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# HEMISPHERE

VISUAL CULTURES *of the* AMERICAS

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VOLUME VIII, 2015

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## VISUAL CULTURES *of the* AMERICAS

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VOLUME VIII, 2015

*Hemisphere* is an annual publication produced by graduate students affiliated with the Department of Art and Art History at the University of New Mexico (UNM). *Hemisphere* provides a forum for graduate students to present scholarship and studio practice pertaining to all aspects and time periods of the visual and material cultures of North, Central, and South America, and related world contexts. Through the production of *Hemisphere* students promote their educational and professional interests as they gain first-hand experience in academic publishing. Although the inaugural issue highlighted essays, reviews, and artwork by graduate students from the Department of Art and Art History at UNM, subsequent editions consist of work submitted by graduate students at other universities in the United States. The journal welcomes and will continue to accept submissions from authors at other institutions in and outside of the United States. A call will be sent out each year to invite submissions for the next issue.

Subscriptions are not available at this time; however, we welcome donations to support the production of *Hemisphere*.





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## SANDRA MONTERROSO: Cultural Subversions

SARA GARZON, PH.D. CANDIDATE IN ART HISTORY, CORNELL UNIVERSITY, 2015

Sandra Monterroso is currently one of the major exponents of indigenous contemporary Latin American art. Her work is complex insofar as it deals with multiple layers of signification such as ideas of ritual, the colonial legacy, and the concept of hybridity. The artist initially worked with photography and printmaking, however, it was not until the end of the civil war in Guatemala in 1996 that Monterroso began using her body as her preferred medium. She has since produced a series of provocative video-performances that question conventional notions of culture, tradition, and heritage. Integrating both linguistic strategies and traditional artisanal practices into her work Monterroso challenges conceptions of indigeneity as she strives to regain acceptance into the Maya Q'eqchi' community while also asserting her identity as one that is fluid and multiple.

Sandra Monterroso (b. 1974) was born in Guatemala City amidst a Civil War that lasted over thirty years. The artist began her quest to better understand her indigeneity and the boundaries of her mestizo identity when one day, confronted by the passing of her grandmother, she realized that they did not speak the same language, that her grandmother and her were culturally different, and that she knew very little of her own ancestry. It is at this juncture in time that Monterroso's practice starts to gravitate towards topics that deal with her indigenous background, especially the exploration of power and gender relations. Even though Monterroso's work addresses pan-indigenous concerns and makes allusions to Mayan cosmology, she is fundamentally rooted in contemporary art practice.

The use of language, autobiographical references, and the body are the strategies that enable Monterroso to question her subjectivity as a mestizo woman seeking to assert her native lineage all the while contesting the position of the indigenous as subjects of the past. The artist's appropriation of Q'eqchi' culture such as weaving techniques, rituals of healing and other cosmological epistemes can be further read as "decolonial aesthesis"—a term coined by the members of the working group modernity/coloniality/decoloniality.<sup>1</sup> The analysis of Monterroso's work through the lens of decolonial aesthesis acknowledges and validates personal and amalgamated experiences as forms of cultural production. Interested in the fluidity of identity and culture, Monterroso's performative works such as *Meditando El Error* (2008), *La Devolución del Penacho de Vucub Caquix* (2014), *Rakoc Atin* (2008), *Lavar el Miedo* (2003), *Lix Cua Rahro. Tus Tortillas mi Amor* (2004-05), *Colorando y Decolorando las Hebras* (2011), among others, demonstrate the numerous ways in which the artist strives to understand the fluidity of her hybridity as a mestizo woman while in turn revealing the deep roots of colonization.



FIGURE 1. Sandra Monterroso, *Meditando el Error*, 2008. Video-Performance, length 5:48 mins. Courtesy of the artist.

*Meditando el Error* (2008) is one of Monterroso's seminal works. With this performance the artist highlights her concerns with identity and culture, which are key to understanding the driving force behind her work. In *Meditando El Error* (Figure 1), Monterroso reflects on the impossibility of moving forward from the colonial legacy in Guatemala, and questions how the Maya are constantly exoticized and reduced to a mere object of investigation by mainstream society.<sup>2</sup> In the video, two performers, a male and a female, lie next to each other on an elaborate, colonial-style bed. At first the female attempts to stand up, but is inevitably pulled back by the string attaching one to the other. Similarly, the male partner repeats the action. The performance takes place in a private domestic space first, but later it is moved to a rural outdoor setting. Here, the two individuals, now standing, continue to pull away from each other in order to advance, but evidently cannot move much farther. While performing the artist utters Maya Q'eqchi' phrases that allude to issues confronting the indigenous communities in present-day Guatemala such as: "I can't get a job anywhere," "It's a problem to have children," "You are a coward," and "I'm used to it already."<sup>3</sup> The performance and its accompanying dialogue outline the vestiges of colonization, but also reveal an important relational dynamic. The relation enacted by the couple in the video becomes evident through the nature of the voices, which sound more like internal thoughts than actual utterances. The effect is intentional as the artist seeks to present the kind of silent and intuitive dialogue that couples develop after cohabitating for an extended period of time.<sup>4</sup>

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The artist articulates the kind of cultural paradoxes that are at the core of her practice: “There are twenty-two different indigenous languages being spoken in Guatemala all originating from the Maya, where the Q’eqchi’ is the most widely spoken in Guatemala and Belize, and yet none of these are recognized on a geopolitical map.”<sup>5</sup> The absence and invisibility of both language and ethnicities in representations of the world, such as political maps, problematize their possible relationship with a “global collective,” and so the artist asks: “How can [indigenous people] belong and express loyalty to a specific cultural group and a global community at the same time?”<sup>6</sup> Sandra Monterroso’s question is a thought-provoking one. The lack of awareness and appreciation of indigenous nations within the imagination of mainstream societies, as conveyed in conceptual illustrations of the world like maps or historical documents, limits our perception of the cultural groups that constitute the world. In this sense, it is almost impossible for those living between national borders, and overlooked by the homogenizing eye of the colonial enterprise, to have an agency in history and its hegemonic institutions of legitimization.

Monterroso’s recurrent use of Q’eqchi’ elucidates how the assimilation of Spanish has not only overshadowed hundreds of native languages and dialects, but also rendered them almost inexistent in our collective consciousness. What is at stake in the denial of language is the elimination of peoples’ cosmologies, and their sense of self and history. The association of native languages with the past thus renders inactive and illegitimate the people who speak those languages and robs them of any political, social, and cultural agency. Argentine semiotician Walter Mignolo speaks of the colonization of knowledge and beings not only in language but also in aesthetics, which perpetuates the logic of coloniality through the imposition of a Western normativity in the “processes of thinking and doing, of sensing and existing.”<sup>7</sup>

Based on the eighteenth-century Maya Q’eqchi’ *Popol Vuh* (Book of Knowledge), Monterroso’s video art project titled *La Devolución del Penacho de Vucub Caquix* (*The Return of Vucub Caquix’s Feather Crown*, 2014, Figure 2) revitalizes a specific motif from indigenous cosmological knowledge. In this work, Monterroso references the tale of Vucub Caquix, a bird demon in Maya cosmology that personifies the mortal vices of pride, wrath, vanity, lust, jealousy, and greed. In the story, Vucub Caquix equates himself to the gods by pretending to be the Sun and the Moon and is consequently punished by Hunahpu, one of the Maya twin heroes. The tale, which has been known since 200 BCE, is an allegory of the defeat of evil and the return of harmony.<sup>8</sup> To make manifest this ancient mythological story, Monterroso places herself naked inside a rectangular structure made of transparent Plexiglas. Standing inside, the artist is showered by hundreds of black feathers as she slowly turns around. The feathers pile up on top of her shoulders and in between her hands. The shower of black feathers results in her body being covered in black, while the transparency of the Plexiglas is also tainted. The play between clarity and opacity reveals the borderlines of truth, alluding to the ways in which the vices of the conquest are still evident today.



FIGURE 2. Sandra Monterroso, *La Devolución del Penacho de Vucub Caquix*, 2014. Video-Performance, length 1:05 mins. Courtesy of the artist.

The feathers further allude to a controversial dispute over Moctezuma’s iconic sixteenth-century *Penacho* (feather headdress), which is today housed in the Weltmuseum in Vienna. Referencing the dispute over the rightful return of Moctezuma’s feather headdress to Mexico, which Austrian government and museum officials have refused, the artist asks: “Who should this woman, the artist acting as the representative of those who fell during the conquest five hundred years ago, be returning Moctezuma’s feather crown to?”<sup>9</sup> At first, this articulation evokes the dispute between Mexico and Austria over the *Penacho*,<sup>10</sup> but it also confronts the logic of colonization and encourages more questioning—why not return it to the Aztecs, who are the rightful heirs of this cultural patrimony? Is it because there are no surviving Aztec communities in present-day Mexico, or, more likely, because the rhetoric of colonization has made illegitimate their claim to history?<sup>11</sup> In addition, by simultaneously referencing two distinct Mesoamerican groups, the Maya and the Aztec, the artist is more broadly addressing a long-standing pan-indigenous concern about cultural appropriation and sovereignty.





FIGURE 3. Sandra Monterroso, *Rakoc Atin/Hacer Justicia*, 2008. Video-Performance, duration 6:17 mins. Courtesy of the artist.

Addressing the oppression of indigenous people, Monterroso's video-performance titled *Rakoc Atin/Hacer Justicia* (2008, Figure 3) reflects the contradictory relationship between mestizo society in Guatemala and native communities. Performing in front of Guatemala's Supreme Court, the artist writes in salt the words "RAKOC ATIN," which in Q'eqchi' means "to make justice."<sup>12</sup> The action also includes four medical intravenous stands, each holding two large bags of IV solution. During the performance, the artist moves the IV stands slowly letting the solution escape, and creating holes where the salt dissolves. The dissolution of the letters refers in turn, to the absence of justice. The performance uses the public space and the Q'eqchi' language to provoke the audience to consider the unpunished crimes and systematic violence inflicted upon indigenous people by the government and other social actors.<sup>13</sup> More specifically *Rakoc Atin/Hacer Justicia* addresses the aftermath of the military dictatorship of Efraín Ríos Montt (1982–83), who, a few months after being convicted of genocide for killing 1,771 Maya-Ixil, was released by the Guatemalan Constitutional Court. During the genocide, Indian corpses were thrown in the Pacific Ocean denying them proper burial or rituals of mourning.<sup>14</sup> Consequently the use of salt is a double metaphor that points to the government's complicity in the bodies' defilement, but also, paradoxically, makes reference to salt as a material used in Maya ceremonies of healing.<sup>15</sup>

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The use of both verbal and written language is central to Monterroso's work. Not only does the use of Q'eqchi' in her performances bring this particular tongue to the forefront on discussions of decoloniality as an act of resistance, but it also allows the viewer to reflect on how reading and writing are actually the result of modern conventions. In respect to language as a strategy of confrontation, the scholar Helen Potkin speaks about the importance of utilizing language when she states: "The idea of reclaiming language or 'claiming voice' is seen [as] central to the process of decolonization...In this context, performance is understood as a site of opposition and cultural resistance."<sup>16</sup> Similarly, "reclaiming language" in the work of Sandra Monterroso serves as a strategy to challenge claims of cultural superiority by confronting and denouncing injustice. This idea is also key in understanding the importance of language, specifically the utterance in indigenous rituals as a medium for the transfer of knowledge. Performance scholar Diana Taylor in her book, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, writes: "Although the Aztecs, Mayas, and Incas practiced writing before the conquest—either in pictogram form, hieroglyphs, or knotted systems—it never replaced the performed utterance. Writing, though highly valued, was primarily a prompt to performance, a mnemonic aid."<sup>17</sup> According to this line of thought, it is possible to comprehend how Monterroso's objective with the use of language is twofold. Not only is it significant to write the words "RAKOC ATIN" for reasons discussed above, but also the utterance is in itself a performative act, one that implies a demand, and not a plea.



FIGURE 4. Sandra Monterroso, *Lavar el Miedo*, 2003. Performance. Courtesy of the artist.

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In her performance *Lavar el Miedo* (2008, Figure 4), Monterroso further references salt as a physical and symbolic material capable of healing. The discrimination, persecution and violence against those of native descent, which has scarred Guatemala for decades, has made loneliness, depression, and fear endemic among native communities. The artist's action is a ritual of healing that involves water for the purpose of purification and salt for curing. Using traditional ceramic vases typically used for carrying water, the artist symbolically cleanses fear.<sup>18</sup> Lying on a pool of salt, Monterroso pours water onto herself and rubs the salt all over her body until it begins to dissolve. The artist's use of the body allows her to incarnate and make specific the suffering of hundreds, if not thousands, of people. Furthermore, the act of performing in a public space to denounce an injustice or a social transgression activates the audience by implicating them as part of the proceedings.

Through performance Monterroso similarly uses her body as the medium through which she can comment on indigenous practices, and addresses certain issues like gender and racial hybridity. Incorporating herself within the wider practice of performance art, Monterroso conflates the artist's body with the spiritual and symbolic language of the ritual. This strategy is complex as it can be read through different theoretical lenses, including the feminist use of the body as a way of resisting being spoken about and represented by others. The use of the artist's body as a medium can be traced back to feminist and conceptual artists such as Carolee Scheenmann (American, b. 1939) Marta Minujín (Argentina, b. 1943) and Ana Mendieta (Cuban-American, 1948-1985), among many others working in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Although Monterroso does not consider herself a feminist artist, she has indeed created series of works to confront gender and ethnic relations such as *Lix Cua Rahro. Tus Tortillas mi Amor* (2004–5) *La Demoledora* (2010), *Acciones para Abolir el Deseo* (2012) and *Deformación* (2007). In the video-performance *Lix Cua Rahro. Tus Tortillas mi Amor* (Figure 5) the artist is situated in a private space where she obsessively prepares tortillas for an imaginary beloved one.<sup>20</sup> The preparation of



FIGURE 5. Sandra Monterroso, *Lix Cua Rahro. Tus Tortillas mi Amor*, 2004-2005. Video-Performance, Length 12:34 mins. Courtesy of the artist.



corn tortillas involves the use of the body, which the artist herself asserts as being part of nature and thus having an inherent wisdom.<sup>21</sup> During the action, Monterroso takes large bites directly from the corncobs, thoroughly chewing the corn and then spitting it into a cooking pan. After the artist has chewed enough corn she mixes it with water and additional saliva, slowly creating solid dough. Separating the dough into small balls, she carefully makes round, flat tortillas, which she then decorates with a heart-shaped stamp she then colors red. This particularly obsessive and slightly grotesque way of making tortillas is reminiscent of a love potion, which is further enacted by the artist's recitation of a poem in Maya Q'eqchi'. This poem includes phrases such as "love until the break of dawn," "killer of white butterflies," "we are women," "loneliness," "your darkness," and "body and soul."<sup>22</sup> As described by the artist, the poem imparts a sense of the imperfection or disequilibrium through which gender relations are juxtaposed. In this piece, Monterroso also speaks of her own background as a *ladina*—a Spanish-speaking Indian—who strives to gain acceptance from the Q'eqchi' community.

As aspects of Maya Q'eqchi' culture remain strongly patriarchal, women continue to be relegated to traditional roles and jobs including cooking, raising children, and attending to their partners' needs. The artist critiques these gendered values in the Maya Q'eqchi community as a harmful perpetuation of such cultural traditions. In another performance titled *La Demoledora* (*The Demolisher*, Figure 6), the artist uses a steamroller to run over and flatten a series of cooking pots, which are used to make tamales, as a metaphor for the need to destroy the rhetoric of cultural processes and challenge established dynamics of power.<sup>24</sup> Fiona Carson, in her essay "Notes on Notebook," elaborates on the importance of the use of the female body when inverting gender relations by stating: "Through restoring the female body, performance art by women has sought to dismantle dominant constructions



FIGURE 6. Sandra Monterroso, *La Demoledora*, 2010. Vide-Performance, length 1:54 mins. Courtesy of the artist.

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of women. It is claimed that performance's speaking, moving subject resists the assumptions of the passive female, and challenges the patriarchal gaze."<sup>25</sup> This is especially evident in Monterroso's aggressive placement of herself in the driving seat of a construction vehicle, a position typically occupied by men. The driver position imparts a sense of empowerment, which she then uses to physically run over and symbolically destroy a gender stereotype. More specifically, Monterroso's gender critique addresses the Maya Q'eqchi' custom of giving girls as young as ten years old in marriage, in the belief that if they refuse, a curse will befall the entire family.<sup>26</sup> This practice claims the life of many young girls during childbirth every year and serves as evidence of the all-too-common violence perpetuated against indigenous women. In this sense, Monterroso's works also critically examines the relevance of certain Q'eqchi' traditions today.

The use of performance in the context of ritual, especially Native American spiritual practices, can be found in early artistic manifestations: Joseph Beuys's appropriation of the shamanistic and Joan Jonas's incorporation of elements in Hopi religious ceremonies.<sup>27</sup> Similarly involved in the performance of ritual, Sandra Monterroso creates *Mac/Culpa* (2006, Figure 7)—a cathartic action in which the artist, over the course of six minutes, destroys ceramic vases with a hammer. Situated in a white space, the artist wears all white and is barefooted. In the video, Monterroso systematically introduces several sets of vases and shatters them with a hammer until they are broken into very small pieces. As the artist performs this aggressive action, she utters in Q'eqchi' phrases: "My capture is imminent"; "Heart of the wooden stick thrown on the mountain, liberate me!"; "Guilty"; "I cheat on the shadows of the hill"; "Caress coldness with a hug to purify its soul a little bit"; and "He is guilty."<sup>28</sup> A poetic evocation of liberation from both the shackles of patriarchy as well as those imposed by culture, by heritage, and by the past. Toward the end of the performance, the artist drags the shattered pieces of ceramic with her feet in an attempt to create a circle, a shape which is typically used in Mayan rituals, all the while whistling a nursery rhyme that was passed onto her by her grandmother as if performing a ritual herself.



FIGURE 7. Sandra Monterroso, *Mac/Culpa*, 2006. Video-Performance, length 6:00 mins. Courtesy of the artist.

The validity of Monterroso's use of the body in autobiographical performance can be explained as what scholar Suzette Henkke described as the capacity of the "author" to emerge from a cultural periphery by representing him/herself as an empowered protagonist of a self-created narrative that confronts and even subverts the values that relegate him/her to the margins.<sup>29</sup> Monterroso's use of the body, her personal experience, and allusions to ritual allow her to rise from a neglected periphery as a political and social individual with voice and agency in the present.

The destruction of objects with important symbolic meanings is a recurrent expression in the work of Monterroso. The intentional and physical shattering of the vases, which are here understood as markers of cultural heritage, is not necessarily performed only with the simple intention of destroying, but also of reviving. The artist thus describes *Mac/Culpa*:

The destruction of things questions the barbarism, the injustice of quotidian life and work that is imposed by modern society. The performance is a symbolic action of a woman who liberates herself and gains consciousness through the violent play of destruction. The ceramic vases are transformed, as they are exempt from being utilitarian objects. They stop being containers of commonness, stop being captives of themselves and are freed from their function. This work is both an irrational and corporal impulse generated through the act of destroying, while in the meantime the woman, like in a dream, whispers, claims, expresses herself in the mimesis of the play between death, life and the revindication of sensibility.<sup>30</sup>

In this sense, the act of destruction provides a moment in which the artist, an indigenous woman, becomes activated as she emerges from her rupture with symbols that are often associated with folklore and exoticism. Monterroso, however, is not the only or the first artist to symbolically break with an item that epitomizes a local cultural legacy. Another significant example of this practice is the work of the Chinese artist and activist Ai Weiwei, titled *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (1995). Displayed in a photographic triptych, the artist is shown, step-by-step, as he drops from a height an antique urn from the Han Dynasty: an act to metaphorically represent a breakage with the cultural values associated with the social history of China.<sup>31</sup> In a similar way, Monterroso's piece *Mac/Culpa* breaks with a cultural symbol but with the new understanding that culture, like energy, cannot be destroyed, only transformed. In her essay, "The Modes and Materials of Identity," Art Historian Charlotte Townsend-Gault further develops the idea of a break with the past in Native American artistic practices: "The argument, commonly attributed to anthropologists, but in fact made

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in many quarters, that if Native artists abandon tradition they lose their identity, even betray it, raises the question of what 'tradition' is, and, by consigning their culture to a past, seems to overlook its present."<sup>32</sup> This statement elucidates the importance of Monterroso's piece *Mac/Culpa* as a way to resist the presumption that people of indigenous descent, as symbols of culture, are bound simply to produce objects of folkloric function and aesthetic.

Since an art historical discourse on Contemporary Indigenous Art in Latin America has only emerged in recent years, Contemporary Native American Art and Chicano art practices in the United States, which started in the early 1970s, can provide a valuable platform for contextualization. In addressing concerns of objectification and exoticism of native communities, the work of the artists Guillermo Gómez-Peña (Mexican-American, b. 1955), Edgar Heap of Bird (Cheyenne-Arapaho, b. 1954) and the Payómkawichum artist James Luna (b. 1950) offer important precedents. Luna began working in the 1980s, and has since made poignant commentaries on the objectification of the American Indian in popular culture, and highlights the contradictory and complex relationship that people from the United States have with the local native communities. Luna's seminal performance, *The Artifact Piece* (1985–87), speaks to the Western fascination with foreign and exotic curiosities, a legacy of the *Kunstkammer* in the age of European colonization. In the performance, Luna lies in a display case as if he were a museum object, just like those in ethnographic or natural history museums. By allying himself with an inanimate thing exhibited for public consumption, Luna underlines the objectification of the American Indian who is frequently treated as a subject of investigation and evidence of a civilization of yore. The school of modernity/coloniality/decoloniality identifies this exoticizing perception of the Other as a result of modern aesthetics. Walter Mignolo and Rolando Vázquez concur.

Modern aesthetics has been such that what it excluded was erased; at best, it was accumulated in ethnological museums in order to 'preserve the cultures' that had already been deprived of their validity as contemporary aesthetics. One of the basic strategies of coloniality was the classification and ranking of people and regions. Racism manifests in both disqualifying the minds in bodies of color and disqualifying regions as 'falling behind' modernity (conceptualized as Second and Third Worlds, underdeveloped and emerging economies, etc.). People of color in relation to these regions are considered at best second-class people, artists, scientists, intellectuals, etc.<sup>33</sup>



This critique on the “curiosity” of mainstream societies and its perpetual exoticism of native peoples reveals how, not only in Guatemala, but all across the hemisphere, individuals of native descent are treated as historical subjects who only exist within the confines of memory. This mindset shows the ways in which the objectification of ethnic communities invalidates their belief system, knowledge, and cultural authenticity. This is why, by appropriating certain Mayan practices central to the performance and transfer of knowledge, Monterroso is able to contest the significance that these systems of knowledge have in her own identity construction.

