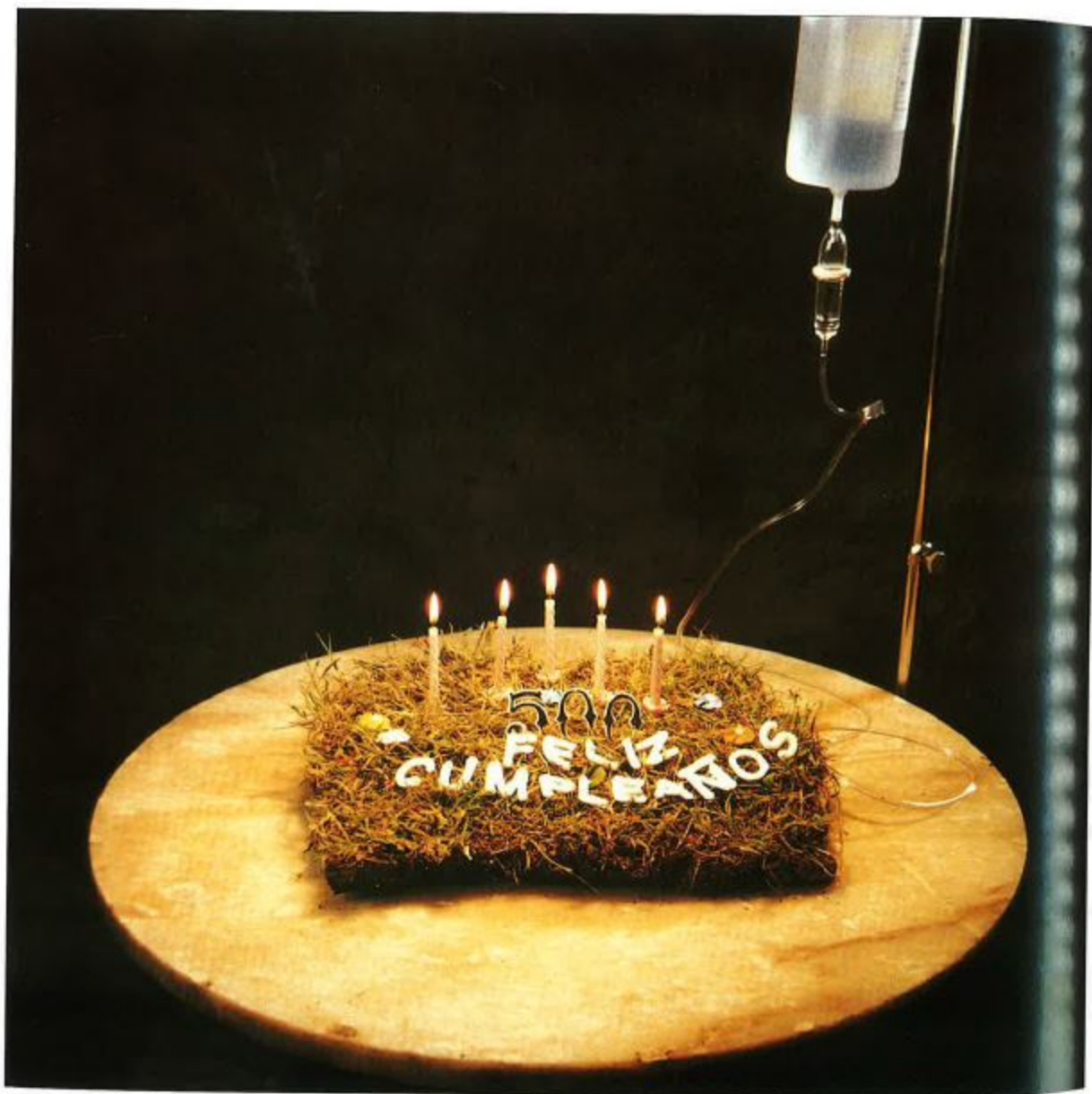




ART AND DESIGN

**NEW ART**  
**FROM LATIN AMERICA**  
EXPANDING THE CONTINENT



# ENGENDERING NEW WORLDS: ALLEGORIES OF RAPE AND RECONCILIATION

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The need to discuss the nature of the Latin American context, to deal with the disjunctions and incongruities of a post-colonial culture has become one of the most readily recognisable characteristics of 20th-century art from Latin America. Complex metaphors and symbolic languages have developed to define the interdependency of European and Latin American cultures, to offer some sort of explanation for the hybrid nature of Latin America. Within this category of cultural production, traditions of allegory have formed an important element. Allegory as a discursive medium is part of the heritage of Catholic evangelisation but also remains part of the visual vocabulary of many contemporary practitioners. In some ways the Renaissance appropriation of the classical past, from which many of our uses of allegory descend, was itself a model of cultural 'interaction'. As a model, it also puts an interesting gloss on the definitions of originality and replication so frequently of interest to artists working outside of the defined mainstream. Re-using and re-ordering the visual languages of a distant culture to the needs of a different time and place cannot be seen as specific to Latin America but rather as symptomatic of an awareness of cultural multiplicity.

## 1992-1492

In the wake of 1992's quincennial of the 'encounter', attention has been focused anew on the point of contact between Europe and what Europeans called the 'New World'. To many artists, such as Maria Sagradini, the event served to highlight the continuing contradictions and inequality of this relationship. However, from whichever of the numerous complex and often conflicting perspectives adopted towards this historical moment,<sup>1</sup> the quincennial was a reminder of the essentially hybrid nature of Latin American culture.

Neither indigenous, nor European, Latin American culture has been balanced between a sense of belonging and of exclusion since the 'encounter'. The visualising of this finely poised relationship has traditionally encompassed the recognition of both conflict and power, a tipping of the scales in the direction of one ideological camp or the other. The art of the region's diverse constituencies determined that whichever visual

