

PRE-COLUMBIAN REMIX

The Art of Enrique Chagoya

Demián Flores

Rubén Ortiz-Torres

and Nadín Ospina



Neuberger Museum of Art

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Edited by Patrice Giasson

Essays by

Joaquín Barriendos

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Serge Gruzinski

and Julian Kreimer

Neuberger Museum of Art

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Neuberger Museum of Art



Page 2: **Enrique Chagoya**, Detail of *Abenteuer der Kannibalen Bioethicists* (The Adventures of the Bioethicist Cannibals), 2001. Color lithograph, woodcut with chine collé and collage, 7 ½ x 92 inches. Collection of Catherine M. Coates, New York.

Page 10: **Nadín Ospina**, Detail of *Palillos de poporo* (Coca Straws), 2001. Gold, 6 parts, 11 ¾ x 1 x ¾ inches for each work. Courtesy of the artist.

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Pre-Columbian Remix and the Art of the Present

Patrice Giasson

*For Alessandra,
Tlazocamatic*

T

he relationship between contemporary Latin American artists and the pre-Columbian universe is multifaceted. While revealing a fascination with the art objects of the ancient civilizations that inhabited the Americas, such as the Aztecs, Mayans, and Incans, the work of the artists featured in this exhibition offers a new reading of

history that does not respond to traditional ways of looking at the past. The past is not conceived as a long narrative of successive events in time but rather as something that is integrated into the present and whose relationship with the present needs to be creatively constructed.

“We are standing on top of this cultural heritage, but it doesn’t belong to us in a contemporary way; that is, the relationship to this past is as removed as it might be to a Swiss or a Japanese or an African individual,” Colombian artist Nadín Ospina said one day in an interview.¹ This statement may seem unexpected for an artist who has been so profoundly interested in pre-Columbian art, but it nevertheless expresses the importance of reevaluating the significance of a cultural heritage too frequently taken for granted. By bringing up this question, Ospina signals how

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Nadín Ospina, Detail of *Jefes* (Chiefs), 2006. Bronze, 10 parts, 11 ½ x 5 ½ x 4 ¾ inches for each work. Courtesy of the artist.

important it is for contemporary Latin American artists to create through their work a *contemporary* relationship with the past.

The works of Enrique Chagoya, Demián Flores, Rubén Ortiz-Torres, and Nadín Ospina have in common precisely that they all address pre-Columbian history through a contemporary eye, fusing and remixing the ancient iconography with pop-culture imagery in a humorous and ironic manner. This allows them to inscribe their own time and concerns into the historical framework. Remixed and renewed, the past suddenly becomes accessible. Ultimately, the contemporary spin the artists give to pre-Columbian art brings to light concerns specific to Latin America, such as national identity, “cultural colonization,” and immigration, as well as universal questions including corruption, war, globalization, and consumption. It also allows a different understanding of history at large.

A Past in Search of an Author

In most Latin American countries, the very idea of “pre-Columbian heritage” is in fact a creation that emerged as part of a strategy to reinforce national unity. Indeed, at the beginning of the 1920s, countries like Mexico, Peru, Bolivia, and Ecuador started to include pre-Columbian history in their national narratives, while several artists, inspired by the prevalence of *indigenismo* and in search of a Latin American aesthetic that would differ from European models, turned their eyes toward native models, local landscapes, and the ancient history of their continent. One of the most famous examples is Mexican artist Diego Rivera, who in the 1930s created, with national funding, several frescoes on public buildings that idealized the pre-Columbian past. He also built an important collection of artifacts—many of which were later found to be fakes. Eventually he gathered them in a temple-museum, the Museo Diego Rivera Anahuacalli, which he had specifically conceived in 1953 for this purpose and which since then has played an important role in the idealization of the pre-Columbian world.

Rufino Tamayo, another important artist among the great Mexican modernists, had a very different approach than Rivera in his relationship with the pre-Columbian past. In the mid-1920s Tamayo accepted a position at the Mexican Archaeology Museum, where he copied pre-Columbian artifacts by hand. Like Rivera, he also collected during his lifetime more than one thousand pre-Columbian artifacts, which he, too, donated to a museum, the Museum of Pre-Hispanic Art in his native Oaxaca, founded in 1974. Nonetheless, Tamayo was not interested in idealizing his subject matter and rarely represented explicitly indigenous scenes or ancient artifacts in his artwork, but rather looked at them in a contemporary manner. Works like *Woman Spinning (Mujer hilando)* (1943), in the collection of the Neuberger



Rufino Tamayo, *Woman Spinning* (*Mujer hilando*), 1943. Oil on canvas, 43 x 32 inches. Collection Friends of the Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College, State University of New York. Gift from the estate of Roy R. Neuberger. Photography by Jim Frank. Art ©Tamayo Heirs/Mexico/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