In order to address her interest with the fluidity of identity, Monterroso creates a two-part performative action titled *Colorando y Decolorando las Hebras* (2011, Figure 8). In the video *Colorando las Hebras* (“Coloring the Threads”), the artist employs the traditional Maya technique of dyeing textiles, where using two wooden paddles she masters the strands of thread as she submerges them into a hot pot of water where the yellow dyes are concentrated. In this dance of hands it is possible to appreciate Monterroso’s agility in the way she handles the paddles to manipulate the threads without ever letting go or touching it with her hands. In contrast, the next video *Decolorando las Hebras* (“Discoloring the Threads”) shows the artist by the edge of river. This time, she is holding the threads with her hands as she scrubs them violently against each other and re-washes them with clean water. The artist scrubs and twists in a hopeless effort to wash the yellow color away. The concerted and patient process of coloring suddenly becomes a fierce and desperate act, which consequently reveals a sense of frustration, as the threads never completely revert to their original color. In this two-part performance, Monterroso directly explains what the Polish sociologist Zigmunt Bauman termed “liquid modernity.”<sup>34</sup> Bauman’s concept refers to the lightness or liquidity of life, love, emotions, and even art, resulting from Modernity and globalized societies.<sup>35</sup> Monterroso dyes the threads yellow, and

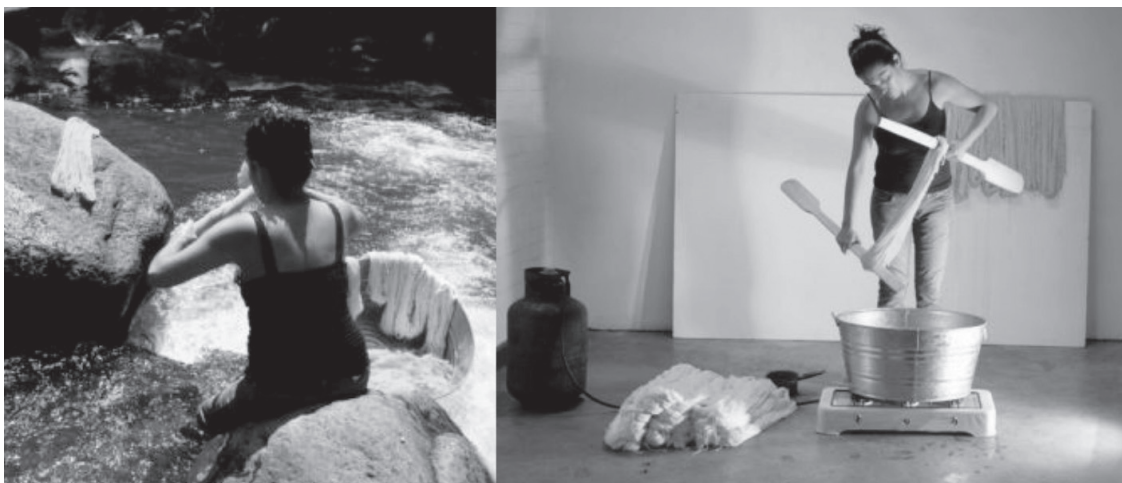


FIGURE 8. Sandra Monterroso, *Coloring and De-coloring the Threads*, 2011. Video-Performance. Courtesy of the artist.

then, through the impossible effort of de-coloring them, she emblematically tries to wash away the idea of the static and the permanent that is often associated with indigenous tradition, culture, and identity. As a performance piece, Monterroso comments both on Baumann's conception of the ephemeral quality of contemporary human relations, and invokes Mexican anthropologist Gilberto Gimenez. Gimenez opines, "Identity must not be understood as a homogenous, static, and immutable repertoire of meanings, because although it has certain areas of stability, it is always transforming."<sup>36</sup> Monterroso's references to Gimenez and Baum's theories on culture and identity are fundamental in understanding the changing nature of humans as social agents who are constantly in flux as they consume and create culture.<sup>37</sup>

Stemming from her performance *Coloring and De-coloring the Threads*, which was shown as part of the exhibition "Crossed Effects" at the Piegatto Gallery (2011, Guatemala City), the artist creates a series of knotted sculptures. These yellow knots stem directly from the traditional weaving technique called *Jaspe* or *Ikat*, which is intrinsically related to the dyeing process as this determines the texture and method of the weave.<sup>38</sup> The piece titled *Nudo Gordiano, Es Más Fácil Cortarlo que Desatarlo* (*Gordian Knot, it's Easier to Cut it than to Untie it*, 2011, Figure 11), moreover, makes reference to the classic myth of the Gordian Knot.<sup>39</sup> In this large installation the artist hangs a machete behind a large yellow knot to critique violence as a way to approach problems that are "hard to solve." According to the exhibition curator, Ernesto Calvo: "[the show] *Effectos Cruzados* . . . is not intended to evoke ethnic positions or determined political postures, but rather to provoke a reflection over the contradictions or ambiguities of said positions."<sup>40</sup> In this sense, the knots, like so many of Monterroso's works, underline the tensions produced from the continuous struggle to reconcile the social and the intimate, the cultural and the political, the contemporaneous and the ancestral. Such interconnections problematically inform the artist's individual and collective identity, her simultaneously local and global position.<sup>41</sup>

Another important artist who widely used the idea of the knot is the Peruvian poet and artist Jorge Eduardo Eielson (1924–2006). Eielson's interest in the knot as a symbolic form started at his first acquaintance with pre-Columbian textiles in the late 1940s.<sup>42</sup> Among the Incas, the knot, or *Khipu*, is a common tool used either for accounting records or to transfer knowledge such as historical recounts, beliefs and other customs.<sup>43</sup> Constituting a recurrent theme in the artist's visual production since the 1960s, Eielson understood the knot as the link between living beings and their fundamental principle, the union that allows one to follow a giving path.<sup>44</sup> In this sense the knot can be interpreted as the agent between equals or contraries, which provides and maintains a structure while at the same time creating tension. According to Eielson, knots that are so intricate must not be cut since it is the process of undoing the knot (here translated as the attachments that oppress the essence of men) that will clear one's prospect towards any chosen path.<sup>45</sup> Sandra Monterroso's

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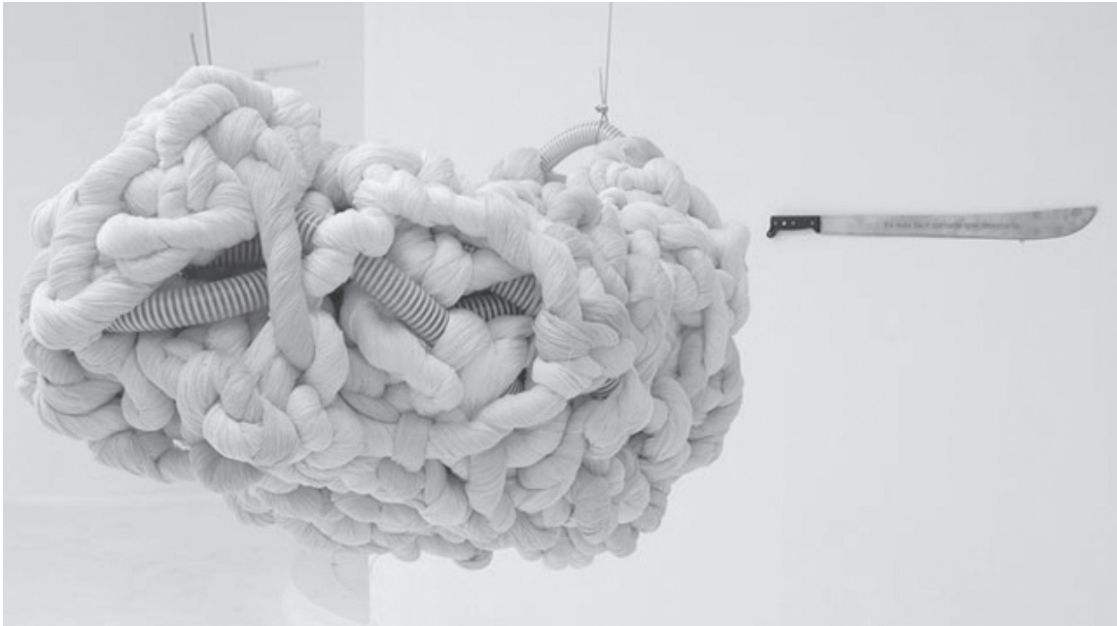


FIGURE 9. Sandra Monterroso. *Nudo Gordiano, Es Más Fácil Cortarlo que Desatarlo*, 2011. Thread, plastic and engraved machete 1.20 m x 80 cm x 60 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

work, in a similar fashion to Eielson's, bases her artistic expression on the tensioning and de-tensioning, which is generated allegorically by the knot and its liberation.

Art critic Gustavo Alonso de Montenegro states that the use of materials in the work of Sandra Monterroso gives her both a 'pretext and a context' by which to articulate her critiques.<sup>46</sup> Throughout her body of work, the artist's choice of material and references to native practices is deliberate. Monterroso employs color according to the four cardinal points in the Mayan cosmology. Black represents West, white is associated with the North, red is the East, and yellow represents the South. In *Meditando el Error* (Figure 1), for example, the black garments worn by the performers signify the colonial legacy and a perpetual state of mourning that the imposition of western culture has produced, while the red refers to spilled blood. In *Mac/Culpa* (Figure 7), the artist uses white while in the two-part performance *Coloring and De-coloring the Threads* (Figure 10) she uses yellow to discuss her southern geopolitical location and make evident the implications of that position within the confines of the global. Although the artist continuously avails herself of the use of media that one could claim as traditional—objects such as corn, salt, thread, ceramic, and wicker—the most important materials that she uses are language and the body. Through the Maya Q'eqchi' tongue, she makes her art an act of resistance, capable of questioning the logic of colonialism, while the use of her body asserts her position and subjectivity as a mestizo woman. The materials that the artist employs in her work are strategies that allow the audience to experience the paradox of the socio-political position of indigenous and mestizo individuals today, while also inviting them to reflect on their intrinsic history.<sup>47</sup>

## CULTURAL SUBVERSIONS

Although diverse in subject matter, Monterroso's aesthetic sensibility touches upon the political and the poetic as she analyzes the kind of dichotomies that complicate our understanding of identity and cultural heritage. Discussing her art within the framework of decolonial aesthetics is thus an effort to actively acknowledge and validate indigenous cosmologies and artisanal practices as part of Latin America's contemporary social fabric. Monterroso's break with the past resides in her understanding of new possibilities of existing and transforming culture. Her artistic manifestation through performance, the use of the body, the autobiographical and cultural elements, empowers the artist, but also activates the viewer by reversing a hegemonic logic and demystifying social stereotypes.

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The working group modernity/coloniality/decoloniality was founded by a South American school of thought in 1998 that is led by a collective of multidisciplinary scholars. In the text "*Decolonial Aesthetics: Colonial Wounds/Decolonial Healings*" (2013), the authors Walter Mignolo and Rolando Vázquez define *Decolonial Aesthetics* as "a movement that is naming and articulating practices that challenge and subvert the hegemony of modern/colonial aesthetics. *Decolonial aesthetics* starts from the consciousness that the modern/colonial project has implied not only control of the economy, political, and knowledge, but also control over the senses and perception. Modern aesthetics has played a key role in configuring a canon, a normativity that enabled the disdain and the rejection of other forms of aesthetic practices, or, more precisely, other forms of *aesthetics*, of sensing and perceiving. *Decolonial aesthetics* is an option that delivers a radical critique to modern, postmodern, and altermodern aesthetics and, simultaneously, contributes to making visible decolonial subjectivities at the confluence of popular practices of re-existence, artistic installations, theatrical and musical performances, literature and poetry, sculpture and other visual arts." In the text the authors continue to clarify that "by talking of decolonial *aesthetics* (instead of decolonial aesthetics), what is being recognized is that decolonial *aesthetics* is not just an indictment of the universal validity claim of modern/colonial aesthetics, but that it asserts itself as an option. ... It is an option because it does not seek to regulate a canon, but rather to allow for the recognition of the plurality of ways to relate to the world of the sensible that have been silenced." See Walter Mignolo and Rolando Vázquez, "*Decolonial Aesthetics: Colonial Wounds/Decolonial Healings*," *Social Text*,



July 15, 2013. [http://socialtextjournal.org/periscope\\_article/decolonial-aesthetics-colonial-woundsdecolonial-healings](http://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/decolonial-aesthetics-colonial-woundsdecolonial-healings) [Last visited 08.27.2015].

<sup>2</sup> Sandra Monterroso, personal interview by Sara Garzon, New York, April 18, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Monterroso, *Meditando el Error*, 2008. Video-Performance, 5:48 min. Translation to English from the Q'eqchi': Maab'ar xink'ule chi k'anjelak ("I can't get a job anywhere"); Jun Ch'a'ajkilal li k'uula' lik (It's a problem to have children"); Chanchanat li ak'ach ("You are a coward"); and Xinc'ay ajcui' ("I'm used to it already").

<sup>4</sup> Monterroso, personal interview.

<sup>5</sup> Sandra Monterroso, "Mediaciones y Recepciones de la Paradoja de la Identidad Cultural a una Cartografía de las Mediaciones Culturales." Paper presented at the Conference "Guatemala Punto y Línea sobre el Antiplano" at the Museo de Arte y Diseño, Costa Rica. April 2012, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=qMr3zflHbf0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qMr3zflHbf0). [Last visited 09/21/2015].

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> See Mignolo and Vázquez, "Decolonial *Aesthetics*."

<sup>8</sup> The story of the Twin Heroes tells the tale of two brothers who were exceptionally talented at playing ballgame. The Lords of Death subjected the twins to a series of tests in the Underworld. However, after their triumph, the twin heroes are honored by the Lords of the Heavens for their courage and intelligence, and as a reward are brought up to the sky. In the sky one twin became the Sun and the other becomes the Moon. The nobles in the Maya empire all claimed they were descendants of the Hero Twins, as it was through this association that they were granted the right to rule. For a full description of the Twin Heroes tale and other stories in the *Popol Vuh*, refer to Dennis Tedlock, trans., *Popol Vuh* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), p. 73.

<sup>9</sup> "Sanar las Vértebras: Entrevista a Sandra Monterroso," *Gimnasia: Ejercicios Contemporáneos*, July 18, 2014, <http://revistagimnasia.com/entradas/2014/7/10/reconociendo-vrtebras-entrevista-a-sandra-monterroso>. [Last visited 04.04.2014, link no longer active].

<sup>10</sup> Mexico and Vienna dispute the possible repatriation of a feather headdress reputedly worn by Aztec emperor Moctezuma II, which is believed to have been brought to Europe by Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés. The headdress was first documented in 1596 in the collection of Tyrolean archduke Ferdinand II. After much debate, the primary reason impeding repatriation is the very fragile state of the object. For more details see Paul Barford, "The Vienna 'Penacho' Feather Headdress" *Cultural Repatriation News and Issues* (November, 2012) <http://culturalpropertyrepatriation.blogspot.com/2012/11/the-vienna-penacho-feather-headdress.html>. [Last visited 09/21/2015].

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<sup>11</sup> “Sanar las Vértebras: Entrevista a Sandra Monterroso,” *Gimnasia: Ejercicios Contemporáneos*, July 18, 2014, <http://revistagimnasia.com/entradas/2014/7/10/reconociendo-vrtebras-entrevista-a-sandra-monterroso>. [Last visited 04.04.2014, link no longer active].

<sup>12</sup> Translation by Sandra Monterroso.

<sup>13</sup> Kency Cornejo, “Indigeneity and Decolonial Seeing in Contemporary Art of Guatemala,” *Fuse Magazine* 36, no. 4, p. 27.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Helen Potkin, “Performance Art,” in *Feminist Visual Culture*, edited by Fiona Carson and Clair Pajaczkowaska (New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 81–82.

<sup>17</sup> Diana Taylor. *The Archive and the Repertoire. Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 17.

<sup>18</sup> Monterroso, “Artist’s Portfolio” (unpublished), p. 28.

<sup>19</sup> Monterroso, personal interview.

<sup>20</sup> Monterroso, “Artist’s Portfolio,” p. 11.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Monterroso, *Lix Cua Rahro. Tus Tortillas mi Amor*, 2004–5. Video-Performance, 12:34 min. Translation to english from the Q’eqchi’: rahoc tixto toj iq’uec’ re (“love until the break of dawn”); aj camsinel pepem pompori (“killer of white butterflies”); Ixko (“we are women”); Junatalil (“loneliness”); xk’ ojyinal (“your darkness”); and amn tz’ejcual (“body and soul”).

<sup>23</sup> Monterroso. “Artist’s Portfolio,” p. 11.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>25</sup> Fiona Carson, “Sculpture and Installation,” in *Feminist Visual Culture*. Edited by Claire Pajaczkowoska and Fiona Carson (New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 57.

<sup>26</sup> Carolina Gamazo, “La maldición de Maritza Caal,” *Plaza Publica*, March 24, 2014 [www.plazapublica.com.gt/content/la-maldicion-de-martiza-caal](http://www.plazapublica.com.gt/content/la-maldicion-de-martiza-caal). [Last visited 09.21.2015]

<sup>27</sup> RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2011), p. 166.

- <sup>28</sup> Monterroso, *Mac/Culpa*, 2006. Video-Performance, 6:00 min.
- <sup>29</sup> Deirdre Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 4.
- <sup>30</sup> Translated by Sara Garzon from Monterroso, "Artist's Portfolio," p. 10.
- <sup>31</sup> "Ai Weiwei—Dropping the Han Dynasty Urn, (1995)," *Choices*, Brown University, <http://vimeo.com/64886243>. [Last visited 09.21.2015]
- <sup>32</sup> Charlotte Townsend Gault, "Hot Dogs, a Ball Gown, Adobe, and Words: The Modes and Materials of Identity," in *Native American Art in the Twentieth Century*, edited by Jackson Rushing III (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 155.
- <sup>33</sup> Mignolo and Vázquez, "Decolonial *Aesthesis*."
- <sup>34</sup> Monterroso, "Mediaciones y Recepciones."
- <sup>35</sup> Zigmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Malden: Blackwell, 2000), p. 94.
- <sup>36</sup> Gilberto Gimenez, "La cultural como Identidad y la Identidad como Cultura," special issue, *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* 66 (October 2004), p. 82.
- <sup>37</sup> Monterroso, "Mediaciones y Recepciones."
- <sup>38</sup> Monterroso, personal interview.
- <sup>39</sup> Gordium was the capitol of the Turkish Kingdom of Phrygia. The legend tells the story of a time when the people of Phrygia were once without a king. In this time of uncertainty the oracle at Telmissus predicted that the next man to come driving an ox-chariot was to be their new king. That man happened to be a peasant by the name of Gordias, who was appointed king right away. In gratitude his son, Midas, dedicated the ox-chariot to the god Sabazios by tying it by the shaft with an intricate knot. The ox-chariot remained tied in place because of the complicated knot until Alexander de Great arrived in the 4th century BCE. Alexander the Great, having tried several times to undo the knot, impatiently cuts through it. For the full myth see Lynn. E. Roller, "Midas and the Gordian Knot," *Classical Antiquity* 3, no. 2 (October 1984), pp. 256–71.
- <sup>40</sup> Ernesto Calvo. Exh. cat. *Efectos Cruzados*, trans. Anna Mercedes Urbina Miron. (Guatemala City: Piegatto Gallery, 2011), p. 9.
- <sup>41</sup> Calvo, *Efectos Cruzados*, p. 9.
- <sup>42</sup> Alejandro Tarrab, "Los Nudos Infinitos de Jorge Eduardo Eielson," *Espéculo: Revista de Estudios Literarios* (Universidad Complutense de Madrid), no. 28 (2004–5), p. 3.

<sup>43</sup> Cyrus L. Day, "Knots and Knot Lore: Quipo and other Mnemonic Knots," *Western Folklore* 16, no. 1 (January 1957), p. 8.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Alonso de Montenegro Gustavo, "Verbos en Femenino [Interview with Sandra Monterroso]," *Prensa Libre*, March 2, 2013, [www.prensalibre.com/cultura/VERBOS\\_0\\_1094290563.html](http://www.prensalibre.com/cultura/VERBOS_0_1094290563.html). [Last visited 04.04.2014, link no longer active]. Citation was made in reference to a section of the interview that reads: "Cuando mi abuelita, en 1998, está por fallecer, fui a visitarla y me dijo algunas cosas que no entendí. Me habló en k'ekchí, idioma que por entonces yo no conocía, y eso me llevó a cuestionarme: ¿Cómo es que viviendo en el mismo país, siendo de la misma familia, no nos conocemos y hablamos lenguajes tan distintos?", dice Monterroso, quien ha encontrado en las artesanías textiles y símbolos culturales un medio, un mensaje, un pretexto y un contexto para denunciar la opresión. "No es que rechace el valor de los signos culturales, como el traje tradicional, pero sí lo convierto en un signo para señalar prejuicios y discriminación", explica, [Monterroso] muy cerca de la Columna vertebral, un monolito construido con cortes y faldas usadas."

<sup>47</sup> Calvo, *Efectos Cruzados*, p. 9.

## HEMISPHERE

# THEY BECOME GREEN: Preciousness and Materiality in the Feather Paintings of Mexico

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Quite early in the Spanish colonial project, Europeans recognized the beauty and craftsmanship inherent in Mexican featherwork (Figure 1). Yet while they admired its aesthetics, they utterly failed in comprehending its meaning. The reason for this is simple; Indigenous American featherwork is carried more by what the object is made of - its materiality - than by what it represents, as is more common in Western visual culture. Europeans were not disposed to consider feathers as a valuable material, so to them the shields, capes, and mosaics coming from the New World became nothing more than expertly crafted blocks of color that were pretty, but hardly precious. To Indigenous Mexicas, however, feathers suggested complex messages about light, divinity, sacrifice, life, and the proper functioning of the cosmos. By studying traditional featherwork techniques, investigating Mexica-Aztec mythology and history, and analyzing a particularly fine example of colonial featherwork, *The Mass of Saint Gregory*, I demonstrate that the physical materiality of featherwork more directly reflects Indigenous Mexica thought and belief in the colonial period than the iconography the feathers are being used to depict.

Feathers have long been used to enhance the beauty of objects created around the world, but perhaps nowhere was the use of feathers more sophisticated than in the mosaics that were produced in the Valley of Mexico in the sixteenth century. Feather mosaics, which blended Western painting traditions and subject matter with Indigenous technique and concepts of materiality, were unique to the colonized New World. The techniques of featherwork in Mesoamerica date back centuries, probably to the ancient Maya, but the later Mexica-Aztec people of Central Mexico tended to create featherwork in one of two ways;<sup>2</sup> according to Book IX of the Florentine Codex, feathers were either wrapped with maguey thread and incorporated into various garments like cloaks or headdresses, or they were glued to wood or paper frames to make flat objects like shields.<sup>3</sup> Depending upon the skill of the maker, the complexity of featherwork could vary dramatically.

