

WOUNDED BODIES: An Image of Mexico at the End of the Century

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The exhibition of "The Alluded Body: Anatomies and Constructions", presented in the National Art Museum in Mexico City (Nov. 1998-May 1999) is a milestone in the representation of the body in Mexican artistic work. It marks a constant concern, expressed historically. The presence of the body has been frequent in Mexican painting since pre-Columbian murals and sculpture, in Colonial art, and in nineteenth and early twentieth century art. However, after a parenthesis of abstract and geometric art, specially during the 1960s and 70s, the body as an artistic motif appears in a new and very important manner during the 80s and 90s.

In the pre-Columbian world, with human sacrifices as a part of religion, there are works of art concerning the body. An example is Coyolxauhqui, the cut-up woman: in the myth of Huitzilopochtli, Coatlicue's children (Coyolxauhqui, the moon, and 400 sons, the stars) are defeated by their newborn brother Huitzilopochtli, the sun. The mythology of pre-Columbian religions depicts a terrible world, with slayings, flayings, and sacrifices for the gods.

After the Conquest of Mexico, during the 16th century, there were very few nudes, due to the Catholic Church's censorship,

except for some nude Christs and some saints during martyrdom.

Two examples are Sumaya's *Saint Sebastian*, which was placed in the altar of Pardon in the old Cathedral in Mexico City and later moved to the 17th century Cathedral, which remains until today, and a sculpture also of Saint Sebastian in the church of Xochimilco. During the 16th and early 17th century, there is still a liking for the body in art, such as the paintings of Echave Orío and Echave Ibá. But during the 17th century, the Church's censorship became much stronger.

In the 19th century, the Liberal world allows nudes; however, a self-censorship persists in the artists. In 1888, Felipe Santiago Gutiérrez is the first artist to paint a nude woman, an Amazon of the Andes. And at the turn of the century, the *fin de siècle* phenomenon comes from Europe to Mexico, and appears in the work of Julio Ruelas, with the idea of the *femme fatale* who destroys humiliated men.

Later on, during the 1920s, with the beginning of modern times, a new tradition is founded, totally breaking with the previous one: there is a new manner of expression in art

starting in 1923 with Roberto Montenegro and Diego Rivera (who paints the first murals), and there is a renewed liking for the body, both male and female. Sensuality is evident, for example, in Rivera's murals in the choir and the apse in Chapingo (by the way, Tina Modotti, the photographer, posed for Rivera for these

murals). On the other hand, José Clemente Orozco in 1913-1915 painted whores in the series of *The House of Weeping* as well as heroic female bodies, as in *Omniscience* (in Mexico City). But later he starts to represent pain and tragedy, as in *Catharsis* (1934) in the Palace of Fine Arts, and in the murals of the University of Guadalajara. Orozco portrays destructive and destroyed women, painful bodies, while Diego Rivera prefers representing beautiful women. Other artists of that generation are: Raúl Anguiano (the work of 1939-40), David Alfaro Siqueiros, Jorge González Camarena, and José Chávez Morado, who paint heroic figures and civic images (honoring the Revolution of 1910), as well as very muscular bodies of Indians and workers.

However, in the 1920s, there is also a countermovement with very sensuous and sometimes terrible images, as in the work of Julio Castellanos: *St. John's Day*, based on a photograph by Lola Alvarez Bravo (which is now in Banamex) or *The Hut* (in the Museum of Modern Art). Alfonso Michel also paints many sensuous bodies, like his Adam; and Frida Kahlo, not only in her self-portraits, but also where she "undresses" her image in a painting, as in *A Few Little Shots*. Somewhat later, the work of Juan Soriano is worth mentioning, such as, for example, the painting of *Saint Hieronymus* (the nude saint inside a house, with a sheet hanging over the window as a curtain, and the image

of a Memento Mori in a skeleton on a painting on the wall behind him).

From the history of photography in Mexico, we should remember Edward Weston, who lived a few years in Mexico with Tina Modotti; Tina, who later became a photographer, was his model for the "nudes on the roof". His work is related to that of Manuel Alvarez Bravo's renowned photos of nudes, such as *The Sleeping Fame* (1927) and later *The Murdered Worker*. There is a surrealistic idea in the latter with the image of death and blood on the floor. Later on, Héctor García produces important work in this field. Antonio Reynoso also photographs bodies, and sometimes disfigured bodies, as in *The Fat Woman* (1960).

