hillsides. It’s not a plastic asshole, but the painting’s characterization of Los Angeles as a cauldron of racial/environmental/ (insert your own dystopic category here) disaster comes through just fine.

Which makes Debora’s inspirational, spiritually attuned thematic preoccupations all the more remarkable. Vincent Valdez, with whom Debora interned for four months in 2009, was born in San Antonio to an artistic family, earned an art degree at the Rhode Island School of Design, and has exhibited his work at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and galleries throughout the United States and in Europe. His life and career have largely followed an upward trajectory. If anyone has reason to damn Los Angeles in his art it is not Valdez but Debora, whom the city nearly crushed. That a native son so abused should choose to depict his hometown as a landscape of spiritual renewal says, I think, as much about Los Angeles as it does about Debora’s obvious originality of vision. Los Angeles, it turns out, is the holy city Debora paints, Ironically for all the reasons it’s most despised. The sprawling, junky grid, the casual stance toward history and tradition, have both made LA an ideal landing zone for newcomers. Not since the nineteenth century, when an influx of Catholic and Jewish migrants transformed New York into a giant experiment in faith-based living, has a major American city so thrown open its doors to the world’s devout, mobile masses.

The demonic Chevy Suburban did not hit Debora. “I felt the impact of the truck but it wasn’t the truck,” Debora told me when he resumed his story. “It was something greater and higher than myself pushing me to the center divider. I looked up and saw clouds and birds and peace. I felt like God loved me so much he got me to the center divider and showed me who I could be.”

By that point the Highway Patrol had arrived on the scene. Officers stopped traffic on the freeway and motioned Debora to cross to the shoulder. “I ran away from them,” Debora said. “I got to the projects and I called my mom and I said, ‘Mom, I almost got killed today.’ ‘Where you at?’ ‘I’m in the projects.’ ‘I’m on my way, mijo. Don’t move. Don’t leave.’ She was like Mary picking her son off the cross. That’s how I felt.” A few days later Debora entered a Salvation Army drug rehabilitation center in Pasadena, where he stayed for six months. The day he graduated from the program he went to Homeboy Industries. “What do you need?” Father Greg asked him. “A stepping stone to get my life on track,” Debora replied. “Okay, you start Monday.”

Four years later, Debora is Homeboy’s lead substance abuse counselor. He celebrates five years of sobriety this year. He and his longtime girlfriend Elizabeth live in an apartment in Boyle Heights with their four children. Driving to his downtown art studio Debora passes the old site of Aliso Village and Pico Gardens. There are brightly painted stucco townhouses there now, fronted by tidy lawns and ficus trees in pots on porches. Children play at a nearby elementary
A S P A D E  I S  N O T  A  S P A D E

school. Light rail trains glide along First Street toward the high-rises of
downtown. There is no visible graffiti. The new projects are called Pueblo del Sol,
Village of the Sun.

What is this city that simultaneously oppresses and inspires its most vulnerable
citizens? That contains some of America’s most iconically miserable slums and
yet finds within itself the ability to reel at least one of those slums back from the
brink? That inspires such scorn from all but those most ill-used by its maddening
contradictions?

Numbers tell part of the story. In 2009, the most recent year for which the
Census Bureau has released such detailed figures, thirty-four percent of southern
Californians were foreign born, the highest concentration of any major US
metropolitan area, including New York. Those newcomers—almost four and a
half million, a third from Asia, more than half from Mexico and Latin America—
have created in Los Angeles a massive religious infrastructure similar to the
network of Catholic parishes and Jewish synagogues that once anchored life in
immigrant landing zones such as New York’s Lower East Side and South Boston.

More Catholics pack more parishes and run more schools in southern California
today than in any other archdiocese in the nation. Mosques in Orange County
operate mortuaries and schools and furnish reception rooms for weddings and
other community activities. In Hacienda Heights, a few freeway exits away
from Debora’s old neighborhood, the largest Buddhist temple in the western
hemisphere organizes summer camps, teaches Cantonese, produces radio and
television broadcasts, raises money for disabled children, operates a printing press,
and runs an art gallery.

