



The Hachwinik, Bearers of Tradition, 2001 (acrylic on canvas).

The Painting of *Kayum Ma'ax*

“Before, they could only come in small airplanes,” says Kayum, remembering the arrival of the German painter who, before going, left him his first painting implements: tubes of color, cardboard and paper.¹

“He lived here about a month.”

Kayum is talking about Nahá, a remote Mayan community in the heart of the Lacandón Jungle, until a few decades ago accessible only by light airplane.

“He did portraits. He did portraits of Old Mateo and of Old Chan Kin. I liked to watch him. I took him to work in the fields and then we went to the lagoon by *cayuco* (dug-out). I took him everywhere and he made me his helper. My father gave his permission; he paid me 20 cents.”

Photos courtesy of Cultural Dissemination Office, Coneculta-Chiapas.
Photographer: Osiris Aquino.



Dawn, 2001 (acrylic on canvas).

“From the time I was little I made drawings with the charcoal from the fires and my mother worried. She said that it wasn’t a good thing to do. But my father said that it wasn’t a bad thing if painting was in me.”

Kayum was only eight or nine years old and spoke no Spanish when the German arrived. But a long time before that he already knew that painting was in him.

“From the time I was little I made drawings with the charcoal from the fires wherever I could, and my mother worried. She said to clean that up, that it wasn’t a good thing to do. But my father said that it wasn’t a bad thing if painting was in me, that the gods and people liked paintings. So then my mother didn’t say it any more.”

“The German didn’t teach me much, just to mix colors, but I didn’t learn the names.” From the German he also learned to appreciate what he once considered an absolute delicacy: sardines.

“One day he offered me some of his food. It was in a can; it was sardines. I liked them very much.” So much so that when he began to earn money from his paintings, sold for a few pesos, along with paint, he bought sardines and crackers. “I didn’t give anybody any because I liked them too much.”

When the German left, he left behind a box of tubes of paint. “I never stopped painting. Although sometimes I did for a few months because I had to help my father with the planting.” He did not go to school; he began speaking Spanish at 12 and learned his numbers and letters at 18. “Then I met Gertrudis. I had about 10 paintings of trees and the lagoon. I was embarrassed when she saw my work but she said it was good. I gave her some

paintings; I didn't want to sell them. She gave me more paints so I wouldn't stop painting." Kayum is referring to photographer Gertrude Duby, who, together with her partner, anthropologist and cartographer Frans Blom, made innumerable expeditions to the Lacandón Jungle, among other regions of Chiapas, during which they developed a special link to the Lacandon. The Bloms lived in San Cristóbal de las Casas and Kayum went there with his father's permission.

"She convinced me that my paintings were good enough to sell. I sold them for two pesos to the tourists and then upped the price to five. I painted what I saw in the jungle, the lagoon, the ani-

mals, the trees. First I did small paintings, but then I did bigger ones in oil."

With no formal education and without external influences, Kayum perfected his painting, and his themes took on strength.

"When I was younger I sometimes painted what was in my dreams. Then I grew up, I had my family and my painting began to improve. I began to paint legends."

In Nahá, the teachings of Old Chan Kin, his grandfather, are still respected. Until his death, Old Chan Kin was one of the most admired Lacandón leaders by both his own people and outsiders. Old Chan Kin taught them to preserve their

In Nahá, the teachings of Old Chan Kin, his grandfather, are still respected. He taught them to preserve their traditions, to respect the trees because they have spirit, heart.



Nahá, 1999 (acrylic on canvas).

traditions, to respect the trees because they have spirit, heart; to care for the mountain to keep the gods happy because only in that way they will take care of the world and men. Many of his people's traditions live in Kayum's paintings, transformed into legends.

"I paint that in my paintings so they can endure as memory. In the painting *Birthing*, there is a legend: when a pregnant woman is about to give birth, she looks for the *ceiba* or silk-cotton tree. She must not see her husband. She cleans the place with leaves. The woman's labor pains pass into the *ceiba* through the reflection of the light or through the shadow. This is how we are born and the mother doesn't feel so much pain."² Perhaps this is why —because they are memory— he resisted selling his work.

"Once I went to San Cristóbal in a little plane to an exhibition Gertrudis organized. I took about 20 paintings to finish and frame. I didn't want to sell them because they were legends. I didn't know what price to put on them. They were legends."

Kayum sold all his work. He is not very sure but he thinks that he sold them for about 70 pesos each. Gertrude took care of the buyers and helped him deposit the money from the sale in the bank.

"It came to about 1,500 pesos; that was a lot for me. She told me I couldn't just wander around the street with that much money, so she put it in the bank."

Money is not the painter's motivation. Rather, his painting is a reflection of his life. Kayum lives in a part of the jungle that little by little has been invaded by groups of Tzeltals and Tzotzils because of bad colonization policies, so his community is facing grave challenges: how to stop the destruction going on around them. The groups that have penetrated the Lacandón Jungle lack the magical-religious link with the jungle that Nahá still has. That is why they cut down the forests on the hill-sides to plant crops or raise cattle. In Nahá, they have decided to declare their lands a protected zone and all the inhabitants, regardless of their occupation, work to make sure that the protective measures are complied with. Kayum, like everyone in Nahá, sometimes puts aside his painting to spend the entire day in the hills.



Hunter Kin in the Lacandón Jungle 50 Years Past, 1999 (acrylic on canvas).



In the Jungle the Stream Never Dries Up, 2001 (acrylic on canvas).



Birthing, 1999 (acrylic on canvas).



Jaguar of the Jungle, 2001 (acrylic on canvas).

“I paint legends so they can endure as memory. In the painting *Birthing*, a pregnant woman is about to give birth, she looks for the *ceiba* or silk-cotton tree. Her labor pains pass into the *ceiba* somehow and the mother doesn't feel so much pain.”

Despite his occupations as a parent and a member of the community, Kayum's painting has had the opportunity to travel beyond the borders of Nahá, Chiapas and the country itself.

“When I was a boy I wanted to go ‘to Mexico’. I began to go to San Cristóbal and then, when some Spanish journalists came to Nahá, they saw my paintings and they invited me to exhibit in Spain. I was in Madrid about a month. I sold all my paintings. I visited museums and I liked them very much. Later I was also invited to New York, to another exhibition of my paintings, but I didn't go because it was too expensive. I also received a grant from the State Center for Indigenous Languages, Art and Literature, a grant for about 1,000 pesos a month. I went back and forth to San Cristóbal to workshops and talks. My work has also been shown in Mexico City.”

Kayum was awarded the 1992 Chiapas Prize for visual arts. His certificate hangs on the outside wall of what serves as his “office”, together with some charcoal sketches whose themes are anybody's guess. Despite this recognition and his trips “to the world”, his attitude toward painting is the same as more than 40 years ago when his father calmed his mother's fears and supported his need to express himself with sketching: painting is in him. **MM**

Elsie Montiel
Editor

NOTES

¹ Except where otherwise specified, all quotes are from the author's personal interview with Kayum Ma'ax in the community of Nahá in the Lacandón Jungle, May 31, 2005.

² “Inkaboo Kayum Ma'ax García,” *Cinco pintores mayas, cuadros de luz* (Mexico City: Coneculta Chiapas, 2004), p. 83.