Feather workers, known as *amanteca*, held remarkably high social status among the Mexica.<sup>4</sup> Organized in a somewhat similar fashion to the guilds of medieval Europe, the *amanteca* controlled their own membership, education, and internal ranking; resided in a separate urban district of their own; committed themselves to particular patron deities; and enjoyed special relations with the state and the *pochteca*, traveling merchants and feather importers.<sup>5</sup> In special schools, the *amanteca* trained both boys and girls from a very young age, but divided tasks based on gender. In general, boys learned how to choose feathers and construct flat feather mosaics, while girls



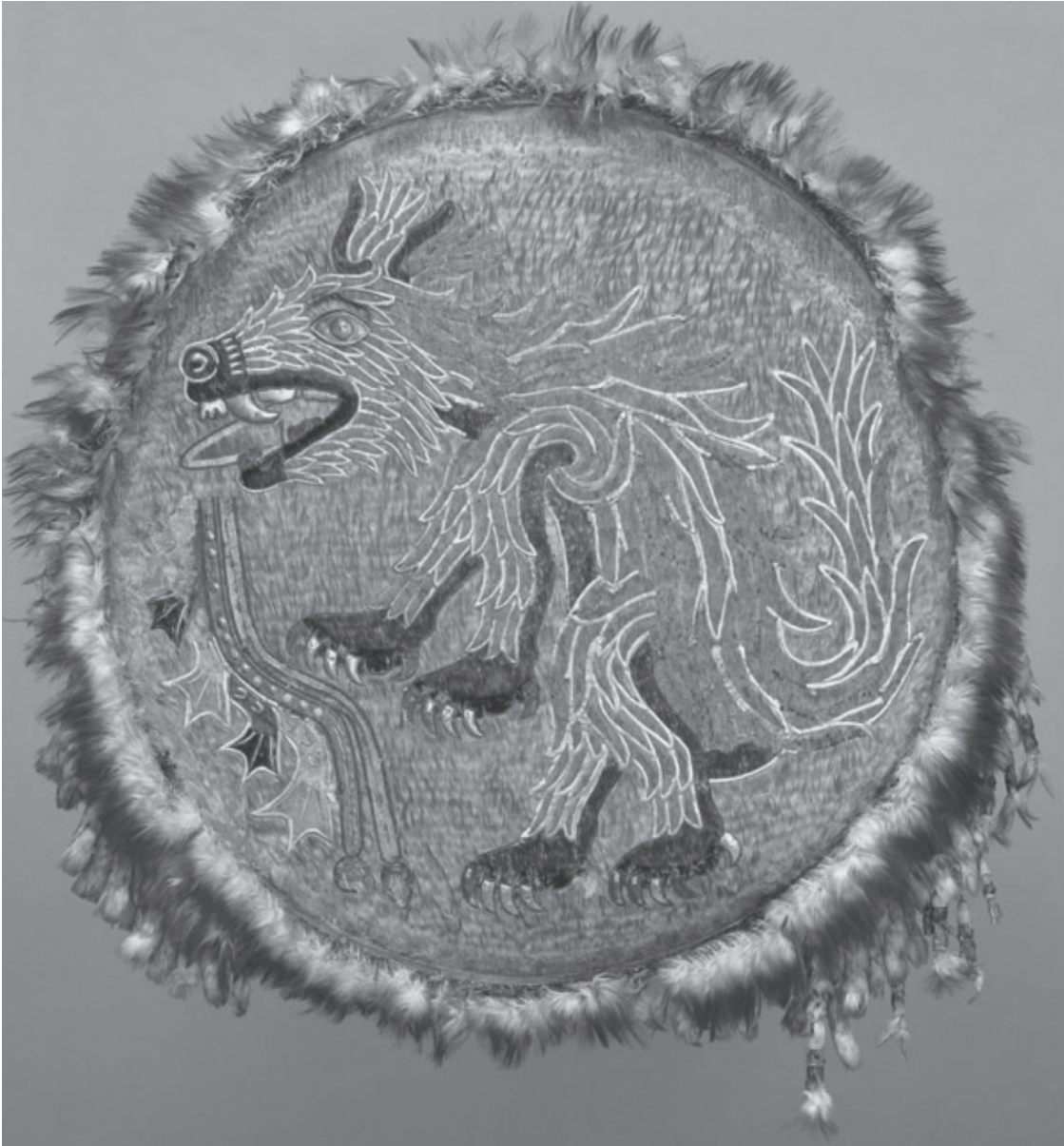


FIGURE 1. Featherwork Shield. Late 15th or early 16th century, feathers on wood panel, 70 cm in diameter. (Image courtesy of the Museum of Ethnology, Vienna, Austria).

learned how to dye feathers and weave them into cloth. Like other fine craftsmen, feather workers were excused from paying taxes and some of the *amanteca* became wealthy enough to be minor nobility in their own right.

While feather workers only operated in the largest population centers of the Mexica empire, such as Tenochtitlan, Tlatelolco, and Texcoco, they were not necessarily in the employ of the state.<sup>6</sup> The *amanteca* in the public realm did work specifically for the ruler, making royal attire, creating gifts for other nobles, and decorating images of the gods and goddesses in the Mexica pantheon. One of the benefits to this type of work was access to the state treasury and its impressive supply of magnificent feathers that

were collected as tribute or purchased in trade. Public feather workers could also visit the royal aviary where birds of many species were kept for their feathers. *Amanteca* could also choose to work privately, making shields and other accoutrements for elite warriors, priests, or other nobility. In these cases, feather workers could trade for the feathers they needed at the market or from traveling merchants.

It was the Emperor Ahuitzotl (r. 1480-1502/3) who conquered areas of the southern Pacific coast and first made it possible for the *amanteca* to incorporate exotic feathers into their work.<sup>7</sup> Prior to this time, only local birds were available, such as ducks and white herons, whose feathers needed to be dyed. In the scant thirty years or so between Ahuitzotl's triumph and the arrival of the Spanish, the *amanteca* created a hierarchy of desirable tropical feathers. The most precious feathers were the long, iridescent green tail feathers of the male quetzal bird, which were reserved for the exclusive use of the highest nobles, deities, and deity performers, but also popular were the feathers of yellow-headed parrots, scarlet macaws, roseate spoonbills, cotingas, and tiny hummingbirds, of which there are approximately fifty species in Mexico.

Many of these feathers were demanded as tribute from the furthest reaches of the Mexica empire. According to the Codex Mendoza, more than three thousand quetzal feathers were sent to the capital annually from the tropical regions to the south. It is possible that the Mexica state used more than ten thousand quetzal feathers per year, so a substantial number of feathers must have come from trade as well. This is a remarkable figure given two salient facts: only nobles, deities, and deity performers preparing to be sacrificed were allowed to wear quetzal feathers; and male quetzal birds only have a couple of long tail feathers each. Considering also that quetzal birds cannot live in captivity and they only nest at the tops of tall trees in the cloud forest, gathering ten thousand feathers from five thousand birds each year was not a simple task. According to contemporary accounts, Indigenous hunters would painstakingly capture the quetzal birds alive using woven nets. They then plucked the two long tail feathers and released the bird so it could "bear more of the same fruit the following year."<sup>8</sup>

Most other birds were less fortunate. Hummingbirds, because of their small size, had to be hunted with reed blowguns and shot with salt or rice grains so as to not destroy the feathers.<sup>9</sup> The demand for cotinga birds, yellow-headed parrots, Mexican trogons, and roseate spoonbills included both their feathers and their skins, so while many were kept in captivity and regularly plucked, many others were sacrificed outright. It is not surprising to discover that nearly all of the most prized birds of the sixteenth century are now considered endangered, including the quetzal, which has been on the near threatened list since 1976, although not solely because of the feather trade.



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Its bill is pointed, yellow; its legs yellow. It has a crest, wings, a tail. It is of medium size, the same as the slender-billed grackle. The tail feathers are streaked. On [the tail], the feathers which grow on it are called *quetzalli*. Those which are on its tail are green, herb-green, very green, fresh green, turquoise-colored. They are like wide reeds: the ones which glisten, which bend. They become green, they become turquoise.<sup>10</sup>

This description of the quetzal comes from the eleventh book of the Florentine Codex, a twelve-volume work put together over the second half of the sixteenth century by the Franciscan monk Bernardino de Sahagún with a number of Indigenous scribes and informants. Sahagún's intention was to record every aspect of Indigenous life before it disappeared forever, and the eleventh book was dedicated to descriptions of all the birds, animals, and plants that could be found in the Mesoamerican region. Apart from providing a wonderful example of the Mexica-Aztec rhetorical style, the excerpt emphasizes color more than any other physical aspect.

Although it is always difficult to correlate the spectrum range that any given historical culture associated with any given color term, it is especially difficult when using the Florentine Codex, considering that this set of books is an English translation of a Spanish translation of a Nahuatl alphabetic translation of an oral translation of the pictographic images that served the Mexica as written language. While the modern reader may not know precisely what color the Mexica saw when referring to herb green, very green, fresh green, or turquoise, or if there was any difference at all, the scholar can be certain that the greenness itself was significant. In fact, the word *quetzalli* that was used in the passage to describe the greenness of the quetzal feathers was also applied to other important objects like greenstones and children as a signifier of both preciousness and fertility.

Apart from color, the other indicator of preciousness to the Mexica was iridescence. This quality suffused nearly all of their most valuable objects, including gold, greenstone, obsidian, and amber, but feathers are uniquely shiny because of their minute and complex keratin structure.<sup>11</sup> When sunlight strikes an iridescent feather, these microscopic structures break the light into various colors like thousands of tiny prisms. This is what produces the metallic sheen of prized quetzal and hummingbird feathers, and makes their colors appear to change depending upon the angle of light hitting the feather and the positioning of the viewer's eye. Appreciation of iridescence was a quality shared by the Indigenous Mexica and their European conquerors, although the presumption that both cultures saw and appreciated iridescence in the same way led to significant misunderstandings.

When the Spanish took control of Tenochtitlan in 1521, every aspect of Indigenous life changed. For the *amanteca*, their elite native patrons were replaced by Spaniards who were often impressed by the skill involved in featherwork, but who did not require feather costumes or ornaments themselves. In fact, the government of New Spain actively suppressed the work for a time, concerned about uprisings and idolatry. Many examples of existing featherwork objects were sent back to Europe as ethnographic curiosities, as were a number of ekphrastic accounts, seen in this example from José de Acosta in 1586.

[W]e marvel as to how such delicate works can be made from the feathers of birds, for the colors are so even that they seem to have been painted; yet, unlike works rendered with colored pigment and paintbrush, these pictures reflect a lovely sheen when we glance at them obliquely, so cheerful and lively that they are altogether delightful.<sup>12</sup>

The sudden loss of demand for featherwork and the introduction of smallpox, which may have killed up to ninety percent of the artisans in the capital city of Tenochtitlan, might have marked the end of featherwork in the colonies if it were not for the efforts of Christian missionaries like Fray Pedro de Gante who encouraged the remaining *amanteca* to take up their work in the service of the Catholic church. Schools and workshops were set up by the various mendicant orders to produce approved iconographic programs for use as church decoration. Hundreds, if not thousands, of remarkable featherworks featuring Catholic subjects were created.

Unfortunately, the level of skill and pride that feather workers retained in the early years after the Conquest barely survived the seventeenth century. Despite his amazement at the craftsmanship involved in featherwork, the Augustinian friar, Matias de Escobar, understood its decline. In 1729 he wrote, “In Tiripitío I was able to find a feather worker and in Pátzcuaro there are a few; they do not apply themselves because the work is great and the profit small, for the Spaniards disparage such marvelous work only because it is made by Indians.”<sup>13</sup> It was that in only a few generations that featherwork went from being one of the most admired arts on the continent to being wholly disregarded.

I suggest that there are two interrelated, metonymic concepts that might help to explain why feathers and featherwork were so valuable to the Mexica and how they may have been viewed by an Indigenous audience. The first is grounded in the physicality of feathers. Feathers, obviously, come from birds, which are creatures that are able to fly, walk, and in some cases, swim. They had bodily access to the heavens, the terrestrial world, and the underworld (which was believed to be entered through bodies of water). As birds are primarily distinguished from other animals by the fact that they have feathers, it makes some logical sense to believe that their feathers are the source of their powerful ability to transcend the realms, and are therefore special.





FIGURE 2. *Our Lady of Health of Pátzcuaro*. 18th century, feathers on wood panel, 26 x 22 cm. (Image courtesy of the Museum of Ethnography, Berlin).

Second, in the heavens dwell the gods, who require human sacrifice to keep the cycles of the cosmos in motion. The term ‘gods’ may be a bit of a misnomer, however. Elizabeth Boone points out, the Nahuatl word that is commonly translated as “god” is *teotl*, but its actual meaning is more like the Polynesian concept of *mana*, “a sacred and impersonal force or concentration of power.”<sup>14</sup> An associated Nahuatl term is *teixiptla*, which is usually translated as “impersonator,” “substitute,” or “image,” but is “essentially the physical representation or incarnation of the *teotl*.”<sup>15</sup> For the Mexica the *teotl* or divine essence, can only be called forth through the creation of *teixiptla* in the form of a ritual object like a statue, or in living form as a person who will be dressed in the finest possible costume and later sacrificed. Considering the fact that physical form and costume define the deity, and may even create it, the obligatory use of feathers in these costumes suggests that there was a strong correlation in Mexica thought between feathers and *teotl*; in essence, feathers embody the divine. Thus, featherwork held great meaning on various levels – it imbued objects with the transcendent qualities of the feathers themselves, and simultaneously signaled a metonymic embodiment of sacred forces. Although this conceptual process was never specifically articulated by the Mexica or their Spanish chroniclers, the connection between feathers and divinity is clear.

This can be demonstrated through the mythologies of many deities, but none so strongly as Huitzilopochtli (Hummingbird-on-the-left), the patron deity of the Mexica, who served as a god of the sun, war, and fire and wore a hummingbird headdress covered in brilliant, iridescent feathers.<sup>16</sup> The myth of Huitzilopochtli establishes his identity as a sun god, but it also serves as a complete explanation of the cosmos, while further highlighting the importance of feathers to Mexica culture. According to Burr Cartwright Brundage, the myth states that Huitzilopochtli’s mother was Coatlicue, an earth mother goddess. She had already given birth to a daughter, Coyolxauhqui, and to innumerable sons, the Centzon Huitznahua. One day, as Coatlicue was sweeping her temple, she found a ball of feathers (or feather down) and tucked it into the waistband of her skirt where it impregnated her. Coyolxauhqui, humiliated by this occurrence, convinced her brothers to attack and kill their mother for bringing shame on their family. Though still in the womb, Huitzilopochtli reassured his mother that he was in no danger. Just as the multitudes of Coatlicue’s children reached the top of Coatepec, where their mother’s temple was located, Huitzilopochtli was born, fully-grown and fully-armed, and he proceeded to defeat his sister and brothers in battle. Coyolxauhqui was decapitated before she was tossed into the sky to become the moon. Her innumerable brothers, the Centzon Huitznahua, suffered the same fate, becoming the stars. It was that the earth mother conceived all the celestial beings: Huitzilopochtli, the sun; Coyolxauhqui, the moon; and the Centzon Huitznahua, the stars. To the Mexica, the most important of these gods was Huitzilopochtli, the brilliant sun, who traces his divine origin to feathers.

The other related metonymic concept for understanding the importance of feathers to



the Mexica is somewhat more metaphysical in nature. Feathers are, of course, brilliant in their very nature, which means that they reflect light. For the Mexica, all light came from the sun, which in one aspect was a personification of Huitzilopochtli, as I have just described, but in another was a manifestation of the human essence or life force. This force was known as *tonalli*, a heat/light energy, which was believed to constitute one's temperament and decide one's fate.<sup>17</sup> Literally translated, it could mean "heat of the sun," "to make warm," "irradiation," "sign of day," or "destiny."<sup>18</sup> *Tonalli* took the form of breath and could come from fire or blood (hence the necessity for sacrifice), but its best source was the sun.<sup>19</sup> The sun, therefore, was understood as the divine source of life itself, which may be why Francisco López de Gómara noted in 1551 that:

...[the *amanteca*/feather workers] do not eat at all, for they are consumed all day long placing and replacing the feathers, looking away, then at other feathers, then at the sun, at the shade, at the glimmer of the light on the feathers, checking to see which side is best, which one gleams best in the sunlight.<sup>20</sup>

It is unclear whether feather workers believed the sunlight to be reflecting off the feathers, as it is scientifically understood today, or whether they conceived of the *tonalli* as being absorbed and reemitted by the feathers as a living process, either way, the relationship of *tonalli* to feather was obviously a priority for the *amanteca*. It is again clear that the iridescence and luminescence of feathers was directly related to the divine life force in the Mesoamerican mind. This conceptual framework is oversimplified, but it provides some insight as to why the Mexica saw such value in objects that may appear somewhat mundane to Western eyes.

One such object is the earliest dated featherwork of the colonial period. Known as *The Mass of Saint Gregory* (1539), it may be the best example for examining some of these issues and methodologies in context (Figure 3). Its history is fairly well documented; the feather mosaic was made by (or by the order of) the Indigenous governor of Tenochtitlan-Mexico City. His name was Don Diego de Alvarado Huanitzin, and he (or his artist) worked under the supervision of the Spanish priest Pedro de Gante.<sup>21</sup> The image was intended as a gift for Pope Paul III, in celebration of his papal bull of 1537, the *Sublimis Deus*, which unequivocally declared that the Indigenous peoples of the Americas were rational beings with souls; therefore, the enslavement of native Americans was incompatible with Catholic doctrine.<sup>22</sup> The bull also entitled native peoples to liberty and property, and concluded with a call for their evangelization. Although the declaration was repealed a short time later and largely ignored by colonists and conquistadors, it did mean enough to Huanitzin to serve as the inspiration for *The Mass of Saint Gregory*. Unfortunately, his gift never made it to the Pope. What is certain is that the featherwork resurfaced in 1987 in remarkable condition. Its owner, a second-hand clothes dealer, sold it at auction in Paris and it now resides in the Museum of the Jacobins in Auch, France.



FIGURE 3. Diego de Alvarado Huanitzin, *The Mass of Saint Gregory*, 1539, feathers on wood panel, 68 x 56 x 23 cm. (Image courtesy of the Musée de Jacobins, Auch, France).



*The Mass of Saint Gregory* is more than two feet high, almost two feet wide, and nine inches deep. The reverse side of the wood board is covered in polychrome lacquerware, a technique known in the Americas prior to the arrival of the Europeans. The feather mosaic may have taken five or six months to complete and seems to have been based on a German print by Israhel van Meckenem (Figure 4). The most significant difference between the print and the Mexican featherwork is the materiality of the feathers themselves, including their color and shine. Though most of the mosaic consists of cut feathers, there is some amount of infilling where there once was gold leaf, and some paint or dye on the surface, particularly visible as the blood of Christ. While it is often difficult to determine what particular bird species were used to make any given featherwork, the color and size of the bright blue feathers that constitute the background of *The Mass of Saint Gregory* seem to indicate that precious, iridescent hummingbird feathers were included in the composition, possibly as many as a hundred per square inch. It is also possible that this blue background was meant to indicate the bright sky of an exterior scene. If so, it would temporally and spatially relocate Pope Gregory's miraculous vision from sixth century Rome to the open chapels of sixteenth century Mexico. Given the two pineapples clearly depicted on the altar, a fruit exclusive to the Americas, such a shift seems intentional, and may suggest that the artist wanted to indicate how his homeland was favored by God.

Also remarkable in this image is how quickly native artists picked up European techniques of art making, including linear perspective and chiaroscuro. The subtle shading and modeling, particularly around Christ's ribcage and left arm, give him a three-dimensional appearance that had not been present in Mesoamerican imagery prior to the Spanish invasion of 1521. The fact that this subtle effect could be implemented a mere eighteen years later by artists who were culturally ensconced in an entirely different visual tradition and working with wholly different materials, is extraordinary.

As the title of the featherwork would suggest, *The Mass of Saint Gregory* depicts a moment from the life of Saint Gregory. Having prayed for a sign to convince a doubter of the doctrine of transubstantiation, Pope Gregory I is shown holding mass as the image of Jesus, as the Man of Sorrows, appears on the altar above him.<sup>23</sup> Christ, defeated and bloody, is depicted with the instruments of his torture all around him, including the coins of Judas that signify his betrayal and the three nails that remind the viewer of the Trinity as much as of the Passion.<sup>24</sup> These rebus-like signs are known as the *Arma Christi* (the Arms of Christ) and were used as mnemonic devices to trigger associations in the mind of the viewer in much the same way that pre-Columbian Mexica documents were written.

*The Mass of Saint Gregory* was a relatively popular subject after the late Middle Ages, so any educated European viewer should have been able to recognize the scene immediately. This particular object was destined for one specific and very well educated viewer: the Pope. The governor of Tenochtitlan, in a well-informed and



FIGURE 4. Israhel van Meckenem. *Mass of Saint Gregory*, c. 1490-1500, engraving. (Image courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Rosenwald Collection, 1954.12.91).



politically savvy way, may have chosen the subject for its papal connotations, subtly suggesting a complementary connection between the recipient, Paul III, who refused to allow the slavery of Amerindians, and Gregory who was granted a vision of Christ. Cleverly, Huanitzin also uses the subject to demonstrate his intellectual mastery of somewhat esoteric Catholic knowledge, including the doctrine of transubstantiation, thus proving his humanity, according to the *Sublimis Deus*.

While a European viewer may have read as much from the subject matter and largely ignored the medium, apart from its aesthetically pleasing quality, the materiality was likely a greater signifier of political and religious meaning for an Indigenous viewer. First, the object was intended as a gift from arguably the most important Mexica personage in New Spain, to the representative of the Christian God on Earth. It was constructed of the finest, most luminescent materials: premium feathers and lacquerware. These materials were certainly appropriate for an elite object intended for a divine spokesman, considering their joint quality of reflecting heavenly light, but it is suggestive that the luxurious materials chosen for this project were those that were most valued by Indigenous peoples, not the equally radiant gold and silver preferred by Europeans, to which the artist surely also had access. Second, *The Mass of Saint Gregory* would have revealed a further meaning to a native viewer. In the metonymic, Indigenous world view, feathers were associated with sacrificial victims, the priests who slew them, and the gods they represented. In this way, the materiality of the feather mosaic also expertly conveys the complicated nature of Christ as victim, priest, and divine presence in one.<sup>25</sup>

Given all of these related associations of feathers, light, the divine, the soul, and the proper functioning of the cosmos, featherwork objects like *The Mass of Saint Gregory* take on a much greater significance. They were not mere craft items created by Indians who were too ignorant to understand the relative values of objects, as the Spanish believed. Featherwork and feather workers deserved their high status for expertly encapsulating both *tonalli* (life force), and *teotl* (the divine essence of the gods), in technically sophisticated and aesthetically-pleasing forms, with complex, intertwined levels of meaning and understanding, which were still circulating and widely understood well into the early colonial period.

