

The new past

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Drawing inspiration and information from South America's indigenous cultures, the art of Miguel Angel Ríos, Milton Becerra, and Nury González rewrites their history— a history that is part of the hemisphere's common patrimony but which for centuries was written by the conquerors.

In appropriating native traditions, myths, techniques and materials, they uncover the great cultural depth, complexity, and sophistication of these cultures. Since this richness lies outside of established canons of art history, the appropriations encountered in their artworks create an original artistic and symbolic universe that is prompting new responses and possibilities for contemporary art.

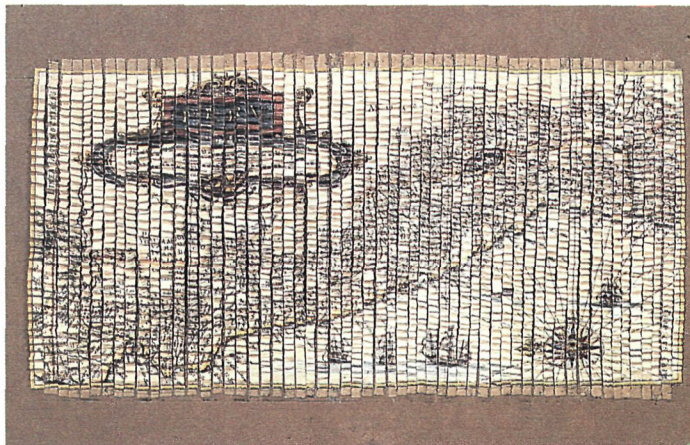
Born in 1943 in Catamarca, in the Andean region of Argentina, and currently living in New York, Ríos's ingenious and cosmopolitan art fosters the permanence of pre-Columbian culture within contemporary society. In this recent series that he started less than a year ago, he appropriates the Inca *quipus*. At the beginning, he used only two elements: pleated sheets of corrugated cardboard and polyester cords, as in "A 500 Años de la Conquista". Later on, he incorporated ceramic beads. Ceramic is typical to pre-Colombian cultures. The cords and the ceramic beads were tied into knots, thereby keeping information in the same way the Incas once kept alive their sources. More recently, he has been using cibacrome photography, usually from old maps, and has devised a metaphorical system of color to indicate distances and latitudes. With the *quipus*, Ríos brings to the electronic age of hyperactive highways an information system invented in the pre-history of the Americas.

In Andean culture, the *quipus* was an information system. A series of knotted strings, they stored all sorts of data: cen-

sus count, output from of the gold mines, compositions of work forces, amounts and kinds of tributes. Only superficially primitive, this form of inventory had a rational organization and specific format. Sometimes, to emphasize this coding, the *quipus* had other visual marks including very long cords, very short cords, tight knots, loose knots, small cords tied on the main cord or specially colored cords.

Through the *quipus*, Ríos actually, is communicating about time. Ríos's reflection of time is greatly different from the temporal notions held by Europeans. Unlike many other European and American artists from Dali to Rebecca Horn, where the investigation of time has metaphysical resonance, Ríos's manipulation of time is timeless. While in the Western tradition time is a part of the cosmic scheme and an entity detached from nature, in pre-Columbian America time was measured in cycles and connected to the landscape —i.e. to the orientation calendars of the Olmec and Mayan cultures (1). Ríos' *quipus* contains layers of time. They become a place where information about ancient and contemporary South America meet. In "Untitled No. 1", which shows the diversity of languages and religions of Latin America over centuries, he also incorporates writing, a non-Andean form of memory, to remind us of the European presence in South America. In tracing the past and present, Ríos transmits a cross cultural information challenging the established ways of keeping time.

Although Becerra does not make a direct allusion to time, his works uncover myths and rituals buried in time for many centuries. Born in Venezuela 1951, Milton Becerra Broke with the traditions initiated by Carlos Cruz-Diez's "physichromes" and Jesus Soto's kinetic art. Both have exerted a great deal of influence on local artists and, as many other artists of his generation, Becerra's early career was molded by these Vene-



Miguel Angel Ríos. Estudio para "Huellas del colonizaje". 1992. Papel picado y cartón. 46×30 cms.