Museum of Art, demonstrate Tamayo's ability to combine avant-garde techniques derived from Cubism with pre-Columbian and Mexican forms, while at the same time stretching the interest of Cubist painters in African models toward Latin American ones. Rivera had certainly widely explored the roads of Cubism in his early works,² but upon his return to Mexico in 1921, he turned his back on them to dedicate himself to mural paintings that could serve didactic and political purposes. The numerous scenes of ancient Mexico that one can observe on the second floor of the National Palace of Mexico seem to be literally dragged out from ancient manuscripts

and artifacts onto the walls. In Tamayo's *Woman Spinning*, on the contrary, the past is implicit, evocative. Brownish red tones and an earthy, porous texture recall ancient pottery; the shape of the woman, and her steady and frontal position, bring to mind massive Aztec sculptures, while the presence of the wheel, and the fact that she is spinning wool, both absent in the pre-Columbian time, add a post-Conquest historical layer to the image. Like the pre-Columbian past, *Woman Spinning* seems embedded in a certain silence, waiting to be deciphered. The bare-breasted Mesoamerican goddess Tlazolteotl, known as the "great spinner and weaver" and associated with fertility, sexuality, and birth, may come to mind. The act of weaving may also echo the passing of time, and one wonders: What is she measuring with the thread that she holds up between her arms? Is she trying to connect us to a universe we know very little about? Our contemporary knowledge of the pre-Columbian world is indeed fragmented and can only be seen through layers of superposed histories. After all, it was the sixteenth-century missionaries who, while converting, and partially destroying, the pre-Columbian world and its artifacts, made efforts to describe that universe, its practices, and its art. This means that it is through the prism of the sixteenth century that we access the pre-Conquest period. Tamayo's image expresses this multilayered reality. Furthermore, the colors of the image and the fact that she is spinning may recall the native women textile workers in the state of Oaxaca, but only indirectly, since they are never bare-breasted. Ultimately, one might say that Tamayo may have been one of the first Latin American artists to open the path to a multilayered reading by combining the ancient, the post-Conquest, and the modern.

Like Tamayo, none of the artists presented in this exhibition intend to blindly recuperate elements of an "intact" pre-Columbian world; rather, all four revisit the cultural legacies through a contemporary eye. Their reading of the past and present is not linear and constantly plays with anachronism. Serge Gruzinski, in his article dedicated to Chagoya, explains that the use of anachronism offers to the artist a vantage point missing to the historian: "Chagoya's work swarms with reminiscences and historical winks for the viewer while it tirelessly builds an interpretation of history. This is the history of Mexico, Latin America, and the West as well as that of the United States" (51). Furthermore, in many works by Chagoya, the classical references are not limited to the pre-Columbian, but also include references to colonial art and to nineteenth- and twentieth-century Mexican art—such as the work of José Guadalupe Posada—as well as references to colonial European imagery. Demián Flores's *Zegache* series is another example of the use of anachronism. As in Tamayo's work, traces of colonial, pre-Columbian, and modern are intertwined. Composed as a palimpsest, it allows the modern viewer a multilayered access to the past, and to the present.

Pop Culture and Pre-Columbian Art: The Need to Remix

The blending of images from the pre-Columbian times with contemporary popular imagery, and the juxtaposing of Western and non-Western artistic elements, make it possible for contemporary Latin American artists to express the contradictions of living in multiple places and dealing with multiple iconographic, social, and political universes. On the other hand, the act of remixing appears as a key to challenging simultaneously, in the same image, several dominant discourses.

The appearance of superheroes and friendly comic characters such as Superman, Mickey Mouse, and Bart Simpson within a pre-Columbian or colonial landscape implies that the pre-Columbian past is as mythical or falsely close as Disneyland. On one hand, archaeological sites in Latin America have been converted into tourist destinations not so different from the Magic Kingdom. Inversely, as Virginia Pérez Ratton notes, Disneyland is so profoundly rooted into the collective imaginary of Latin America that it is also converted into a land of cultural peregrination, with organized tours that bring entire families to the “Meca de Mickey.”³

Like their U.S. counterparts, Latin American artists were fed during their childhood with the animated cartoons created by Warner Bros. and Disney. Referring to the more recent TV series *The Simpsons*, Jaime Cerón, in his article in this volume, certainly has a point in suggesting that “the North American cartoon may offer more principles of identification with contemporary social and cultural context than those existing between the present and our heroic past, eradicated by the incessant processes of cultural colonization” (35). But familiarity is complex and ambiguous. A book such as *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic*⁴ reminds us how, since the 1970s, cartoons have been used as an instrument of imperial domination over Latin America. This may explain the need for contemporary artists to remix and replace the foreign images in a pre-Columbian context. Moreover, in the works presented in this exhibition, the foreign images are not only subverted through wit and irony, they are also locally “absorbed,” following the conceptual path evoked by Oswald de Andrade in his ironic *Anthropophagite Manifesto* (1928): “But they who came here weren’t crusaders. They were fugitives from a civilization we are eating, because we are strong and vindictive just like the Jabuti.”⁵ In Chagoya’s codex, Mickey is being salted up to be cannibalized; in Nadin Ospina’s sculptures, Goofy and Mickey are petrified; in Demián Flores’s canvases, Bugs Bunny and Elmer J. Fudd are decapitated.

To summarize, we can say that the juxtaposition of North American comics with pre-Columbian iconography in the same work addresses several forms of “cultural impositions”: on one hand, the comic universe so closely linked with the expansion of capitalism and the diffusion of the “American dream”; on the other hand, the misuse



Enrique Chagoya, Detail of *Codex Espangliensis: From Columbus to the Border Patrol*, 1998. Artist's book with letterpress in black and red from zinc photoengravings on traditional Mexican *amate* paper, accordion-folded, lined with Shintengujo tissue, hand-painted using acrylics. Artist's proof, 9 ½ x 330 inches.



Demián Flores, *Defensa personal: Tláloc* (Self-Defense: Tlaloc), 2006. Oil on canvas, 78 ¾ x 70 ¾ inches. Courtesy of Casa Lamm, Mexico. Collection of the artist. Photography: Adriana Calatayud.