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NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Christian F. Feest, “Dürer et Les Premières Évaluations Européennes de L’art Mexicain,” in *Destins Croisés. Cinq Siècles de Rencontres Avec Les Amérindiens*, ed. Joëlle Rostkowski and Sylvie Devers (Paris: UNESCO—Albin Michel, 1992), 107–19.
- <sup>2</sup> Alberto Cue, “Featherwork Among the Mexica,” in *The Art of Featherwork in Mexico*, ed. Teresa Castelló Yturbide (Mexico City: Fomento Cultural Banamex, A.C., 1993), 45.
- <sup>3</sup> Bernardino de Sahagún, *General History of the Things of New Spain: Florentine Codex*, ed. Arthur J.O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble, vol. 10 (Santa Fe, N.M.: School of American Research, 1950).
- <sup>4</sup> Cue, “Featherwork Among the Mexica,” 54-57.
- <sup>5</sup> Frances Berdan, “Economic Dimensions of Precious Metals, Stones, and Feathers: The Aztec State Society,” in *Estudios De Cultura Nahuatl*, Vol. 22 (1992), 306.
- <sup>6</sup> Cue, “Featherwork Among the Mexica,” 52, 54.
- <sup>7</sup> Diana Magaloni-Kerpel, “Real and Illusory Feathers: Pigments, Painting Techniques, and the Use of Color in Ancient Mesoamerica,” *Nuevo Mundo*, January 25, 2006, <http://nuevomundo.revues.org/index1462.html>.
- <sup>8</sup> Berdan, “Economic Dimensions,” 304.
- <sup>9</sup> Guadalupe González-Hontoria, “Aztec Featherwork,” *Americás*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (1973), 16.
- <sup>10</sup> Bernardino de Sahagún, *General History of the Things of New Spain: Florentine Codex*, ed. Arthur J.O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble, vol. 11 (Santa Fe, N.M.: School of American Research, 1950), 19.
- <sup>11</sup> María Olvido Moreno, “Birds and the Preservation of Featherwork,” in *The Art of Featherwork in Mexico*, ed. Teresa Castelló Yturbide (Mexico City: Fomento Cultural Banamex, A.C., 1993), 235.
- <sup>12</sup> José de Acosta, *Historia natural y moral de las indias, en que se tratan de las cosas notables del cielo, elementos, metales, plantas y animales dellas, y los ritos y ceremonias, leyes y gobierno de los indios, compuesto por el P. Joseph de Acosta*, 2nd ed. (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1985), 204.
- <sup>13</sup> Teresa Castelló Yturbide, “Featherwork in the Indigenous Tradition,” in *The Art of Featherwork in Mexico*, ed. Teresa Castelló Yturbide (Mexico City: Fomento Cultural Banamex, A.C., 1993), 156.

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<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Boone. "Incarnations of the Aztec Supernatural: The Image of Huitzilopochtli in Mexico and Europe," in *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 79, No. 2 (1989), 4.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Other gods in the Mexica pantheon served these functions as well.

<sup>17</sup> Alfredo López Austin, *The Human Body and Ideology Concepts of the Ancient Nahuas*, vol. 1 (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988), 211.

<sup>18</sup> Alessandra Russo, "Plumes of Sacrifice: Transformations in Sixteenth-Century Mexican Feather Art," in *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* no. 42 (October 1, 2002): 233.

<sup>19</sup> López Austin, *The Human Body*, 1: 206–207.

<sup>20</sup> Marita Martínez del Río de Redo, "Featherwork During the Viceroyalty," in *The Art of Featherwork in Mexico*, ed. Teresa Castelló Yturbide (Mexico City: Fomento Cultural Banamex, A.C., 1993), 106.

<sup>21</sup> Also known as Domingo Diego, or Diego Huanitzin, he was related to the last Mexica emperor.

Alessandra Russo et al., *El vuelo de las imágenes: arte plumario en México y Europa = Images Take Flight: Feather Art in México and Europe* (México, D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2011), 17.

<sup>22</sup> John Francis Maxwell, *Slavery and the Catholic Church: The History of Catholic Teaching Concerning the Moral Legitimacy of the Institution of Slavery* (Chichester: Rose [for] the Anti-Slavery Society for the Protection of Human Rights, 1975), 68–71.

<sup>23</sup> Transubstantiation is the Catholic belief that the bread and wine of the Eucharist literally embody the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ.

<sup>24</sup> Donna Pierce et al., *Painting a New World: Mexican Art and Life 1521-1821* (Denver, CO: Denver Art Museum, 2004), 100.

<sup>25</sup> Russo et al., *El vuelo de las imágenes*, 17.

## TROUBLING ENCOUNTERS: Portrait of Don Francisco De Arobe and His Sons, By Andrés Sánchez Gallque

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In a letter to King Philip III sent in the year 1599, Don Barrio de Sepúlveda, a judge of the Real Audiencia of Quito, stated that he had accomplished the conversion and reduction of a community of mulattoes living in the province of Esmeraldas. To confirm this allegiance, Barrio de Sepúlveda Barrio sent a portrait of Don Francisco de Arobe and his sons, native leaders of the region, with the necessary documentation.

In the painting, more commonly known as *Portrait of Three Mulattoes from Esmeraldas* (1599), Don Francisco de Arobe appears at the center, between his two sons, Don Domingo, at the right, and Don Pedro, at the left (Figure 1). The three men are depicted standing, holding sharp spears, with Don Francisco and Don Domingo presenting their hats to the viewer in a sign of respect. They wear a combination of Spanish and indigenous clothes and native gold jewelry. The lace collars, sleeves, and silk cloaks follow Spanish conventions. Beneath their cloaks, each man wears an Andean-style poncho made of a non-traditional fabric, similar to brocade. This amalgamation creates an ambiguous vision of allegiance where the limits between rulership and vassalage are not clearly specified.



FIGURE 1. Andrés Sánchez Gallque, *Portrait of Three Mulattoes from Esmeraldas*, 1599, oil/canvas, 92x175 cm. (Image courtesy of Museo de América, Madrid).

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At the upper right corner, there is an inscription that reads,

To your Catholic Majesty Philip, King of Spain and the Indies.  
Commissioned and paid by Doctor Juan del Barrio de Sepúlveda,  
judge of the Real Audiencia of Quito, in the year of 1599.

This painting was produced in the city of Quito, in what today is Ecuador. It was sent as a gift to the King of Spain and likely displayed among other treasures in the Alcazar of Madrid. Although there is no information related to the location of the painting at the beginning of the seventeenth century, inventories dated during the reign of Philip IV show that the portrait was displayed in the palace alongside other “exotic” scenes, representations of battles and portraits of enemies of the Spanish Empire.<sup>1</sup> The work, with its unusual combination of Spanish and indigenous paraphernalia, is without any known precedents and is considered to be the first signed portrait produced in the Spanish colonies.

The letter that accompanied the painting in its transatlantic journey states,

As it is possible that Your Majesty would like to see the portrait of these barbarians, invincible until now, and they are an extraordinary thing, [I] send it with a letter and this memorial to Your Majesty. They are willing, agile and very fast. They usually wear golden earrings, nose ornaments, rings on the chin and buttons on the nose, everything made of gold. Other noble natives of this province also wear these ornaments... They usually bring spears in their hands and three or four darts made of wood, very pointy, although without iron. They are portrayed as they are, with the exception of their clothes.... For they are not people who know of civility and their land is warm, they use shirts and blankets like the other Indians. They are very smart and shrewd.<sup>2</sup>

The identity of the painter, Andrés Sánchez Gallque, is known to us because he signed the painting, something unusual at the time. Sánchez Gallque was a recognized artist educated in the School of San Andrés, which was led by the Franciscans in Quito. He later belonged to the guild of the Virgin of the Rosary and worked under the tutelage of the Dominican friar, Pedro Bedón.<sup>3</sup> His skills, rendered apparent in the execution of this portrait, were likely the reason why he was chosen by the Spanish judge as the artist for a commission of such importance. Although the ways in which the painter exerted his own agency have been recently studied by Thomas Cummins, the extent to which he was able to incorporate his own ideas in the painting is uncertain.<sup>4</sup> Surely we cannot undervalue the role of Sánchez Gallque in the artistic process. However, since the portrait was presented as a personal gift from Sepúlveda to the king, it is



highly likely that the judge oversaw the commission and deemed the final product appropriate.

The role that Don Francisco and his sons had in the fashioning of their representation is not clear either. The portrait likely worked as a contract that assured the tributary exemptions for Don Francisco de Arobe and his descendants, and confirmed their status as free men. Similar agreements occurred in pacts between the Spanish crown and other leaders of the region, suggesting this painting also guaranteed certain privileges. Moreover, the Spanish judge indicates in one of his letters that the clothes the sitters wore for the portrait did not originally belong to the mulattoes, but that he provided these Spanish outfits as part of the agreement between parties.<sup>5</sup> In the painting, the mulatto rulers are portrayed as noblemen, wearing Spanish and indigenous garments and jewelry indicating their status. The facial hair of Don Francisco, a moustache and goatee, also seems to conform to Spanish conventions. The use of the word “Don” before their names, a title only allowed for nobility, further confirms their high social status.

Several scholars have noted that the portrait seems to recreate the idea of perfect vassalage. They describe Don Francisco and his sons as men who are full of pride but still loyal subjects of the Spanish crown.<sup>6</sup> However, recognition of the status of blacks in sixteenth-century Spain raises some doubts about the way Spaniards might have interpreted the condition of Don Francisco and his sons. In this essay, I focus on the possible interpretations of the portrait in the Spanish court and on the inherent anxieties suggested by the complex iconography of the painting. I argue that the portrait of Don Francisco and his sons is in fact a manifestation of the struggle produced by the encounter between the rigorous Spanish regime and a dynamic mixed culture. This struggle is referenced by displaying the sitters under a mask of satire not fully evident to our eyes, but very likely understood by sixteenth-century courtiers. I set the painting against the historical events that led to the portrayal of Don Francisco and his sons, as well as in relation to its intended courtly audience, to demonstrate that the inclusion of both Spanish and indigenous elements are inherent marks of Spanish angst. These elements served to emphasize the associations of the sitters with barbarism and present them as exotic beings. However, they also symbolize the difficulties that Spanish colonizers experienced during the process of conquest. This last point is especially underlined by the parallels between the use of imposed foreign clothing and theatrical disguises used in courtly performances.

The supposed submission of the mulattoes of the region of Esmeraldas was an important achievement for Barrio de Sepúlveda. During the entire sixteenth century, the coast of Esmeraldas represented a real hardship for the Spanish crown, as several military expeditions tried to conquer the region without success. Besides its difficult geography, Esmeraldas was populated by rebellious communities that fought against the Spanish enterprise. Therefore, aside from confirming the obedience of these

fierce rulers, the portrait emphasized the judge's accomplishments and was possibly used as a tool for self-promotion. It seems that Sepúlveda's personal interest was to reach a higher position within the administrative system of the colonies, given that, in 1602, he was appointed judge in the Audiencia of Lima, capital of the Viceroyalty of Peru. This assumption is supported by a letter written in the same year in which King Philip III recognizes the efforts of Barrio de Sepúlveda as the mastermind behind the pacification and conversion of the community of mulattoes.<sup>7</sup>

Several years before the execution of the painting, the colonial government had failed to create allegiances with other local leaders. One of the rulers of Esmeraldas, Alonso de Illescas, was a native Cape Verdean who had grown up as a slave in Seville. After arriving to the coasts of Esmeraldas due to a shipwreck, Illescas managed to make an alliance with the indigenous Niguas that inhabited the area and, after some time, became their leader.<sup>8</sup> Spanish authorities contacted Illescas in 1586, and he was named governor of the region by King Philip II. However, this allegiance did not prosper, probably due to Illescas's fear of being enslaved.<sup>9</sup> During the second half of the sixteenth-century, the Illescas were one of the main adversaries of the family of Don Francisco de Arobe. Don Francisco was the son of an enslaved African man, Andrés Mangache, and an indigenous woman from Nicaragua who had arrived in Esmeraldas in 1545, after escaping from a shipwreck. The couple settled in San Mateo Bay and created allegiances with local communities that allowed them to emerge as leaders. Illescas and Mangache fought each other over the control of the region and its natural resources. In relation to this political backdrop, the commission for the portrait of Don Francisco and his sons confirmed them, at first glance, as legitimate leaders of Esmeraldas and truthful representatives of the Spanish king over other groups that inhabited the region.

As documentary sources indicate, in sixteenth-century Spain, portraiture was mainly intended for the highborn. In 1611, Sebastián de Covarrubias, Spanish scholar and author of the relevant dictionary *El Tesoro de la Lengua Castellana o Española* (*Treasure of the Castilian or Spanish Language*, 1611),] defined the term "portrait" as the likeness of a person of importance and worth, whose effigy should be kept for future memory.<sup>10</sup> At the time, portraits in most instances represented people with outstanding virtues and became sources of inspiration and emulation. Likenesses of non-noble sitters became more common only later during the seventeenth century and even then, they were regarded with suspicion.<sup>11</sup> In the Spanish American territories, nobility was also represented through European-style portraiture. For instance, series of portraits were used in Peru to claim the privileges and reinforce the dynastic continuity of Inca nobility. Examples of this type of portraiture can be found in the work of Mercedarian Friar Martín de Murúa. His *Historia del origen y genealogía real de los reyes Incas del Piru* (*History of the origin and genealogy of the Incas, kings of Peru*, 1590) includes portraits of native leaders wearing indigenous

clothing and the Inca royal fringe that signaled their status. Moreover, coats of arms are included to visually reinforce their nobility.

The portrait of Don Francisco and his sons has several elements that connect it to these portrayals of indigenous nobility. Although the cloaks, ruff collars, white shirts, and hats are typical of Spanish noblemen, the inclusion of startling golden jewelry and ponchos link the mulattoes to indigenous communities. The jewelry was especially significant to a claim of indigenous heritage, in the same way that the Inca fringe signified Inca ascendance. Similar jewelry can be found depicted in examples of pre-Hispanic pottery that represent indigenous nobles and shamans; as such, the jewelry served to underline Don Francisco's high status. The connection between golden jewelry and nobility is also expressed in the letter that Barrio de Sepúlveda wrote to the king, as he says that other noble natives also wore those ornaments.

It might seem paradoxical that Barrio de Sepúlveda allowed the inclusion of so many elements that reinforced indigenous power. Recent material analyses of the painting have revealed that, originally, the artist had rendered the jewelry with paint, and that he added gold only later.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps the judge felt that the addition or presence of gold jewelry not only enhanced the appearance of these extraordinary men, but also served to highlight the value of the painting as a commodity and as a royal gift.

The inclusion of actual gold in the painting also helped emphasize the riches of the province of Esmeraldas and added relevance to the pact of allegiance the judge had achieved. Barrio de Sepúlveda's visual statement was particularly timely, as Philip II had declared the third bankruptcy of the Spanish kingdom during his reign before he died in 1598. The urgency for gold, in part, informed the expedition to Esmeraldas. The account of Father Espinosa, a Mercedarian friar who mediated the negotiations between the people of Esmeraldas and the Spanish government, mentions the impatience of the Spanish commission in their quest for gold.<sup>13</sup> Certainly, the Spaniards were aware of the possibilities of finding gold in these regions because of the fine ornaments worn by the native people. More than presenting the caciques' insignia of power, Barrio de Sepúlveda was assuring the allegiance of a rich zone that could alleviate the economic problems that Spain had at the time. In seeking Philip III's approval and support, Barrio de Sepúlveda offered to the King of Spain a promise of riches.

An unusual point of interest in the portrait is that it includes portrayals of Don Francisco's sons. The presence of Don Pedro and Don Domingo was used to emphasize the continuity of the lineage of the Arobe family and to guarantee the maintenance of its legal rights in the future. Dynastic legacy and social claims were also displayed in a similar manner in the Inca portraits that were sent to Spain during the colonial period. The inclusion in the painting of the names and ages of the sitters not only served to identify the individuals, they also formalized the legality of their power.

The inscription of names and hierarchical ranks was common in official portraiture, especially when related to representatives of the King of Spain.

Besides recognizing the status of Don Francisco and his dynastic legacy, the painting officialized the role of the Arobe family members as vassals of the Spanish king. Although Don Francisco and his sons were portrayed as warriors, by offering their hats to the viewer the mulattoes seem to indicate a certain degree of submission. On one hand, this representation served to emphasize the accomplishments of the judge by making evident the appeasement of a dangerous and rebellious community. On the other hand, by representing the mulattoes holding their spears and wearing rich clothing, the artist replicates depictions of King Philip II in royal armor. Similar to the king, Don Francisco looks intently at the viewer as he wields his weapon. The portrayal of the mulattoes, therefore, suggested their willingness to fight for the king's service by protecting the coasts of Esmeraldas from any intrusion that might jeopardize Spanish dominion. To defend Esmeraldas was a matter of royal concern as, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Dutch pirates attacked Spanish ships that transported silver from Callao to Panamá and from Acapulco to Manila; the coasts of South America remained the backdrop of battles between these two European forces.<sup>14</sup> Through this portrait, Barrio de Sepúlveda intended to highlight the usefulness of having subjected a group of fierce warriors and to stress their role as protectors of the Spanish colonies.

The extraordinary appearance of the rulers of Esmeraldas must have confused and dazzled Spanish courtiers. By dressing the sitters following Spanish decorum, Barrio de Sepúlveda created an association between the mulattoes and people of Spanish nobility. Yet, such an association must have been problematic in the minds of Spanish viewers who might have interpreted it as ironic. Ideas surrounding the image of blacks and miscegenation during the renaissance negated the possibility that Don Francisco and his sons were perceived as Spanish noblemen. It is likely that Spanish courtiers associated the physical appearance of these Esmeraldas rulers with the people of African descent who lived in Spain at the time, especially Moors and African slaves. Although Spain had accepted the presence of Muslims until the fifteenth century, the latter were traditionally considered to be the quintessential enemy of the Christian empire. At the time, the supremacy of a cultural group was based on religious arguments and black skin had a derogatory connotation because it was associated with Islamic religion and demonic notions.<sup>15</sup> In literature of the Golden Age, blacks were usually considered inferior, and were belittled with satirical descriptions. In general terms, comical portrayals of blacks were based on what was perceived as a vulgar way of speaking and physical ugliness.<sup>16</sup>

Spanish ideas about black people living in the colonies were in no way different. At the beginning of the conquest, Spaniards enslaved African people so they could work as servants and as a force to control indigenous populations. As black people

had become numerous and difficult to control, the Spanish introduced certain laws to discipline and segregate them. For instance, in 1522, the Council of the Indies published an edict stating that, if a black person attacked or injured a Spaniard, he would be flogged one hundred times and his hand would be cut off if the slave relapsed. A 1577 law decreed that black and mulatto freedmen should live with their masters and pay tribute.<sup>17</sup> In general, these legal measures indicate that the Spanish kingdom had a high degree of anxiety about black populations and viewed them with suspicion.

Besides the prejudices associated with darker skin, miscegenation was also seen in a negative light during this period. Although Don Francisco and his sons are today identified as mulattoes, at the time, they were considered *zambos* or *zambaigos*, the result of miscegenation between African and indigenous people. These terms first appeared in 1560 but were used sporadically and were usually confused with the term *mulatto*. The chronicler, Juan López de Velasco, in his description of the Indies, mentions that *zambaigos* were considered the worst and vilest people of that part of the world. The famous poet, Garcilaso de la Vega, also defined the term *mulato* in a pejorative manner by relating it to the word “dog.”<sup>18</sup> At the time, miscegenation was seen as impure; mixed race individuals like mulattoes and *zambos* were thus considered to represent the lowest strata of colonial society. It is unclear whether Spanish courtiers knew about this categorization. In inventories of the time of Philip IV, the painting is said to portray three *black* men, Don Francisco and his sons.<sup>19</sup> However, in his letter to the king, Barrio de Sepúlveda categorized the group as “mulattoes” as a way of underlining his negative opinion of them.

In the visual arts of this time, reception of black skin was commonly associated with ideas of otherness and perceived as a mark of divine punishment.<sup>20</sup> During the early modern period, white and black were interpreted as opposing concepts related to holiness and evil, respectively. These associations between white/positive and black/negative can be seen in portraits where black people—usually slaves—appear in blatant opposition and subordination to a white person. For instance, in the portrait of *Joanna of Austria with a Black Page* (1553), the young slave is characterized not as a person but as an accessory that emphasizes the superiority of the princess.

As Joaneath Spicer notes, black slaves were also seen as luxury items and as exotic commodities. Exoticism might have indicated the luxury and power of acquisition of the owner while simultaneously undermining the image of black people through their objectification and marked otherness. Similarly, portraits of African rulers and ambassadors can be perceived as exotic characterizations of the “Other.” As Kate Lowe states, these representations were in many cases European constructions of “Africanness,” suited to confirm a variety of European preconceptions more than to portray true likenesses.<sup>21</sup>



Either when shown in juxtaposition with white figures or in individual portraits, black figures were certainly viewed with suspicion by sixteenth-century European viewers. This suspicion was further heightened by associations between Africans, Moors, and Indians in the minds of the Spanish courtiers. Analyzed in this context, it becomes clear that the allegiance suggested between the Spanish crown and Don Francisco de Arobe was produced as a result of the Spanish need to acquire certain control over the strategic region of Esmeraldas. Although the portrait of the mulattoes seems to convey an image of considerable nobility, the sitters were in fact members of a racial group seen as inferior, which could only be improved by the whitening force of the Catholic faith. This contradiction would, therefore, manifest the colonizer's anxiety over the difficulties of subjugating a rebellious community.

Exoticism and barbarism were, in the eyes of Spaniards, two complementary ideas. In portraits of African nobility, turbans, feathers, and abundant jewelry were regarded as signs of exoticism. In the case of the rulers of Esmeraldas, exoticism was suggested through the presence of glistening indigenous jewelry that contrasted with the dark skin of the mulattoes, and also by the foreign clothing and "primitive" weapons. Similar to portrayals of African leaders, the inclusion of these elements indicated Otherness. As Thomas Cummins has observed, the description of Barrio de Sepúlveda Barrio in the letter emphasizes the extraordinary aspect of the mulattoes, underlined by the beauty of their physiques, the richness of their golden jewelry, and their fierceness.<sup>22</sup> In this case, extraordinary means exotic, unusual, and also non-white. These associations were meant to belittle the nobility of Don Francisco and his family by further distinguishing the image of these noblemen from Esmeraldas from that of true European gentlemen.