The changes in art during the 1960s run, more or less, along the roads of abstractionism (Manuel Felguérez, Vicente Rojo, Lilia Carrillo, and many others). However, during the 70s, the non-figurative abstract painting becomes more sensuous, such as in the work of Irma Palacios, in which the concern for representing forms is much stronger than in the previous decade. Within this rupture of the 60s, there is also a recovering of the body, as for example in José Luis Cuevas, with depictions of brothels, Kafka's characters, and insane asylums. In the Cuevas Museum (inaugurated in 1993), there is a room for erotic work where, among others, there is a test tube containing semen.

We no longer see the "classical idea", but rather that of a hurt and wounded body.

Essential in Mexican art, in the second generation of the rupture with the school of muralism, is the work of Francisco Toledo, with his figurative images of animals in sexual relations with men and women, often with an implicit or explicit strong erotic seal (for example, fish that are penises), and with figures or scenes adapted from Zapotec mythology. Among his important works, there are self-portraits which are photographs of his own naked body with an erect penis (Carrillo Gil Museum and University of Guadalajara), as well as other photographic self-portraits, in which the head appears covered with a tortoise shell or a lizard, and the penis is shown. In 1972, Ricardo Rocha proposed, for the cover of the *Revista de la Universidad*, a painting composed of women's genitalia. All these artists have the notion of recovering the body in art, but the real phenomenon occurs in the 1980s. The representation of the body acquires strength in other art forms as well, combining traditional concerns with the search for new forms of expression.

In the 80s there is a "boom" of the representation of the human body in art. In Mexico there has always been a problem of censorship, due to the influence of the Catholic Church. Erotic images were banned. Even though things changed a bit during the

70s, censorship has not been eliminated. In 1977 a painter was beat up in the University for his work. When I was director of the Museum of Modern Art, we had an exhibition of the winners of an art contest. One of them, De la Rosa, painted a Virgin of Guadalupe with Marilyn Monroe's face and body, and Christ in the Last Supper, with the face of the popular actor and singer Pedro Infante. Another painting by the same artist was the national flag stepped on by a pair of boots. This provoked violent reactions from the Church (in Cerro del Cubilete), and their organization Pro-Life (in the Museum and in the central plaza) tried to destroy the exhibition. This incident was a landmark in the artistic community, and the director and sub-director were removed from their posts. There was a lot of support and proposals for the Museum, murals were painted on the subject, and there was a festival in the San Francisco plaza under the direction of the actress Jesusa Rodríguez. After all the protest, there were threats of closing down plays that had to do with religion or that were against "moral standards".

But the body and its implications continued developing in art, and artists have gained more freedom and new spaces. In Mexico, since the 80s there was also a concern for creating new art genres. In the National Institute of Fine Arts (INBA), the museum had rooms for conventional genres, such as painting, sculpture, etching, and others, but not for the new forms. In

1983, Oscar Urrutia inaugurated a few rooms in the Palace of Fine Arts for what he called "alternative art" (objects, happenings, installations, performances, etc.). Other spaces were also created with the support of the National Institute of Fine Arts, such as the Ex Teresa in 1989, invented by the painter Eloy Tarcisio, in order to display these different forms: the Antigua church and its 17th century convent, out of use for many years, was recovered with its atriums, cloisters and inner rooms, for alternative art. Many museums also opened rooms for these new forms and new artists, such as the Museum of Modern Art, which includes Nahum Zenil's work called *I too was a Mexican*: his self-portrait and the portrait of his boyfriend on a bed, covered by the Mexican flag. There are also new spaces in the Carrillo Gil Museum, the Tamayo Museum, and the University Museum of El Chopo. Gabriel Macotela opened a multimedia show in an abandoned movie theater, the Ideal. In photography, among the new artists are Armando Cristeto, Rogelio Villarreal, Adolfo Patiño (for example, a group of chairs with the portraits of painters and art critics). And young artists find and create new alternative spaces, such as La Quiñonera, Temístocles, and La Panadería, among others. It is important to mention the annual show of gay and lesbian art in the University museum of El Chopo, which has been going on for 15 years, and the show of erotic art in the Carrillo Gil Museum.

On the other hand, during these years there has been a remarkable increase in the presence of nudes in theater and cinema. For example, when Jorge Ibargüengoitia wrote his plays, he did not consider any erotic scenes, but director Ludwig Margules' staging transforms the play into something different, with nudes and sexual intercourse on scene, much more explicitly. Another example can be seen in Julio Castillo's work: as a director, his stagings make the plays terrifying and very strong. Sergio Magaña's play is also worth mentioning: it is about the *Rabinal Achí* of the mayas, during the 16th century; there are two characters, an Indian and a Spaniard, who wants to know the details of human sacrifice; after insisting, the Indian accepts describing the details and, in the end, the Spaniard must live the sacrifice in his own flesh.