Enrique Chagoya, Detail of *Codex Espangliensis: From Columbus to the Border Patrol*, 1998. Artist's book with letterpress in black and red from zinc photoengravings on traditional Mexican amate paper, accordion-folded, lined with Shintengujo tissue, hand-painted using acrylics. Artist's proof, 9 ½ x 330 inches.

of pre-Columbian art for commercial and touristic purposes or as an instrument of national identity.

Behind the Humor, the Harsh Reality

Behind the irony and humorous tone, several artworks presented in this exhibition contain references to historical and contemporary scenes of violence. The monumental images of Demián Flores feature businessmen, soldiers, boxers, wrestlers, superheroes, and national icons dressed up in pre-Columbian attire fighting with Aztec shields and arrows. Putting in tension several iconographies, in which strange hybrid creatures are produced, Flores's images allude directly to collective problems, social conflicts, wars, and misunderstandings among humans. His images also echo the

voices of Mexican street art, with their traces of tagging, paint splashes, and remnants of old advertising signs.

In the work of Chagoya, sixteenth-century colonial imagery illustrating Aztec human sacrifices is not only juxtaposed to the violence of the Conquest—with images taken from Theodor de Bry that he covers with bloody red painting—it is also mixed with modern images that bring us to other types of contemporary violence. These have to do with the harsh experiences of immigration, xenophobia, and war, as well as the abuse of the power of money, the global expansion of the consumer economy and its environmental impact, and questions related to the sexual scandals surrounding the Catholic Church.

For Nadín Ospina, the violence that emerged from the search for gold in the Americas during the sixteenth century is expressed through fake-ancient objects that bring to light the modern avidity surrounding the collecting of pre-Columbian artifacts and the black market that puts them in circulation. On the other hand,





Nadín Ospina, *Chacmool I*, 1999.
Carved stone, 7 ½ x 13 x 5 ½ inches.
Courtesy of the artist.

golden works like *Palillos de poporo* (Coca Straws) (2001), reminiscent of traditional coca-leaf straws, are actually transformed into modern objects with cartoon heads. But if they refer to modern drug consumption, they also challenge with irony the international categorization of Colombia as the land of drug trafficking. Exoticism and the everlasting racial prejudices against indigenous people are also being debated in works like *Vasos tipilecas* (Tipilecas Vases) (2001).

The Fetish Object

Contemporary artists frequently question the manner in which we relate to objects and images we encounter in our everyday life, be it a toothbrush with a reclining image of Goofy—which inspires Nadín Ospina’s *Chacmool I* sculpture—or an ancient clay pot in a museum. Ospina’s initial “disillusion” upon discovering twenty years ago that an object he thought to be an original pre-Columbian piece was in fact a fake led him to a deep exploration of why such objects are being “fetishized.” It also triggered in the artist several questions regarding the way in which we have been looking at the pre-Columbian past since the nineteenth centu-

ry, as well as the ability of forgers to create wonderful replicas that had the capacity to conjure up the past. Created with the help of contemporary local craftsmen, Ospina's old/new objects have no other pretensions than to be what they are: contemporary objects. His work is not iconoclastic; it does not discredit the pre-Columbian form. On the contrary, the ancient materials—clay, stone, gold—are respected and his sculptures remain as solid and compact as an ancient stone sculpture. Nevertheless, converting them into a pop image allows him to raise questions regarding the manner in which individuals relate to images in general and to question in passing the role of the traditional museum. In Leiden's Museum of Ethnology, during his exhibition *The Ground & The Real* (2002), Ospina installed his fakes among the museum's original collections, provoking a beneficial astonishment and great debate. Here, by entering the museum, the pop image, which usually pervades everyday life, is ironically converted into a sacred object. Similar to what Pop artists did in the 1960s, relocating it in a new environment allows the viewer to look at the popular image differently. But inversely, the fact that an ancient sacred artifact is being approached with irony also attenuates its "sacredness." The artist thus also questions the manner in which ancient artifacts, often placed in environments foreign to their reality, are being de-contextualized—a phenomenon that frequently illustrates more our own concern with the objects than what they meant to the people who created them.

Ospina's relocation process could in some ways be compared to the work *Bonampak News* (2006) by Mexican artist Pablo Vargas Lugo, who revisited the ancient pre-Columbian writing system. Vargas Lugo's work is closely related to the themes of *Pre-Columbian Remix*, since he also addresses implicitly the attitude we have toward pre-Columbian artifacts, particularly the contemporary treatment we give to ancient manuscripts. *Bonampak News*, a "newspaper" written in Mayan glyphs, brings the ancient manuscript down to earth and to present time. The authentic Mayan codex, usually kept in a library or a museum, is transformed into a banal document swept by the wind. Displayed on the gallery floor, it nevertheless comes back from the street to the museum, but this time as a contemporary object that revisits Mesoamerican writing. By removing the precious object from its regular context—the rare book collection, the museum—and bringing it back to the modern gallery via the street, Vargas Lugo makes the two temporalities meet: the present time of daily news and the ancient past. The familiar becomes unfamiliar, but at the same time the unfamiliar, the foreign, becomes familiar, allowing visitors to include themselves in the story.

Pablo Vargas Lugo, *Bonampak News*, 2006. Five pieces made of fiberglass and decal prints, variable dimensions. Installation shot. Photography: Alessandra Russo.



