

# The Woven Codex

by Elizabeth Ferrer and Ruth Hardinger

Pre-Hispanic peoples recorded their most important information in codices – these manuscripts include accounts of rulers and conquests, genealogical data, descriptions of sacrifices and other rituals, time-keeping systems, and information about eclipses and astronomical phenomena. Above all, codices were written to preserve history and pass on knowledge across generations. This approach to symbolically communicating ideas has long fascinated the New York-based artist Ruth Hardinger, who has frequently referenced aspects of indigenous culture in her sculptures, paintings, and works on paper. For the recent series of Iris prints, *The Woven Codex*, she drew from the logographic writing systems once used by Mixtecs and Aztecs to infuse her distinctly contemporary works with layers of historically redolent and richly expressive imagery.

These digital prints have their origin in Hardinger's longstanding collaborations with Alberto Vásquez J., a Zapotec weaver working in Teotitlán de Valle, Oaxaca. Vásquez is responsible for the 1995 tapestry, *The Woven Codex*, a work based on Hardinger's full-scale cartoon, a watercolor and gouache drawing. Using yarns colored with natural dyes, Vásquez reinterpreted Hardinger's hand-painted and drawn elements, converting them into the warp and weft of a loom. At the heart of *The Woven Codex* is a large place symbol, a tree hovering in an indeterminate space. Other forms – an Aztec gaming symbol, an offering bundle, and balls and rings representing the ancient ritual ball game – surround the tree, suggesting uprooted elements of history capable of making their presence felt in disparate times and places. Images of these forms and symbols, the tapestry itself, photographs, and Hardinger's older sculptures (themselves inspired by Meso-American cultural practices and produced in collaboration with Oaxacan ceramic artists), all become recurring elements in these prints. Working with a digital printmaker in New York, Andre Ribouli at Pamplemousse Press, NYC (representing yet another level of collaboration), Hardinger freely manipulated this vocabulary of forms, changing scales, shifting positions, picturing forms in seeming movement, and rendering them in various tonalities. The artist's strategy of borrowing, altering, and referencing (both from herself and from ancient history) generates a non-linear sense of time, one in which the past and the here and now mirror and parallel each other in unexpected but powerfully evocative ways. Moreover, in using a computer and digital technology to produce these images, Hardinger signals the possibility of linking ancient and contemporary forms and practices to explore the inexplicable – the metaphysics of time, and our relation to it.

## Works in the Exhibition

Hardinger envisions the seven images of *The Woven Codex* as a symbolic account of a day moving from the dawn to the pitch blackness of night. She underscores moments of change, such as the instant when night becomes the day. In this way, she pictures a liminal world, one at the threshold of change and new possibilities.

## **1. Base**

This image merges two digital scans, of Hardinger's cartoon for *The Woven Codex* and of Vásquez' resulting weaving. The creative process of interpretation is clearly evident, as the forms, textures, and colors of the drawing assume new qualities once translated into a weaving. Through digital technology, the work of two artists is symbolically woven together, allowing us to observe the relation between distinct artistic media.

## **2. Dawning**

The imagery of the first work is reversed and darkened, signifying the moment when night gives way to day. In the foreground, two of Hardinger's sculptures flank an opening in the darkness that gives way to a photograph of the Oaxacan countryside. Another sculpture, the *Long Red Count*, stands along the horizon in the center, appearing to beckon us inward. Other forms appear repeatedly in differing formats, receding and then reappearing to make their presence insistently felt.

## **3. Mid-Day**

Although the scene is suffused with the effulgent light of the day, the imagery here is veiled in an atmospheric haze. The distance between surface and ground is stretched and grandly distorted as if viewed through a telescope. Yet, fragmentary forms emerge, acting as threads of connection to real and imagined worlds.

## **4. Eclipse**

A pitch-black landscape descends across the tapestry, literally about to eclipse other forms in the composition. A red offering bundle clearly hovers near the top. Other manipulated forms slowly appear as the eye adjusts to the blackness. The sculpture, a transformed *Long Red Count* seems to fall in such rapid motion that it creates a tail, like a comet. Hardinger's *Re-Collection #5*, a 1995 work made in collaboration with Enerina Enríquez López, floats across the middle of the composition, defying the eclipse and evoking the survival of ancient symbols in our time.

## **5. Twilight**

In astronomical terms, the twilight is a time of celestial movement, when some cosmic forms fall and others rise to take their place in the night sky. Hardinger evokes these forces by showing a fragment of her fresco sculpture *The Divided Count*, which seems to be slowly descending and receding into space. In the middle ground, the place symbol of the tree in the weaving also descends, while in the foreground, an offering bundle twirls, as if in defiance of the other physical forces at play.

## **6. Evening**

A photographed landscape stretches across the lower portion of the print, its dense blackness signaling the moment when the sun dips below the horizon line. Above, ringed pillars and fragments of weaving ascend, tip,

and recede. A cosmic cloud of subdued color seems to open in part, as if welcoming the shift between the life of the day and the more enigmatic life of the night.

## **7. Late Night**

The ominous slippage of darkened imagery creates a sense of forms receding and sliding off an icy surface. Spiraling toward the center, we sense a growing chill culminating at the center in a mysterious, unknowable void. But the red hot and oscillating offering bundle swiftly moves across the picture plane, signaling its passage into another temporal plane. The day is complete, but surely, a new cycle is about to begin.

*Prints: Iris inkjet prints on somerset velvet paper*