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Between the Chac Mool and the Chalice: An Art Exhibit at DePaul University

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I

In January of 2012, I had a solo exhibit at the Center for Intercultural Programs at DePaul University (activities office of the Student Center). The result became an interesting experience of introspection. When the Center’s Program Development Coordinator, Stefanie Smith, first approached me with the opportunity of exhibiting my artwork, she gave me a theme to work with: “Reflection.” At first I thought it would be easy enough, since a lot of my work already deals with reflections of identity, but it wasn't until I visited the DePaul campus (for the first time) that I began to reflect on my own Catholic religious upbringing. I noticed the St. Vincent DePaul Church in the middle of campus, the tall bronze statue of Monsignor Egan at the entrance to the Student Center building, and inside, a chapel, all of which tipped me off that I was in the ambience of a Catholic school. Then and there I began reflecting on my artwork and realized I would be putting together an exhibit dealing with my own religious influences; a presentation that would visually depict my own personal reflections on religion and how they have shaped my beliefs and identity. I would come to realize how much religion, and specifically my Catholic upbringing, had influenced my art. The exhibit became an attempt to showcase work that exposes not just my religious beliefs but also my cultural and political beliefs.

I was born in Albuquerque, New Mexico, to a Catholic family. The church was imbedded in my parents’ spiritual and social lives. Since they were children, my parents have been active participants in the local church. As adults, both my parents were lectors who assisted the priests during Mass, but also were involved in other social groups offered by the church community. I was taken to all of these events: Mass on Sundays, Christmas and Easter, weddings, baptisms and funerals. The Catholic Church was completely intertwined in the Mexican-American/Hispano/Chicano culture in which I grew up. For me, there was no escaping the Catholic religion. For New Mexicans, even if you weren’t religious and didn’t go to Mass, there was always some saint staring at you from the dashboard of the family car or glaring down at you while you ate at grandma’s house. The culture I was brought up in totally revolved around the Catholic beliefs and practices brought from Spain to the Americas.

I was an altar boy when I was small, made my first Holy Communion when I was 10, was confirmed at 16, and active in my church’s youth group throughout my teens. Though I’m not as involved with the Catholic Church as I once was, I still consider myself a Catholic. I don’t go to Mass every Sunday like I used to but I still say my nightly prayers. I believe in God but I have conflicts with the institution of the Catholic Church, its gory past and its outdated present policies. I have become more critical of the Church over the years, but have found hope in new practices, such as the ideas of Liberation Theology, which speak more to a social justice take on the teachings of Christ. I also credit the church with introducing me to some of my first glimpses of art: from paintings to sculpture to architecture; sitting in Mass with nothing else to do for an hour but to look around, I was engulfed in art. Trying to make sense of the different scenes of Baroque allegorical paintings of tortured saints, or visually reading the Stations of the Cross as though it were a comic strip, I had lots of time in the pew, unconsciously absorbing all the visual stimulation that would begin shaping my way of making art.

I had not recognized or understood how profoundly my religious experience had affected my art until I started thinking about this exhibit. It would seem like an obvious influence, considering the Catholic Church was an extreme patron and power behind the development of the arts in the Western world. The huge amount of religious art made in Europe and beyond because of the Church would of course have an impact on me as an artist and Catholic. I find myself going into churches when I travel, not only to look at the architecture and art inside, but also to kneel and give thanks to the iconography that gazes back at me. Notwithstanding this obvious influence, I was shocked to discover, in my archives, the amount of religious art I had created that dealt with religious themes. I had not realized until that moment that I had made so much art with Catholic religious content.
Editing from my large collection of artwork was not the challenge; picking art that would fit in the specific space provided by the Center for Intercultural Programs was the hard part. The “gallery” space offered to me is not a place used to display art, but instead a room with a principal function for university club meetings. It is not a room in a normal rectangular shape but somewhat of a hexagon, with one wall occupied by a huge wooden, wall-mounted box that hides a dry-erase board. Another challenge to the room is that one wall is made up mostly of glass and looked out towards the courtyard. The wooden box and glass wall would prevent me from hanging anything in those spaces and thus limit what I could display. The more I contemplated the space and its challenges, the more I began to think about not just hanging artwork, but adapting to the very space: to use its awkwardness to my advantage. If the space itself became an installation piece, I could push religious motif even further. The challenge was to transform the quirky room into a religious chapel.

