

ROOTED VISIONS

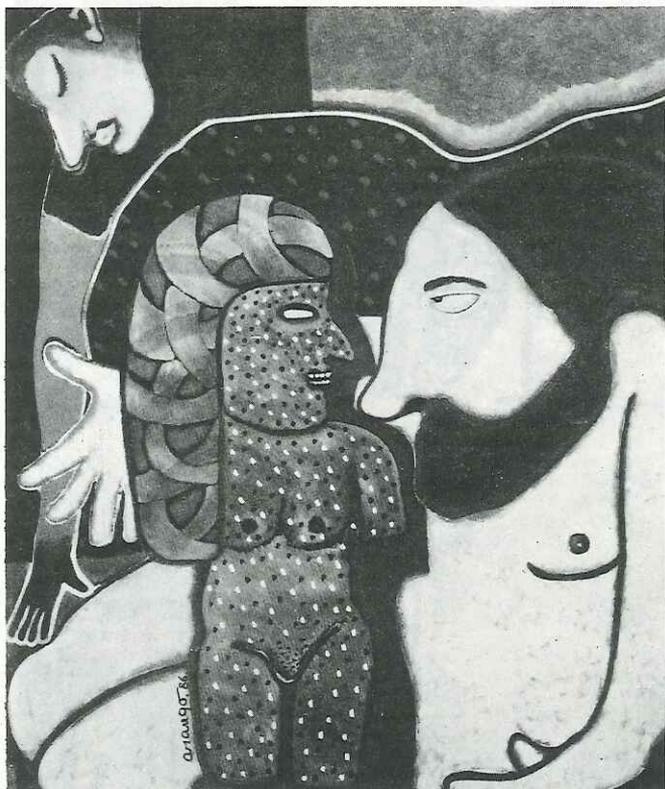
In the past nine years Mexico has witnessed the appearance of a number of artists who have succeeded in bringing the traditional realist roots to the forefront with great contemporary zeal. Many elements have undoubtedly played a part in this current need to examine the traditions that, with their manifold meanings, have inspired and renewed the art of Mexico during this decade.

A volatile economy coupled with tremendous social changes, in addition to the physical hardship of earthquakes, seem to have propelled a compelling disposition to exhort those values that can best project a selfhood, one that is rooted in a "mexicanness" (la mexicanidad). On the other hand, there are those who view this art as a new and contemporary rendition of earlier Mexican art, such as the 1930's Mural Renaissance, or the humanist realism of the *Contemporáneos* who during that

time taught in the open-air schools that were created to promote art appreciation and creativity to the less privileged popular classes.

Although it would be comfortable to presume that this new art forms part of an order and chronology of Mexican art, particularly since similarities abound, there is still something quite different at hand in this work. The striking difference of this new work with earlier Mexican realism is the absence of an ethical point of view. Without the ethical program of their predecessors whose socially-oriented comradeship with the masses made the indigenous heroes of monumental mural art, and subject of romanticism, these artists take their spiritual ideas from the layers of cultural forms, like pre-Hispanic, or the indigenous version of Christianity, as well as the wit and irony of the objects surrounding the popular fairs. And, they generally adopt a more humble and not specifically political attitude. In fact, as several Latin American critics have observed, the use of native traditions within what could appear to be close to today's mainstream styles, can also be seen to have a subversive quality.





Cortés and the Malinche. Alejandro Arango

When it comes to introducing the work of other cultures, most North American critics tend to recur to a frame of establishing differences and similarities, the other and the self, local and world view conceptions or appropriation and originality, and so forth, in order to come up with an acceptable Western working method of appreciation. Quite to the contrary, one would wish for a collapsing of these divisions and that by seeing and looking at this art, the viewer is forced to take the perspective of the other, the native of that other culture, so that what is at first perceived and felt to be strange can, by the same token, take the viewer away from what is thought she knows about herself. Still, in order to accomplish this, it is necessary for a viewer to have at least a minimum of clues to guide him or her in the process to acquire such an appreciation.

Mexico has for a long time been a focal attraction for artists and intellectuals, to live and immerse themselves in the plural and rich cultural traditions, so distinct from their own backgrounds. Richard McKinzie

wrote in *The New Deal for Artists*, "people talked most about the Mexican 'invasion' of American art... Among a certain artistic set, admiration of Mexican art took on something of the flavor of a religious cult." While it is hard to speculate about the results of these previous exchanges, it is fair to assess that Mexican art is not totally unknown to the New York audience for it to be strictly viewed in terms of the other and the outsider.

