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MADRE TIERRA: A CONCEPT, AN EXHIBIT, A PUBLICATION

by

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Until the mid-seventies, Chicano art was largely dominated by men. Though some were sensitive to women's issues, the images that emerged predominantly depicted women as passive wives, helpmates and mothers, Indian princesses, pre-Columbian and Catholic goddesses, sex symbols, and occasionally as betrayers like Doña Marina, La Malinche, the Indian interpreter and mistress of Hernán Cortés in the 16th century. As a more pervasive feminist consciousness developed and greater numbers of Chicanas became visible as artists, new concepts emerged. Women began to redefine themselves as individuals, casting aside the stereotype of passivity. As liberated women, they celebrated the joys of maternity. They reexamined their historical sisters like Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and La Malinche, discovering, for example, that Doña Marina (as Adelaida R. del Castillo has written) embodied effective, decisive action in the feminine form; that she should not be portrayed as negative, insignificant or foolish, but be perceived as a woman "who was able to act beyond her prescribed societal function, namely that of being a mere concubine and servant." (Essays on La Mujer, UCLA, pp. 125-126). To this redefinition Martha P. Cotera added: "La Malinche is the woman men have always picked on. Encouraged by the Octavio Paz mentality, men have used her as a club for us, to keep us down." (The Chicana Feminist, Austin, p. 30.) Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Mexico's greatest literary figure in the 17th century, was an early exponent of women's rights and perhaps the first feminist writer in the hemisphere. She repeatedly confronted the male ecclesiastical establishment for the right to continue her intellectual pursuits.

Women have written about, painted, photographed and filmed labor and

political leaders like Lucía (Lucy) Eldine Gonzales de Parsons who was an anarchist, writer, lecturer, and charter member of the Chicago Working Women's Union in the 1870s and a founding member of the Industrial Workers of the World in 1905; like Luisa Moreno, national organizer for the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America in the 1930s; like Dolores Huerta, Vice-President of the United Farm Workers from the 1960s on, boycott leader and tough negotiator for the union; and, most recently, like Gloria Molina, newly elected to the California State Assembly.

Chicana writers and artists have also taken another look at female goddesses like the Aztec Tonantzin/Coatlicue and the Catholic Virgin of Guadalupe, either of which can be dealt with in traditional ways, or in innovative ways that relate them to contemporary realities and concerns. In the words of literary critic Marcella Trujillo, "Chicanas took the symbols afforded them through the Chicano movement and transformed them according to their feminine perspective. Some Chicanas' (work) has been a vehicle whereby they could escape into another temporal sense of our folklore, our legends and modus vivendi; that particular past which seemed a safer and saner world, the world as it ought to be, albeit a very traditional romantic view. In a quest for identity and an affirmation that brown is beautiful, the Chicana has sought refuge in the image of the indigenous mother. Some Chicanas view the Indian mother as Mother Earth; (and) some identify with the bronze reality in religious themes of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the spiritual mother..." (Heresies magazine, No. 8, 1979.)

Most notable among Chicanas who have chosen an innovative path in their treatment of female goddesses is the Guadalupe series of San Francisco artist Yolanda López who fused the Virgin with Coatlicue (whom she considers "the mother of us all") or with images of contemporary women of Mexico and the United States. Ester Hernández of Oakland shows the Virgin as a karate fighter in her print La Virgen de Guadalupe defendiendo los derechos de los Chicanos. A recent

exhibit in Austin, Texas, sponsored by Women and Their Work, organized by Santa Barraza and Juan Pablo Gutiérrez and titled "La Lupe: Mixed Media Exhibition of the Virgen of Guadalupe," also takes a fresh approach to the traditional images and their values.

The most recent expression of this theme is that of "Madre Tierra," or more correctly, the "Great Mother" if one is to include the Virgin of Guadalupe who is a monument to motherhood without being an earthy fertility symbol like Tonantzin. A portfolio (and an exhibit recently held at the Los Angeles Woman's Building on North Spring Street) was produced by the Madre Tierra Press collective and features the art, dance, and literature of thirteen Chicanas from the Los Angeles area. Coordinated by printmaker Linda Vallejo with the assistance of Susan E. King, studio director of the Woman's Graphic Center at the Woman's Building, the limited edition portfolio on Mohawk paper combines serigraphy with offset and letter press reproduction. The women, each of whom contributed a 10" x 14" page and whose biographies appear on two additional pages, include writers Osa de la Riva, Mary Helen Ponce, Naomi Quiñonez, and Sylvia Zaragoza-Wong; dancer Josefina Gallardo; writer-artists Juanita Cynthia Alaníz and Olivia Sánchez; photographers Judy Miranda and Rosemary Quesada-Weiner; and artists Linda Vallejo, Cecelia Castañeda Quintero, Yreina Cervantes and Anita Rodríguez.

