

## SACBE, SENDERO: OPEN ROADS

Essay by Lucy R. Lippard

The road runs South to North, and back again, like the alleged route taken by the original peoples of this hemisphere. Influences in the mainstream art world tend to go the other way, with the achievements of Latin American art belatedly recognized in Europe and New York. Yet there have been several surges along the South to North axis during the history of modern art. The powerful presence of so-called pre-historic, pre-Columbian cultures (insultingly defined by civilizations that postdate them) has made itself felt with increasing strength in the past fifth years, as Barbara Braun and César Paternosto have brilliantly demonstrated. [1] This exhibition approaches the subject with subtlety, focusing on four artists who are to greater and lesser extents uncategorizable, whose work is visually dissimilar even as it is driven by a similar convictions. Each work in turn raises different issues, depending quite literally on where the artists are coming from.

Two of them are Native North Americans. Victor Masayesva is culturally rooted, living in Hotevilla on the Hope Nation. Kay Miller is a displaced, unenrolled Métis/Comanche raised in Texas. Ruth Hardinger is an Iowan/New Yorker who regularly collaborates with indigenous people in the Oaxaca Valley of Mexico. Milton Becerra is a Venezuelan living in Paris who has occasionally worked among the Yanomami. Such a span of background and foreground reflects precisely the twisting character of the road under scrutiny, and some of its illusions and dangers.[2] Suffice it to say here that these artists have presumably thought long and hard about their relationships to their sources from their various angles of access. Hardinger, for instance, talks about having an “esthetic/cultural identity and a national identity that do not share the same borders”[3].

Masayesva has traveled a circular road from elementary school at Hope, high school in New York, college at Princeton, graduate school at the University of Arizona and back to Hopi. He brings this broad experience to his two videotapes - ignoring in Hopiit the “split” between two worlds so often discussed in this context, and in Siskyavi - Place of Chasms suggesting at least the possibility of harmony between the two radically different cultures, even as he highlights the contrasts. I first saw Hopiit (and the logger film version, Itam Hakim, Hopiit) some ten years ago; it remains a transcendent experience, in part because the language spoken throughout is Hopi, and only Hopi, stating unequivocally who is the audience, who is the outsider. With no “translation”, we non-Indian viewers are kept in our places, and at the same time we are given the conditional gift of a fragmentary but unromanticized, unsyncophantic, unanthropological glimpse of a seasonal cycle at Hope. The drums of a corn dance beat in the background as a white horse canters through the snow. Lightning flashes, rain comes, corn grows in the dry dusty earth, is harvested and stored away for winter. An elder tells the story: children learn by playing; a chained eagle stares over the landscape; a fruit tree flowers. (Although this description may sound conventional, the tape is not.)

In Siskyavi, the contrasts, or chasms, are harsher and deeper, but only if one gets below the surface of the work - an unfamiliar mixture of the didactic, the poetic, and the resistant. Hopi high school students leave home to study their own pottery at the Smithsonian (with much high-tech chemical analysis); they return and discuss the experience with their elders as they go about making their pottery: the two are intercut. Masayesva’s own mediums, video and animation, are implicitly involved in the contrast, as are the geography of the nation’s capitol, elaborate machines, and bloodless lectures - all played against an oral culture, the hand-made, and processes of creation which begin traditionally with digging clay and acknowledging its source. Quietly woven into the tape are political issues such as cultural survival and cultural property rights, including NAGPRA (Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act). The archaeological site at Siskyavi, source of the pots under scrutiny, has been left untouched by generations of

Hopi. As one older woman says, they were told to stay away from there, but archaeologists have no respect, and they will find out a way of making money from the place.

The sculptural component of Kay Miller's contribution to this exhibition is called the South Wind and consists of a field of metaphorical artifacts ranging from a dominating Darth Vader bust to a rack of antlers; from bones, crystals, and a stuffed owl found in the trash, to kitsch animal figures, fake fruit, political buttons, and a light-up tipi. Miller's witty and profound work is always about "double vision." This piece "brings together all we expect and deserve and what we get... The power available to any person in time of crisis and decision has very deep roots in the past, whether the past of physical ancestry of the past outlined by a series of previous embodiment..."[4]

Her three paintings - *In its Nature*, a stunning image of a poser in antlers with bits of turquoise embedded; *It Otter Be*, a hand mantra, a wave, a flower connecting human and animal life; and *Reclamation*, a mountain lion encrusted with mirrors and rhinestones - also attempt to transmit understandings that would be otherwise lost. Animals are the message carriers in all of these works, traveling the memory road between the sacred and the profane. Caught as she is between her own lost identities, Miller uses paradox to help create energy conduits and aspires to the kind of "spacious mind" that comes from ridding oneself and one's art of culturally imposed preconceptions.