language was adopted it would carry a set of meanings beyond that of the artists' personal aesthetic. From the very first moments of contact between the two worlds, the power of visual languages to speak to the continent's different constituent cultures – the Spanish, the indigenous and the ever increasing 'mestizo' – was acknowledged. At the same time, the differing traditions of representation and symbolism remained recognisably culturally specific. In the period after the Mexican Revolution, a highly rhetorical stand was taken to the notion of interdependency, as artists such as the muralists attempted to construct what they saw as a new, assertively anti-colonial art form.<sup>2</sup> For many contemporary artists, however, the notion of both conflict and affiliation goes deeper than the rights and wrongs of colonialism.

## The Rape of America

Traditionally, the encounter is discussed in ostensibly sexual terms. The eroticised Indian nude greeting the arrival of the Spanish conqueror with equanimity, represents a long standing tradition of allegorical renderings of the colonial enterprise in the Americas. In a work such as Jan van de Straet's engraving from c1600 of *Vespucci Discovering America*, the naked fertile America is quite literally discovered by the explorer Vespucci; the clothed, civilised European, Vespucci, bringing technology and knowledge to the available, desirable but primitive Americas.

This fantasy of colonial relations, intersecting as it does with traditional gender roles – Woman/passive v Man/active; Woman/Nature v Man/Technology – has functioned as a powerful metaphor within Latin American culture. In one form or other this gendering of the 'Encounter' appears in many different Latin American contexts as an explanation of the hybrid nature of the post-colonial culture; the Indian mother taken by force by the European father, giving birth to the 'illegitimate', mixed race, 'mestizo', culture of Latin America.

The most famous version of this allegory of cultural origins is that of the Spanish conqueror Hernán Cortés and his Indian interpreter/mistress, Malinche. From the 16th century on, the realities of Mexican colonial culture could be visualised via this relationship. The problematic



OPPOSITE: Maria Sagradini, *Made in Uruguay* (detail of installation), collection of the artist, 1991; ABOVE: Jan van der Straet, *Vespucci Discovering America*, c1600



figure of Malinche, half collaborator, half victim, manifests the ambivalent inter-relationship of the conquered to the conqueror. In Antonio Ruiz's intricate, small painting, *The Dream of Malinche* (1939), Malinche's sleeping body metamorphoses into a microcosm of colonial Mexico. Traditionally, she is both pitied and despised but nonetheless she embodies the territories of the colonised. She forms part of the complex amalgam of allegorical Indian women referred to by Octavio Paz in his seminal discussion of the Mexican psyche *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950).<sup>3</sup> In this work Paz links the figure of Malinche to that of the 'chingada', a raped and beaten mother of popular slang, and discusses the cultural ramifications of the collective mother/victim/nation image.

