NOPALITA: A MYTHOLOGY OF CULTURAL SELF-REPRESENTATION

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The first segment introduces the background information on the use of *paños* as art by prisoners and how I appropriate the same materials to create and record my own cultural mythology. The Statement of Problem and Questions are about how and what cultural information is chosen in creating a visual mythology.

The second segment explains the invention of the mythology by describing why certain experiences were chosen, specifically those of the graduate school experience. Also the development of self-representation through self-portraits is described.

The third segment explains the symbolism used in the imagery, such as the cacti as cultural indicator and palimpsest.

The fourth segment is a conclusion involving the realization that feeling caught within a hybrid culture is an important part of my identity.
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INTRODUCTION

I am Chicana, Tejana, Latina, Hispanic, and Mexican-American. It is perplexing to have so many classifications associated with my identity. Cultural identity usually contributes to psychological and social stability, however my experience has been a confusing balancing act. My self-perception, although largely based on Anglo-American culture, still maintains an important affiliation with Mexican culture. In this way I feel part of both, yet I belong specifically to none. The tension that occurs between the two cultures is the focal point of my artwork.

Background

The format used in this body of work is the paño or handkerchief. I use handkerchiefs as a ground to draw and paint on. I appropriate the genre of paño arte, or handkerchief art in materials as well as style. Paño arte originates from the subculture of prison art. Prisoners draw directly onto handkerchiefs using the little means they have, such as ballpoint pens or pencils. My style of drawing and painting is also influenced by the untutored nature of the prisoners’ skills. I grew up in a predominately lower class Mexican-American neighborhood where imagery such as graffiti, mural paintings, tattoo art, low rider art, Catholic religious imagery and paño arte was popular. The attraction to this untutored style is also partly due to the reaction of living in a world of technology where everything I consume visually is airbrushed to perfection. Technology now removes the flaw of the human hand. However, my sensibilities lie more in tune with the revival of the human touch. I see these “flaws” as aspects that create interest, character and appealing variation.
Low art often defies what art history and culture define as acceptable and important by accepting and celebrating similar attributes of the human hand. In the same way of defiance, cultures have maintained their difference from the dominant culture by taking on traits or behaviors different from the mainstream. Cultures will often become hybrid and intermix with other cultures to become a new culture. The hybrid cultural construction interests me and affects my cultural self-perception.

Statement of Problem

Through the development and creation of my artwork I have investigated what the construct of Mexican-American culture has come to mean to me and how I define it. This involves how I choose to accept, deny or alter cultural information and how these aspects define my beliefs of what constitutes culture. The imagery is a recorded mythology of a hybrid cultural existence.

The art produced represents feelings and reactions to dilemmas that I encounter in everyday life. These instances include graduate art school experiences from the viewpoint of a Mexican-American woman and aspects of artistic genre relating to cultural background. It also involves cultural role expectations and how I deconstruct traditional expectations in order to fit into the role that I have made for myself. Specific dilemmas have come to the forefront of the series of work and I have chosen a few experiences to depict over others because of their importance to me at the time of creation.
Methodology

In this body of work I have used the format of the handkerchief, or paño. The handkerchiefs work as individual pieces, diptychs, and small arrangements or groups. I have used an assortment of materials and juxtaposed various textures of one material over or against another, such as acrylic paint, graphite, ballpoint pen, crayon, china marker, and enamel paint.

The imagery included self-portraits and distorted likenesses of myself, as well as the invention of an imaginary character. Other imagery, such as crowns, cacti, dunce caps, banners and text were also included.

Questions

1. Which experiences or areas of my life did I focus on and depict to create the mythology?

2. What kind of imagery did I use to transform my experiences into a mythical vocabulary?

3. How did I symbolize the tension of living within two cultures?

4. Did the work give me insight into my cultural identity, in what way?
INVENTION OF A MYTHOLOGY

In the series entitled *Nopalita*, I created a personal mythology of visual elements using symbolic imagery. The symbols were chosen for their significance in cultural and personal references. The imagery was not narrative, but instead represented general feelings associated with experiences I encountered. The self-portrait was a significant element in understanding self-perception. A transformation of the self-portrait occurred through various drawings. The representation of self evolved from an awkward depiction of distortion taken from photographs and observation to an invention of a mythical character. I created my own mythical world where cultural and social dilemmas were represented by invented symbolism and imagery.