This sense of inferiority is also underlined by the fact that Barrio dressed the Arobe men in Spanish outfits. His description of them as typically wearing only shirts serves as a clear sign of their barbarism. Although Barrio de Sepúlveda gave Spanish clothes to Don Francisco and his sons as part of their agreement, framing the men as commodities, these clothes indicate a civilizing process as well. As the judge mentions in his letter to the king, he regarded the mulattoes as people who did not know of civility, something that was likely associated to the way they were dressed. These associations were widespread among Spanish colonizers and are revealed in the accounts by chroniclers, such as Captain Bernardo Vargas Machuca, who in 1599 described indigenous people as follows:

...All of them are barbarous peoples, as is shown by their houses, dress, food and curious clothing, of which anyhow they wear very little ... they did not know what stockings and shoes were until, as a result of contact with us Spaniards, they were reduced to civility and put on clothes, and covered their bare bodies with shirt, doublet and hose, stockings and shoes, hats and cloaks.<sup>23</sup>

Another aspect that emphasizes the barbarism of Don Francisco and his sons in the portrait is the inclusion of spears. As mentioned before, although these weapons served to highlight the fierceness of the mulattoes and their willingness to defend the Spanish empire, spears and darts were commonly associated with savagery and seen as the primitive counterparts of European weaponry. For instance, in allegorical representations, America is portrayed as a naked woman with a spear. Both her nakedness and weapons allude to her wild condition. In the same manner, the inclusion of sharp spears in the portrayal of the mulattoes suggests their uncivilized state.

The portrait, thus, presents an interesting tension between civility and barbarism. By giving clothes to the portrayed subjects, the judge created an image of conversion from a wild and savage state to a more civilized one. In this case, Spanish clothes are associated with the white man and embody ideals of superiority, civility, higher intellectual capacity, and better moral values. However, this process of civilization is depicted as incomplete, as Don Francisco and his sons still wear some indigenous paraphernalia and firmly hold their spears. These attributes are, thus, marks of these men's resilient barbarism. This image of the mulattoes was, in addition, a convenient diplomatic tool, as it served to justify the Spanish occupation of Esmeraldas, and the Americas at large, by presenting the colonizers as a positive transformative force.

The ironic undertones of the painting and the imposition of European clothing hint at the parallels that existed between colonial portraiture and theatrical performance at the Spanish court. Since the mid-sixteenth century, the development of portraiture and the professionalization of theatrical activity allowed for the display of an extensive variety of clothing styles related to an increase in fashion changes. Although since the time of the Catholic monarchs, the use of costly clothing was limited and Spanish decorum relied more on sobriety than on ostentation, performers were allowed to display their fashion on stage, fostering the consumption of clothes that laws prohibited to most. Consequently, a person who changed clothes too frequently was compared to an actor who played a different role depending on the occasion.<sup>24</sup>

The interest in theatricality increased in Spain with Charles V's rise to power in 1516. Since the 1550s, there had been a literary tradition and fondness for courtly spectacle. This development has been related to the influence of the Neapolitan court in Italy, where jousts, tournaments, masquerades, and theatrical performances had been a component of courtly life since the beginning of the sixteenth century. This interest in theatre was inherited by Philip II and his courtiers, who spent considerable amounts of money on sceneries, writers, actors, and musicians.<sup>25</sup> During the sixteenth century, the Spanish tendency to dramatize and impersonate historical and mythical characters also influenced other media, like painting.<sup>26</sup> In cultivated circles, such as the one led by Francisco Pacheco (head of the art academy in Seville, as well as teacher, mentor, and father-in-law of painter, Diego Velázquez), the connection

among diverse art forms fostered an intersection between literature and painting. This cultural environment provides a rich context to understand the reception of the portrait of the mulattoes at the Spanish court.

By dressing Don Francisco and his sons in Spanish clothes, Barrio de Sepúlveda presents a reality that simulates a performance, where the subjects play a role assigned by the Spanish crown. Because the Arobo men wear clothing that was imposed on them, it is challenging to understand the connection between the mulattoes and their attire, and to ascertain whose identities the portrait represents. It is not clear whether Don Francisco and his sons are portrayed as native or as Spanish, and as independent rulers or subjects of the Spanish crown. It is clear that the clothes Don Francisco and his sons are wearing did not represent the cultural identities they possessed before the portrait was made, so their image is a construction of “Spanishness.” I argue that the mulattoes are similar to actors who impersonate Spanish noblemen but whose real identity is far from being represented.

In this case, the painting presents the artificiality of the status of Don Francisco and his sons through two different layers. The first one is their portrayal itself, as only people of high merits and recognized social status were portrayed as such during Spain’s Golden Age. Vicente Carducho (Italian painter at the Spanish court and director of the art academy in Madrid) was openly critical in his *Diálogo de la Pintura* (1633) of ordinary men and women with economic means but without noble background who had themselves painted as aristocrats. His comments ridicule pretentious sitters who tried to acquire a higher status by having their portraits made.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, the idea that a plebeian could be portrayed as gentility produced the artificial ennoblement of the sitter.

The other layer of artificiality is introduced through the representation of a partial state of nobility. By being presented with expensive ornaments and clothing, Don Francisco and his sons are included in the realm of the aristocracy. Nonetheless, I believe that the introduction of indigenous elements in the portrait and contemporary notions of Spanish decorum situate the caciques from Esmeraldas in an ambiguous space that is not fully indigenous or fully Spanish. A comparison of the representation of Don Francisco and his sons with portraits of Spanish noblemen of the same period demonstrates a clear distinction between true and pretended “Spanishness.” Spanish nobility in portraiture was expressed through the rules of decorum imposed since the times of the Catholic Kings and radicalized during the reign of Philip II. Several examples of Spanish and colonial portraiture demonstrate how nobility was depicted through the replication of the canons established in portraits of Philip II.

In his royal portraits, the king usually appears wearing austere clothing, which consisted of a black suit and a white ruff collar. In portraits of noblemen from Spain and the Spanish American territories painted in the second half of the sixteenth

century, such as El Greco's portrait of a *Nobleman* (ca.1586) and the portrait of *Viceroy Luis de Velasco I* (1549), the sitters appear wearing similar attire, mimicking the gravity of the king. These examples strongly contrast with the representation of the mulattoes who appear wearing rich, colorful clothing. The luxurious textiles worn by Don Francisco and his sons, and their elaborate jewelry could represent for the Spanish courtiers not only marks of exoticism, but also a complete lack of decorum. I suggest that for Spanish courtiers, these lavish paraphernalia was likely seen as a display of the mulattoes' impropriety.

Portraying subjects using satire was one of the ways in which portraiture of non-noble people was accepted at the Spanish court. Although the idea of parodying the subjects was fully developed by Spanish artists during the seventeenth century, satire and mimicry were already present in pictorial representations of the sixteenth century. The most obvious examples of parodic portrayals are the depictions of "peoples of pleasure," characters with physical or mental deficiencies whose function was to entertain courtiers by dancing, singing, or performing comedies. In certain instances, their transgressions included masquerading as nobility, actions that comprised the use of rich clothing and the mimicking of courtiers' manners. In examples such as the portraits of *Dwarf of Cardinal Gravela by Anthonius Mor* (c. 1550) and *Pejerón, Jester of the Count of Benavente and the Grand Duke of Alba* (ca. 1560), "people of pleasure" are represented wearing expensive clothing and expressing a grave attitude, possibly to increase the irony underlying these portrayals. In the case of the depiction of Pejerón, instead of conveying an outright comedic image, Mor rendered an ironic version of the jester by representing him with a serious expression and an uncomfortable gaze. As his demeanor does not echo the elegance of his outfit, the stance of Pejerón remains ambiguous and the artist's characterization of him is difficult to define.

In the case of Gravela's dwarf, the sense of ironic emulation is even more apparent, as he is represented in a manner similar to other Spanish noblemen. Mor portrayed him wearing rich dark clothing, a matching hat, and a white shirt, as well as a golden necklace. The satirical element found in the contradictory stance of the dwarf as a soldier—wearing a large sword and holding a baton in his right hand—becomes more evident when his height is compared to the large dog standing next to him.

In other instances, presenting "people of pleasure" alongside members of the nobility further emphasizes their impropriety, as is the case with the portrait of *Infanta Isabel with Magdalena Ruiz* (1586). In this example, the presence of the dwarf enhances the princess's beauty and nobility in a manner similar to other court portraits, where slaves are contrasted with their masters. In this case, Magdalena brings a degree of playfulness to the work. Actually, Philip II wrote several times to his daughters about her special interests in drinking and dancing, stressing her comic role at court.<sup>28</sup>



Usually, the presence of comic characters was displayed in opposition to court sobriety and as a way to emphasize the dignity of the higher born.

Considering this context, I suggest that Don Francisco, Don Domingo, and Don Pedro might have been presented as the center of a subtle parody, as perceived through the eyes of the Spanish monarchy. However, the parody behind this portraiture not only undermines the noble depiction of the mulattoes, it also indicates a certain uneasiness on the part of the Spanish colonizers. The need to belittle the mulattoes, who, according to Barrio de Sepúlveda were converted vassals, was probably connected to the difficulties that the Spaniards had to confront during the process of conquest. Barrio knew that the allegiance with the mulattoes was fragile and that the agreement between the parties could break at any moment, as had happened in the case of Alonso de Illescas.

Although the sitters in the painting of Don Francisco and his sons are depicted displaying their hats as a sign of submission, this gesture is more a respectful salutation than an act of real deference. In painting, acts of submission require the representation of different levels of power and demand that hierarchical positions be clearly illustrated. The emphasis on hierarchy is usually supported by the presence of the person to whom the allegiance is rendered, in this case, the king. However, the absence of the king in the painting—and of any other person who could represent him—destroys the illusion of submission. Moreover, the perspective of Sánchez Gallque's composition positions the viewer at eye level with Don Francisco, abolishing any sense of hierarchy. This mild gesture and the fierce gaze of Don Francisco add to an ambiguous representation of submission. Visual representation then becomes a tool that helped Spaniards assuage the anxiety produced by the interaction with mixed-raced communities that were difficult to control.

In practical matters, the legitimization of Don Francisco's power and the lack of Spanish physical control meant that Esmeraldas continued to be a region where only the mulatto and indigenous communities ruled, ignoring the pacts of allegiance accepted in the past. In 1605, the province was the center of local rivalries that ended in bloody battles among the mulatto elites. Although Don Francisco de Arobe was not accused of participating in the riots, the Spaniards felt disappointed by his failure to control them. In response, Don Pedro, son of Don Francisco, threatened to burn their fields and disappear in the jungle if the Spanish decided to punish the Arobe family. The Spanish opinion was that Don Francisco and his people were drunkards and not true Christians, and that all the money spent on them had been wasted.<sup>29</sup>

The multiple readings of this complex portrayal show the degree of instability inherent to the definition of vassalage. The fact that Don Francisco and his sons are depicted as Spanish vassals rivals the idea that they were independent local leaders.

This paradox is emphasized by the combination of Spanish and native elements. The portrait is an ambivalent expression of an unresolved conquest, a construction of a fictive reality where the Spanish seem to be in control of a rich region. The portrait reflects these difficult interactions by superficially recognizing the sitters as noblemen while simultaneously questioning their status. Irony reinforces the social and hierarchical gaps between the painted American subjects and Spanish nobility. The fascinating complexity of the portrait reflects, therefore, the difficulties of the process of conquest and the conflicts brought by the contact between Spanish society and indigenous communities.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Andrés Gutiérrez Usillos, "Nuevas Aportaciones en torno al lienzo titulado *Los Mulatos de Esmeraldas*. Estudio Técnico, Radiográfico e Histórico," *Anales del Museo de América XX* (2012):7-64.

<sup>2</sup> Adam Szaszdy, "El transfondo de un cuadro: 'Los Mulatos de Esmeraldas' de Andrés Sánchez Galque," *Cuadernos Prehispánicos* 12(1986): 93-142, 96.

<sup>3</sup> For the most recent information about the painter, see Susan Verdi Webster, "Of Signatures and Status: Andrés Sánchez Gallque and Contemporary Painters in Early Colonial Quito," in *Andrés Sánchez Gallque y los Primeros Pintores en la Audiencia de Quito*, ed. Ximena Carcelén (Quito: Casa de la Cultura Ecuatoriana, 2014), 25-97.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Cummins, "Three Gentlemen from Esmeraldas: A Portrait fit for a King," in *Slave Portraiture in the Atlantic World*, ed. Agnes Lugo-Ortiz et al., 118-45. (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 126-38.

<sup>5</sup> To learn more details about the agreement with other leaders of Esmeraldas, see Kris Lane, *Quito 1599: City and Colony in Transition* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002), 37. For the information about the clothes, see Szaszdy, "El transfondo de un cuadro," 96-98.

<sup>6</sup>. See for instance Thomas Cummins, *The Art of the Viceroyalties, 1500 and 1700* (Madrid: Museo de América, 1999), 172; Thomas Cummins and William B. Taylor, “The Mulatto Gentlemen of Esmeraldas, Ecuador,” *Colonial Latin America: A Documentary History* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc., 2002), 159; see also Thomas Cummins, *The Arts in Latin America 1492-1820* (Philadelphia P.A.: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2006), 418. For other interpretations, see Inmaculada Rodríguez Moya, *Iberoamérica Mestiza Encuentro de Pueblos y Culturas* (Madrid: Sociedad Estatal para la Acción Cultural, 2003), 152-153. Michael Schreffler presents the painting as an object of gift-giving and an example of colonial subjection in Michael Schreffler, *The Art of Allegiance* (Louisville: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), 103. In his most recent interpretation of the painting, Thomas Cummins emphasizes the fierceness and independence of the mulattoes. See Thomas Cummins, “Three Gentlemen from Esmeraldas: A Portrait fit for a King,” 118-45.

<sup>7</sup>. Lane, *Quito 1599*, 22-51.

8. For a discussion of the historical context surrounding the production of the painting, and the allegiance between the Spaniards and Don Francisco, see John Leddy Phelan, *The Kingdom of Quito in the Seventeenth Century* (Madison, Milwaukee, London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1967); Szaszdy, “*El Transfondo de un cuadro*,” 93-142; For a more detailed explanation of Alonso de Illescas’ arrival to power see Lane, *Quito 1599*, 27-29.

<sup>9</sup>. Cummins, “Three Gentlemen from Esmeraldas,” 124.

10. Sebastián de Covarrubias, *Tesoro de la Lengua Castellana o Española* (Madrid: Luis Sánchez, 1611), 1264. “RETRATO, la figura contrahecha de alguna persona principal y de cuenta, cuya efigie y semejanza es justo quede por memoria a los siglos venideros.” The translation is from the author.

<sup>11</sup>. Marcus Burke and Peter Cherry, *Spanish Inventories 1, Collections of Paintings in Madrid, 1601-1755* (Los Angeles: The Provenance Index of The Getty Information Institute, 1997), 85-86.

<sup>12</sup>. Gutiérrez Usillos, “Nuevas Aportaciones en torno al lienzo titulado *Los Mulatos de Esmeraldas*,” 43-4.

<sup>13</sup>. Lane, *Quito 1599*, 36.

<sup>14</sup>. Phelan, *The Kingdom of Quito*, 12.

- <sup>15</sup> See Margaret Greer, Walter Mignolo and Maureen Quilligan, *Rereading the black legend: the discourses of religious and racial difference in the Renaissance empires* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 316. And Gustav Jahoda, *Images of Savages: Ancient Roots of Modern Prejudice in Western Culture* (London, New York: Routledge, 1999), 27. For opinions about black people in Spain, see Aurelia Martín Casares, "Cristianos, musulmanes y animistas en Granada," in *Negros, Mulatos, Zambaigos: Derroteros africanos en los mundos ibéricos*, ed. Berta Ares Queija and Alessandro Stella (Sevilla: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2000), 207-214.
- <sup>16</sup> *The Image of Black in Western Art*, ed. David Bindman et al. (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 2010), 191-201. See also Joaneath Spicer, "European Perceptions of Blackness as Reflected in the Visual Arts," in *Revealing the African Presence in Renaissance Europe*, ed. Joaneath Spicer (Baltimore: Walters Art Museum, 2012), 44-6.
- <sup>17</sup> Baltasar Fra Molinero, "Ser mulato en España y América," in *Negros, Mulatos, Zambaigos*, 136-137.
- <sup>18</sup> Berta Ares Queijas, "Mestizos, mulatos y zambaigos," in *Negros, Mulatos, Zambaigos*, 83.
- <sup>19</sup> Gutiérrez Usillos, "Nuevas Aportaciones en torno al lienzo titulado *Los Mulatos de Esmeraldas*," 49.
- <sup>20</sup> Joaneath Spicer, "European Perceptions of Blackness," 35-60.
- <sup>21</sup> Spicer, "European Perceptions of Blackness," 35-60. And Kate Lowe, "Visual Representation of an Elite: African Ambassadors and Rulers in Renaissance Europe," in *Revealing the African Presence in Renaissance Europe*, 99-115.
- <sup>22</sup> Cummins, "Three Gentlemen from Esmeraldas," 131.
- <sup>23</sup> Bernardo de Vargas Machuca, cited in John H. Elliott, *Spain and its world 1500-1700* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 55.
- <sup>24</sup> Laura Bass, *The Drama of the Portrait: Theater and Visual Culture in Early Modern Spain* (Louisville: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), 45.
- <sup>25</sup> For court performances in the kingdom of Charles V, see Roy Strong, *Art and Power: Renaissance Festivals, 1450-1650* (Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1984), 18. For the analysis of theatrical performances during Philip II's rule see Teresa Ferrer Valls, *La práctica escénica cortesana: de la época del Emperador a la de Felipe III* (Rochester: Tamesis Books, 1991), 51-73.



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- <sup>26</sup> Bass, *The Drama of the Portrait*, 4.
- <sup>27</sup> Vicente Carducho. *Diálogos de la Pintura*. Impreso con Licencia por Francisco Martínez, 1633, 111.
- <sup>28</sup> For a more extensive analysis of “people of pleasure” see Fernando Bouza, *Locos, enanos y hombres de placer en la corte de los Austrias* (España: Edición Temas de Hoy, 1991), 17-35. To know more about the function of Magdalena Ruiz, see Javier Portús, *De El Greco a Picasso* (Paris: Ministerio de Cultura, 1987), 96.
- <sup>29</sup> Cummins and Taylor, “The Mulatto Gentleman of Esmeraldas,” 161.

## OIL IN THE ABSTRACT: Designing Venezuelan Modernity in *El Farol*

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Marking its thirtieth anniversary of publication, Issue 230 (July 1969) of the Venezuelan journal *El Farol* boasts a striking and memorable cover design by former art director Gerd Leufert. A purely abstract composition, this design presents the reader with a hallucinatory overlay of two grids, one pink and one orange (Figure 1). The placement and configuration of the orange grid adhere to the physical dimensions of the journal, but its pink counterpart introduces a sense of formal and structural instability. As a printed duplicate of the underlying orange form, this pink grid announces the mechanics of the chromotype process, in which a single image is produced by the printing of successive layers of visual information. Within the spatial logic of the design, however, the pink quadrilaterals appear utterly dislocated, floating away from the orange field and perhaps even off the page itself. The very layout of the cover is one of flux, a perpetually moving optical illusion that refuses both stasis and formal resolution even as it foregrounds the material conditions of its own production.

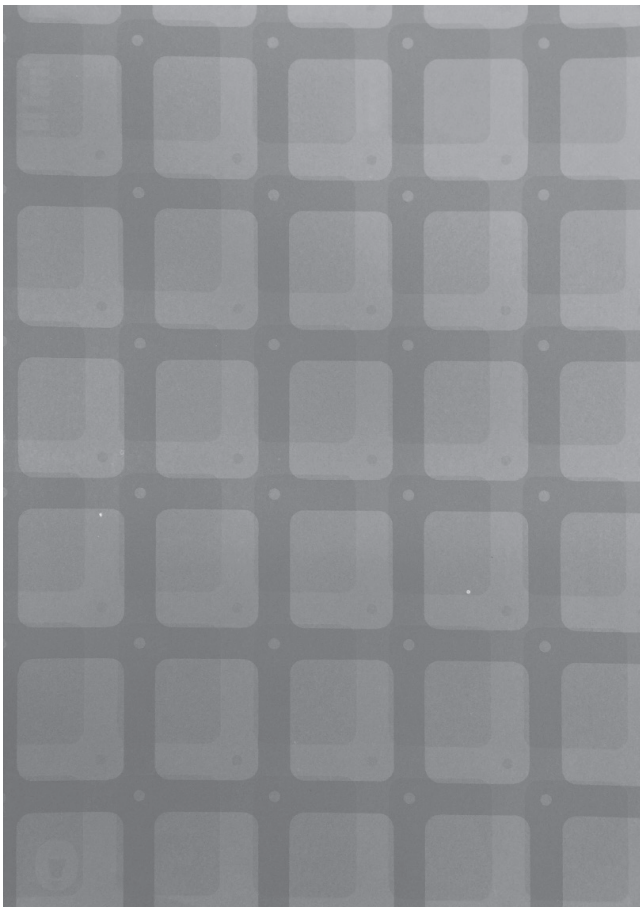


FIGURE 1. Gerd Leufert, front cover of *El Farol* 230 (July 1969). Image courtesy of Gerd Leufert Estate.

Referring to this design in particular, Leufert commented that “it would be best if the cover, rather than reflecting the end of an era, marked the beginning of a new one.”<sup>1</sup> That Leufert heralded this brave new world with an exercise in optical dissonance is not all that surprising. By the late 1960s geometric abstraction, especially its kinetic variant, had taken hold in Venezuela with acutely nationalist overtones, the visual expression of a broader, more deeply rooted ideological impulse to modernize the country. Yet if Leufert’s cover was meant to signal the future, the content of this issue of *El Farol* was much more invested in the past. Included were the proceedings of an informal roundtable conversation between Enrique Puig-Corvé, a public relations consultant who had served as a founding member of *El Farol*’s Caracas editorial team, and its three best-known art directors: Leufert, Nedo Mion Ferrario, and Carlos Cruz-Diez— all of whom had achieved international acclaim as artists in their own right. The primary topic of conversation was the journal’s historical importance as an arena for the development of Venezuelan graphic design, and the Lithuanian-born Leufert—who had served as art director for the journal from 1957 to 1959— was singled out by his peers as the main instigator of the publication’s development into an artistically significant institution: “In reality, when Gerd entered the picture,” Cruz-Diez stated, “*El Farol* began to be *El Farol*.”<sup>2</sup> The comment is telling, for Leufert’s tenure was cited as a point of origin, reducing the first eighteen years of the journal’s run to little more than prehistory. In the estimation of Cruz-Diez and his contemporaries, it is only through Leufert’s intervention that *El Farol* became relevant as a cultural institution, transforming from a functional but unremarkable publication to an aesthetically vital and, more importantly, intrinsically Venezuelan paragon of design.

Noticeably absent from the conversation is any mention of *El Farol*’s function as the official mouthpiece of the Creole Petroleum Corporation, the Venezuelan subsidiary of Standard Oil Company of New Jersey and the largest oil producer in the country. Nearly forty years after its final issue was released, this fact has largely receded from public memory, or has been absorbed so thoroughly as to be accepted without consequence. The journal is instead remembered primarily for its graphic work, largely thanks to the efforts of its own team of editors and designers, but since its foundation in 1939 *El Farol* had in fact served as part of a broader public relations campaign undertaken by the U.S.–owned oil company. True to Leufert’s intentions, the sumptuous look of the thirtieth-anniversary issue bears almost no resemblance to the journal’s first numbers, which are marked by uniform textual layout and a relative dearth of imagery. Indeed, over the course of 249 issues until its final edition in 1975, the design of *El Farol* would encompass everything from regionalist figuration to the hard-edged geometric abstraction denoted by Leufert’s grids. The only unifying factor remained the publication’s steadfast alliance to and promotion of company interests.