It is this allegory of injured 'motherland' that is frequently referred to in the work of Frida Kahlo, who elides the notion of personal injury with that of the collective trauma of colonisation.<sup>4</sup> In *The Two Fridas* (1939), Kahlo depicts herself as the allegorical body of Mexico, literally split into two, yet interdependent; the injured infertile colonial body gaining strength from that of the strong fertile Indian woman. This Indian woman is not the compromised and despised 'mother' Malinche, but Kahlo's iconic image of the inviolate spirit of the Americas, the Tehuana.<sup>5</sup>

In the period after the Mexican Revolution, the Tehuana came to represent an assertively post-colonial culture, the fertile un-bowed body, closer in spirit to the 'Amazons' of 16th-century travellers' tales. She existed in direct opposition to the image of the brutalised Indian woman, raped by the European colonisers. She represented a pride in the indigenous past and a denial of cultural dependency. This glorification of the 'un-raped' Indian woman emerged simultaneously to the appropriation of the visual languages of popular art into the construction of an oppositional culture to that of the Eurocentric high art tradition.

In Diego Rivera's *Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in the Alameda Park*, the artist produced a work which constituted a personal manifesto for a new art.<sup>6</sup> Rivera paints himself as a child (the art of the revolutionary future) nursed by the Tehuana (Kahlo) but parented by the 'popular' (in the form of the printer José Guadalupe Posada and his most famous creation, the skeletal lady 'La Caterina'). This allegorical 'family' is used to lay claim to a set of cultural values that conformed to Rivera's anti-colonialist aspirations. Past conflicts epitomised by the skeletal yet living figure of the Caterina, are seen as engendering a new, more positive future.

Contemporary Mexican artists appear highly conscious of the work of their predecessors and the use of allegory remains an important tool, but the mood has radically changed. Rivera's

use of the popular and the indigenous to represent the dynamics of national identity is savagely inverted in Julio Galan's *Tehuana* (1990). Here the familiar costume of the Tehuana becomes an empty, bitter reminder of the hollowness of nationalist rhetoric. The blank gap for the face beckons like a fairground painting, waiting to be filled by any passing visitor, still a reference to the popular, but evoking a more random, less controllable force. Galan's is a world where 'authentic identity' has become something to buy at a souvenir shop. This is not so much a transformation of the allegorical body of the Tehuana, as a knowing rejection of the traditions of visualising the 'Latin American' identity. In this play upon the traditions of asserting a 'purer' identity, Galan attempts to escape the endlessly polarised positions of the gendered allegories of cultural interaction.

In a similarly bleak vein, Enrique Chagoya's *LA-K-LA-K* (1987), takes Posada's 'La Caterina' and unites her with a skeletal Mickey Mouse in a parody of Rivera's *Alameda*... self-portrait. The 'mother' culture claimed by Rivera has the bleak emptiness of Galan's *Tehuana*, the 'new art of the revolution', the sterility of Disney. Here again we are forced to recognise the mass marketing of the notion of authenticity, the impossibility of the 'pure' inviolate culture.

The battle seems no longer to be the simpler rejection of colonial culture espoused by the generation of Diego Rivera and the proponents of nationalist cultures within Latin America. The stark blacks and whites of Rivera's more jingoistic 'good Indians/bad Spaniards' have blurred to grey. To put it simply, the definition of what is imposed and what is inherited in cultural terms has shifted. Colonialism is not denied but clearly defined criteria of cultural identity are replaced by a series of questions.

### Guilt and Reconciliation

The 'encounter/Rape/conquest' and its ensuing progeny, so often a theme within Latin American art, remains more than just a reference to a distant if crucial moment in history; it also becomes an allegorical reworking of the problematic position of the Latin American artist to the visual languages of a Eurocentric 'high art' tradition.

This tradition of the 'great artist' as the signifier of civilisation has itself been a focus of attention during the 1980s, an intrinsic part of the self-conscious games of post-modernism. However, in the work of Latin American artists, such as Alberto Gironella or Alejandro Colunga, these references are given an added meaning.