At the same time, the type of exhibitions that have been organized show a Mexican art that is bound to a progressive history which takes the viewer from the pre-Hispanic universe to the art of the Vice-Regal Spanish period, into the 19th century—with its incipient nationalism—ending with the art of the muralist. Then, apart from the visibility of Frida Kahlo and Rufino Tamayo, hardly anything has been shown that addresses a contemporary vision of the rootedness and how the actual coexistence with popular tradition has operated in today's art.

In contrast to the United States, when the traditional, the indigenist, and the roots reappear in a Mexican art discourse, it seems

to meet with the question of national as opposed to international art; in short, a debate on colonialism. While this is a significant enough question to raise, it should be put within the context of the intrinsic and vital connections that Mexican artist—regardless of their class origin—establish with their surrounding realities and the legacy of their shared tradition.

During the sixties this question of tradition was largely centered on the confrontation between those who preferred international abstract models and those who preferred the figurative modes. By the seventies many international exhibitions, as well as juried competitions and exchange programs had put abstraction, specially geometric abstraction, into a Mexican and Latin American perspective. It even came to be seen as a genuine native form of art.

Then, after a period of exploration and experimentation in which artists banded together in groups, and after the debacle of the economy and banking systems, as contact with international art became difficult, and the country turned into itself, the artists took the challenge of this relatively isolationist period to seek out popular and traditional roots that would come to represent the strength of a new sense of "mexicanness." This was not part of a consciously determined program, but emerged spontaneously and simultaneously in the individual work of a number of artist. Nahum B. Senil's statement of what occurred to him is pertinent:



Opera singers. Adolfo Riestra

"I first showed abstract work in a government gallery, as a result of the La Esmeralda art school. Soon I realized that there was no way to be myself unless I did art that related to my situation, which is composed of many realities." Another artist in this exhibition, German Venegas, from the mountain region of the State of Puebla, also spent time at the La Esmeralda school but soon began to incorporate into his art the wood carving of his ancestors that he had learned as a child. Actively involved with the Holy Week tradition of Mexico City's Ixtapalapa area, where Christ's *Via Crucis* is enacted in its entirety, he employs this subject matter not as a reflection and representation but as a visual communication of a direct and personal spiritual experience. Contrasting gods and demons, heroes that are victims as well, lions and toads, saints and serpents, his painting and sculpture show some of the most powerful contemporary correspondences with the underworld, terrestrial and celestial realms of the continuous battling duality in Mexican art. Evoking awe and dread, inspiring terror, has been a part of Mexican art, from the Aztecs to today, and Venegas brings this in an unusually personal and contemporary fashion for us to consider, whether we see it from within Mexico or from New York.

Adolfo Riestra, an artist who paints and creates monumental clay figures, could easily be locked into being an extension of just Meso-American, pre-Hispanic art. However, upon closer examination, these imposing figures are an approach to the creation of a contemporary pantheon of demigods and temple guards, a unique blending of images for devotional veneration that have permeated throughout many cultures, from Babylonia to India or Africa, yesterday and today. Rocio Maldonado, by some critics associated with Frida Kahlo's sensibility, works large scale, extending her painting onto the frame. With allusions to the *ex-voto* tradition, the iconography points at a female condition of both fantasy and fear. The recurring image of the Virgin of Guadalupe as patron saint is here set in a scenario of newborn babies, bleeding hearts,

spined roses, and the anatomy of females, angels and saints, that only occasionally and almost incidentally refer to the male. By contrast, Adolfo Patiño's Virgin of Guadalupe is placed in the context of the heroic, those heroes who in general art historical terms are personally important to the artist, as well as those individuals that he has decided, by means of artmaking, to turn into heroes. His obsessive anthologizing and remodeling of some of Mexico's national icons into a meaningful alternative, seems to share the same spirit of excessiveness with which the official Mexican media insist in confronting and reminding the public with what is "Mexican."

