

Sola, pero bien acompañada: Celia Herrera Rodriguez

January 5 – March 31, 2006

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“As Chicanos, we are a displaced people of many nations of origin, living in diaspora in the United States. Our mestisaje – perhaps more a political idea rather than a fact of biology -- was forced upon us. How do we recover from the shock of displacement, the loss of indigenous memory? How do we rekindle the home-fire? The painting is the record along the road. It allows me to think, meditate, to assume the posture of ceremony, to pay attention in that deep way. The door opens to us, just by spending time looking at the images, the symbols. And we begin to understand. These paintings and installations are a conceptual language, a suggestion of how to find our way back to home.”

Celia Herrera Rodríguez

Celia Herrera Rodríguez' work, based in the language of the symbol is a directed gesture toward the recuperation of a history, a way of knowing, lost to Xicano/as. It is epitomized in the centerpiece of this exhibition, “Un rezo en cuatro caminos” (A Prayer on Four Roads), the title invoking the four directions, the four paths to knowing. In many ways the work, which was originally presented at the III Bienal Internacional de Estandartes Tijuana 2004, represents the center-stone of Herrera Rodríguez' own viewpoint as a transplanted Tepehuan (Odami) -originated MeXicana artist. It speaks to the artist's complete confidence in the history of our interconnectedness and interdependence as Native Peoples throughout the continent.

She states:

“Looking at indigenous cultures before all of the claiming of territory and borders, certain elements recur. There is consistency underneath all the variations in our nations that are older than contemporary formations of tribal affiliations. The simple fact is that knowledge was passed down and shared among indigenous peoples of this land. Acknowledging this can give us an idea of the development of thought on this continent. By looking at symbols and responding intuitively to them (and this can be deceptive because of colonization with its patriarchal and christian overlays), we can base our interpretation on something more reliable than the politics of the day. This requires that we ‘get out of the way to know.’ Sometimes you're wrong. But if we don't take the chance we are left with the mundane, the perverse version of ourselves that the U.S. and Mexico have handed to us.”

Going to several pueblos of the southwest and northern México, including the Paquimé culture of Casa Grandes, Chihuahua, Celia Herrera Rodríguez began to investigate the way spiritual knowledges had traveled in the Americas, along the same trade routes where sacred objects -- such as parrot feathers, seeds pods, and clay vessels, along with other 'trade commodities' -- had been exchanged. Such ruminations returned her to the ceremony she felt especially close to after a generation of practice -- the peyote medicine ceremony. Following the "routes" the symbols of ceremony took, she arrived at the four elements – fire, water, wind, and earth – and the *ánima* contained within the major symbols explored in this exhibition.

As Celia Herrera Rodríguez describes it, "The symbols in my work are not words but they act as words, as they did in the earliest forms of writing." The act of painting is the effort to "re-animate the 'alchemy of the word.'" (Rimbaud) She explains, "The word is magic. It is sacred. Visual language is not limited by culture and verbal vocabulary. It isn't even limited by my own interpretation. It is the opposite of rhetoric." She describes her process as a painter as one in which what she does with her hands, creates an opening, an allowance for this animation to occur. "It may not make a whole sentence," she says, "but it attempts to put life into something, to say something that causes change in thought and action." Celia Herrera Rodríguez views the use of watercolor as integral to this animation process. "Water color is alchemy."

She continues.

"The pigment and binder are made from minerals or extracted from a plant or animal source. That is to say, that the paint is derived from a substance of the earth that then rides on the element of water. The pigment adheres to the fiber of the paper by the elements of air and heat (fire). The paper itself is shaped by water and bound together by the relocation of its fibers. All this is accomplished by the actions of the human hand. When I am putting the color down, drawing out the shapes, the colors radiate in the light. When the paint is wet, the shapes talk to me, as if full of medicine. I am outside of time, like meditation. I am not exactly praying, but I am in a different higher place, without worry... just moving the paint across the paper. I am aware of how the different colors stimulate my psyche. It transforms the way I am thinking. Once dry, the paper changes texture, the color changes. I feel a spiritual connection with the pigment. I wait for a long time for the symbols to emerge. I put one symbol down and wait to see what next emerges – something like how a dream unfolds. If I focus too soon, I change the story. If I am not conscious, I lose the thread of the dream. If I move before I am certain, I end up with murky spots, places that require resolution to keep the 'whole' of the painting. What at first may have seemed simple, in the act of trying to render a certain symbol I discover how complicated it is. I have to keep following it through until it reaches the point of satisfaction. Sometimes it is a good painting – it does what I had hoped, sometimes it's just a step in the path."