The process of relocation and desacralization reaches another dimension through the photographs of Rubén Ortiz-Torres. The images included in this exhibition emphasize the ambivalence of an ancient world featured as a modern playground. They are part of a series entitled *The Past Is Not What It Used to Be* that includes scenes of kitschy neo-pre-Columbian theme parks and monuments created in different parts of the world. To complete the artifice, the mostly black-and-white and cyanotype photographs are printed with an old-fashioned technique that recalls romantic scenes taken by nineteenth-century travelers exploring the ancient ruins. Some pictures of fake temples are even bathed in a misty aura, recalling the drawings and lithographs of the old travelers, who were perhaps, as we will see later, more interested in impressing their audience than in offering a faithful reading of the context in which they found the ruins and artifacts. Ortiz-Torres, by using old techniques and a romantic touch to “document” his discoveries around the world, addresses precisely the awkward distortions of nineteenth-century travelers’ history reading. In some cases, as Julian Kreimer notes in his article, Ortiz-Torres “even appears in the hero role of photographer-explorer, tripod on his shoulder ... emulating so many of his predecessors who posed next to the monuments tools in hand,

Rubén Ortiz-Torres, *Indios de Barcelona, Tarragona, España* (Barcelona Indians, Tarragona, Spain), 2007. Gelatin silver, turned to blue and sepia, 12 ½ x 18 ½ inches. Courtesy of the artist and Galería OMR, Mexico.



immortalizing their triumph” (90). Ultimately, as Kreimer rightly remarks, “the sad title of the series is true, the past really is not what it used to be ... [but nevertheless] Ortiz-Torres’s images show us what the present looks like and, in these tangled images, reveal our reality in all its complicated layers” (99).

The Pre-Columbian Attraction Through Centuries

We saw at the beginning of this essay how, early in the 1920s, pre-Columbian art and history began to be incorporated into the national narratives of numerous Latin American countries, and how they constituted an important inspiration for numerous modernist artists. In order to better situate the works presented in this exhibition, the second part of this essay will extend the discussion of the pre-Columbian attraction both historically and geographically, providing examples taken from different times and contexts.

The aesthetic fascination with pre-Columbian objects can be traced as far as the first years of contact, in the early sixteenth century, when precious pre-Columbian objects arrived in the hands of European artists such as Albrecht Dürer, who was awestruck with their nature. Serge Gruzinski has noted the phenomenon of artistic *métissage* that began emerging soon after the contact,⁶ and we could say that in some way, it was in the sixteenth century that the process of remixing pre-Columbian artifacts began. This also involved the transformation of pre-Columbian techniques for the production of objects indispensable for a new society. A good example of this phenomenon is a piece of featherwork kept in the Museum of Anthropology of Mexico. Formerly considered part of a sumptuous Aztec warrior shield, it was in fact most probably made after the Conquest as the central disc of a chalice cover, used in celebrating the Catholic Mass.⁷

This said, it was during the nineteenth century that worldwide interest in pre-Columbian objects really began to surface, when amateur archaeologists, diggers, and travelers began to unveil, depict, draw, and photograph the secrets of the rich empires that had inhabited the Americas. As Tripp Evans explains, there was in both Europe and America a public avid for glorious, exotic, and “spectacular” scenes.⁸ Pre-Columbian artifacts were subjected to all sorts of romantic vision and speculative interpretation. Building in some cases on sixteenth-century statements by the first missionaries, nineteenth-century travelers depicted the pre-Columbian creators as being linked to the ancient Romans, Greeks, Chinese, and even the lost tribes of Israel and the island of Atlantis. John Lloyd Stephens’s book *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan* (1843), which became a bestseller, contained the marvelous images of his traveling companion Frederick Catherwood, which captivated the reader’s imagination. But Catherwood’s “tireless effort to clear, measure, and ‘copy’ the sites ...

[also] constituted anticipatory acts of ownership,” allowing the authors to incorporate the Mayan history into the history of the United States itself in order to bolster the grandeur of North America and provide it with the antiquity it lacked.⁹ This may certainly seem strange today, but paradoxically, the nineteenth-century strategies of ownership also allowed the “foreign” pre-Columbian artifacts and cities to become “familiar” to the U.S. audiences.

Though the images produced by traveling artists and writers had sparked interest in the ancient Mesoamerican civilizations, the aesthetic influence of pre-Columbian art really began in the second half of the nineteenth century, through decorative arts—which were then elevated as fine arts—and with the work of artists like Paul Gauguin who in the 1880s “appropriated Pre-Columbian ceramic forms and techniques, invoked and reworked them in this medium, as part of an attempt to retrieve the meaning, and indirectly the conditions, of social life before industrial capitalism.”¹⁰ A few years later numerous vanguard artists from different parts of the world also began to revisit, reinterpret, and seek inspiration in the pre-Columbian past. In tandem with the Mayan revival, which emerged at the end of the century, renowned architect Frank Lloyd Wright created innovative projects in the 1910s and 1920s that directly echoed the Mayan temples.¹¹ Numerous international artists are famous today for having searched for inspiration in the pre-Columbian universe. We can think of Henry Moore’s sensual reclining figures inspired by the Mesoamerican god Chacmool; Alfred Jensen’s colorful paintings derived from a fascination for

Ester Hernandez, *Libertad* (Liberty),
© 1975. Etching on paper,
15 x 12 inches.
Courtesy of the artist.