The idea of a destroyed body also appears in photography, such as in Pedro Meyer's mutilated *Sandinista Guerrilla Fighter* (1982), in Rogelio Cuéllar (also the idea of the body in difficult positions, such as an anus, that is, a body upside down), Eniac Martínez, Pedro Valtierra (pictures of the miners' protest of 1985: naked men with helmets), Slim (naked or half-naked homeless young men with pants that are huge at the seat and punk hair-styles, which represent bodies hurt by poverty and its conditions (in Chopo Museum), and Marco A. Pacheco's *Divine Proportion* (three photographs of a dwarf). In 1993, the

Carrillo Gil Museum presented an show called "Transgressions of the Body", cured by Edgar Ganado, which could be considered as a predecessor of "The Alluded Body".

Among the new forms of seeing the body in art, it is interesting to mention several artists. In the first place, there is Enrique Guzmán who, although he committed suicide being very young, was a preceding character, because the subject of the wounded body begins with his work: he included elements like razor blades, the nostalgia for the body, or the national flag with a shoe on it. Before he died, he destroyed a large part of his work in Aguascalientes. But, in a certain way, he is the "grandfather" of the younger painters of the 80s.

Examples of artists after Guzmán are, among others: César Martínez, who has worked on the image of Michelangelo's David on the computer, with an erect penis and other variables. The sculptor Reynaldo Velázquez, for example, with his piece *Supine*, which is a full-sized wooden naked man lying on a cot with an erect penis, or *Dulcior quae favis*; Velázquez's work has an extraordinary technical quality but, at the same time, there are forms which are somewhat surrealistic: in itself, the fact of such a perfect supine body in normal size is a terrible and ambiguous representation, since it is not clear whether it is dead or alive.

Another important artist is Germán Venegas, for example, with a woman painted from behind and from below with her genitalia upside down, and on the face is the artist's self-portrait; his father used to make religious objects and, following this tradition, Venegas also creates wooden carved half-broken bodies, male and female genitalia, and forms that are difficult to understand.

Nahum Zenil often puts his own face on the characters of his paintings, or sometimes also his boyfriend's portrait; an example is a drawing of a scene that resembles a family portrait after a wedding, in which all the characters have the artist's face, or another painting of a child with the face of the adult artist, which produces a somewhat grotesque impression; Zenil has also created many very realistic erotic images of the erect penis, and a full-size image of himself, naked and standing, with all the details, and instead of the face there is a hole, so that anyone can look through that hole and assume the artist's body (as in popular Mexican fairs).

Julio Galán has an obsession with childhood, and, like Zenil, paints different figures (including a woman in a typical dress, "china poblana") with his own face.

Eloy Tarcisio uses several symbolic elements, such as hearts, for example in the human sacrifice of the ancient Aztecs, but there is no intention of stylizing the scenes, for

the pictures have been painted with ox blood; there are also the flowers used in Mexico for the Day of the Dead, called *cempasúchil*; there are scenes, which remind us of what could have been a ceremony in the 16th or 17th century world, for example a man and a woman's mouths holding an obsidian flint, symbolizing a kiss through the weapon of death. Tarcisio has made installations with wooden crosses and *cempasúchil* flowers (the first was in 1982 in the Tolsá Plaza in Mexico City), with a public use, so that any visitor can place an offering in honor of their own deceased relatives.

I would also like to mention Miguel González Casanova, whose work represents women with kitchen utensils. And Semefo, an artists' group with the subject of forensic services, autopsies, corpses, etc., terrible and sordid; among them is Marta Pacheco from Guadalajara.

The 1999 exhibition of "The Alluded Body" is very important, since it collects, in one show, many artists and their work in which the idea of the body, male and female, emerges as a specific phenomenon, produced mainly during the 80s and the 90s, although it appeared since the 1920s.

After abstractionism and the new trends of the 60s and 70s, this concern for representing the body in art returns in new forms. It is no longer a body as the representation of beauty

in the traditional manner, but rather -and this is very important- now it is a body that is wounded, hurt, virtually or physically abused. Thus, the idea of the body is, at the same time, the idea of a subjected body and that of, at least, a virtually unknown body. In its transgressions, it is no longer the image of "beauty", but of a mislaid reality expressed by means of the body.

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I would also like to mention Miguel González Casanova, whose work represents women with Witches' skulls. And finally, an artists' group with the subject of forensic services, autopsies, corpses, etc., terrible and horrible among them is María Pacheco from Guadalajara.

The 1999 exhibition of "The Altered Body" is very important, since it collects, in one show, many artists and their work in which the idea of the body, male and female, emerges as a specific phenomenon, produced mainly during the 80s and the 90s, although it appeared since the 1970s.

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