The history and living practice of ceremony as understood through the elemental is what Celia Herrera Rodríguez' work considers. The water bird, the female-figured gourd-vessels, the lighting rod of male fire, the huichol deer, and night moth appear as apertures in her paintings, an invitation to a return to the elemental, that deepest site of knowing.

In her installations (four presented here), the 'sacred' is similarly expressed. The painted symbol becomes object; two-dimension emerges into three. What we can hold and touch in our hands, what we can smell, and taste – corn husk, pottery shard, metal nail and cotton cloth -- these are the elements of ceremony, of a prayerful awareness. Objects are placed as sacred items because the objects hold memory, meaning. They are carriers of knowledge. What may at first appear ordinary and mundane, within the displaced meXicana household, the metal pot and cup, the bag of beans, represent ways of making home that have survived migration.

Some of the installation objects bring with them a history of other installations and performance works by the artist. The broken dishes are the remnants of a work Herrera Rodríguez took to Málaga, Spain and Boston, Massachusetts, where in protest against the centuries-old theft and destruction of the sacred items of Indigenous America, she publicly 'returns the favor' to the colonizer by 'ceremoniously' destroying some of his own revered objects. In the opposite vein, the tobacco tie used in these installations come from many people, many places including a memorial for Chicana poet and philosopher, Gloria Anzaldúa. Mainly associated with Lakota tradition, here the tobacco ties are made of paper, acknowledging the traditional sacred use of paper as a medium of prayer throughout the continent – from the Precolumbian Mexica culture to the contemporary spiritual practices of the Huichol and Otomí. The ties in this exhibition link a continent through shared prayer and the divisions imposed by a Spanish- and Anglo-America dissolve in the act.

Of special significance here at the Gorman, with its history of exhibition of California Indian work, Celia Herrera Rodríguez, has created a chain of tobacco ties as a prayer for 'Grandma Flora' (Jones), the leader of the Winnemem Wintu who passed away in 2003. Reflecting on the installation and the elder Florence Jones, the artist states: "She symbolizes the meaning and energy of female water that emerges from the earth, because that was one of her strongest prayers in the latter part of her life. Part of her teaching was to foresee that the waters were coming; that we needed to keep the sacred fires burning to keep waters in balance. Everything the California elders had predicted has come to pass: AIDS, the eruption of Mount St. Helena, the culture of chaos that has so deeply affected our communities, the tsunamis...Katrina." The artist goes on to discuss 'development' plans to exploit water reserves in the Shasta area, which will have a devastating effect on the Winnemem Wintu and the environment. "Now the Water District wants to flood sacred lands where the Winnemem bless their newborns and young women. How then do they direct their children without these ceremonies? How are we all affected without the grounding of the sacred? Stick a tube down into the sacred waters and draw it out? It's rape."ⁱⁱ

Growing up in the great shadow of Mt. Shasta in Sacramento in the late 60s and early 70s, Celia Herrera Rodríguez found resonance for her impulses as an artist through the Northern California Native communities and the Chicano Movement, which first opened the door toward an understanding of the intra-cultural and spiritual connections among Indigenous traditions. Sra. Angelbertha Cobb, an early cultural activist in the Sacramento Valley, stands out as a significant influence in this regard. Herrera Rodríguez' undergraduate work in Ethnic Studies at CSU, Sacramento introduced her to several Northern California Native artists and teachers, as well as to the contagious energy and political vision of the RCAF, a Sacramento-based Chicano arts collective. These early influences are what forged into Herrera Rodríguez' political vision and art practice the necessary link between the struggle of Northern Native Peoples to regain and retain cultural and legal sovereignty, and the mandate of Xicanos, as an indigenous people, to refuse to relinquish the right to self-determination. As the artist puts it, "This is the truth of this continent, that our many cultures have developed side by side, sometimes in conflict, but always in communication. There is no denying one another's existence."