Mayan temples, calendars, writing, and counting systems; Joseph and Anni Albers’s complex interpretations of Incan textiles; and, of course, Robert Smithson’s environmental artworks, which had a major influence on contemporary artists.¹² Following in the footsteps of Stephens and Catherwood, who one hundred years before him had written their *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan*, Smithson created his series *Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan* (1969), which consisted of on-site installations with mirrors that basically faced an empty horizon or sky. They were immediately dismantled after being photographically documented. The work dealt with the passing of time and the idea of silence and absence surrounding the Mayan universe.

In Latin America, since the mid-twentieth century, popular culture has also given birth to all sorts of kitsch interpretations of the pre-Columbian universe. Carrying on the nineteenth-century tradition of exoticism, spectacular neo-Incan or neo-Aztec works were staged in almost every art form: in music, with figures like the singer Yma Sumac, who crafted her history as a descendant of the last Incan emperor, Atahualpa;¹³ in dance, with *concheros* feather dancers who began to

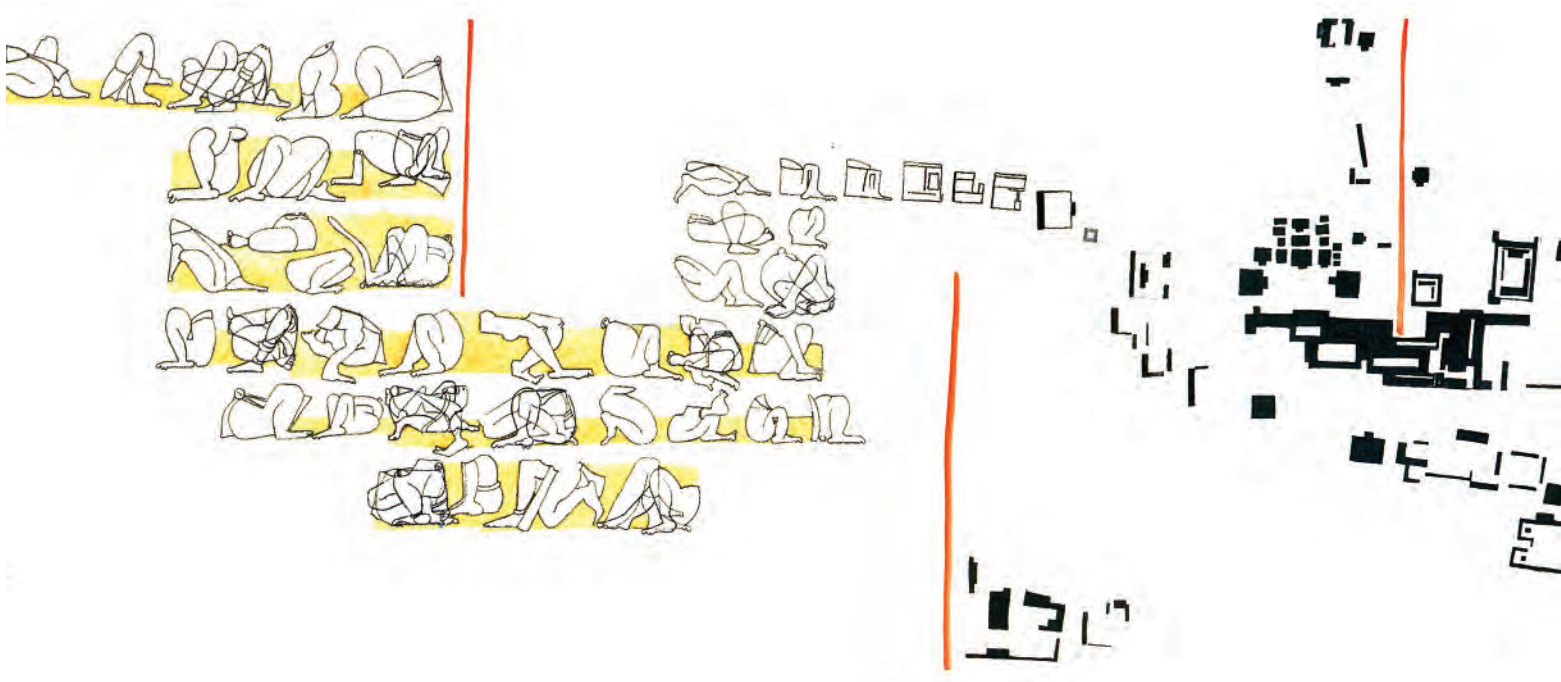
perform neo-Aztec dances in public places; and in low-budget movies, with series like the *Aztec Mummy*, meant to be horror films but today tagged as funny and trashy due to their lack of verisimilitude. Some elements in the works presented in this exhibition may echo these mass-media stagings of pre-Columbian art that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, but it would be wrong to reduce them to this; it would be forgetting that the works by Ortiz-Torres, Flores, Ospina, and Chagoya challenge from different angles the images that this very tradition of neo-exoticism has projected on countries like Mexico, Peru, or Colombia during the second half of the twentieth century. The kitsch element that one might see in some of their work should rather be associated with the camp style that emerged a few decades later, which exaggerated popular culture using humor and irony. Camp style has been expanding widely in Latin America, as one can observe today in the works of underground art collectives like the Mexican group Sonido Apokalitzin, where images and sounds of mambo music are remixed with Catholic devotional ceremonies, open-air street market scenes, and pre-Columbian rituals.