As one enters the room, the facing wall is the one with the mounted wooden box. It is flanked on each side by smaller inverted walls. I would use this space as the focus of the room and turn it into the altar of the “chapel.” Because I could not hang anything from the centralized wooden box, I conceived the idea of covering it with a giant custom-made vinyl sticker, which would neither damage the box nor prevent access to the dry erase board within. The image I chose for the sticker was a symbol that I have developed and used over the years. It is a severed forearm with a cartoonish bone sticking out from the bottom. The hand holds a heart with a crown of thorns, and fire spurts from the top of it. This symbol represents the mezcla, or mixture, of the two religions that form Mexicano/Chicano identity: indigenous religious symbology of Meso-America, and the Spanish Catholic religion of Europe. The Sacred Heart, usually depicted as a heart set aflame with the crown of thorns, is an old Catholic symbol that represents Christ’s love for humanity. The hand holding the heart is a gesture harking to the Meso-American religious practice of human sacrifice, specifically to the hearts sacrificed to certain deities. The severed arm hints at the brutality of both religions, which conquered and brutally killed in the name of faith.

This centralized image was then flanked by two vertical hanging sculptures. The sculpture I placed on the left was a piece called, “Our Lady of Hypocrisy”, a bloody and horrifying depiction of the Statue of Liberty, modeled on a combination of different Virgin Mary statues. This
“saint” holds up a missile and stands on the black crescent moon of the apocalypse. In the center of her body is a dripping heart, pierced by seven M-16 rifles. This plays with the iconic image known as Mary and the Seven Sorrows, where seven daggers pierce her heart. The Statue of Liberty, one of the most recognizable symbols of liberty and freedom, has become a secular deity worshiped around the world. The sanctification of Lady Liberty in this piece is contrasted with the harsh reality of what the U.S. attempts to do in the name of liberty and freedom: continuous foreign military occupations, bombing campaigns, and political assassinations carried out by U.S. policy in the name of this goddess of liberty and freedom.

On the opposite wall, I placed a mini altar titled “Altar of the Lost.” This piece is a personal reflection on border displacement. The little yellow altar dedicated to San Antonio, the patron saint of lost things, is a narrative of myself, depicted in two different scenes. In the first, my caricature asks San Antonio: “On which side of the border do I belong?” He stands there confused, pointing in all directions. In the second scene, I attempt to talk to San Antonio but cannot, for he holds a plate with my tongue on it, representing the loss of language. As a Chicano (Mexican-American), I am a product of identity displacement and feel lost, for I am neither “Mexican” nor “American” enough to completely integrate into either culture. An old Catholic custom when an object is lost is to hide or turn upside down a statue of San Antonio until the lost object is found, which is why this altar has a drawer built into it with a statue of San Antonio hidden inside. The altar and prayer to San Antonio asks to help Chicanos like myself find our identity, language and place in this world.

Continuing to move clockwise in the gallery space, the wall to the right was the largest one in the room. This is where I chose to place two of my largest paintings. The first, a six by eight foot painting on tin, is called “The Miracle at the Cottonwood.” Designed in Ex-voto style (Mexican folk art, usually painted on a sheet of metal, to give testimony and thanks for a miracle; also depicts the petitioner and the saint), these are small intimate pieces, but I had created an oversized allegory depicting my own miracle of awareness and understanding of my cultural history.

The painting portrays the famous “American” battle of the Alamo, but in this version all the characters are portrayed by myself. As a youth, I was lost and confused about my history and ethnicity. I grew up watching the Disney version of the battle at the Alamo and was influenced by this constructed patriotic take on the historical event. Using my mom’s sofa as a fort, I would recreate battle scenes in which I played the defenders of...
the Alamo, the “good guys”, battling the Mexicans, who were always portrayed as the “bad guys”. (Coincidentally, I would later serve in the United States Air Force and was stationed in San Antonio, Texas, trained in defending U.S. military bases. When I went to the Alamo for the first time, I was a Chicano wearing a U.S. uniform, visiting the holiest of shrines of “American” patriotism. As I looked at the relics of muskets and uniforms, I thought to myself this should have been considered a great victory for Mexico not a tragic tale of United States’ heroism. Reading the names of the Tejanos/Mexicanos that died defending the fortified church adds another layer of complexity to the very whitewashed version we’re usually told. Now, looking back and reflecting on my visit there, to the beginning of the end of Mexico’s northern frontier, I feel saddened that I was ironically reliving, in every literal way, my childhood playground of being a defender of U.S. imperialism. Was I there at La misión San Antonio de Valero to honor the losers or the victors? Till this day I’m still sorting through these manipulated beliefs and false devotions. There is a certain bit of faith that goes along with history.

The next wall, to the right of the door, and where the room is entered, is the space where I hung the last of the big paintings. This square painting is called “The Evil Trinity of Chicanos”, and represents a visual interpretation of my understanding of the three parts of Chicano religious identity. Chicano history is shaped by three distinct bloody conquests, led by three different imperial powers, each imposing a new form of religion on the people conquered: beginning with the Aztec religion and its human sacrifice, to the Spanish Christians, who preached the peaceful testament of Jesus Christ but ruled using torture and fear. The Spanish were subsequently conquered by the United States, who brought the greedy third religion of Capitalism, which preaches using and abusing anyone to gain private wealth. The painting reveals a central figure in the process of being constrained, from one side, by a Spanish Conquistador, who holds a golden cross in his right hand. On the opposite side is an
Aztec Eagle warrior holding a bloody heart, and above them all is Uncle Sam who is shoving dollar bills down the main figure’s throat.