The roots of Latin America's colonial past grow from the same soil as Spain's 'golden age of painting'; for every Columbus, Cortes and

FROM ABOVE: Antonio Ruiz, *The Dream of Malinche*, 1939, collection of Mariana Perez Amor; Frida Kahlo, *The Two Fridas*, 1939, collection of the Museo del Prado, Mexico City

Pissaro there was also Titian, El Greco and Velázquez.<sup>7</sup> As representative of Spanish culture at one of the most dramatic points in colonial history, the work of these 'Great Masters' takes on an added political dimension within a Latin American context.

In Colunga's *The Marriage of Chamuco & La Llorona*, the deliberately 'El Grecoesque' style of the artist's earlier work is present if subdued, while the theme is again that of hybrid identity. As with Chagoya, this work parodies the claims of the earlier generation and denies the notion of a transcendent culture emerging from the ashes of colonialism. Instead we are shown a 'family' of the insane and the vicious; Chamuco, the Christian devil imported by the Spaniards; and La Llorona, the 'Weeping Woman', a figure descended from an Aztec death goddess whose annual festival represents the trauma of conquest. This is not just the injured Chingada but an altogether more dangerous and uncontrollable 'mother' figure, who is said to roam the streets at night stealing children to revenge the loss of her own murdered offspring. Colunga's dark allegory points to the shared heritage of horror, a sort of 'a curse on all your houses'. There is no heroic victim, just a legacy of pain and cruelty.

The assigning of blame is also deliberately avoided by Alberto Gironella. His numerous reworkings of Velázquez's *Queen Mariana* dissect and reconstitute the body of this colonial queen, transforming aggressor into victim.<sup>8</sup> In *Queen of Yokes*, the ghost of the Velázquez portrait fights with the vitality of the collage of popular references, as if trapped forever within the wrong painting. In inverting the traditions of the male/Spanish/coloniser allegory, Gironella also humanises the notion of power, focusing on more subtle notions of freedom and oppression. The Spanish Queen becomes as much a victim of her birth and her particular historical moment as Malinche.

While in Mexico the point of contact between the 'old world' and the 'new', and the metaphorical debate surrounding that moment has a continuing relevance, it is obvious that the conditions of the present have changed. Within other parts of Latin America the relationship to the history of colonialism has not always been so vociferous and yet this move towards a less polarised position is equally evident.

In a work such as *El Compromiso* (1982) by the Uruguayan painter José Gamarra, the scene is set in a fantasy coastline jungle somewhere in Latin America. The style of the painting is deliberately 'old master' with only its scale alerting the observer to its 'modernity'. In this far away un-reachable place the representatives of indigenous and colonial world views are locked in violent conflict. The priest cuts the throat of

the feathered serpent while the native child stares unconcerned at a pet parrot. As an audience we are not asked to judge or take sides, we merely observe the progress of history. We cannot judge events taking place in a world created by writers and explorers, this lush jungle painted Rousseau-like by Gamarra from his studio in Paris.<sup>9</sup> For Gamarra, the past is indeed another country, a place where injury and cruelty co-exist with hope and innocence. His Latin America is an Eden-like paradise on the point of corruption; the conquest a sort of 'fall of man'. Yet the event is inevitable and offered in explanation of the chaos and hurt of the present times, a distant starting point. This point is made not just by the subject matter but by the manipulation of the traditions of representing the unknown. Gamarra's bitter sweet Utopias evoke the Latin America of European fantasy, it is a place without tangible existence yet is somehow familiar.

This same sense of familiarity pervades the work of the Argentine Miguel D'Arienzo. In his *La Conquista* (1992), the violence of the 'encounter' is only passingly referred to in the figure of the Indian child aiming his bow at the distracted conquistador. Even this reference is ambivalent: is this an attack or are we observing the antics of some indigenous Cupid, whose magic arrow will turn the heart of the homesick Spaniard towards the Indian woman who gazes so solemnly at the spectator? 'See what is about to happen', she seems to say as we are confronted with the amoral inevitability of history. D'Arienzo's work is not, however, about Latin America's colonial past in any direct sense. Even more strongly than in Gamarra's work we are asked not to assign blame. The Spaniard arrives almost like Ulysses on the island of Circe, he is about to forget his past to lose himself in his 'new world'. In this sense D'Arienzo's work is all about memory and loss, his characters as they move from painting to painting (and many of his works pick up on the same characters), act out semi-forgotten moments in a past they no longer recall. Did they once belong to Titian or Goya? Was that gesture once played out in a painting by Velázquez or Tintoretto? Like a company of provincial players performing *The Tempest* in the Pampas, they act out a narrative, the meaning of which they have forgotten, while the lines and parts remain and are reconstituted into a new set of meanings. For D'Arienzo this seems to be the crux of the matter – that within replication there is also a re-ordering, a re-constituting of meaning which makes the alien, familiar; the distant, close.