The work of Mexican artists living in the United States—associated with the Chicano movement—played an essential role in revisiting the past in light of the present. Ester Hernandez's drawing *Liberty* (1975) features a Statue of Liberty being reshaped by the artist-sculptor—herself?—into a Mayan stele. At the bottom of the hybrid statue one can read the word *Aztlan*, the name of the mythical place of origin of the Aztecs, which some believe to be situated in the southern United States, and which was transformed into an identity banner by the Chicano groups of the 1970s. The pre-Columbian culture is thus reterritorialized. It is not a foreign thing anymore, nor part of an official discourse given as a whole; it is rather reinvested personally and collectively by the artist. Inversely, by changing the allegorical symbol of the Statue of Liberty, the Chicana artist transforms the landscape of the United States and inscribes her presence into it in a humorous manner.

Another Chicano artist is Robert C. Buitron, who created in 1989 a series of hilarious calendars featuring the adventures of Popocatepetl

Robert C. Buitron, *Popo in Therapy*, from the series *The Legend of Ixtaccihuatl y Popocatepetl*, 1989, Gelatin silver print, featuring Ramon Delgadillo (as Popo) and Kevin Flynn (as shrink). 13 ¾ x 17 ½ inches. Courtesy of the artist.

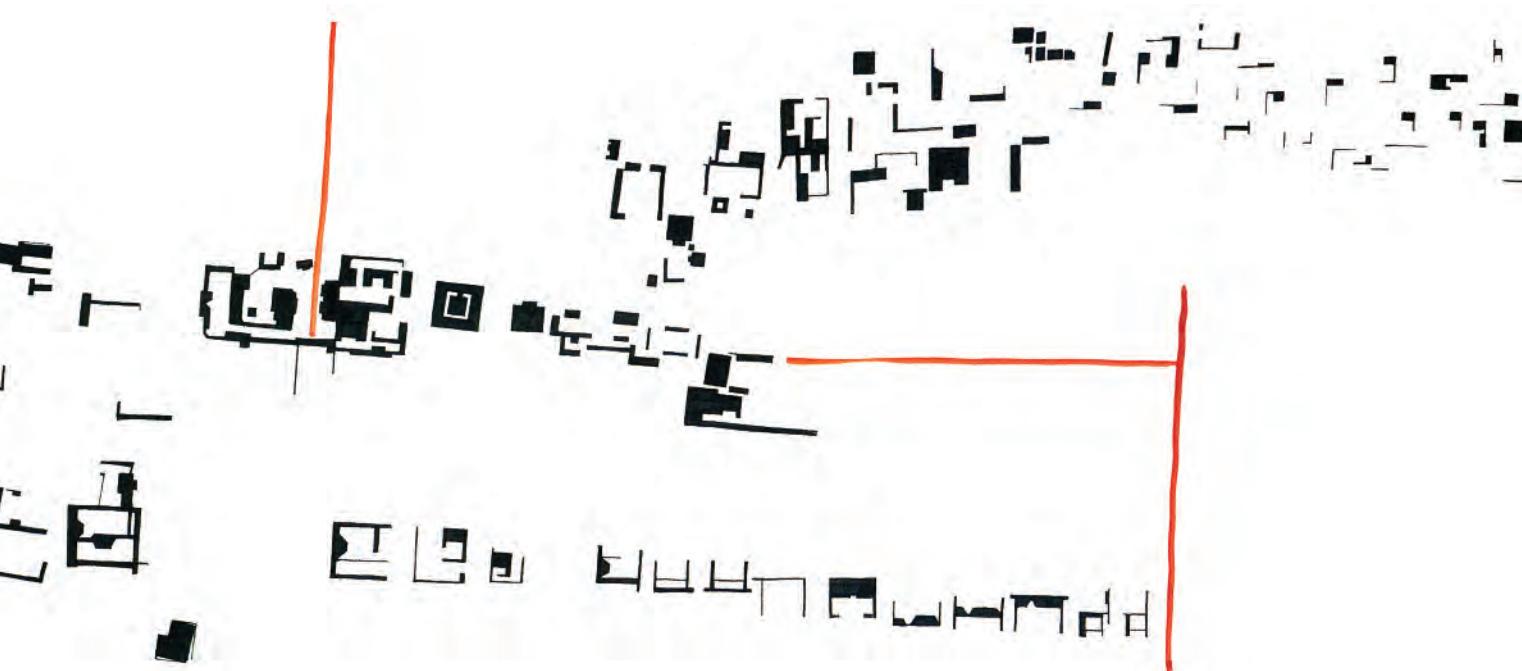




Nanne Meyer, *Codex Meyer I*, 1996, (Detail). Lead and colored pencil, ink, gouache on paper, 26 x 402 ½ inches. Berlin: Berlinische Galerie für Moderne Kunst. Courtesy of the artist and Berlinische Galerie für Moderne Kunst.