Among all those who impacted Herrera-Rodríguez' life, her own grandmother, Domitila (Tila) García, who raised her as her only daughter, continues to affect the artist in the spirit of her art practice. A cannery worker of deep pride and fierce conviction, Tila raised her granddaughter with an unwavering set of values of what was right and just, values it would take the artist a full generation to fully comprehend and live up to.

Herrera Rodríguez attributes her earliest desire to draw to the embroidery work she did as a young girl during her visits to her grandmother's homeland of Sandías Tepehuanes, Durango, México. She states, "My first impulse was to use line." She goes on to describe how this was discouraged in art school where to draw the illusion of three-dimension, "to see as you would look through a window" was privileged over the two-dimensional forms one might see on an embroidered tablecloth or a Mesoamerican manuscript. She explains, "Art school has a way of belittling women's work. Anything involving textiles or originating from the home is considered less serious – craft rather than art. Much later I started to look at what was left in the domestic sphere of our culture that had not been stolen from us: sweeping, cooking, mundane objects like wash bins or the molcajete. This all came directly from my grandmother. I had to free myself to be able to draw symbols the way I had seen them used in cloth." For Herrera-Rodríguez the symbols became a way to return home, Learning to value those home objects returned to her the home values originating from her grandmother and her Tepehuan past.

Another 'grandmother' Herrera Rodríguez counts as fundamental to her survival as a young woman was the Winnemem elder, Flora Jones. Her gifts as a healer made the life of this artist possible -- a claim, no doubt, which could be made by the thousands of others Flora Jones touched. Her hands testified to the human capacity for a change of heart. As with Herrera Rodríguez' own blood grandmother's, Grandma's Flor's faith -- "to see spirit as clearly as one see every day mundane objects" -- would take a generation for the artist to live up to. In this light, the title of this exhibition has particular meaning, that this *solo* show is the result of *many* hands, *many* prayers, and much "good company."

Indeed, the impetus for Celia Herrera Rodríguez' vision as a conceptual artist can be attributed to several sources. Her ideas are cultivated from an intuitively driven research. "The books fall open in front of me," she says of the intensive study that runs concurrent with her visual and performative explorations. Research, then, for Celia Herrera Rodríguez is the road traveled, the image on a wall painting, the impromptu conversation with an elder about an herb that soothes a sore throat. It is reading between the lines of the anthropologist's interpretation. The impetus for an art piece can be drawn as much from a moment's illumination during ceremony as the ordinary function of a chipped teacup once used by her grandmother. For Celia Herrera Rodríguez, research is simply, "making the connections between things."

The result of this research is to teach through art practice, possibly even to teach what is unknown -- what the artist, herself, cannot wholly articulate. Celia Herrera Rodríguez' art is a single movement, performed within the "good company," of many others of similar thought and practice. It signifies a return to the earliest mandate of Chicano Art -- protest; but here it is protest against amnesia. "When the Spanish arrived," the artist reminds us, "they burned our books. Colonized people are not supposed to practice our writing, our language." For Herrera Rodríguez language resides in the symbol -- placed on the page, the wall, the floor, the home, the body. When the body enters the living painting, as it does in Celia's performance work, which may be the most integral expression of Celia's artist's vision, we are invited to perform the actions the objects (symbols) require. Grinding stone against metate, we sit on the ground, we eat the sacreds (corn, meat, fruit, water). We 'perform' memory. We remember. We are not so lost after all.

Cherríe L. Moraga
January 3, 2006
Oakland, CA

¹ Direct quotations of Celia Herrera Rodríguez were taken from an interview the author conducted with her on December 28, 2005.

ⁱⁱ See website: winnememwintu.us, especially words by Principle Chief and Spiritual Leader Caleen Sisk-Franco