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Book Review

Chicano Art vs. Censorship

- Reviews section -

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Although past controversies about artworks that incorporated sacred icons with perceived profane elements – such as Andres Serrano’s *Piss Christ* (1987) and Chris Ofili’s *The Holy Virgin Mary* (1996), referred to as “Dung Virgin” – are often cited as early examples of artistic culture wars, Chicana feminist artists have experienced protests, verbal attacks and even death threats for their reimaginings of the Mexican Virgin of Guadalupe since the 1970s

A new collection of essays, *Our Lady of Controversy: Alma López’s Irreverent Apparition*, examines this history and the complex issues that sparked a prolonged protest of López’s digital collage *Our Lady* at the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe in February 2001.

The collection includes two personal essays by the artist, ten critical essays, numerous black and white and color images of artworks by Alma López and other artists, and a DVD conversation featuring López and pioneering Chicana artists, Estér Hernández and Yolanda López (no relation), whose Guadalupe artworks generated the first protests in the 1970s.

With the exception of one essay, the collection provides insightful and sound theoretical and political critiques of the controversy, engaging issues such as freedom of speech and artistic liberty, sexual and identity politics, social class and political power, the conquest and colonization of Native peoples, religious tradition and iconic representation in New Mexico, and Chicana feminist and lesbian representational strategies.

Karate-Kicking Guadalupe

Iconic representations of the Mexican Virgin of Guadalupe, one of the most influential Mexican and Mexican American cultural icons, were first used by the Catholic Church to reinforce the Spanish conquest of Native peoples in Mexico and subsequent colonialist agendas.

As art historian Jeanette Favrot Peterson documents, representations of the Virgin Mary in Spanish colonial art served the interests of the ruling elite. [1] Specifically, the Virgin of Guadalupe, depicted with olive skin, downcast eyes and folded hands, reflected the church’s image of the defeated native population from the 16th to 18th centuries and reinforced submissive female gender roles and heterosexual, religious-sanctioned unions into the present.

As the national symbol of Mexico, however, Guadalupe’s image also became associated with liberation movements including the 1810 Mexican Independence movement, the 1910 Mexican Revolution, an indigenous and peasant uprising led by Emiliano Zapata after whom the present-day Zapatistas named themselves, and the 1960s farm workers’ strikes led by Cesar Chávez and Dolores Huerta, which initiated the Chicano civil rights movement.

The two paradoxical representations, passive Virgin and active revolutionary, became the locus for Chicana feminist artists’ critiques of rigid gender roles and sexuality and their reimaginings of Guadalupe in their own image as a real woman, active, strong, and political.

Groundbreaking artistic representations that exploited Guadalupe’s liberatory significance include Estér Hernández’s karate-kicking *Our Lady of Guadalupe Defending the Rights of Xicanos* (1976) and Yolanda López’s *Guadalupe Series*, including the self-portrait *Tableau Vivant* (1978), which features the painter in running shoes holding Guadalupe’s cape in one hand and a live snake in the other, and running over the fallen angel that traditionally holds the Virgin aloft.

Alma López’s *Our Lady*, the subject of this book, features a digitally-altered photograph of a Chicana clothed in garlands of roses and foliage covering her breasts and midsection and standing with arms akimbo gazing directly at

the viewer, in contrast to the religious icon's downcast eyes and folded hands. In the tradition of Guadalupe, a blue cape covers her shoulders, although adorned with symbols of an indigenous Mexican goddess, and she stands atop a crescent moon.

Unlike the image of the religious icon, whose moon base is supported by a winged male angel, López's Guadalupe is held aloft by the outstretched arms of another woman, bare-breasted and bearing butterfly wings. New Mexican protesters viewed the image, especially the two models' bare skin, as "offensive" and "blasphemous," and the Archbishop of Santa Fe attacked the artist's faith and called the rape survivor who posed for the work a "tart" and a "prostitute." [2]

Santa Fe parishioners and the Archbishop demanded that the image be removed from the museum exhibit. At the same time, New Mexico state lawmakers threatened to deny the museum funding. [3] The museum received bomb and death threats and at one public meeting, male protestors surrounded the artist and the exhibit curator shouting "Burn her! Burn them!" [4]

A statement López prepared for the meeting with the protestors appears as the opening entry of the book's collection. While López's initial response of surprise and disbelief at devout Catholics' condemnation of her artwork may seem naïve and innocent, she points out several important contradictions in their positions.