The inaugurating exhibit of the portfolio took place on December 12, 1982, a day sacred to Tonantzin and to the Virgin of Guadalupe whose shrine, the Basilica of Tepeyac in Mexico City, occupies the original site of Tonantzin's temple. Ceremonies began before an audience of about 100 people with dancers Cecelia Castañeda Quintero and Linda Vallejo from the group Flores de Aztlán performing a mystic Indian rite of meditation and dance before a small altar containing pink roses, a feather, burning incense and a candle before an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe ^a -/truly syncretic event. The dancers wore

white costumes split to the thigh, silver ornaments, braided black wool headdresses like the Indian women of Oaxaca, and rattling anklets like the Yaqui deer dancers. Poetry readings completed the evening.

The emphasis given by the Flores de Aztlán dancers to the mystic or spiritual aspect of the Madre Tierra theme - a theme chosen by Linda Vallejo which is consistent with the trajectory of her personal art work focusing on archetypal geometric and cosmic symbols - was not necessarily shared by all the participants of the collective, nor was it mandatory to their participation. Vallejo and dancer/choreographer Josefina Gallardo were closest to the original intention, the folkloric and legendary approach which Marcella Trujillo referred to as a "very traditional romantic view." Some of the other artists integrated the mythic nature of the theme with their contemporary vision with a sense of strain. Others marginalized it; still others completely ignored it and simply dealt with the world around them from a woman's point of view.

Vallejo's graphic contribution to the portfolio is a letterpress print of red roses (symbol of the Virgin of Guadalupe) surrounding a short poem in green ink which, with the white paper, produces a symbolic red/white/green color motif. Four other visual artists are wholly contemporary. Olivia Sánchez recreates a world seen through the windshield and rear view mirror of a car: busy city streets, passing automobiles, telephone wires and palm trees, street signs, and a poster advertising the candidacy of Art Torres are contained within geometric forms. This is the only work that has no obvious feminine reference but it reflects Sánchez's ongoing interest in the Chicano element inserted in the physical topography of Los Angeles. Rosemary Quesada-Weiner's black and white photograph Soy Chicana unites (as do the poets) a young woman with her grandmother; a flower motif carries over from the dress of the one to the fashionable T-shirt of the other. Yreina Cervantez borders her red and black print Somos la nueva

Chicana with written references to goddesses of the Old and New Worlds, from Ishtar to Guadalupe/Tonantzin whose combined image forms a shield for the contemporary Chicanas in the center of her design, while the Virgin's sickle moon and a rose float in the sky. Her dedication, however, is not to the Virgin but to the Homegirls of Long Beach, where she lives and with whom she works: "todas las chavalitas hermosas y los niñitos lindos." It is obvious that the three women in her print are taken from real women. Below are the nicknames of seventeen other "homegirls" listed in the calligraphy of graffiti.

Judy Miranda's stunning print in striped lavender, light gray, and black encloses two reversed heads within a flattened cut-through shape (reminiscent of papel picado) taken from the silhouette of a large view camera mounted on a tripod. The reversed heads refer to the inverted image produced by the camera obscura - the earliest form of photographic equipment - which was corrected in later cameras by the prism lens. Miranda allows us to look through the back of the view camera and under the dark cloth that hides the photographer's head at the ground glass frame where the photograph is composed. Around the border of her print she writes: "Photography...is more than a means of recording the obvious. It's a way of feeling, of touching and loving. The image you catch on film is captured forever, whether it be a face or a place, a day or a moment. A photographer remembers little things long after you have forgotten."

On the pages dedicated by the writers, we find a celebration of the processes of gestation, birth, motherhood, and grandmotherhood; a celebration of the continuity between several generations of women. Though the writing at times echoes with indigenous references - feathered and jeweled words, images, and rhythms - its essential theme is historical and modern.

Taking the portfolio as a whole, we find a mixed aesthetic level. Some of the writers and artists are still in a formative phase; they show promise but have not yet achieved total integration between their concept and their form.

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Others have produced fine images and statements. All the women I spoke to felt that the process of working together as a collective was a very important part of the experience. Eight months of collaboration (from June to December 1982) allowed the women to learn new techniques and stretch beyond their previous limitations. All phases of the printing, from serigraphy to the operation of the letter and offset presses were done by women utilizing skills generally reserved for men in the commercial world. To give women this opportunity, this experience, and this confidence was the original intent behind the organization of the Woman's Graphic Center a number of years ago.

It is sincerely to be hoped that the Madre Tierra Press collective will not stop with one publication but will continue to explore this rich vein of artistic possibilities, engaging other women and new themes.

The Madre Tierra portfolio is available at \$25.00 for unsigned numbers and \$100.00 for signed. Further information can be obtained from Linda Vallejo at 302 West 7th Street, Long Beach, California 90813.