The final wall, consisting mostly of glass windows, again posed the problem of being unable to hang anything in this area. Keeping with the idea of transforming the space into a chapel, it came to me that I could use the windows to my advantage. Recalling the stained glass windows of iconic religious imagery I had seen so many times, I was struck with the idea of mimicking the stained glass: I would transform the three large framed windows by once again using vinyl stickers. In each window frame I placed a black sticker that converted it into an arch. Each black arch became the new window frame for three icons representing the three elements of Chicano religious identity. Referencing the same ideas of Meso-American beliefs, United States’ Capitalism, and Spanish Catholicism from the previous painting, the three elements of Chicano identity are further reduced into icons.

In the first arched window, I placed a simplified Chac Mool symbol, a statue found in ancient Meso-American religious centers, of a reclined figure with arms lifting up a vessel for sacrificial offerings. The third of the arched windows frames a chalice, symbolizing the cup used during Mass which transforms communion wine into the blood of Christ, which is then drank by the congregation. Both symbols come from cultures that were oceans apart, but each used in similar fashion: religious vessels for sacrificial blood. The Spanish and Aztec empires were both bloodthirsty conquerors—the blood of their conquests fermented in religion.

Between these two icons is the final element of Chicano religious identity. The third conquest is what differentiates Chicanos from *mexicanos*—the conquest by the United States. A third conquering empire, obsessed with consumerism and capitalism, does not hesitate to spill blood to remain in control. I meditated on what simple icon I could use to represent it. What object could represent an almost religious fervor for consumerism, worshiped by society? What modern day vessel holds the sacrificial blood of humans … and then it hit me: television. Of course, the TV is worshiped religiously by millions, and publicizes bloody sacrifice, from movies to the nightly news. And all the programming is brought to us on behalf of the almighty dollar. An icon of a television with a dollar sign on the screen is what I finally used for the final element in the center arch. In effect, it became the title of the show: “In Between the Chac Mool and the Chalice.” The idea is that in being between spaces, not “Mexican” enough and not “American” enough, Chicanos lie somewhere in between: balancing on the border between cultures, languages, nations and religious beliefs.

To the right of the windows was the final space I needed to fill: a small wall with a framed cork board that could not be removed. Because of its permanent nature, I had once again to adapt to the area. I was lucky enough to identify a piece that fit just inside the cork board frame: a white silk banner with gold fringe I made a year ago for a religious exhibit in Jalisco, Mexico. The piece is designed like the religious banners seen in Catholic churches. The flag features a royal blue key crossed by a DNA double helix and represents the two faiths of science and religion. Used for good, science and religion can be enlightening and beneficial for humanity, but used for evil, they can both be horrible destructive powers. The two depictions are keys of life, one for the now—the scientific double helix; and one for the afterlife—the biblical key to the
kingdom of God. Above the two keys is a mushroom cloud and beneath them a dove, both painted in the same royal blue color. Religion can foster morality and peace for humanity, but has also been used to motivate persecution, torture and war. Science, with its ability to cure the sick, harness energy, and help us understand the natural world, can also be used solely for destruction as with the atomic explosion.

This small exhibit turned out to be much more for me than merely hanging work on the wall. It became an evaluation of, and reflection on, what I had unknowingly been working on for a long time. Back home in New Mexico, I have family and friends who are Santeros, artists who specialize in the traditional folk art of creating saints. My friend Vicente, who is a Santero, once asked me why I never got into making saints. I responded that's not what I was into, without realizing I was creating santos, in my own very non-traditional way. It's amazing how you can be doing something for a long time, and not consciously realize you are doing it. It's amazing how ideas and influences seep into our subconscious, only to be expressed or discovered later.

I moved from New Mexico about five years ago and currently live in the Pilsen neighborhood of Chicago, a neighborhood speckled with churches on every block. Though I am far from my Catholic upbringing, I can still find a common thread in every Mexican/Mexican-American barrio I've been to. The Catholic iconography is a constant wherever I go. I can always find a Virgen de Guadalupe looking down at me whether I'm in Los Angeles, Chicago or Albuquerque. Catholic iconography is like La Virgen, embedded into the very fabric of Mexican/Mexican-American life. Despite moving from Albuquerque to Chicago, I have not traveled far enough to escape the stares of the saints, nor would I want to be hidden from their line of sight, which continues to influence me.