How did an apparently nondescript oil journal become an exemplar of Venezuelan graphic design and of Venezuelan modernity? Certainly Leufert’s work as art director

constitutes a decisive intervention, but this is not simply a case of rebranding. To bifurcate the run of *El Farol* into pre- and post-Leufert eras is to deal with the journal on a strictly visual basis and thereby obfuscate the considerable ideological consistency of its mission, which has not been dealt with in relation to its shifting aesthetic identity. Existing literature on the oil industry and of *El Farol* in particular tends to detach corporate interests from artistic practice: accounts of the oil industry in Venezuela frame *El Farol* primarily within the scope of a broader corporate public relations gambit, while design histories mention the journal only in passing as an important though ultimately minor publication.<sup>3</sup> Yet when viewed as critical visualizations of the modern that are nonetheless products of their corporate, developmentalist context, the imagery of *El Farol* carries far different implications. By tracing the evolution of the journal's design under its primary art directors—Cruz-Diez, Leufert, and Nedo—it becomes evident that the cultivation of a modernist aesthetic functioned not in spite of Creole's interests but instead constituted a manifestation of a modernity as it was determined and espoused by the petroleum industry in the very pages of the journal. In its self-presentation and in its reception, the perceived metamorphosis of *El Farol* from a foreign-owned corporate organ to a source of national artistic pride mirrored the imagined trajectory of Venezuela's modernist experiment, principally with respect to its relationship with the oil industry, from a product of foreign intervention to a project of national self-actualization.

This is not to indict Leufert, Nedo, and Cruz-Diez as necessarily complicit, nor to dismiss the Venezuelan vogue for geometric abstraction as essentially participatory within a framework of foreign-led, capitalist exploitation of natural resources. Rather, a consideration of *El Farol's* graphic design in light of the journal's ideological basis begins to illuminate the idiosyncratic contours of artistic modernism in Venezuela, as well as the contradictions and fissures that kinetic art sought to resolve. That artists like Leufert found a receptive platform in the oil journal—and that their work was promoted so enthusiastically as the emblem of a revitalized, redefined oil nation—reveal that the most immediate visual hallmarks of Venezuelan modernity, namely its fetishization of abstraction and technological innovation, were constructed in dialogue with and largely due to the circumstances generated by the development of the oil industry. The designers' reluctance to address those circumstances in the roundtable discussion only speaks to the naturalization of this ideological matrix as a necessary precondition for a modernist narrative of progress.<sup>4</sup>



*El Farol's* thirtieth anniversary issue opens with an editorial by director Felipe Llerandi that argues that the journal, due to its longstanding support of the arts in Venezuela, amounts to “Algo más que petróleo.”<sup>5</sup> Such a characterization certainly paints the publication in a flattering light, but Llerandi’s need to justify *El Farol's* continued presence in Venezuela is betrayed by his acknowledgment of the unusual premise of the journal itself. He concedes that “the very idea of creating a magazine that responded to the industry’s concerns through the [Venezuelan] community’s cultural affairs was, in its novelty, as strange as it was suspicious.”<sup>6</sup> By this point in the journal’s history, the rhetorical moves of Llerandi’s statement had become commonplace for *El Farol*: the 1939 inaugural issue opened with “Palabras preliminares” by the editorial team, which declared that “we aspire to collect the most intense palpitations of national spirit in our pages... believing sincerely that in so doing we reaffirm, once more, the sincerity of our patriotic devotion.”<sup>7</sup> From its very first issue, *El Farol* defined itself against its inherent status as an oil journal, proposing not that it denied its corporate function but exceeded it. The scope of *El Farol* would include the oil industry but not be limited to its interests; its import would be cultural as well as economic. Throughout its print run, the U.S.–owned company journal would position itself as a force in the service of Venezuelan patriotism, so frequently and deliberately that its efforts to do so ultimately underscored the strangeness of such a proposition.

The peculiarly confident yet defensive tone that *El Farol* frequently adopted can be explained, in part, by the precarious status of the oil industry at this moment in Venezuela and abroad. Creole Petroleum was founded in the midst of a contentious economic climate in which the uncertainty of oil exploration was accompanied by the possibility of sudden, unimaginable profits for both the industry and the Venezuelan state. Initially a small U.S.–owned syndicate that managed leases and options in several Caribbean countries including Venezuela, Creole was acquired by Standard Oil Company (New Jersey) in 1928 and became a subsidiary of its U.S.–based parent company.<sup>8</sup> A byzantine sequence of acquisitions, sales, and power struggles—of which the protagonists were overwhelmingly foreign businessmen—characterized the early years of the industry and its relationship to the Venezuelan government under the dictatorship of Juan Vicente Gómez, which welcomed foreign speculation as a means of consolidating power in his own hands.

To understand the stakes that motivated the foundation of *El Farol*, it is crucial to consider the broader perception of Creole and other companies following Gómez’s death in 1935. During this period the oil industry at large experienced an international crisis of public relations, spurred primarily by the 1938 expropriation of Mexico’s oil resources by newly elected President Lázaro Cárdenas. Venezuela, with its vast oil reserves and favorable political climate, became all the more attractive; at this moment, however, the political elite saw an opportunity to wrest economic power from foreign entrepreneurs.<sup>9</sup> In 1936, the writer Arturo Uslar Pietri, responding to a cresting of hostility toward the industry and shifting political tides, identified oil as

the lifeblood of a vital, industrial, and wholly modern nation:

If we were to propose a motto for our economic policy, we would suggest the following, which dramatically sums up the necessity of investing the wealth produced by the destructive mining system, so as to create reproductive and productive agricultural wealth: sow the oil.<sup>10</sup>

Uslar Pietri's paradoxical metaphor of "sowing the oil" rescues oil production from its harmful potentialities by formulating as a necessary investment for the renovation of the country into a modern economic power. Subterranean petroleum deposits would provide the collective base material for the reshaping of the nation, and in a single, three-word phrase Uslar Pietri articulated what would become the ideological maxim for practically all subsequent Venezuelan political and economic philosophy.<sup>11</sup>

If *El Farol* was born out of this climate of hope and hostility, the first serious steps towards its creation were taken by a young Nelson Rockefeller. A member of Creole's Board of Directors since 1935, Rockefeller toured the company facilities in March 1939 and was appalled to find that they functioned as self-contained enclaves, and that almost none of the U.S. employees had even bothered to learn Spanish. With the situation in Mexico souring despite his own efforts to forestall expropriation, Rockefeller quickly notified Creole's management team and, in the hopes of reforming relations with local communities, began to put together a comprehensive public relations program. Of paramount concern, according to Rockefeller, was that "we convince the Venezuelan people in all walks of life that...[we] are not interested solely in coming down to squeeze as many dollars out of the country as possible, but that [we] have a real concern for the general economic and social welfare of the country."<sup>12</sup>

The results of these efforts were outlined in an internal memorandum, submitted in May 1939 for Rockefeller's approval, that proposed an elaborate, countrywide media strategy. In addition to a strengthening of relations with the press and the establishment of a weekly radio program, most ambitious was the proposed foundation of a "company magazine...designed (a) to foster where possible a community of interest among our employees, and (b) to distribute among a selected group of outside people, thus making a visual demonstration of our social program."<sup>13</sup> It was to be published jointly by the Standard Oil Company of Venezuela and Lago Petroleum Corporation (both of which were, at the time, managed by Standard of New Jersey under the umbrella of Creole), and would cover a variety of subjects that included professional matters—safety tips, the progress of refinery construction, and notable company promotions—as well as themes relating to leisure and entertainment.<sup>14</sup> In this respect the journal, which was to become *El Farol*, was conceived as a sibling of Standard's bi-monthly English-language journal *The Lamp*, in publication since 1918. Not only did the Venezuelan journal derive its name from its forbear—*El Farol* (a

literal Spanish translation of *The Lamp*) but it too would attempt to, in the words of one Standard executive, “merge the [oil] industry into the economic and social life of the country.”<sup>15</sup>

The front cover of *El Farol* 1 (June 1939), published only one month after the public relations memorandum, bears a reproduction of a landscape by the Venezuelan painter Tomás Golding, the title of the journal rendered in angular script yet seemingly emergent from the clouds overhead (Figure 2). The editorial team’s choice to use Golding’s painting for their cover is not altogether unexpected. Its depiction of two women carrying baskets on their heads as they walk toward a small thatched hut, the only human-made structure on a Caribbean beach full of cacti and plantains, exoticizes the country as a paradise that is not merely tropical but, more importantly, necessarily rural and unspoiled. The image also serves as a direct link between the journal and its U.S. counterpart, for it would also be used for the August 1939 cover of *The Lamp* that highlighted Standard’s “Venezuelan Shift” and related “An Intimate Picture of the Third Largest Oil Producing Country.”<sup>16</sup> The repurposing of Golding’s painting for both journals speaks to an editorial (and corporate) overlap—or, more practically, perhaps to the rushed publication of the latter—and registers the shift of ideological and aesthetic valences that distinguishes the two publications. For the readership of *The Lamp* the image connotes a far-flung paradise, passive and primitive, with natural resources ready for the taking. In *El Farol*, it is a signifier of nationalistic pride. It established a visual template that would dominate the covers of the first decade, consisting of folkloric paintings of (predominantly pastoral) Venezuelan life.

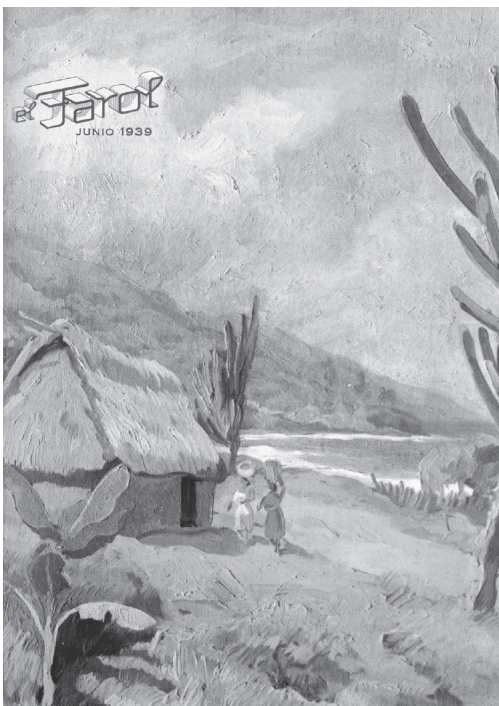


Figure 2. Front cover of *El Farol* 1 (June 1939), painting by Tomás Golding.

For *El Farol*, Golding's sentimental landscape serves as the visual equivalent of the "Palabras Preliminares" that attempted to fold the interests of the U.S. company into a nascent Venezuelan nationalism. To accommodate its new audience, the Venezuelan journal would have to thread a very particular needle, and to do so it adopted a strategy of *venezolanización*: the publication "should be a purely Venezuelan magazine, not aimed at the foreign staff," the Creole memorandum reads. "All illustrations should show only Venezuelans, and [all imagery] emanating from the States should be redrawn to local appeal."<sup>17</sup> Much as Uslar Pietri had called for, *El Farol* would redefine petroleum extraction as a patriotic mandate, a symbiotic effort between foreign companies and the Venezuelan people in the ongoing modernization of the country.

The idea of modernity was foundational for a journal that emphasized the titular *farol* as a graphic and thematic leitmotif: the first sixty-three issues featured a small image of a lamp on the margins of every page, visually unifying their disparate contents with an icon that suggested intellectual and spiritual illumination.<sup>18</sup> The journal took its cue from *The Lamp's* declaration that it would "light the way to an understanding of one another" but adapted this maxim for more overtly nationalist purposes:

Venezuelan, instruct yourself; light the divine fire in your spirit...  
the love of your country, a respect for its laws, and the veneration  
of its heroes, who gave their blood and their life for you, will  
all flourish in your heart; and your conscience will be elevated,  
perfumed with culture and civic integrity.<sup>19</sup>

*El Farol* presented itself—and the oil companies—as bringing modernity to Venezuela, but it did so in a manner that, much as the journal title was integrated into the cover imagery, was less a rupture than a reconciliation. Through Creole's intervention, the citizens of the "host nation" become safer, healthier, and wealthier, and they would also look back proudly upon their own history. The oil company would thereby fashion itself as a supplier not just of modernity but of tradition as well, Venezuela's past and future united by the oil industry. Yet the passage above begins to reveal the seams of this project. It marks a shift in focus, from the light of the "lamp" that would usher Venezuela into a modern future to the Venezuelan *reader*, who was clearly identified and circumscribed by nationality. In a curiously reflexive manner, the reader was forcefully commanded to "instruct yourself" and foster a love of country. Notably absent is any mention of the medium by which this instruction may take place, namely *El Farol* itself. Here a central tension of the journal may be elaborated: for its reconciliation of foreign industry and homegrown, nationalistic modernism to be successful, it had to be naturalized. This process plays out in the pages of the journal. Significantly, in the same issue, *El Farol* 5 (October 1939), only the authors of those features that directly relate to Standard or Creole—those on the La Salina cement plant, on the benefits of kerosene, and



even on the Miss Esso pageant—remain anonymous. These are in contrast to the articles on aboriginal caciques and Venezuelan writers, which are credited to Felipe Tejera and Manuel Perfiles, respectively. As a result, the historical and cultural past was framed as something to be retrospectively assessed, summarized, and explained by contemporary Venezuelan writers; the activities of the company, however, were given no such distance. They are related to Creole's readership by a nameless editorial author, presented as nothing less than the voice of the company itself. The absence of consistent bylines would persist until the mid-1950s, effectively subsuming all information regarding Creole's activity within this monolithic company voice. If the revelatory light of *El Farol* sought to illuminate the country's pre-petroleum past as well as the means by which it could transform itself into a modern nation, that light burned so bright to be blinding.

It was the company itself that would remake Venezuela and transform the romantic landscapes of the journal's front covers into a geography of charts and numbers that illustrated their back covers (which were similarly uncredited). Issue 5 (October 1939) presents the first of these diagrams, which overlays two pie charts quantifying global and national levels of oil production for the year 1938 (Figure 3). If this image employs a visual vocabulary of technical data and measurement as a foil against the landscape paintings of the front covers, the dialectic between landscape and industry is one of translation rather than opposition. At the center of the pie chart totaling national production is a miniature landscape that echoes the illustration on the bottom left of the page. It is an industrial-pastoral scene of an oil encampment in Venezuela, horizontally bifurcated by the edge of a body of water—likely Lake Maracaibo, the site of the majority of Creole's activity. In the top half of the illustration, two oil derricks dwarf a mountain, the form of which is echoed by an enormous white cloud. Industry is thus firmly situated within an elemental repertoire of water, earth, and air, the derricks a visualization of how Creole harnesses and rationalizes the untamed Venezuelan landscape. Thus, the early years of *El Farol* already linked graphic design, albeit in a relatively preliminary form, with its ideological foundation in the logic of industrial development. Only through the intervention of the foreign oil corporation, conceptualized as an autonomous entity unto itself, would the ostensibly primitive Venezuelan landscape—and its inhabitants—be so rationalized.

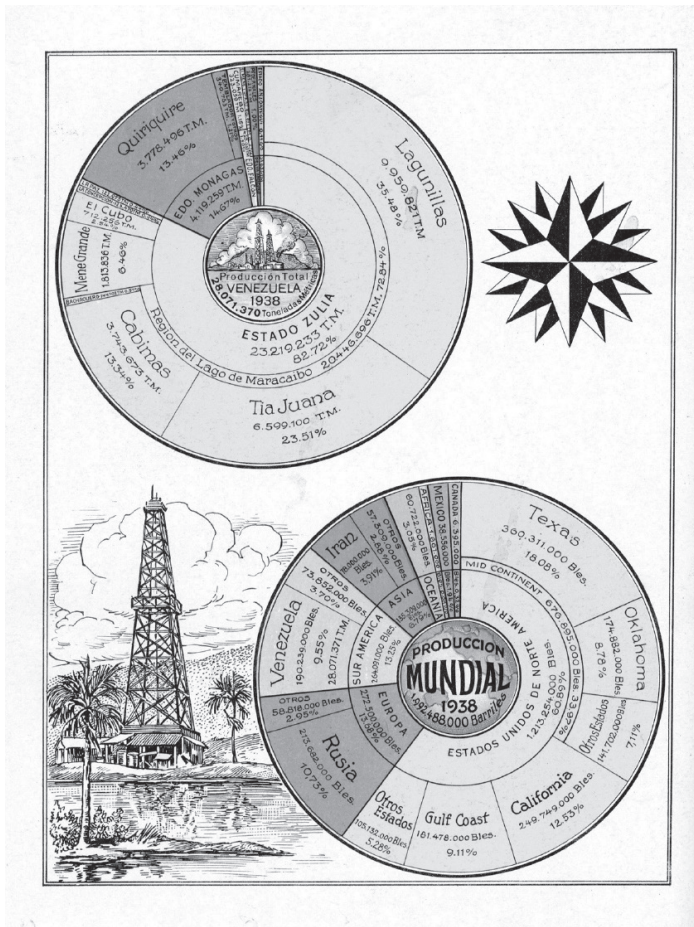


Figure 3. Back cover of *El Farol* 5 (October 1939).

As “a purely Venezuelan magazine,” *El Farol* deliberately employed Venezuelans to comprise its editorial board, authors, and artistic team, and it prominently included work produced by Venezuelan artists like Golding. Such a strategy was key to situating the publication as self-evidently Venezuelan in character, but it more importantly enabled the journal to claim itself and the oil industry, not unfairly, as important sponsors for art and design in Venezuela. Although the journal occasionally featured articles on various artists and fine art programs through the 1940s, its transition towards a more overtly artistically-minded publication began only in its second decade, when the publication would strengthen its commitment to a more abstract version of Venezuelan modernism and the importance of graphic innovation. A clear turning point in both these respects can be identified with Issue 150 (February 1954), which took as its theme the prospect of a modern, and modernist, Caracas. Much as the articles of this issue exult the physical urban metamorphosis of the capital city under the petrostate, so too does *El Farol* call attention to its own emergent identity as a singular publication, crediting as its creators not only Creole but also its editor-in-chief Alfredo Armas Alfonzo as well as its art director Cruz-Diez. The latter had joined Creole’s Publications Department in 1944, contributing various illustrations and producing several cover’s nationalist and corporate imagery specifically for *El Farol*.

To play up the country's modernist credentials in anticipation for the X Inter-American Conference held in Caracas in 1954, Cruz-Diez selected a relatively abstract photograph of Alexander Calder's recently completed *Nubes acústicas* that was created for Carlos Raúl Villanueva's famed Ciudad Universitaria. Perhaps the Ciudad Universitaria, the most celebrated of the grandiose urban interventions undertaken during the reign of Dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez (1953–58), proved to be the site of abstraction's legitimization in Venezuela. Villanueva sought to synthesize International Style architecture with modern art, inviting an international roster of artists to contribute large-scale public works. The Calder mobile thus functioned as a shorthand for a type of Venezuelan artistic modernism that, at the moment of its codification at the University and in contemporaneous cultural debates, was thoroughly embraced by *El Farol*. The cover promoted a newly abstract signifier for the nation, and the issue similarly extolled the virtues of developmentalism as manifest in the rapid urbanization of the capital city. Photographs illustrating the issue constitute a now familiar repertoire of highways, skyscrapers, and abstracted compositions, all of which are set against and in conjunction with the mountains and forests surrounding the city. Such imagery lauded the metamorphosis of Caracas into a rationalist, urban center than retained an essentially tropicalist character, a synthesis of the dialectic between primitive and industrial.

Even after Cruz-Diez left *El Farol* in 1955, his interest in the Ciudad Universitaria and geometric abstraction proved to be influential. Much as abstract art proved to be compatible with the developmentalist visions of Pérez Jiménez, so too did it provide a new iconography for the journal's own ideological aims as an organ of the oil industry. The Ciudad Universitaria would be invoked once again in Issue 166 (September–October 1956) as a means of formally resolving the heterogeneity of *El Farol* (Figure 4). A boldly geometric composition, the first in the history of the journal, appears on the front and back covers and reflects the growing acceptance of abstraction under the *perezjimenato* of the 1950s. Alternately overlapping and contiguous, the flat, unmodulated forms constitute a matrix within which appear images taken from various time periods and media. Direct references to the University appear on the back cover in the form of a photograph of the Estadio Olímpico and a drawing of Spanish sculptor Baltasar Lobo's contribution to the campus, an abstract sculpture titled *La Maternidad*. Taken as a pair, the images represent architecture and the arts, photography and drawing, in a visual synthesis that recalls Villanueva's professed aims.<sup>20</sup> The front cover, in a contrast that reinforces the dialectic of progress so promulgated by *El Farol*, references the past; an overtly old-fashioned woodcut of a printing press presents a clear signal of the newfound importance of graphic design.