Choice of Experiences

I chose certain experiences because I felt they embodied the struggle of my hybrid cultural identity. These experiences were used in a broad sense and were not literally depicted in the work. They were translated into imaginary dilemmas relating to and influenced by reactions to experiences. One reaction is the sense of being trapped in a cultural limbo.¹ The *paños* themselves signify part of this experience. They are outside the arena of art because they are neither canvas nor paper, but they relate closely in material to both. Using the *paños* in my art expresses feelings of imprisonment and being trapped within stereotypes of culture and gender. The *paños’* design contributes to that effect by enclosing the images within its boundaries of lace, weaving and pattern.
The use of materials also ties into the idea of not fitting perfectly into one category. The materials are mixed and create a sense of tension when one is placed against another. The style of drawing in the work volleys between traditional drawing and more graphic, cartoon-like depictions. For example in *Be Specific* (figure 1), the self-portrait is drawn more traditionally in graphite and the cartoon-like cactus is heavily drawn with crayon onto the graphite.

My experiences with graduate school and my reactions to art theory influenced the creation of the mythology. These experiences often left me feeling like an outsider or other because I was not always aware of or agreed with dominant views of the art world, such as elitist points of view and formalist ideas. I translated the reactions into mythical predicaments that occur in the *paños*. This is signified by the unusual placement of images and covering up of areas in the drawings. In *Be Specific* (fig. 1), the cactus on the forehead is an obstruction and an interruption of thought. Text and style also relate to how situations in the art world are humorous, paradoxical, and ironic. In *A Wink and A Nod* (fig. 2), the diptych is drawn in a naïve style related to outsider art, but the text and actions of the figural elements imply that the work is in fact not naïve. Instead they indicate the artist is aware of the significance of the genre being used. The decision to depict only the head and exclude other figural aspects is a focus on higher forms of reasoning and thought. The body is no longer important and the intellect is most affected. The head becomes its own world reacting and engaging in dilemmas within the composition.
Self-Representation

A repeated element used to signify the dilemma of self-perception is the self-portrait. The depiction of self involved the two cultures experienced in daily life. Slight variations and visual distortion of facial features in self-portraits alluded to the distortion of self-perception in cultural identity. These depictions referenced the instances when my ethnicity came into question. I am often asked, “What are you?” My appearance, either socially or ethnically does not give enough clues as to what specific category I should fit into. This experience forced me to see myself as Other. Drawing the self-portraits with various distortions aided me in taking on the questions about otherness and how this affects my self-perception.

Certain self-portraits are drawn with the Anglo-American cultural influence that surrounds me. The Anglo-American face occupies all forms of American media, from television to billboard advertisements to magazine covers. The idealized faces in the media are digitally perfected and considered beautiful within our society. My first attempts at self-portraits became distorted and even started to emulate Anglicized features. I recognized that I compared myself to and identified with Anglo-Americans and the idealized forms of beauty in the U.S. The unconscious desire to belong to American society’s definition of what is considered to be normal and beautiful is evident in some of the depictions. In the paño, Ingenue (fig. 3), the features of the face are distorted and the nose seems to turn up slightly.

Self-portraits became mythological when I drew myself with more Mexican indigenous features. I intentionally exaggerated certain features as opposed to the
Anglo features that appeared more subconsciously in other self-portraits. The exaggerated features represented a conscious desire to belong to the lost indigenous Mexican culture of my ancestry. These drawings involved creating an imaginary character with stylized and mythical attributes. Through this character I was free to express a creation of self made entirely of what I chose. In the print, *Nopal en la Frente* (fig. 4), the facial features are intentionally exaggerated and drawn from imagination.