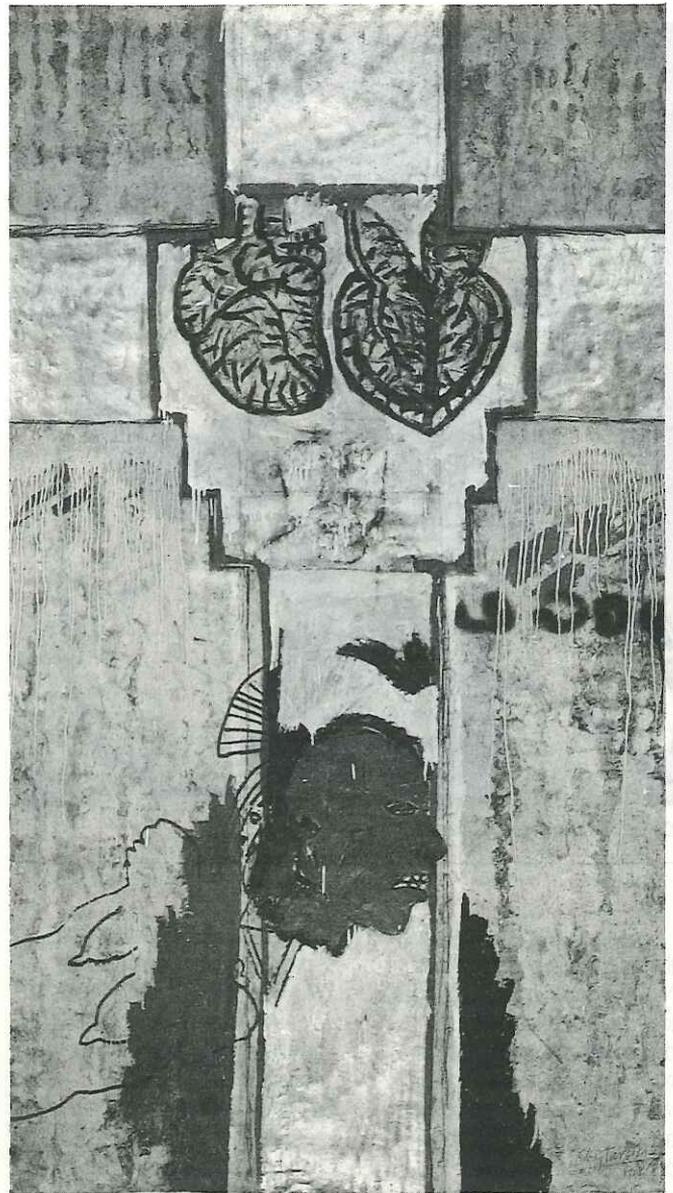
On another level, Dulce María Núñez also presents the transformative element of national symbols. The *Ixtaccihuatl* volcano (Nahuatl for the Dormant Woman) becomes, next to her self portrait, an acute statement about Mexico, *la patria*, in a state of possible awakening, perhaps exploding, to reveal its true identity, strength and character. The *Ixtaccihuatl* has been a theme for many Mexican artists, including Rufino Tamayo's famous *Sleeping Musicians*, but

Núñez' vision, coming from a woman artist, is at once poignant and direct by alluding to ancient fearful attributes of the female.

Eloy Tarsicio traces "mexicanness" by way of mythological-religious connections, such as the cactus, eagle and snake of the Mexican flag, and its colors as a contemporary metaphor for destruction and resurrection. Currently he is working on a series of large bark-paper codexes that are another approach to the Aztec's view of death, the expression of chaos and evil absolutely necessary for the continuity of life.

The frightening, voracious and macabre imagery that speaks for the ceremonial and ritualistic content of much of Mexican art, seems at the same time a difficult aspect for a western trained art viewer, who would probably prefer these violent explosions to be tamed into something that can be appreciated from a distance or on strict formal terms.

As an extension of selfhood and "mexicanness," it should only be natural that some artists such as Julio Galán, Miguel Ventura and Nahum B. Zenil engage in a true visual self-analysis. Their work



From Tenochtitlan to our time. Eloy Tarsicio.



Unto. Adolfo Riestra

generally shows rapture and pain that accompanies this type of process of examination. Here the individual self is placed in contrast with larger issues of a collective Mexican idea of self. One of the most pertinent images in this respect, "I Lied to You" by Julio Galán, reveals an almost uncanny introspection as to the nature of appearances and hidden identities. The "what you see is not what you get," with eyes mirroring the soul, renders one of the most memorable visualizations of duality. One could continue to elaborate on other images included in this exhibition, suffice it to state that all the artists included have contributed on many levels, each with individually

outstanding elements, to give an approximation of the plural expressions of rootedness in today's Mexican art.

To conclude, it is significant to point out that this work should be viewed also within the larger scope of Mexican art, the one that extends beyond the Rio Grande to the north, where Hispanic-Americans and North Americans alike, share and feel akin with the rich and varied traditions that in a time of change continue to nurture the art on both sides of the border. □