Issue 166 was the first to feature work by Leufert, and it signaled the direction in which he would take the journal when he assumed the mantle of art director in 1957. Leufert had come to Caracas in 1951 from his native Lithuania, drawn by the prosperity of the oil boom, and he brought with him a strong European training in



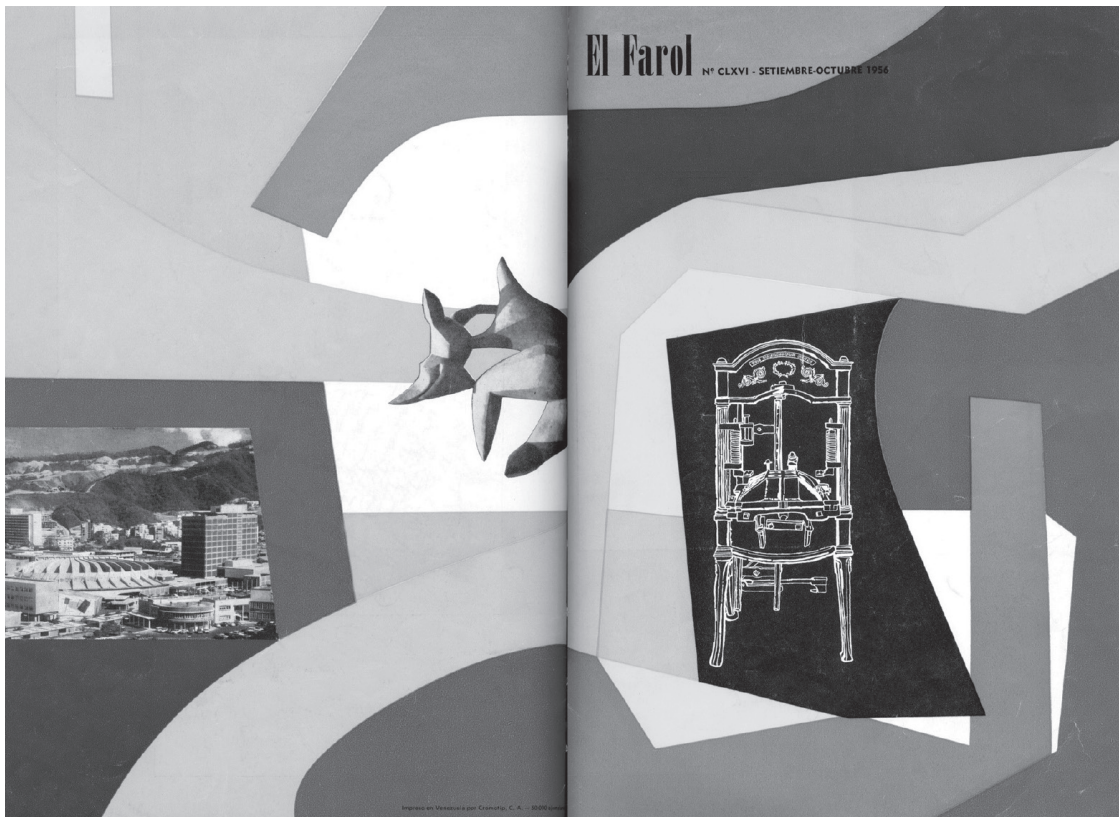


Figure 4. Gerd Leufert, front and back covers of *El Farol* 166 (September–October 1956). Image courtesy of Gerd Leufert Estate.

the graphic arts, having studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich under the tutelage of designer Fritze Helmuth Ehmcke.<sup>21</sup> As art director for *El Farol*, Leufert worked closely with editor Alfredo Armas Alfonzo to transform the journal into an entirely new kind of publication that, more than delivering news and commentary about the activities of Creole, would serve as a record of Venezuela's ascendant modernity even as it strengthened its commitment to documenting the country's pre-petroleum history. Leufert's *El Farol* deployed geometric flourishes and brilliant color palettes in conjunction with overtly historicizing imagery that, even more so than the iconographic dichotomy of pastoral and industrial landscapes of years before, declared itself both modern and Venezuelan. In this sense his work for the journal, though it has come to be known as a high point in the history of graphic arts, responded directly to *El Farol's* well-established ideological program.

The irony of Leufert's involvement with *El Farol* is that his (retrospectively applied) status as the father of modern Venezuelan design obscured two key aspects of his work for the journal—its scarcity and its fetishization of tradition. Leufert only served as art director for two years, and not including Issue 166 he produced a total of only four wholly original cover designs for the journal.<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, even though his time with *El Farol* was brief, Leufert's impact was considerable. Drawing upon his



training in Munich, he brought a desire for a total aesthetic that holistically unified typography with imagery specifically for the journal. The advent of this approach to “design,” Leufert argued, superseded the journal’s longstanding dedication to mere “layout,” in which each element functioned as a relatively discrete unit and was often reproduced from or in conjunction with another source.<sup>23</sup> Compare the inaugural issue’s use of the Golding landscape, which was also chosen as the cover of the *The Lamp*, with Leufert’s debut seventeen years later. Where the former functions as an illustration that has little bearing on the margins and typography of its contents, the abstract forms of the latter find a complement in the inset pages, which similarly utilize geometry as a framework for references to the past, in this case the title page of a nineteenth-century treatise by Andrés Bello that is praised for its “sobriety and good typographic taste.”<sup>24</sup> They are words that double as a reference to *El Farol* itself at the moment.

The overall effect of Leufert’s “design” is one of disparate elements that are unified in such a manner as to suggest an overarching logic that is not only visual but also historical in nature. Geometry in this cover appears as the vehicle through which the past and the present of Venezuela can be delivered to *El Farol*’s readers. A literal circumscription that smoothes the disjunctures of rapid industrialization by retroactively positioning them as the anticipatory prehistory of a modernist present and projected future. Leufert’s consistent design preferences, particularly his use of geometry as an organizing principle, ensure that any variations in typeface or illustration were read not as evidence of inconsistency but rather as permutations within a larger structural framework. It is as if the developmentalist foundational program of the journal itself, of Creole and the oil industry at large, found visual expression. Of importance is that this was not necessarily a proscribed aesthetic or even one that Leufert intentionally adapted for the purposes of the journal, but instead that the very genre of the oil journal, in all of its ideological contradictions and nationalist discrepancies, proved fertile ground for a Lithuanian artist to introduce to Venezuela—as it would be subsequently framed—a viable, professionalized discipline of graphic design. Certainly, Leufert’s contemporaneous pedagogical and exhibiting activities were critical to his fostering of a design tradition in his adopted home, but the fact that this tradition was disseminated widely in conjunction with, and as a representative of, the oil industry reveals the latent politics at work in the crowning of geometric abstraction as the de facto visual language of a modern Venezuela.<sup>25</sup>

Leufert’s contributions to the journal proved so distinctive that his departure marked a clear shift in its design. The first issue produced without him, *El Farol* 183 (July–August 1959), eased the transition somewhat by featuring on its cover a reproduction of an abstract composition by Gego (Gertrud Goldschmidt), the German-born partner of Leufert. The appearance of Gego on the cover of the journal signaled the direction that the new art director, Nedo, would take the publication. Born Nedo

Mion Ferrario, but known professionally by his first name, he had followed a similar trajectory as his predecessor. After studying at the Academy of Fine Arts in Milan, the twenty-three-year-old artist arrived in Venezuela in 1950, where he would remain for the rest of his life. He worked for local subsidiaries of the advertising firms McCann–Erickson and for Colman Prentis & Varley, Inc., but he would also serve as art director for the entire run of the journal *CAL: Crítica, Arte, y Literatura* (1962–67), since recognized as one of the most prestigious cultural publications in Venezuelan history.<sup>26</sup>

Nedo did not cultivate a unifying aesthetic for the journal, nor did he assume sole responsibility for the cover design. He expanded Leufert’s abstracting impulse to include other artists such as Gego, fostering a greater, more unpredictable variety of visual idioms over thirteen years and sixty consecutive issues of the journal. While Leufert had produced his own covers for the journal in accordance with the themes chosen by Armas Alfonso, Nedo established himself as a single, independent voice among several of the country’s most respected artists. Throughout his tenure the covers of the journal would feature, to name several examples, colonial woodcuts depicting the settlement of the Venezuelan landscape, informalist assemblages by Elsa Gramcko, and impressionistic pastoral paintings by Régulo Pérez, in addition to and hard-edged, abstract works by the designer himself.<sup>27</sup> This resistance to the relative unity and coherence introduced by Leufert, however, is indicative not of inconsistency but instead of a different approach to the same problems addressed by his predecessor; it marks not a return to but a modification of *El Farol’s* history of avowed heterogeneity. Nedo’s especially candid comments from the 1969 roundtable conversation provide an insight into his work for the journal. “In its contents *El Farol*...doesn’t know if it wants to be a technical or literary journal,” he lamented, before concluding that it simply “lacks direction.”<sup>28</sup> This statement was met with a courteous but forceful response by Puig-Corvé, who noted that the designer’s arrival coincided with an editorial change of guard, but Nedo’s criticism could be easily applied to the conceit of the oil journal in general.<sup>29</sup> They reveal that, rather than attempt to reconcile the contradictions of *El Farol* as had Leufert and Armas Alfonso into a single program, Nedo’s strategy lay in foregrounding its pluralities. Yet reading against Nedo’s somewhat pessimistic attitude toward the direction of the journal, the covers are not symptomatic of a disharmonious or unfocused editorial mission. They affirm the productive legitimacy of multiple visual vocabularies and temporalities that, in the journal’s greater emphasis of culture over company, are no longer subordinate to an overarching corporate voice.

As the 1960s progressed, Nedo turned to increasingly unpredictable aesthetics and materials, which in the oil journal functioned to a similar end. This moment saw the international and institutional success of kinetic artists such as *El Farol’s* own Cruz-Diez and Leufert, as well as Jesús Soto.<sup>30</sup> If Venezuelan kinetic art can be taken, as Marta Traba construed, to be the hegemonic crystallization of a developmentalist

modernity, its implications were explicitly articulated by the contributing writers of the journal.<sup>31</sup> A 1960 article by Meneses on the work of Soto is illuminating in this regard. Relating a fairly standard biography of the artist that describes Soto's progression from figuration to abstraction to kinetic art, the author subsumes this trajectory within a broader, and much more familiar, teleology from primitive to modern.<sup>32</sup> His repeated references to the Orinoco River and "great, powerful... virgin jungle" of Soto's birthplace of Ciudad Bolívar are interrupted by parenthetical digressions involving pirates, tropical birds, and indigenous tribes, all of which characterize the artist's origin as one that is more than simply Venezuelan: it is Venezuelan beyond civilization.<sup>33</sup> As Meneses locates traces of this mythic past in Soto's dynamic use of color but firmly categorizes the artist's present kinetic output as a signifier of modernism that, in its universalist non-objectivity, he reaffirms the distance Venezuelan culture has ostensibly traveled for its arrival upon the international stage. The conceptual transition from primitive to modern, in effect, is grafted upon a stylistic progression that finds its culmination in abstraction.

With kinetic art folded into the ideological program of *El Farol*, Nedo's material manipulations of the journal carry connotations beyond those of mere stylistic diversity. The use of a variety of paper weights and finishes, with non-archival newsprint for historical pieces and glossy paper for more technical material, was practice that anteceded Nedo's time at *El Farol*, but as art director he elaborated this strategy to include different sizes, grains, transparencies, and even orientations. The title page of the Soto article by Meneses, for instance, is printed on heavy blue cardstock half the width of the journal, a tendency that Nedo frequently used for title pages as a strategy for isolating discrete articles. Other issues feature graphs and charts of global petroleum production on transparent paper, elaborate photo spreads on double-folded paper, and intentionally disordered *tables of contents*. The cumulative effect is one of disorientation and unpredictability, and the shifting visual codes turn the journal into a kind of kinetic object in itself. For Nedo, such challenges to the layout of *El Farol* served as the fullest articulation of modernity. Not only did they reposition the journal as a luxury commodity, self-consciously reveling in the sheer availability of newly accessible materials thanks to the profits yielded by the oil boom, but they also elevated the dazzling forms and material mutability of kinetic art as clear evidence of the arrival of a Venezuelan modernism.<sup>34</sup>

The most unambiguous indications that Nedo had embraced the language of abstraction were evident in his cover designs for the journal's final decade. In these years he produced original compositions that derived from his own longstanding interests in non-objective form and optical puzzles.<sup>35</sup> One of the most critically praised of these was his work for Issue 229 (April 1969), which dispenses with imagery altogether in favor of twelve repetitions of the name of *El Farol* (Figure 5). The overlapping lines of his original typography, which in its series of contiguous tubular

## OIL IN THE ABSTRACT

forms resembles nothing so much as the much-vaunted pipelines that enabled oil transport, produces a visual interference that at once recalls the buzzing *moiré* of kinetic masters like Soto and anticipates Leufert's superimposed grids, which graced the cover of the subsequent issue. Nedo's typographic intervention practices a type of alchemy that transforms the name of the oil journal into a kind of kinetic mantra—its own potentially indefinite self-replication producing the very image of an endless, hyper-modern, futurity that *El Farol* proclaimed to deliver. With this cover *El Farol* became, in a way, the very emblem of Venezuelan modernity, cementing the link between oil, economic prosperity, and cultural development.<sup>36</sup>

If the life of *El Farol* can be read as a gradual process of the *venezolanización* of a petroleum-led, developmentalist iteration of modernity, this vision saw its fullest manifestation in one of the journal's final issues, from 1974. Now operating at a less frequent run under the direction of Felipe Llerandi, this issue was the first of five that adopted the somewhat ingratiating subtitle *La calidad de la vida*. On this occasion the editorial team welcomed back Cruz-Diez as a guest designer. In the nearly twenty

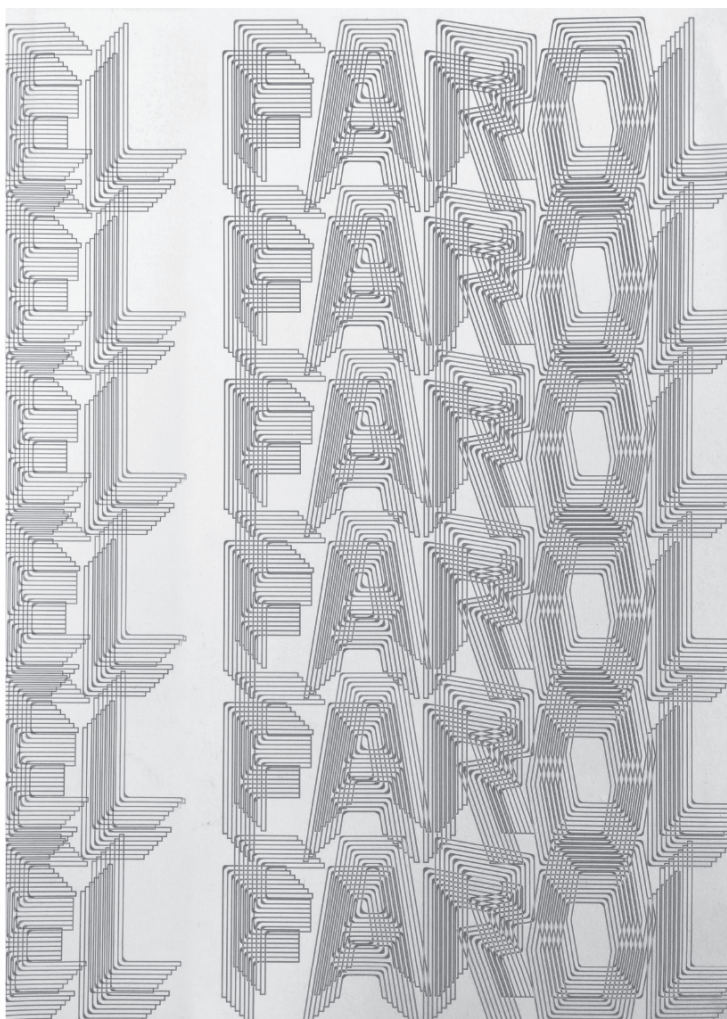


Figure 5. Nedo Mion Ferrario, front cover of *El Farol* 229 (April 1969). Image courtesy of Sucesión Nedo M. Ferrario.



years since he had left *El Farol*, Cruz-Diez's name had become synonymous with kinetic art, his visual style as recognizable as it was renowned. His distinctive wedges of color could be found in his *Fisicromías* that adorned murals, crosswalks, and public spaces in Caracas and beyond. When given the opportunity to return to *El Farol*, he chose reconfigure the journal as a vehicle for his own artistic interests in a manner much more radical than anything Leufert and Nedo had attempted. Though the issue focused almost entirely on Creole's support of the burgeoning environmentalist movement—a strategy intended to save face in the midst of growing concern over oil's harmful ecological effects—Cruz-Diez neglected to address its contents.<sup>37</sup> Rather, he wholly restructured the physical format of the journal. The cover consists of a black page, half the width of the entire journal, upon which the name and date of the journal appear; the other half, which at first appears to be a series of abstract forms replicating the details of a red, blue, green, and black *Fisicromía*, is comprised of the margins of subsequent pages, each progressively wider by several centimeters (Figure 6). This same operation is carried out in reverse over the second half of the journal. By turning *El Farol* into something of a paper-based *Fisicromía*, its material form shifting as the reader flips through the pages of the journal, Cruz-Diez fully collapsed the distinctions between art, design, and print matter.

Even as Cruz-Diez closed the circle of his career—from art director to kinetic artist and back again—he asserted his remarkable degree of authority by subordinating the journal to his aesthetic brand. That this issue was the first of the journal's final reinvention as *La calidad de la vida*, a name that in its optimism belies the growing

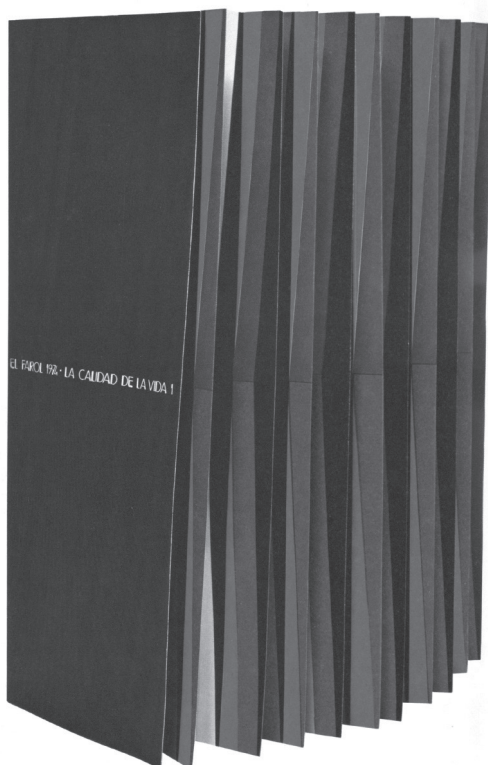


Figure 6. Carlos Cruz-Diez, *El Farol: La calidad de la vida* 1 (1974).

Image © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.



calls for the industry's expropriation, furthers the notion that this constituted a break with the past. Leufert's thirtieth-anniversary design may have looked toward the future, but Cruz-Diez's contribution five years later declared its arrival. Here, a Venezuelan-born artist, known foremost for his kinetic work and with a greater degree of international recognition than his European-born colleagues, successfully marshaled the visual codes of artistic modernism in a manner that materially revised, even dismantled, the genre of the corporate oil journal. And yet what is construed as a graphic rupture was actually extensively well prepared, even anticipated, by the journal's foundational identity. *El Farol* never ceased to function as the official journal of Creole, a status that remained unchanged until its final issue the following year, and its underlying pursuit of a quintessentially Venezuelan modernity formed its organizing logic from the very beginning.

To adopt, momentarily, the teleological rhetoric of the journal itself, Cruz-Diez's 1974 issue represents the culmination of *El Farol's* mission. The passage from an imported, predominantly U.S.-based mode of development that (not entirely convincingly) sought to industrialize an economy, a society, and a state thought to be backward or unsophisticated, to a confidently nationalist belief in the flourishing of an internationally relevant but innately local modernity, is complete. Such a shift, from Golding to Cruz-Diez, depended upon the obfuscation of its own origins, on the dislocation of the product from its ideological roots. When Leufert chose to package *El Farol* in the language of the grid—especially in a high-keyed, implicitly tropicalizing color palette—or when Cruz-Diez converted the form of the publication into a tangibly luxurious object that replicated the visual hallmarks of one of the nation's most famous artists, the reader witnessed the material fulfillment of the pledge to “sow the oil.”

In 1996 Aquiles Esté, in writing about the significance of *El Farol* to the history of Venezuelan graphic design, argued that the journal's long run and its many visual identities allowed it to register “the marks of a certain *criollismo*.”<sup>38</sup> His terminology is fitting, as *criollismo* is used colloquially to signify Venezuelanness but literally translates, imprecisely, as “Creoleness”: Esté's canny word choice ascribes nationalist import to *El Farol* but nevertheless evokes the name of the petroleum company that founded and sponsored the journal as a public relations device in the first place. Much as the term *criollo* historically signifies hybridity, the publication straddled the divide between past and present, culture and industry, and the local and the transnational. That the journal transformed itself into “Algo más que petróleo,” however, did not negate its oil-based ideological coordinates, and ultimately it was its unyielding entrenchment with Creole that assured its demise. The final, brief turn to *La calidad de la vida* occurred precisely at the moment of the journal's impending dissolution; its parent company ceased to exist after the industry was formally nationalized in January 1976. The final issue of the journal makes no note of these impending events, instead devoting its opening editorial to a history of the progress and development

of human civilization over thirty thousand years. Ever forward-looking, *El Farol* welcomes the “fourth great revolution...of science and technology” that will benefit the Venezuelan nation. Yet this was to be a future without Creole.<sup>39</sup> It is as if petroleum and its attendant modernity had become so thoroughly, successfully Venezuelan that the U.S.–owned oil company had been rendered superfluous, a remainder of yet another past that would be soon discarded for the promise of a future as bright as it was illusory.

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## NOTES

This article has been adapted from the first chapter of my dissertation, and as such it has benefitted from the support and feedback of many. My thanks especially to Edward Sullivan and Thomas Crow for their commentary on earlier versions of the project, as well as to Robert Brennan, Kara Fiedorek, Marci Kwon, and Brett Lazer for reading numerous drafts and posing reliably challenging questions. Additional thanks to Lourdes Blanco de Arroyo and Aixa Díaz for taking the time to answer my many inquiries about the history of the journal. For their patience and generosity with archival materials, particular thanks are due to Clayton Kirking and the staff of the New York Public Library; to Linda Gill and the staff of the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection at the University of Texas at Austin; and to Tom Rosenbaum and the staff of the Rockefeller Archive Center, Tarrytown, New York. I am also grateful to the editorial staff of *Hemisphere* for their thoughtful, rigorous comments on an earlier iteration of this paper.

<sup>1</sup> “Yo pensé que la carátula más que reflejar el punto final de una época debía mejor marcar el comienzo de una nueva.” Gerd Leufert, quoted in “*El Farol* y la imprenta,” *El Farol* 230 (July–August–September 1969): 50. All translations are by the author unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> “En realidad cuando Gerd entró, *El Farol* empezó a ser *El Farol*.” Carlos Cruz-Diez, quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> To date the most substantial account of the history and impact of *El Farol* can be found in Miguel Tinker Salas's study concerning the oil industry and Venezuelan society, *The Enduring Legacy: Oil, Culture, and Society in Venezuela* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009); the influence of *El Farol* within the genre of the company journal and upon the Venezuelan printing industry at large is discussed in Juan José Martín Frechilla, "La gran ilusión: El petróleo en las revistas venezolanas entre 1909 y 1957," in *Petróleo nuestro y ajeno: La ilusión de la modernidad*, eds. Juan José Martín Frechilla and Yolanda Texera Arnal (Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela, Consejo de Desarrollo Científico y Humanístico, 2005), 279–360. For graphic design histories that make reference to the journal, in the context of the artistic careers of Leufert and Nedo, see for example Alfredo Armas Alfonzo, *Diseño Gráfico en Venezuela* (Caracas: Maraven, 1985); Aquiles Esté, DGV 70.80.90: *Diseño Gráfico de Venezuela* (Caracas: Centro de Arte La Estancia, 1996); Amarillis Elias, "El pasado, presente y futuro del diseño en Venezuela," *Actas de Diseño* 6 (March 2009): 127–31.

