

Notes from the Living Room Couch: A Collector Speaks Out

by Armando Durón - major contemporary art collector, ex-president of the Board of Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC)

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Each of us is obsessive about something. Each of us collects--for aesthetic, or utilitarian or other purposes. From wood for the fire to survive, to Timothy Dahlmer memorabilia to satisfy a macabre fascination, to a painting from the Bellagio Gallery because there is \$10 million available to spend, or while in search for one of the millions of other objects hovering around the center of these extremes, each of us is driven by a need for some material thing.

Going through the objects left behind by someone who is recently deceased immediately makes one wonder what that person must have been thinking to preserve such things. Likewise, why do I preserve what I preserve? If I were to imagine myself dead, would the reasons I have left behind such objects made of so much canvas and paper be readily apparent? Would they mean anything--anything at all? Certainly, they could not mean the same things to even the most kindred spirit. There are after all different "motives" which could be attached to the same object: functionality, emotional pull, monetary value, aesthetic reasoning. Aesthetic reason? In this age of objective rationality, even aesthetics have to have a reason. If I were to die tomorrow what would be found is easy enough to catalog, but my meaning would mostly die with me.

When we collect-whatever it is we collect-we do so in part because we have appointed ourselves as the preservers of certain needs, dreams, melancholy, capital, memory or misery. We convince ourselves that we know something no one else knows and that it is our duty to preserve it in the form of our collection for those in the present, or in the future, that do not have our "special" knowledge.

If our perceived special knowledge is that our collection will have great monetary value, then we are collecting as an investment. But if we are collecting for other reasons such as to let others know why we feel what we feel-if we can convey such a concept merely by letting someone else see what we have seen-then we are collecting dreams. Then it may be true, as Borges wrote, "the dreams of one man is part of the memory of all."ⁱ If we collect to preserve for others the culture that composes a people's collective being, we do so to share with others our people's experiences, our memories.

It was recently written that if one controls people's memory, one controls their dynamism, their experience and their knowledge of previous struggle. From its dogmatic stance, one might be tempted to conclude from this statement that art is war by other means. But I prefer the less confrontational approach taken by Arthur C. Danto when he wrote "we serve the future best by preserving what connects us with our own interests; the question is immediately raised: Who are we? It was my need to be included in the "we" that first led me to collect Chicano art. As a collector I am not limited by the objectivity expected of art historians and critics. I collect to explain to myself, not others. I am mindful of my responsibility to preserve, to conserve, to properly frame and to present the works in favorable light. As a collector of Chicano art, I am passionate by definition--there being no resale market to speak of. It is an obsession very few are cursed/blessed with. I can remain true to what I like without the pretense of objectivity.

Perhaps, a collector can bring a breath of fresh air to what often appears to be a rather austere discourse. It is my hope that I will do that in the following words.

I do not recall when I met Linda Vallejo. It seems as if I have always known her art. I was familiar with Linda's works long before I ever met her. I had seen her paper and wood sculptures and masks, with their feathers, gnarled and knotted branches, seaweed, papier mache, plastic objects, shells, metal and other materials. But it took me a very long time to actually acquire one of Linda's pieces. Frankly, at first they confounded me. What would I do with a piece of wood with copper-colored paint on it, or a mask with a beard of seaweed, or a delicate mixed-media construction on arches paper? Now, I wish I had one, or two or three or each of these types of works.

Linda's art is among the most indigenous-based of any of the Chicano artists of Los Angeles. Her art works over the past twenty-five years evoke the spirit of a Meso-American shaman chronicling the story of her people's creation and journey through transcendent time and space, especially its women. Yet Linda has mostly been excluded from too many important Chicano art exhibitions for not being Chicano enough and has been likewise excluded from non-Chicano exhibitions for being too Chicano. Some have complained that her work is not easy to categorize. That need to categorize in order to understand, is perhaps one of the problems with today's art establishment—a practice too many Chicanos are more than willing to emulate. And yet I find it quite easy now to at least categorize Linda's work as unique, original and totally engrossing. Her visual language may disturb some viewers because it transcends mere notions of linear nature. As for me, her work makes me lose my balance one moment and makes things much clearer the next.