These different representations of myself symbolized a state of cultural duality, constantly accepting and rejecting cultural traits. Fusco refers to a similar development in relation to Mexican society when she writes “Mexican cultural identity develops within the dynamic of attraction to and rejection of these two images of Otherness -the rural, indigenous past, and the present and future threat of ‘gringoization’.”³ No definitive strategy was used in choosing which parts became my cultural identity, instead it was an ongoing process whereby certain parts were accepted or rejected according to what was happening around me. These drawings became a representation of a world where a multitude of selves could manifest and evolve into a mythical being. This mythical representation transformed awkward distorted self-portraits into a culturally ideal self.
SYMBOLISM

The imagery and symbolism within the paños was influenced by both traditional and outsider art. Traditional elements involved knowledge of the art world and theory. The outsider elements were associated with graffiti, tattoo art, and religious imagery. The two are mixed in various ways to achieve an amalgamation of style. I reduced my visual vocabulary to include only a few symbols that I repeated in different ways throughout the series. The most important symbols are the self-portraits, the imaginary character and the cactus.

Cacti as Cultural Indicator

The use of the cactus is related to a Mexican saying, “nopal en la frente” which literally translates into, “cactus on the forehead.” The meaning of this saying relates to the social structure in Mexico and the tension that still exists between the indigenous and Spanish populations. To carry a cactus on the forehead is to exhibit indigenous facial features. In Mexico, the phrase is used to admonish those who appear to be hiding their indigenous ancestry. It also is used as a descriptor for someone who is “from the country” and does not have knowledge of city life, otherwise known as a rube. In my work I used the phrase and the imagery as a declarative indicator of culture and class, a marker that I placed and emphasized upon myself, such as in Nopal en la Frente (fig. 4). The style of drawing and the symbols were used to assume the identity of the rube in the art world in the same manner, as in the paño piece Ingenue (fig. 3). Cacti often had multiple meanings. In Be Specific (fig. 1) the cacti stood for
obstruction of thought, identification as a rube and also as the way the art piece was “being specific.”

Cacti as Palimpsest

The cactus was also as an object in the composition that acted as an obstruction and created a palimpsest. On some paños cacti protruded from various areas of the floating head to symbolize obtrusions of thought and creativity. On other paños cacti acted as part of a palimpsest by obstructing parts of the imagery with its layers. The cacti itself was obstructed with paint as in the piece Many Little (fig. 5). The cacti forms obstruct the design of the handkerchief, while the forms are partially obstructed by paint and that in turn is covered over with graphite. The layering signifies the concept of suppression of variation and difference by outside factors. However it is also a realization that within layering there can be endless differences. The use of obstruction relates to parts of culture that remain distant yet recognizable, such as the use of the Spanish language and ideas of art theory.

Horns, Halos, and Other Elements

The imaginary representation of self was influenced by Mexican indigenous imagery in an effort to reclaim and reuse historical imagery. The depiction of the hair on the mythical character relates to imagery of Aztec women’s hairstyles as is evident in illustrations in the Codex Mendoza⁴. This consisted of long hair being bound into braids and wrapped around the head. In my work this hairstyle was stylized even further and often appeared as conical forms that project from and create a halo around the head. The forms of the hair have been referred to as both animal horns and musical or
speaker horns. Throughout the series the hair form began to embody a personification of the experiences I encountered. The forms sometimes coincided in action along with the imaginary character or sometimes acted independently. For example, in Mirénme (Fig. 6) the main figural element’s eyes are covered by the outstretched horns of the hair and in Digenme (Fig. 7), the horns of hair cover the mouth.

Other forms of imagery included elements usually found in tattoo and or religious imagery. Banners were used to proclaim information often important to the work. Text occupied the central area of the banner and was sometimes intentionally negated from the banner, such as in Ah, sí! (Fig. 8). The banner located above the self-portrait is deprived of text by strokes of paint located in the area where text usually would be. This signifies the relation of information to states of being and thought processes.