<sup>4</sup> It must be noted that the artistic modernism to which I refer, namely that realized under the general banner of geometric abstraction and kinetic art, is but one modernism of many that flourished in Venezuela. I intend not to categorize the whole of Venezuelan modern art as essentially rooted in (foreign) petroleum development, but rather to look at the ways in which this particularly abstract strand of modernism—which did and continues to enjoy outsize status in histories and discourses of Venezuelan modern art—emerged from the preconditions that were established, in part but not in whole, by the particular political and economic experience of the oil nation.

<sup>5</sup> Felipe Llerandi, "Algo más que petróleo," *El Farol* 230 (July–August–September 1969): 2–3.

<sup>6</sup> "...la idea misma de crear una revista que respondiera a las preocupaciones de la empresa por los asuntos culturales...era en ese entonces, por lo novel, tan extraña como sospechosa." *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> "...aspiramos a recoger en nuestras páginas las palpitations más intensas del alma nacional...creyendo sinceramente, que al proceder así, ratificamos, una vez más, lo sincero de nuestra patriótica devoción." "Palabras preliminares," *El Farol* 1 (June 1939): 1.

<sup>8</sup> In 1943 Creole merged with Lago Petroleum Corporation. "Appendix 4. Creole's Corporate History," in Taylor and Lindeman, *The Creole Petroleum Corporation in Venezuela*, 87–89.

<sup>9</sup> Substantial reform to Venezuela's oil policy would not occur until the 1943 Hydrocarbons Law, which formally established a "50-50" plan that required the splitting of profits equally between the state and the corporations. The "50-50" plan proved far more difficult to implement in practice than in theory. An increase in oil prices in 1946–47 resulted in taxes paid to the state that amounted to less than fifty percent of total profits made by the industry. In 1948 the government instituted a flexible "additional tax" that would bring total payments to fifty percent of all profits before taxes. For more comprehensive histories of the oil industry and its importance in Venezuelan political and economic history, see Aníbal R. Martínez, *Chronology of Venezuelan Oil* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1969); Rómulo Betancourt, *Venezuela, política y petróleo* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1979); Judith Ewell, *Venezuela: A Century of Change* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984); Jorge Salazar-Carrillo, *Oil and Development in Venezuela During the Twentieth Century* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1994); Fernando Coronil, *The Magical State: Nature, Money, and Modernity in Venezuela* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1997). See also Jonathan C. Brown, "Why Foreign Oil Companies Shifted Their Production from Mexico to Venezuela During the 1920s," *The American Historical Review* 90, no. 2 (April 1985): 362–85.

<sup>10</sup> "Si hubiéramos de proponer una divisa para nuestra política económica lanzaríamos la siguiente, que nos parece resumir dramáticamente esa necesidad de invertir la riqueza producida por el sistema destructivo de la mina, en crear riqueza agrícola, reproductiva y progresiva: sembrar el petróleo." Arturo Uslar Pietri, "Sembrar el petróleo," *Ahora* (Caracas), (July 14, 1936).

<sup>11</sup> "Sembrar el petróleo" would be embraced especially by the political party Acción Democrática (Democratic Action, or AD), which was founded by Betancourt and other members of the Generación del 28 in 1941 and instituted the first democratic government in Venezuela, known as the *trienio* due to its brief, three-year existence (1945–48).

<sup>12</sup> "Re: Random Reactions and Thoughts Concerning My Visit to Venezuela," confidential memorandum from Nelson Rockefeller to T. R. Armstrong, April 4, 1939, Record Group III 4 A, Box 144, Folder 1571, Rockefeller Archive Center, Tarrytown, NY (RAC). For histories of Nelson Rockefeller's activities in Venezuela and Latin America, see Darlene Rivas, *Missionary Capitalist: Nelson Rockefeller in Venezuela* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Cary Reich, *The Life of Nelson Rockefeller: Worlds to Conquer, 1908–1958* (New York: Doubleday, 1996); Gerard Colby, *Thy Will Be Done: The Conquest of the Amazon: Nelson Rockefeller and Evangelism in the Age of Oil* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995).

- <sup>13</sup>. The idea for a radio program would eventually become the news broadcast *El repórter Esso*, launched by Creole in 1942 on Radio Caracas. The radio program would broadcast until 1975, with a televised counterpart between 1953 and 1972. Memorandum, enclosed in H. R. Barbour to Nelson Rockefeller, May 2, 1939, 2–4, Record Group III 2 C, Box 120, Folder 904, RAC.
- <sup>14</sup>. For example, the memorandum recommends a section dedicated to social goings-on in the oil camps as well as a sports column chronicling the activities of local employee teams. These proposals would become the “Sociales” and “Deportes” sections of *El Farol*, and they would remain consistent features until March 1946 and September 1947, respectively. Memorandum, enclosed in letter from H. R. Barbour to Nelson Rockefeller, May 2, 1939, Record Group III 2 C, Box 120, Folder 904, RAC.
- <sup>15</sup>. Ibid.
- <sup>16</sup>. “Venezuelan Shift,” *The Lamp* 22, no. 1 (August 1939): 11; D. Thomas Curtin, “The Road,” *The Lamp* 22, no. 1 (August 1939): 12–18.
- <sup>17</sup>. Memorandum, enclosed in letter from H. R. Barbour to Nelson Rockefeller, May 2, 1939, Record Group III 2 C, Box 120, Folder 904, RAC.
- <sup>18</sup>. The first issue to do without the lamp header was *El Farol* 64 (September 1944).
- <sup>19</sup>. “Venezolano, instrúyete; enciende en tu espíritu la divina hoguera, la llama sagrada del saber...florecerá en tu corazón el amor a tu patria, el respeto a sus leyes y la veneración a los héroes...y tu conciencia se elevará perfumada de cultura y de integridad ciudadana.” José A Florville, “Comparaciones Analíticas de ‘*El Farol*,’” *El Farol* 5 (October 1939): 23. See also “‘*El Farol*’—Su Valor Simbólico,” *El Farol* 5 (October 1939): 17; “Lighting the Lamp,” *The Lamp* 1, no. 1 (May 1918): 2.
- <sup>20</sup>. The progress of Ciudad Universitaria was documented through several articles across the run of *El Farol*, beginning with Fabio Arias Rojas, “Ciudad Universitaria: Venezuela en América,” *El Farol* 81 (February 1946): 3–5. The non-Venezuelan artists who contributed to the project were singled out for consideration by Guillermo Meneses, “Los artistas extranjeros de la Ciudad Universitaria,” *El Farol* 169 (March–April 1957). Villanueva too would contribute to the journal, being one of several architects interviewed by Omar Vera López in “Hacia una arquitectura nacional,” *El Farol* 160 (October 1955): 34–37; and authoring the features “Creación de ciudades y leyes de Indias,” *El Farol* 192 (January–February 1962): 5–12; and “Santa Teresa y el Teatro Municipal,” *El Farol* 205 (April–May–June 1963): 19–26.



- <sup>21</sup>. A typographer by trade who was particularly concerned with professional trademarks and graphic signs, Ehmcke imparted upon Leufert a strong sense of the social importance of design as a synthesizing force that could bring together art, architecture, and craft. Armas Alfonzo, “Gerd Leufert: La escuela siempre abierta,” in *Diseño Gráfico en Venezuela*, 4245; “Gert [sic] Leufert: *Life Gestures*—Works on Paper (1960–1995),” press release, (Cecilia de Torres, Ltd. April 2007).
- <sup>22</sup>. These were for *El Farol* 175 (May–June 1958), *El Farol* 178 (September–October 1958), *El Farol* 179 (November–December 1958), and *El Farol* 182 (May–June 1959).
- <sup>23</sup>. “*El Farol* y la imprenta,” 50–55.
- <sup>24</sup>. “Sobriedad y buen gusto tipográfico revela la portada del primer libro impreso en el país.” *El Farol* 166 (September–October 1956): endpage. This book was Bello’s 1810 *Calendario manual y guía universal de forasteros*, the “first printed book in the country” that was published by the Imprenta de Gallagher y Lamb. It was printed on the first printing press that was introduced to Venezuela, by Francisco de Miranda in 1806. This is the same printing press that appears on the front cover of *El Farol* 166 (September–October 1956).
- <sup>25</sup>. Leufert was at the Universidad Central de Venezuela from 1958 to 1960, after which he would teach at the University of Iowa and the Pratt Institute, New York. He would also serve as curator at the Museo de Bellas Artes de Caracas and as director of the museum’s affiliated magazine *Visual* through 1966. He would found the Curadoría de Dibujo y Estampilla [Department of Drawings and Prints] at the museum in 1968, which he directed until 1973. Armas Alfonzo, “Gerd Leufert: La escuela siempre abierta,” in *Diseño Gráfico en Venezuela*, 4245; “Gert [sic] Leufert: *Life Gestures*—Works on Paper (1960–1995),” press release, (Cecilia de Torres, Ltd. April 2007); Iris Peruga and Marco Rodríguez del Camino, eds., *Espacios imaginarios y relaes: Tintas de Gerd Leufert* (Caracas: Museo de Bellas Artes, 1994), 24. See also *Gego and Gerd Leufert: A Dialogue* (New York: The Bertha and Karl Leubsdorf Art Gallery, Hunter College, 2014).
- <sup>26</sup>. Lourdes Blanco, Nedo M.F.: *Una retrospectiva* (Caracas: Centro de Arte La Estancia, 1998).
- <sup>27</sup>. *El Farol* 184 (September–October 1959) uses as its cover image *Indios lavando arena auríferas, grabado en madera*, originally published in *Historia general de las Indias*, by Fernández de Oviedo, 1535; Gramcko’s works appear on the front and back covers of *El Farol* 202 (September–October 19962); *El Farol* 189 (July–August 1960) features on its cover a painting of a rooster by Régulo Pérez; and for *El Farol* 225 (April–June 1968) Nedo opted for a composition of red and white curvilinear forms against a striped yellow background.

<sup>28</sup>. “...en el contenido *El Farol* se ha movido últimamente en el plan de no saber si tenía que llegar a ser una revista técnica o literaria...por eso chocaban los artículos técnicos con los artículos literarios. Falta la orientación.” Nedo, quoted in “*El Farol* y la imprenta,” 55.

<sup>29</sup>. Whereas Armas Alfonso had directed the journal towards a greater emphasis on Venezuelan colonial history and cultural traditions, beginning in 1965 his successor Martín de Ugalde pursued a more heterogeneous vision, opting not for overarching thematic harmony but instead distilling the content into discrete, unrelated articles dealing more directly with subjects pertaining to culture, nature, industry, and history. See Martín Frechilla, “La gran ilusión,” 338–39.

<sup>30</sup>. Guillermo Meneses, “Soto,” *El Farol* 191 (November–December 1960): 29–35; Meneses, “Leufert & *Visibilia*,” *El Farol* 219 (October–November–December 1966): 22–25; Lucila Velásquez, “El espacio infinito del color en el mundo universal de Carlos Cruz-Diez,” *El Farol* 230 (July–August–September 1969): 66–72.

<sup>31</sup>. Marta Traba, “Venezuela: Cómo se forma una plástica hegemónica,” *Mirar en América* (Caracas: Fundación Biblioteca Ayacucho, 2005), 268–79, originally published in *Marta Traba*, ed. Emma Araújo de Vallejo (Bogotá: Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá / Planeta Colombiana Editorial, 1984), 216–19.

<sup>32</sup>. Guillermo Meneses, “Soto,” *El Farol* 191 (November–December 1960): 29–35

<sup>33</sup>. “...la selva virgen. La gran selva poderosa.” *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup>. “*El Farol* y la imprenta,” 50–55.

<sup>35</sup>. For more on Nedo’s artistic practice, see in particular Lourdes Blanco’s comprehensive study, *El otro Nedo, más allá de su diseño gráfico: Pinturas y dibujos, la metasignosis, relieves, pisos y rejas* (Caracas: Fundación Sala Mendoza, 2008).

<sup>36</sup>. Compare Nedo’s typographic invocation of the modern with, for example, the more literal imbrication of art and oil that is rehearsed in his cover for *El Farol* 216 (January–February–March 1966), which manipulates a photograph of an oil refinery distiller, taken by José Garrido, into a photo-mechanical abstraction.

<sup>37</sup>. Articles in *El Farol: la calidad de la vida* 1 (1974) included Octavio Jelambi, “Evaluación y control de polución atmosférica en Caracas”: 11–14; Henry Cabello, “Una bella aventura en la naturaleza”: 15–17; and José Joaquín Cabrera Malo, “Un bosque, una sábana, un hermoso paisaje”: 31–35.

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<sup>38</sup>. “...en *El Farol* todavía se registran las marcas de un cierto criollismo.” Esté, *DGV* 70.80.90, 13.

<sup>39</sup>. “la cuarta gran revolución...de la ciencia y la tecnología.” “Editorial: este número,” *El Farol: La calidad de la vida* 5 (1975): 2.

## **ARTIST SPOTLIGHT: Weathering Oklahoma**

LESLIE MARTIN, M.F.A. CANDIDATE, UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO

Growing up in the tornado alley of rural central Oklahoma has shaped my ideas of the earth and permanence. I remember my first time witnessing the mass destruction of a tornado, as a teenager driving through Stroud, Oklahoma in May 1999. The Tanger Outlet Mall had been the focal point of the news, since it was the largest structure in Stroud and had been demolished. However, what resonates with me to this day is the sight of a large tree in someone's backyard. The flimsy chain link fence around the yard was still standing and appeared to be untouched, however the massive tree that was in the center of the yard had completely twisted upon itself. Still rooted in the ground, all of the branches appeared to have swirled and bent around each other. It was beautiful.

Later on I would experience a more personal account of witnessing beauty in the face of danger. In January 2006 a wildfire that started in Stroud, Oklahoma, raged 20 miles south into the northernmost area of Paden, Oklahoma, my hometown. We raced to help my grandparents evacuate their home. As we were frantically piling the trunk of the car with pictures and family heirlooms, our entire family felt this overwhelming helplessness. The black night sky lit up with orange just above the silhouette of treetops. This sight is still burned into my mind. My uncle arrived with good news that the fire was under control. He loaded us up to drive around and survey the damage. It did not feel like the woods that my cousins and I had so frequently played in. It was now hell on earth. It was in that moment I realized how much stronger than us these forces in the world are. I had never felt so small and full of humility. Looking back, I realize that there is something very beautiful about feeling that vulnerable. It's a solemn reminder that we are impermanent creatures. We manipulate the earth in innumerable ways, yet the earth could wipe out all humanity in an instant if it so desires.

The conversation of force and beauty can be sometimes hard to talk about in Oklahoma. Imagine discussing the beauty of a twisted tree with the relative of someone whom died a block away from that tree from the same destructive force. Yet, somehow after experiencing a traumatic event such as a tornadic encounter, the feelings associated with that event remain connected to us and become part of us. Although I have a deep respect and fear for these natural phenomena, I also admire their beauty and sheer force. The feeling of extreme pressure change and the way the wind stops right before a major storm hits brings an aspect of thrill that cannot be replicated any other way. It's an adrenaline rush, a pure sensation of living in the moment. I aim to examine these feelings and provoke conversation about the terrible beauty that surrounds these events. My lifelong fascination and awe of extreme



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weather phenomena is spurred by growing up in an area where weather plays a very crucial part in the daily lives of people, particularly during the spring and fall, which are tornado season. I'm interested in Oklahoma's weather patterns and its impact on the landscape and culture within the state.

### *Weathering Oklahoma Project*

This project involves communication with Oklahomans in all 77 counties, to create an art piece that depicts weather variations across the state (Plates 1, 2, and 3).

During tornado season, every aspect of an Oklahoman's life is influenced by the weather. When watching local TV, there is almost always an image of the state of Oklahoma in the corner of the screen with counties highlighted with shades of green, blue, yellow, and occasionally red, warning the public of heavy rains, flooding, thunderstorms, and tornadoes. It is interesting to me that this map of Oklahoma and its counties never changes. The political boundaries that humans have created to serve as a sense of place remain constant and recognizable, maintaining a feeling of familiarity and safety. However in reality the impact that deadly weather has on this land can dramatically alter the landscape, causing streets to become unrecognizable because familiar landmarks are no longer there for way finding. To further this conversation, have used sheets of mild steel to cut out each of the 77 counties in Oklahoma. Each county has a rod welded to the back, which will be converted into a stake. I have made contacts with people that reside in each of the counties and have formed an itinerary to travel through Oklahoma to each county to install each stake. Each stake will be installed to allow the metal to be at full exposure to the weather, and facing the appropriate cardinal direction of the actual county. The metal will be exposed to the elements for a minimum of three months and returned to me via pre-paid postage. I will assemble the state of Oklahoma back together. The resulting piece will provide a new perspective on how the weather actually affects the land across the state.

It is important to me to install each stake personally, because I believe the journey is a crucial part of this project. This expedition will take 12 days to complete and documentation is a necessary component. Professional filming and photography is desired, in hopes that a full-length documentary film can be formed. The purpose of this documentary would be to showcase the diverse beauty of Oklahoma's landscape and culture as we explore ideas of permanence and the sublime. Various contacts will also be interviewed throughout the film, and asked where they take shelter during a tornado, what supplies they have handy, etc. Insight on the life of an Oklahoman during tornado season is truly unique and worthy of sharing with those not aware of the precautions one must make to stay safe.

WEATHERING OKLAHOMA



PLATE 1. Leslie Martin, *Weathering Oklahoma* (2015), steel, 138 x 66 x 6 inches.  
Photograph by Abbey Hepner.



PLATE 2. Leslie Martin, *Weathering Oklahoma* (detail). Photograph by Abbey Hepner.



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PLATE 3. Leslie Martin, *Weathering Oklahoma* (Okfuskee County stake installed).



PLATE 4. Leslie Martin, *Doppler Radar Series: 35.3471° N, 97.4879° W* (2015), steel,  
51 x 33 x 5.5 inches.



WEATHERING OKLAHOMA



PLATE 5. Leslie Martin, *Doppler Radar Series: 35.8086° N, 97.0181° W* (2015), steel,  
21 x15 x 4 inches.



PLATE 6. Leslie Martin, *Doppler Radar Series: 36.1397° N, 96.1082° W* (2015), steel,  
36 x 22 x 5.5 inches



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### *Doppler Radar Series*

My visit to Oklahoma last May was filled with many fateful events, including being hailed on while searching for my little brother outside during a tornado, a very intense experience in an undersized community cellar, and being trapped at a mall for over 2 hours while a funnel touched down 22 miles away. The local weather map was pulled up on my phone constantly. And when I wasn't watching my phone, I could turn to any local station on TV and see the familiar floating plasma-like shape of colors that tells me where the storm is, it's severity, if it's headed my way, or if it's headed the direction that I'm about to be heading. These ever changing storm bodies are unique to their own, yet one learns to watch for the distinct characteristics that make it a tornadic storm. The classic hook echo that forms before your eyes on the TV screen causes one's stomach to drop and the hairs on one's neck to stand up. This visual indicator, along with the usually occurring sudden pressure change, are instinctual responses to being in a dangerous experience.

By freezing these Doppler Radar images, blowing them up, and tracing them out with a plasma cutter, I am moving these visual cues to a different context. Each layer of the storm would be cut out separately from mild steel and layered once again, offset from each other. For example, the green portion of a storm, typically the rain, would be the lowest layer, the more powerful portions of the storm would be raised above this layer, such as the yellow, then red layers. If a tornado is recorded in the storm, it is commonly dark red or black, depending on severity. This portion of the radar map would be protruding the furthest from the piece. I am creating a three piece series of these maps, highlighting the bodies of three different storms (Plates 4, 5, and 6). These three separate tornadic storm systems occurred across a vast area of Oklahoma with multiple community sizes. This depicts the reality that tornadoes show no discrimination towards those in its path. They can strike anywhere.

My goal for my work is to pull people into understanding the magnitude of these powerful storms. I intend to communicate the way of life and culture of Oklahoma and cause people to question what is permanent and impermanent. I aim to reveal an understanding of how people handle extreme weather, through displaying different Oklahoman's perspectives on the value of life, material possessions, and crucial decision making, such as what to grab if your house is on fire, or what do you do with your pets during a storm. By raising an educational awareness of extreme storms, one discovers an understanding of their power and learns how to protect themselves and their loved ones.

When I feel the air pressure change, hear the rumble of thunder, and smell the earthy scent of rain, my soul melts and my body relaxes. Being one that tends to thrive when in complete control of things, it is very liberating to witness an event that is completely out of my hands. It makes me realize that something bigger than me is happening, and any problems that I have seem insignificant. These remarkable happenings deserve and demand deep respect and awe.

## **SUBMISSION INFORMATION:**

**A call for papers will be issued for the 9th volume at the end of the year.**

Completed work by M.A. and Ph.D. students, including essays, reviews of recent publications or exhibitions, will be considered for publication. English or Spanish submissions are acceptable.

Each submission must be accompanied by a cover letter that prominently notes the title of the essay, the field of study to which it pertains, as well as a curriculum vitae that includes the author's status (e.g. M.A. / Ph.D. Student or Ph.D. Candidate), department, and institution name and location.

**Essays, reviews, or interviews as well as other documents listed above can be submitted as word documents via e-mail to: *hmsphr@unm.edu***

Journal contributors receive five complimentary copies. Additionally, essay writers selected to publish in *Hemisphere* will be invited to participate in a symposium at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque in the fall semester of 2016, where they will present their essay.

**Submissions are accepted for consideration on condition that the author accepts and warrants the following conditions:**

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2. The *Hemisphere* Editorial Committee shall prepare and publish your submission in the journal. We reserve the right to make such editorial changes as may be necessary to make the essay or review suitable for publication; and we reserve the right not to proceed with publication for whatever reason.
3. You warrant that the submission contains no statement that is abusive, defamatory, libelous, obscene, fraudulent, and in no way infringes the rights of others, nor is it in any other way unlawful or in violation of applicable laws.
4. You shall retain the right to use the substance of the above work in future works, including lectures, press releases, and reviews provided that you acknowledge its prior publication in the journal.

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- In addition to English, we also accept essays or reviews in Spanish.
- No abstract necessary.
- No title page necessary, simply include the title at the beginning of text.
- For essays paper length = 20 to 30 pages. Images are included within the page limit, and will be the first to be cut if it is necessary in terms of your essay's length going over the maximum.
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- Use the *Chicago Manual of Style*, 16th edition
- 12 point font and double spaced
- Please insert a single space between sentences, rather than double. (e.g. hit the space bar once after each sentence)
- Insert page numbers
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**Miscellaneous Notes:**

- Use full name in first mention, then surname only (e.g. "Jane Smith"... "Smith")
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- Be consistent in your use of abbreviations. In your first reference spell everything out and follow by abbreviations in parenthesis [e.g. New Argentine Cinema (NAC)].
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- References to centuries: as adjectives = nineteenth-century; as noun = nineteenth century

**ENDNOTES** (*We use endnotes—not footnotes*):

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- Endnotes are limited to 25.
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- Limit 4 images per essay. Please limit the number of images you include to only those significant to your discussion, and refrain from an excessive number of images simply for the sake of including them.
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