The allegorical nature of D'Arienzo's work is made even more evident in his *Rape of America* acting as it does as a conceptual counterpiece to the more traditional 'Rape of Europa' theme.



FROM ABOVE: Enrique Chagoya, *LA-K-LA-K*, 1987; Alejandro Colunga, *The Marriage of Chamuco and La Llorona*, 1984, collection of Guillermo Sepulveda, Monterrey; OVER-LEAF: Diego Rivera, *Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in the Alameda Park*, 1947-48 (originally Hotel del Prado, Mexico City)





The classical explanation of the origins of 'Europe' linked the notions of history, myth and sexuality into a complex allegory. In D'Arienzo's painting the power relations of the original are inverted. The transgressive lustful figure of the disguised Zeus, the bull, is still the central focus of the allegory. Here, however, he becomes not just the godly antagonist but the Spanish presence. D'Arienzo's bull seems more tragic than aggressive, his America a temptress not a victim. The scene evokes the spirit of the bullfight (a sport imported with enthusiasm by the Spaniards to their colonies) rather than that

of an abduction and rape. The bull appears confused and wounded, dying a victim of its own obsession.

If the languages of allegory have formed an important part of the dialogue between the 'old world' and the 'new', they have also served to highlight the culturally specific meanings of the power relations within the traditions of metaphor. In a time of changing valuations of identity, both sexual and ethnic, the shifting focus of these contemporary Latin American artists represents a complex and sensitive response to a world of change and uncertainty.



#### NOTES

- 1 For an exploration of the issues raised by the quincennial, see: 'The Wake of Utopia', *Third Text*, issue 21, Winter 1992-93.
- 2 The beginnings of this debate are recounted by Jean Charlot in *The Mexican Mural Renaissance, 1920-1925* Yale, 1962. For a more complex perspective on the internal arguments of the Mexican movement see: *Art and Revolution*, the collected writings of David A Siqueiros, Lawrence & Wishart, 1975.
- 3 See Chapter 4, 'The Sons of La Malinche' in Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, translated by Lysander Kemp, Penguin, 1985.
- 4 See Chapter 5, 'Body and Soul: Women and Post Revolutionary Messianism' in Joan Franco, *Plotting Women: Gender and Representation in Mexico*, Verso, 1988.
- 5 I discussed this aspect of Kahlo's work in greater detail in 'Her Dress Hangs Here: De-frocking the Kahlo Cult',

*Oxford Art Journal*, vol 14 no 1, 1991.

- 6 The best way to gain an insight into Rivera's methods and aesthetic arguments is through his own writings. A selected list of his articles is included in the catalogue to the exhibition *Diego Rivera: A Retrospective*, Detroit Institute of Arts, 1986.
- 7 This argument is made very clear by Valerie Fraser in 'Surrealising the Baroque: Mexico's Spanish Heritage and the Work of Alberto Gironella', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol 14, no 1, 1991.
- 8 I would like to thank Elizabetta Andreoli for allowing me to see her interesting account of Gironella in the unpublished dissertation *Cultural Anthropophagy in the work of Aimé Césaire and Alberto Gironella*, University College, London, 1993.
- 9 This theme is discussed further by Valerie Fraser in her article 'A Greener Modernism', see this issue, pp52-61.



OPPOSITE, FROM ABOVE: Miguel D'Arienzo, *The Conquest*, 1992, Private Collection; Miguel D'Arienzo, *The Rape of America*, 1993, Durini Gallery, London; ABOVE: Chamuco and La Llorona; LEFT: José Clemente Orozco, *La Conquista*, 1938-39, Guadalajara, Jalisco, Hospicio Cabañas.