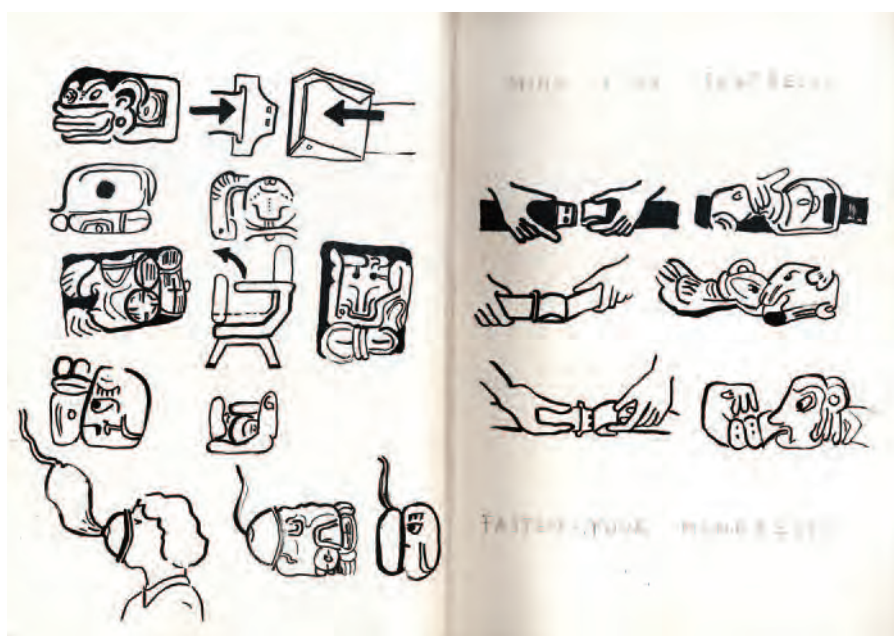
and Ixtaccihuatl, the legendary heroes associated with the massive volcanoes surrounding the Valley of Mexico. His image *Popo in Therapy* (1989) figures a Popocatepetl wearing a necktie, a feathered headdress, and an Aztec sword. He is lying on a divan and undergoing psychoanalytic therapy under the observation of a concerned therapist. Behind them, one can recognize the famous neo-Aztec calendar *La leyenda de los volcanes* (The Legend of the Volcanoes) based on a 1940 painting by Jesús de la Helguera and soon converted into an icon of national memory. Buitron explained in a recent interview that “one of the ideas behind the project was as homage to Jesus Helguera and his calendars. Another reason was to create and claim as our own a kitsch calendar for the Chicano community.”¹⁴ But in *Popo in Therapy*, Popocatepetl escapes the frame of the traditional calendar to investigate his personal situation. Interestingly enough, the Chicano artist seems to remediate the concern mentioned by Ospina—that “the past doesn’t belong to us in a contemporary way”—by reconnecting with the past in a contemporary manner and making it come to life.

But if for Nadín Ospina “the relationship to this past is as removed as it might be to a Swiss or a Japanese or an African individual,” one might wonder: How would a non-Latin American artist deal with this past today? Though not exactly Swiss or African, the work of German artist Nanne Meyer provides a great example for exploring this question. The visiting of archaeological sites and museums in southern Mexico and Guatemala in 1996 triggered in the artist a series of questions that allowed her to produce meaningful but also complex artworks. The artist explained

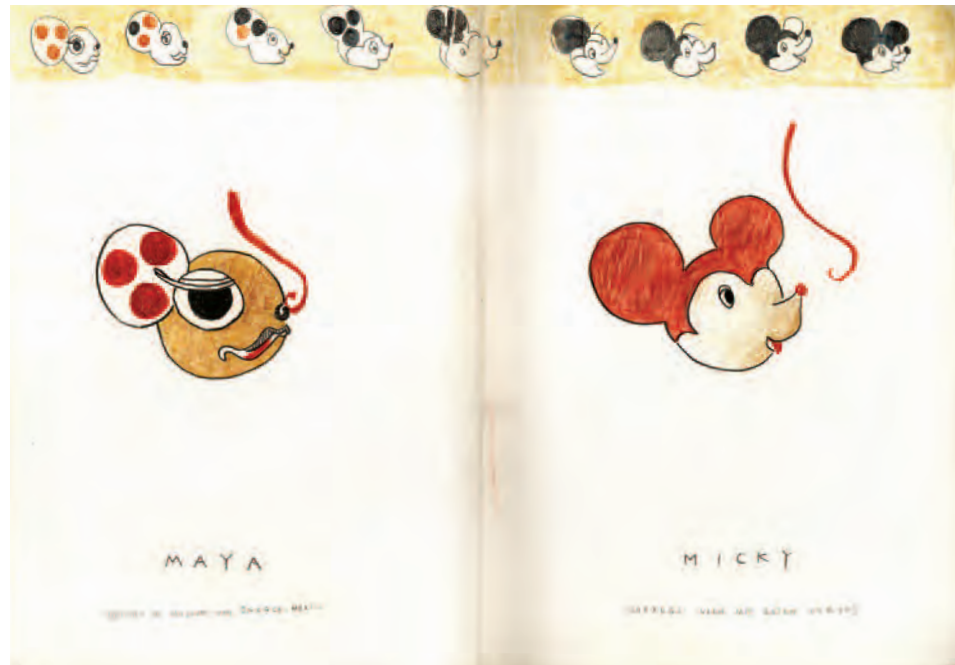


in a recent interview that she needed time to digest the huge amount of signs, art forms, and information she was suddenly facing. Objects needed to be approached slowly, but the task was not impossible: "In front of a whole culture, as an artist, you can still be surprised and find a form to what you are looking at ... I'm from a different background, and all this should come together there [in my work] ... I had to include myself in order to connect."¹⁵ This is precisely what one senses when looking at her twenty-foot-long *Codex Meyer I* and *Codex Meyer II* (1996) covered with ink drawings and watercolor painting that take the visitor into her personal journey into the foreign world. One can feel the complex process of assimilation of the new forms and knowledge the artist is suddenly plunged into. She explores the Mayas' fine and elegant line, the condensation of their glyphs, and their ways of representing the human body, of drawing the eyes, the knees, and the hands. Like our four artists in this exhibition, Meyer brings together contrasting temporalities in a process of metamorphosis. *Codex Meyer I* can

Nanne Meyer, "Mind your seatbelts/fasten your mindbelts," double pages 101/102 in *Yearbook XI*, 1996/97. Gouache and lead pencil, 314 pages 11 x 7 inches (double page 11 x 14 inches). Courtesy of the artist.