While Linda's work does not present an outwardly political message, or incessantly repetitious iconography, its content and meaning is decidedly Chicano. That perspective does not detract from its value to the rest of the world. Chicano art also can serve to reflect universal values. To date, my wife and I have acquired nine works by Linda Vallejo. Lining the works side by side as I have in our home, I can more easily explain to family and friends not only the projection and development of Vallejo's work, but its beguiling complexity and simplicity; its magic and its spirit. Due to space constraints, I shall discuss only four of the works in an attempt to explain what compelled me to acquire them, as well as, why we continue to treasure them. *Madonna Con Columnas de Humanidad* (1975) is a small lithograph on paper (of an edition of only 16) executed in 1975 while Linda was studying in Spain. The Madonna is classically posed holding the child, but appearing suspended between the two columns, she's not confined by conventional structures. Rather, she appears thoroughly modern, as she is keenly aware of the real suffering of ordinary people; projecting out her sympathy to the problems of modern man. I submit that the stilted composition is designed to deliberately belie its tender intentions. I notice the tentative positioning of the columns of humanity on either side of the Madonna that are composed of abstracted stick-like figures, seemingly inching their way up the travails of human existence. And, although the Madonna looks like a cutout from a magazine on baroque art, her soft face and gently flowing robes relaxes the viewer into acceptance of her powers and is complemented by the Christ child's stare.

Madonna explains many things about Vallejo's work. Although an expressly conventional work, it clearly portends the works to come. I had never seen this work prior to 1991 when we acquired it. Yet it explained so much to me about where Linda's work had been and where it was going. Now twenty-five years old, this piece anchors Linda's oeuvre. It is an image transformed by the time Linda's *Beneath the Skin* is included in the landmark *Chicana Voices & Visions* exhibition in 1987 and one that continues to reemerge and reinvent itself up to the present day. We first purchased *The Spirit of Nature as Quetzalcoatl* in 1987, when I saw a series of about eight then new works of graphite and ink on paper. *Quetzalcoatl* was the mythical benevolent god of the Aztecs who, having been made aware of, and acting upon, his human nature, left in disgrace but vowed to return to the Valley of Mexico to retake his place. Representing both the virtuous in pre-Hispanic mythology, as well as the unwitting cause of the downfall of the Aztec empire, *Quetzalcoatl* remains an enigma in Mexican history. It is the prediction of his return that confused the Aztecs when Hernan Cortez arrived at the outskirts of their empire; a tale every child in Mexico learns in school. I remember well the mixed messages I received in learning that the good can also bring disaster upon us all.

Quetzalcoatl has been frequently depicted by Mexican artists, most notably by Jose Clemente Orozco in his frescoes at Dartmouth College and Diego Rivera at the National Palace in Mexico City. Orozco depicted *Quetzalcoatl* as an aging Moses-like figure. Here, Vallejo has represented *Quetzalcoatl* as a virile young man facing the viewer in portrait form. His feathered headdress has become vines and leaves as if from a thick tree trunk. But it is the lines that compose his face that appeal to me most. The medium too lends much to the simplicity of the sitter's stare. There is no pretense here. The piece reminds us that *Quetzalcoatl* remains present among us. In his previous manifestations he was a feathered serpent, a stone, a Moses, or a sitting Buddha-like figure (as depicted by Diego Rivera). Vallejo's *Quetzalcoatl* is a young man, a purely secular being-perhaps warning us about our impending collision with the environment. This work may also be the last one depicting a male. The mystical vision of *Aztlan* as a modern Eden and *Quetzalcoatl* as its Adam, gave way to Linda's many Eves, seeking deeper understanding from the viewer. Linda long ago decided that women better represent the convergence of ideas that make up her oeuvre.

Sunrise (1988) is a simple composition of wood and acrylics of blues and yellows on a small canvas. It harks back to the *palos* of previous years, but it also portends the *Cielos* series. When I first saw this work, I immediately compared it to Claude Monet's *Impression: Sunrise* (1873), although Vallejo's *Sunrise* has the colors inverted. The light from the sunrise appears to be scorching the ground. If it is that time of the morning, it is going to be a hot day, indeed. Whereas, the Monet depicts an idyllic harbor scene with ship masts off in the horizon, Linda's *Sunrise* shows us bare tree trunks standing or fallen in the foreground, alone and apart, with no leaves or branches, as if after a fire. The paint is thick and hard and not translucent and blended. This juxtapositioning may not have been intentional, but I could not help but note it when I first saw *Sunrise*.

Beyond that obvious comparison, I have come to understand something else about *Sunrise*. It is a pivotal piece in Linda's oeuvre. Not only because it stands at the crossroads between her three dimensional-often abstract-mixed-media works and her, almost exclusively, works on

canvas since Sunrise, but because it also signals a turn to a more mystical and introspective work. Almost as if announcing a new era, Sunrise speaks of a longing for something else, something yet unsaid. I have interpreted the scorched earth image I attribute to Sunrise to be akin to the new growth that soon sprouts after a devastating fire. Indeed, Sunrise is one of the few works on canvas since that Linda has executed that is devoid of the human figure.