She notes that Catholic churches around the world contain statues of nude angels and nearly nude crucifixion statues of Christ. [5] She challenges the view that women's bodies are offensive and must be covered. Referring to the photographs of the two women in *Our Lady*, she states: "I see beautiful bodies that are gifts from our creator. I see nurturing breasts. I see the strong nurturing mothers of all of us.... I wonder why they think that our bodies are so ugly and perverted that we cannot be seen in an art piece in a museum." [6]

In addition, she notes the ubiquity of Guadalupe's image, which appears on houses, cars, stores and numerous consumer items, and declares that Chicana artists have the right "to express our relationship to her in any which way relevant to our experience." [7] López addresses freedom of expression and artistic liberty, obliquely referencing the commodification of the religious icon, to which Church officials do not object.

Whose Icon is It?

Several essays explore the issue of perceived "ownership" of the icon and maintenance of tradition versus change. Tey Marianna Nunn, curator of the exhibit in which López's *Our Lady* appeared, explains that the controversy exposed differences including religious vs. secular beliefs, insider vs. outsider control, and Hispanic vs. non-Hispanic identity.

Protestors claimed that God or the Church own the image of the Virgin and that it is "sacrilegious" to change it. New Mexican Hispanos (insiders) accused López, a Mexican-born California resident, whom they considered an outsider and a non-believer, of trying to change their tradition. [8]

Another debate centered on the perception that the museum system was Anglocentric, and did not represent or respect the beliefs of Hispanics, despite a long history of supporting Hispano culture and the fact that the curator, Nunn, and three of the artists are Mexican American and were born in New Mexico. [9]

Kathleen Fitzcallaghan Jones argues that the controversy was centered not on Guadalupe, but on power struggles. For example, regarding the struggle of men versus women and insiders versus outsiders, ironically, one outsider group, the American Society for the Defense of Tradition, Family and Property/America Needs Fatima, was readily accepted by the insiders advocating for the traditional image of Guadalupe.

Fatima, an extreme homophobic, male-dominated Catholic fundamentalist front based in Pennsylvania, arrived in New Mexico uninvited with members from around the country raising the controversy to a nationwide movement. [10] Fitzcallaghan Jones further examines the patriarchal nature of the lengthy battle initiated and carried out in New Mexico by four males associated with the Catholic Church, showing how control of female thought and body and maintenance of male power was the message and purpose of the extended protest.

Another complex issue undergirding the protest involves the historically colonized status of New Mexican Hispanos, who have viewed the Catholic Church as a place of support even though it has not always supported their condition as lower-income workers. Clara Román Odio suggests that the Hispano protestors comprise an “endangered culture” of oppressed peoples, which led them to defend the religious image of Guadalupe to preserve their cultural traditions, and that “the strong survivalist spirit of the community” contributed to their vehement and prolonged protests. [11] Deena González unravels the New Mexican Hispanos’ complex identifications with both the colonizers and the oppressed.

Colonizers include the Spaniards who came from New Spain (Mexico) during the 1600s, European Americans who claimed the territory from Mexico in 1848, and, since the 1950s, the contemporary East Coast art establishment and kitsch merchants, who have taken over Santa Fe and Taos and displaced the Hispano residents, [12] many of whom were forced to move to the outskirts or outside both cities when rent and property prices skyrocketed.

González points out the irony that Easterners brought entire art schools by Georgia O’Keefe and Nathaniel Wyeth, which didn’t provoke protest by Hispanos. ([13] However, López’s Our Lady did, because her artwork challenged the Hispanos’ religious beliefs and therefore their support system. In her otherwise excellent essay, González fails to analyze how Guadalupe is also a symbol of the Spanish conquest, like La Conquistadora, the Virgin of Conquest, whom Hispanos also worship and celebrate.

From a queer perspective, Luz Calvo understands the significance of López’s artwork as creating a “public, cultural space for the articulation of queer Chicana desire.” Calvo argues from a psychoanalytic position that Our Lady and other works by López seduce the spectator “into new desiring positions by exposing Chicana/o libidinal investments” in Guadalupe. [14]

Calvo invokes Homi Bhabha’s theory that identity is never fixed or achieved, noting that Guadalupe is a “polyvalent icon” whose meaning is “twisted” by Chicana feminist and lesbian artists, despite fascist attempts by the Catholic Church and Chicano Nationalists to regulate her meaning within constructs of family values, patriarchal nationalism, and heterosexuality. [15]

Whose Body is It?

News media stories helped inflame the controversy by frequently printing and broadcasting full length images of López’s artwork, focusing the public eye on the female bodies. [16] In addition, the media insisted on calling the artwork the “Bikini Virgin,” trivializing and inaccurately characterizing the image and offending devout followers of the Virgin.