Nanne Meyer, “Maya/Micky,” double pages 87/88 in *Yearbook XI*, 1996/97. Lead and colored pencil, 314 pages 11 x 7 inches (double page 11 x 14 inches). Courtesy of the artist.



also be “read” as a gradual voyage into the pre-Columbian universe. Mayan-like ideograms are slowly metamorphosed into the map of an archaeological site, seen from above, which in its turn is converted into a lateral view of the artist’s hotel room—a switch in time and in perspective that will become a key element in later works by Meyer. The “codice” then evolves into a series of abstract cubes that eventually become symbols from the Mesoamerican numeric system, which in their turn convert into Aztec hieroglyphs.

Suddenly, another kind of ideographic system, more familiar to us, appears; contemporary ideograms found on airplanes safety-measures cards are metamorphosed into Mayan glyphs (see details from her *Yearbook XI*, 1996/97). Upon her return in the airplane, as she reaches for the safety document, her voyage in the past reaches her personal story.

Meyer expresses that she is not trying to simply copy the past, but rather reveal the constant metamorphosis in the nature of things: “Nothing is really fixed, things are always changing,” says the artist, before concluding with “Not understanding is also a form of understanding.”¹⁶ Thus the presence of blanks, unfinished drawings, and representations of clay fragments in her codex, which may recall the white blanks and empty speech bubbles in the works of Demián Flores. Strangely enough, her *Yearbook XI* also shows that she too included in her reading the legendary Mickey. As in Chagoya, Ospina, Flores, or Ortiz-Torres, in Meyer’s codex the Disney character is fused with the ancient pre-Columbian world, and this time, thanks to the mouse, the foreign Mayan universe becomes contemporary.

¹ Interview with Hans Michael Herzog, *Cantos/cuentos colombianos*, exhibition catalogue (Zurich: Daros Latinoamerica, 2004), 15.

² His famous *Zapatista Landscape* (1915) featured a Cubist interpretation of Mexican elements such as the colorful striped blanket and the sombrero. Edward Sullivan mentions approximately 125 works from Rivera's Cubist period (*From Mexico to Montparnasse and Back*, review of exhibition, *Art in America*, November 1999, 6).

³ Virginia Pérez Rattón, "El arte del auténtico fraude," *Mundo* no. 18, *Nadín Ospina: Elogio a la ironía* (Bogotá, 2005): 66.

⁴ Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart, *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic* (Chile: International General, 1972).

⁵ Andrade's text, written in Portuguese, was originally published in *Revista de Antropofagia* 1 (São Paulo), May 1928. For the English translation, see *Latin American Literary Review* 19, no. 38 (1991): 38–47. The Jabuti is a tortoise of northern Brazil, here considered as a combative and astute trickster figure (*ibid.*, note 23).

⁶ Serge Gruzinski, *The Mestizo Mind: The Intellectual Dynamics of Colonization and Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

⁷ Felipe Solís, Roberto Velasco Alonso, "Chalice-cover," *Aztecs* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2002), cat. no. 328, p. 482. For a discussion of this object in the artistic and social context of New Spain, see Alessandra Russo, *The Untranslatable Image: A Mestizo History of the Arts in New Spain (1500–1600)* (Austin: University of Texas Press, in press), chapter 1.

⁸ See Tripp Evans, *Romancing the Maya: Mexican Antiquity in the American Imagination, 1820–1915* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 57. Evans also recounts how John Lloyd Stephens, who was also a U.S. diplomat, had purchased Copán, in Central America, for only \$50 (54). The fantasy and the audacity seemed to be limitless: "In an age when wealthy U.S. industrialists purchased European castles and monasteries for reconstruction in the United States, Stephens may have envisioned living in a transported Maya city himself—perhaps along the Hudson" (60). As for the local inhabitants, Evans explains that by "characterizing the Latin Americans as a withering branch of the American family tree," Stephens "effectively eliminated them from the continent's archaeological inheritance" (58).

¹⁰ Barbara Braun, *Pre-Columbian Art and the Post-Columbian World* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993), 36, 88.

¹¹ Barbara Braun dedicates entire chapters of *Pre-Columbian Art and the Post-Columbian World* to Paul Gauguin, Henry Moore, Frank Lloyd Wright, Diego Rivera, and Joaquín Torres-García and their relationship with pre-Columbian art.

¹² Smithson's work and its influence on contemporary artists have been widely explored in a recent exhibition at the Tamayo Museum. See Pablo León de la Barra, *Incidents of Mirror-Travel in Yucatan and Elsewhere* (Mexico: CONACULTA–Tamayo Museum, 2011).

¹³ Mentioned by Carmen Salazar-Soler during her conference "Une descendante d'Atahualpa chante au monde: Ima Sumac et les Incas" (Colloquium *Peuples et Héros. La production artistique des imaginaires américains*, Colegio de España, Cité Universitaire de Paris, January 24, 2013).

¹⁴ Internet interview with the artist by Patrice Giasson on January 13, 2013.

¹⁵ Interview with Nanne Meyer at the Schwarzes Café, Berlin, December 10, 2012.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*