It wasn’t supposed to turn out this way. Los Angeles and its suburban progeny
have always been vilified above all for their homogeneity, code for the racism
fueling their ever-accelerating flight from old city centers. The racism was real, at
least in the beginning, but whatever homogeneity America’s suburbs once boasted
is long gone. Recently released figures from the 2010 census prompted a flurry
of commentary about so-called “ethnoburbs,” once lily-white suburbs now more
ethnically diverse than the urban cores from which they once sought to escape.
Meanwhile those cores, places such as San Francisco and Manhattan, grew whiter,
wealthier and, according to research conducted by the Barna Group, less devout
in the past decade.

What an “ethnoburb” future might mean for America is perhaps best expressed
in my favorite of Debora’s Childhood Memories paintings, a giant canvas entitled
Pay Me No Mind [see Plate 5]. The painting is a portrait of a friend of Debora’s, a
former gang member named Richard Cabral who worked for a time at Homeboy
Bakery and has since moved on to a career acting in films and television.
Cabral’s head and tattoo-swathed neck dominate the center of the canvas. His
face resolute, he stares left into the middle distance. Behind him dark clouds
gather over the Los Angeles skyline. In an obvious homage to Vincent Valdez, the skyline is alight with sulfurous orange flames. The painting might seem an outright rip-off of Valdez except that behind Cabral to his right stand four children at the edge of a perilous cliff. The children, their bodies squirming with youthful restlessness, peer over the cliff toward the burning city below. The city is positioned so that the glow of its flames illuminates Cabral’s face but not the children. It is as if Cabral shields the children from the fierce heat of Los Angeles.

It almost doesn’t bear saying that the four children are in fact Debora’s own, eight-year-old Damian, seven-year-old Andrew, five-year-old Honesty, and Maya, who is almost four. Of course the painting is autobiographical. The whole purpose of Childhood Memories, Debora told me, is to dramatize his—and by extension every other gangbanger’s—who seeks out Homeboy Industries—decision to leave the gang life and start anew. The show teaches two lessons about that turning point: first, that redemption is always happening, even in the projects; and second, that the projects, even at their nadir, hold within themselves the seeds of their own unexpected renewal. It’s a subtler and more powerful insight than Valdez’s standard-issue vision of apocalyptic Los Angeles. Debora acknowledges the flames but then pushes on toward the cliff-top where the racial cauldron’s heat diminishes and the wiggly bodies of a gang member’s kids say something ineffably real about the possibilities of life in this spiritually charged American city. “I find the divine in the image of a gangbanger,” Debora said as we looked at the painting. I had to agree.

I made one more stop in LA after meeting with Debora. Call it an excess of professional skepticism but I felt compelled to visit Hollenbeck Park, the site of Debora’s miraculous near-suicide story. I wanted to make sure the layout of the park corresponded to the details in Debora’s account. I parked my car and stood atop a grassy hill leading down to the park’s shallow lake. To the west the towers of downtown loomed in afternoon haze. To the north, close enough to touch, rose the fierce ridgelines of the San Gabriel Mountains, their upper reaches white with snow from a recent winter storm. I looked back along Sixth Street where Debora would have run from his mother’s house to the park. There were houses in varying states of repair and, on the corner facing the park, Linda Vista Community Hospital, built in 1904 in grand mission style to care for injured railroad workers but now long abandoned and rumored to be haunted.

I walked down the hill to the lake and crossed over a wooden bridge toward an embankment atop which cars zoomed past on the Golden State Freeway. Beyond the lake the freeway forms an overpass. I walked underneath and came to a fence. I looked up and saw how it would be possible to scale the fence, scramble up a dirt slope and from there climb onto the freeway’s retaining wall. I gazed at the wall for a while. Above, sunlight reflecting from the lake cast wavy patterns
on the concrete of the overpass. I pictured Debora, his shoes and pants legs wet, his face in full freak-out, clawing at the dirt and hoisting himself onto the retaining wall. At that point he would jump down and I would lose sight of him. He would have his encounter with the demon and with God and he would run away and I would see none of it. Around me, around both of us, the city would churn in all its massive, mysterious movement. There would be subtle, powerful redemption and at last there would be the paintings. *Por el Amor de Dios.* I stood there beneath that overpass and I suddenly realized that because of the artist and former gang member Fabian “Spade” Debora what I could see above all here in this rather bleak corner of an already ugly and hard-to-comprehend city was the love of God. I said a silent thank you and walked back to my car.