Ruth Hardinger's *Bundle of Rights* follows her complex *Ballgame* series of 1993 in its juxtaposition of contemporary sculpture and the arts of Zapotec "craftspeople" like Alberto Vasquez, who wove the tapete in this piece, based on Hardinger's drawing which incorporates some imagery from a 14th century Mixtec codex. The ironic title is play on the ritual "offering bundles" in the codices and on her day job as a realtor in New York City. Trained as a classical archaeologist, Hardinger is sensitive to the need to respect rather than cannibalize her sources. Her works are not seamless syntheses, but "likely and unlikely balances"[5] dialogues between cultures. Mexico seems a suitable cradle for such enterprises, since it is the land bridge between continents and is historically the site of previous explosions of inter-American consciousness from artists like Frida Kahlo and Isamu Noguchi to the present.

Milton Becerra's work is closer to the land art and "primitivist" movements of the 1970s. Where many of those artists were rebelling against formalism, he is building on it. At the opposite end of the spectrum from Masayesva, Becerra's approach is global and generalized. In the writings I was given on him nothing is mentioned of his own cultural heritage; whatever it is, it has little effect on his art. He returns often to Venezuela from his home in France, which is probably not as "foreign" as the Amazon into which he has ventured for inspiration from indigenous cultures. His floating sculptures are often made of stone and fiber (earth and line, bedrock and connection), as well as fire and water, elements that incorporate fragility and strength, heights and depths. Concerned for the survival of the Yanomami and the Amazon itself, Becerra sees himself as an ecological interventionist: "I know we must be activists if we are to stay the hand of our undoing"[6] Luis Angel Duque describes Becerra's journey "against the current, against time,"[7] but of course he returns, and the treasures he has amassed on that journey are useful in precisely this time and place.

Hardinger quotes Mexican anthropologist Alicia Barabas, who reminds us that cultures are among "the most syncretic of human creations.. They go on transforming. Thus tradition is not something firm, it can be something that the grandparents taught. The indigenous people of Oaxaca call it "the custom." In order to understand identity, there are two dynamics - one is constancy and one is transformation"[8] Masayesva, who remains on his original cultural base even as he watches it change, and helps to change it with his art, is the only one of these artists to maintain borders, even as he himself crosses them at will. The others share common ground with a number of impressive transcultural contemporary artists who are drawn to ancient material outside their own cultures, like Chilean Cecilia Vicuña (on Andean cultures), Canadian Micmac/Maliseet Lance Belanger (on Central American stone spheres), Argentine César Paternosto (on Incan geometry), or Cuban José Bedia (on North American Plains cultures), to mention only a few.

Many borrow imagery from belief systems not their own because our society does not provide an adequate vocabulary for such cosmic considerations. This particular group of artists in Sacbe, Sendero, Path is juggling social, political, spiritual and emotional well-being within multicentered lives. They have chosen this hard road because they share a principled longing for balance, with all the complex spiritual and political pitfalls involved, taking responsibility for their own realms in relation to others.

[1] See Barbara Braun, "Pre-Columbian Art and the Post-Columbian World", New York, Harry N. Abrams, 1993; Cesar Paternosto, "The Stone and the Thread: Andean Roots of Abstract Art," Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995.

"Jackson Rushing's Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde: A History of Cultural Primitivism," Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995, is also relevant.

[2] I have harped so often on the hazards of colonialism, romanticism, exoticism, etc. that I will call it background here. See for instance, my books "Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America." New York, Pantheon, 1990. and "Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory", New York, Pantheon, 1983.

[3] Ruth Hardinger, in "The Ballgame: Paintings and Sculptures" by Ruth Hardinger, Ames Iowa, Brunnier Art Gallery, Iowa State University, 1992, pg 14.

[4] Dane Ruchyar: "An Astrological Mandala", Random House, New York, NY ,1973., pg 159.

[5] Ruth Hardinger, personal correspondence. 1997.

[6] Milton Beccera, "The New Interventionist Art Statement", Paris 1994, major text by Rafael Damast.

[7] Luiz Angel Duque, "Revista Estilo," No. 14, Venezuela, 1992, and catalog text for travelling exhibition: Klime Global-Arte Amazonas".

[8] Alicia Barabas, quoted in Hardinger, op.cit., p 13.