The media also failed to present the artist’s intent and the models’ perspectives. López says her art seeks to answer existential and corporeal questions posed by Chicana writer Sandra Cisneros, who wondered whether the Virgin was a real woman with a body, especially a brown body. ([17] Clara Román Odio argues that López’s conceptualizations of Guadalupe in multiple artworks is complex and includes “a desire to reclaim [her own] full spiritual and bodily self.” [18]

Similarly, Raquel Salinas, the woman who served as the model for López's *Our Lady*, acknowledges that her motivation was to advance her own healing process after being raped at age 18. Burdened with guilt and shame, she underwent a long process to reclaim her psyche and body. "I feel good about my body [now]. I carry no shame anymore." [19]

López, however, takes the question one step further: "For Cisneros, 'to open the door and accept [the Virgin],' Guadalupe needs to be a woman like her. For me, Guadalupe needs to be queer." [20] In other words, not only does the Virgin need to have a brown body and female sexuality, but she needs to access a queer subjectivity.

Román Odio analyzes how other artworks by López, in particular her 1999 *Lupe* and *Sirena* series, use Chela Sandoval's oppositional technology of love as a method to "challenge heteronormativity (racism, sexism, and homophobia)" producing instead a queer Chicana spirituality and sexuality. [21] In these works, López gives Guadalupe a corporeal body and sexuality and shows her sexually embracing the Mexican lottery figure, *La Sirena*, a mermaid.

Cristina Serna's essay also examines how López's work *Lupe and Sirena in Love* (1999), used on a poster for the 2006 Lesbian March in Mexico City, galvanized protestors. Serna compares the campaign against López's *Our Lady* in New Mexico to a similar aggressive movement against a Mexican artist's exhibition of a revised Virgin in Mexico City revealing the hypocrisies of church and state alliances, which use Inquisition-like tactics. [22]

Emma Pérez analyzes the discourse of the protestors, including three Chicano males who were the most persistent and pernicious, noting that women made their point and moved on, while Chicano Nationalists hounded López and the museum staff. She asks, "Why are [Chicano] nationalist men so invested in policing women's bodies, women's desires, and women's sexualities?" She answers through Foucault that the protestors receive pleasure from the power of speaking, concluding that the repression of sexuality "creates an endless cycle of fixation with sex and sexuality." [23]

Whose Vision Is It?

Alicia Gaspar de Alba's essay inverts the idea of the annual pilgrimage made by thousands of Guadalupe followers to the Basilica in Mexico City to view the sign of her purported apparition, her image on the cloak of the Native man to whom she appeared, which hangs in the Basilica. Gaspar de Alba analyzes what the protestors "saw" in López's image based on their subjective belief systems, compared with the visible components of which the artwork was composed. [24]

Cleverly punning on religious terminology, Gaspar de Alba argues that the controversy created by the Santa Fe protestors produced a "second miracle," an "irreverent apparition" which sparked a pilgrimage of believers and non-believers to the Santa Fe museum. Thousands of visitors were drawn to the "antisacred" site, also referred to as the "cyber chapel," and the "Satanic chapel," who otherwise would not have seen López's *Our Lady* or the other works in the exhibit. [25]

The weakest essay in the collection, while making some interesting points, lacks focus and unity. The intriguing title, "Do U Think I'm a Nasty Girl?" refers to the author's personal response to the 1980s song/video by Sheila E. Appolinia and Vanity 6, but doesn't deliver a critique of the double standard regarding female sexuality that the title suggests or an extended perspective on lesbian self-identification with *Our Lady* that the book's introduction promises.

The entire essay collection deserves much stronger editorial oversight regarding both content and mechanics,

including editing of typos, grammar and editorial inconsistencies, for example in the capitalization of essay titles, that detract from the quality of the edition. In addition, several authors continue to use the inaccurate term “Aztec” imposed upon the Mexica and other peoples of Central Mexico by European historians. [26] Although she is not writing as an academic scholar, López fails to acknowledge the sources of some information in her second essay, which the press editors should have requested.

Nonetheless, the publication of this important collection, with its examination of the intricacies of political, colonial, cultural, racial and sexual ideologies that attempt to discipline female and queer creativity and dissent, resonates even more timely given the events of 2011 and 2012. In Spring 2011, two separate protests over the exhibition of Our Lady occurred, one at the Oakland Museum in California, and another at the University College Cork in Ireland, which sponsored her art in the exhibition “Our Lady and Other Queer Santas.” [27]

And now, as I write this review, Santa Fe’s neighboring city of Tucson, Arizona bans Chicano textbooks, presumably including art books, from schools. It is clear that Estér Hernández’s karate-kicking Our Lady of Guadalupe Defending the Rights of Xicanos, and Alma López’s 2008 revision of her original artwork, Our Lady of Controversy II, which depicts Guadalupe/Raquel Salinas wearing boxing gloves, are more on point and necessary than ever.

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[1] Jeanette Favrot Peterson, “The Virgin of Guadalupe: Symbol of Conquest or Liberation,” *Art Journal*, Winter (1992): 39-47.