Others will no doubt speak more eloquently and authoritatively than I can about the current Los Cielos series. I will concentrate on one piece from that suite. I believe we acquired the first work in that series in 1996. At the time it was the largest work on canvas Linda had completed. (Linda has since completed several larger works for this series.) I fell in love with the work immediately upon seeing it.

One can appreciate the Los Cielos series for different reasons. The piece we acquired conjures up a cornucopia of images and reactions. Visually, it is smoke from a burning fire, it is clouds viewed from mid-air, it is that white water from a torrential river, or the southern clouds, or maybe the northern clouds; a visual symphony of color nuance. Discovering new tableaux each time I see the work is one of its many strengths. Another strength is its moodiness brought on by its luminous qualities. This painting changes as the light of the day and night changes. Cool, hot, somber or joyful; it all depends on the light. But more to the point, this painting changes the place it is encompassing. The eyes, nose and mouth over the deep recesses of the upper nocturnal sky focus the viewer on the question of the symbolic intentions of the painter. Again, Meso-American imagery seems to emerge. This time, instead of a plumed serpent, perhaps it is the Xbalanqué, the little jaguar found in the Popol Vuh.^{iv}

But there is nothing like getting lost in all the negative space. It is that negative space which allows one to conjure up even more fantastic images. Conversely, it is an opportunity to see nothing in particular, to appreciate its colors for what they are, or how they are woven together, or why they come and go. It also allows me to dream and dream and dream on with no objective, just because there is a beautiful painting allowing me to do so. Borrowing from Mark Rothko, my Cielos "is not a picture of an experience, it is an experience."

Taken together, the four pieces alerted me to the transcendent message in Linda's work. Three of the four contain religious imagery, while the fourth appears to me to rely on the barren landscape to convey the sense of the questioning that is at the heart of all religious experience. Thus, the four works establish a dialogue between Linda's works that informs me, at least, of her deep conviction, her closeness to nature and the higher powers that control all our destinies. Even as most of Linda's oeuvre over the last few years may be said to be more introspective, these four works serve as points of reference, as compass points for the four directions, that any journey can take us.

Finally, two of the pieces are multi-colored canvases and two are monochromatic works on paper; two are large and two are small. Small points, perhaps but along with the great insights that these pieces have allowed me to garner, they were noted while seated on the couch where I can view them daily.

The relationship of artist and collector is generally a fickle and complicated one. There are issues of evolving tastes on the part of the collector and just as quickly evolving artistic interests on the part of the artist, not to mention monetary considerations. Yet it is worth noting, at least in passing, that Linda remains a true friend, not because of so many shared trials and tribulations which are said to be the hallmarks of true friendship, but precisely because despite their absence, we have not grown distant, as so many friendships in this megalopolis often do. This exhibition is the first attempt at examining closely the work of this great artist at mid-career. I have often told Linda how confident I am that despite her lack of recognition to date; I believe she will survive the art history cut. Unlike so many others who work for fame instead of for the redemption of their artistic soul, Linda's work will speak long after her. Not that it matters, but I remain convinced that Linda's strength of spirit will last and the poetry of her work will be recognized even if neither of us is around to witness it. Through the works which I am fortunate to safeguard, I shall remain a chronicler of Linda's journey until time catches up with her vision.

NOTES

i Jose Luis Borges, "Martin Fierro" in *Dreamtigers*, (University of Texas Press: Austin, 1964) p. 40.

ii Benjamin Genocchio, "Antidote to Oblivion: Popular Memory In The Work of Juan Sanchez" in *Third Text*, Winter 1999-2000, No. 49, p. 44

iii Arthur C. Danto, "Looking at the Future Looking at the Present as Past" in *Mortality Immortality? The Legacy of 20th-Century Art* (The Getty Conservation Institute, Los Angeles, 1999) p. 11.

iv *The Book of the People: Popol Vuh*, (The Plantin press, Los Angeles, 1954). Xbalanqué was a twin whose adventures are recited in the Maya chronicle.

v Lisa Dennison, "Mark Rothko: Red, Yellow, Orange and Pink", in *The Bellagio*.

Armando Duron is a longtime supporter and collector of Chicano art of Los Angeles. Duron was President of the Artes de Mexico Festival Committee in 1991 and was President of the Board of SPARC in the mid-nineties. Selections from the Mary and Armando collection, including four works by Linda Vallejo, are included in the "East of the River: Chicano Art Collectors Anonymous" exhibition at the Santa Monica Museum of Art, Fall 2000.