Halos or rays of light surrounding the portraits or other objects represent the mystical influence of Catholic religious imagery. Halos draw attention to the imagery and signify importance or holiness. In images of the Virgen de Guadalupe a similar effect is rendered around the whole figure. Halos can also be related to the visual vocabulary in comic books or cartoons where the idea of drawing lines around the image may indicate areas of focus, surprise or pain. Crowns and dunce caps also represented royalty and the association with the Catholic crown of a martyr. The dunce cap, associated with ignorance and stupidity, in the paños has similar associations with the crown. Often the two were fused together as one to indicate the awkwardness and sense of contradiction found in cultural and social dilemmas, such as in A Wink and A Nod (fig. 2).
The ornamentation and inherent pattern found on the paños also affected the composition and feel of the work. I strategically chose certain paños because of their color and patterning. Some of these details I incorporated as part of the formal elements within the composition, such as in ¡Que Lastíma! (fig. 9), where the found patterning around the edges of all three paños seems to point inwardly towards the drawing in the center. The heaviness and color of the pattern also contrasts with and emphasizes the delicateness of the drawn image. In Reina (fig. 10) and Many Little (fig. 5), the floral pattern of the handkerchief creates a sense of femininity and relates to an association with roses and the Virgen de Guadalupe in Mexican Catholicism.
CONCLUSION

In the series *Nopalita* I created a personal mythology of images. My strategy was to use experiences occurring in my life as a basis in the *paños*. My goal was not to communicate specific instances but instead portray broader experiences in a general manner. The work concentrated on translating experiences into predicaments. I chose only a few symbols as the main imagery and used elements of the *paños* as formal aspects because I was interested in removing the unneeded elements from the work. It was more important to give emphasis to the symbolism at hand. The symbols interacted within the compositions of the *paños* and represented the influence and reaction to life experiences. A personal set of symbols emerged and the meanings with which they were encoded also developed.

The self-portrait helped me to determine what aspects of culture to focus in on and why these were important to self-perception. Working in this way made me question why cultural self-perception was important to me. A sense of belonging is important and feelings associated with being caught in a cultural limbo affects self-perception and image. I am not Mexican because I am not from Mexico and I have an American cultural upbringing. However, I cannot completely feel as though I belong in the Anglo-American culture because my physical attributes associate me with the other. There are also parts of my life associated with Mexican culture that Anglo-America is unaware of. As an alternative I fuse together parts of both to create my own idea of culture and self-perception.
In the same way I used visual elements interchangeably to create my idea of a hybrid cultural mythology. My visual construction of self has led me to realize that the cultural limbo I exist in now is actually part of my sense of identity. Without this awareness I would not be able to see both sides as I do now. The recreation of myself as a mythical character is a response to this realization. It seems appropriate that a mythical creature could exist in many places at once. Through this character I translate these experiences into a mythical visual vocabulary. The result is a recorded transformation of culture, altered and made new by my individual experience.
APPENDIX
Illustrations

Figure 1, *Be Specific*, 2003. Mixed media, 15 x 16 in.

Figure 2, *A Wink and A Nod*, 2003. Mixed media, 10 ½ x 24 in.
Figure 3, *Ingenue*, 2003. Mixed media, 10 x 9 ½ in.

Figure 4, *Nopal en la Frente*, 2003. Screen and relief print, 20 x 16 in.
Figure 5, *Many Little*, 2004. Mixed media, 10 x 10 in.

Figure 6, *Mírenme*, 2004. Acrylic, 10 x 10 in.
Figure 7, *Dígenme*, 2004. Acrylic, 11 x 11 in.

Figure 8, *¡Ah sí!*, 2003. Mixed media, 14 ½ x 14 ½ in.
Figure 9, *¡Que Lastima!*, 2004. Mixed media, variable dimensions.

Figure 10, *Reina*, 2004. Mixed media, 9 x 9 in.
ENDNOTES

1. Not belonging to any one specific cultural group.


4. The *Codex Mendoza* is a Spanish manuscript dated 1541 which depicted information about the conquered Aztecs.

5. Virgin of Guadalupe is a Mexican Catholic version of Mary, mother of Jesus in Christianity.

6. Catholic imagery of saints and holy persons usually incorporates some affect of their martyrdom.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