[2] Parishioners Request Removal of Collage,” *Santa Fe New Mexican*, March 17, 2001; Morgan Lee, “Bishop Says Art Trashes Virgin, Insults Catholics.” *Albuquerque Journal*, March 27, 2001; and Morgan Lee, “Our Lady Debate Heats Up Wednesday,” *Albuquerque Journal*, April 2, 2001

[3] Kathleen Fitzcallaghan Jones, “The War of the Roses: Guadalupe, Alma López and Santa Fe,” In *Our Lady of Controversy: Alma López’s Irreverent Apparition*. Ed. Alicia Gapar de Alba and Alma López, Austin: TX: University of Texas Press, 2011 (45-46).

[4] Tey Marianna Nunn, “It’s Not about the Art in the Folk, It’s about the Folks in the Art: A Curator’s Tale,” In *Our Lady of Controversy: Alma López’s Irreverent Apparition*, Ed. Alicia Gapar de Alba and Alma López, Austin: TX: University of Texas Press, 2011 (20, 29-31

[5] Alma López, “The Artist of Our Lady (April 2, 2001).” In *Our Lady of Controversy: Alma López’s Irreverent Apparition*. Eds. Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Alma López, Austin: TX: University of Texas Press, 2011 (14).

[6] López, 14-15

[7] López, 14.

[8] Nunn, 33-34.

[9] Nunn, 34

[10] Nunn, 57

[11] Clara Román Odio, “Queering the Sacred: Love as Oppositional Consciousness in Alma López’s Visual Art,” In *Our Lady of Controversy: Alma López’s Irreverent Apparition*, Eds. Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Alma López, Austin: TX: University of Texas Press, 2011 (127-128).

[12] Deena Gonzalez, “Making Privates Public: It’s Not About La Virgen of the Conquest, But About the Conquest of La Virgen,” In *Our Lady of*

Controversy: Alma López's Irreverent Apparition, Eds. Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Alma López, Austin: TX: University of Texas Press, 2011 (69-70).

[13] Gonzalez, 80.

[14] Luz Calvo, "Art Comes for the Archbishop: The Semiotics of Contemporary Chicana Feminism and the Artwork of Alma López," In Our Lady of Controversy: Alma López's Irreverent Apparition, Ed. Alicia Gapar de Alba and Alma López, Austin: TX: University of Texas Press, 2011 (98).

[15] Calvo, 101-102, 115

[16] Nunn, 21

[17] Sandra Cisneros, "Guadalupe the Sex Goddess," In Goddess of the Americas/La Diosa de las Américas: Writings on the Virgin of Guadalupe, Ed. Ana Castillo, New York: Riverhead Books, 1996

[18] Román Odio, 123

[19] Patrisia Gonzales and Roberto RodrÃ-guez, "The Body of the Sacred Feminine," Column of the Americas, Universal Press Syndicate, April 20, 2001, XColumnOl.com. Archived at <http://www.uexpress.com>.

[20] Alma López, "It's Not about the Santa in My Fe, but the Santa Fe in my Santa," In Our Lady of Controversy: Alma López's Irreverent Apparition, Ed. Alicia Gapar de Alba and Alma López, Austin: TX: University of Texas Press, 2011 (276).

[21] Román Odio, 138

[22] Cristina Serna, "It's Not about the Virgins in My Life, It's about the Life in My Virgins," In Our Lady of Controversy: Alma López's Irreverent Apparition, Ed. Alicia Gapar de Alba and Alma López, Austin: TX: University of Texas Press, 2011 (189).

[23] Emma Pérez, "The Decolonial Virgin in a Colonial Site: It's Not about the Gender in My Nation, It's about the Nation in My Gender," In Our Lady of Controversy: Alma López's Irreverent Apparition, Ed. Alicia Gapar de Alba and Alma López, Austin: TX: University of Texas Press, 2011 (152).

[24] Gaspar de Alba, "Devil in a Rose Bikini: The Second Coming of Our Lady in Santa Fe," In Our Lady of Controversy: Alma López's Irreverent Apparition, Ed. Alicia Gapar de Alba and Alma López, Austin: TX: University of Texas Press, 2011 (214).

[25] Gaspar de Alba, 215, 229-230

[26] Tlahtoque Xochimeh, "An Overlooked Paradox: A Brief Analysis of Aztekism in Some Major Chicana/o Studies Texts," National Association of Chicana and Chicano Studies Conference, San Jose, Calif., April 6, 2007.

[27] Ralph Riegal. "Bishop Claims Image of Virgin is Unacceptable," Irish Independent, June 23, 2011.<http://www.almalopez.net/>." class="spip_url spip_out" rel="external"><http://www.almalopez.net/ORnews3/20...>