Becerra. Meridianos y Paralelos. Instalación. 1991.

zuelan contemporary masters. But, unlike many others of his generation, he later rebelled against their geometric-kinetic rules and devised an original aesthetic language ignoring kinetic visual optical effects and elegance. He turned to Venezuela's indigenous people in particular, but always kept an eye on other original cultures of the continent. He visited not only the Orinoco basin, but also Peru and Bolivia many times. Each of these contacts with the pre-Columbian world gave a unique dimension and philosophical basis to his art. His conceptual sculptures, objects and installations express not only the cosmological system and mythological repertory of the ancient Americas, but also the irreparable damage suffered by both nature and indigenous communities over centuries.

Since paleolithic times, South American native cultures have identified mountains, caves, springs and groves with the dwellings of deities and spirits, or the mythic events of a remote creation, or the deeds of ancestral heroes. Usually, such sites were distinguished by rock paintings, petroglyphic carving, or small portable objects to mark their significance. Becerra's work brings these signs to contemporary art.

The same can be said about the primitive and materials he employs: cords, shells, earth and stones. For French critic Pierre Restany, Becerra "re-invents the stone age". In a 1991 installation, "Meridianos y paralelos", at Galeria Nacional in Caracas, he hanged a very large stone in the gallery's internal garden making an allusion to his ancestors' use of the landscape.

This work might be seen as elaboration of an installation at the 1983 Sao Paulo International Biennial, when at the age

of 32, he represented Venezuela. An extremely simple installation, it consisted of a very large stone placed in a deep hole with a several hollow circles around it. Placed in front of the Biennial's modernist building, the piece symbolically contrasted it with the ritual-landscape of ancient South-America. More recently, in Venezuela and in Paris, where he lives part of the year, he has exhibited a series of object-sculptures that conceptually represent both the art and artifacts of his predecessors, giving a tangible evidence of their identity.

The evidence of a national identity is also encountered in the work of González. Working on the periphery of the international art center, González, who was born, lives and works in her native Chile, mediates the old with the new by interweaving her country's tradition of fiber-arts with contemporary artistic practices. In the high mountains of the Andes, fiber-arts expressed the profound interconnections of humans with a generally hostile nature. Furthermore, the widespread use of textiles there preceded that of fired ceramics by a thousand years, and fiber art continued to be a major focus of creative expression throughout the pre-Hispanic, Colonial and even in the modern era (2).

The textiles used by González are made by artisans living in the few remaining indigenous communities in Chile. Textiles and the vision of human survival they offer are only one of the components of her multi-media and conceptual installations. Indeed, in addition to textiles, she uses assorted materials and media —paintings, ceramics, stones, and lithographs— to depict Chilean cave paintings and their system of symbols. In the recent installation, "De pies y mano", at Gale-



Nury González. *Pies y manos. Detalle Instalación. 1993.*



Nury González. *Installation (detail). 1992. 70×110 cms.*

ría Gabriela Mistral, in Santiago, she re-created the magical atmosphere of a cave's inner landscape. "De pies y mano" is imbued with some of the same characteristics as cave art, especially the idea of integrating a human being into definitive space. To depict these paleolithic spaces with features of the sacred, she uses a totally contemporary artistic language, although the sources of her art are completely removed from any impulse originating in Western art— which ultimately makes her art not only conceptually original but also visually innovative.

All these examples of the use of pre-Columbian sources in contemporary art foster the mediation of the old through new, reviving an overlooked lesson in art theory: i.e., in the arts, the old, the traditional, can "be preserved only through ever newer realizations", meaning that tradition and innovation are not incompatible but rather, are necessary to create *the new*(3). And, in today's art "what's new" does not necessarily imply a complete rejection of the past as it did in until the downfall of Modernism. Likewise, the continuance of these pre-Columbian roots within contemporary aesthetic practices communicates the notion of an essential connection between art and a sense of identity. In the work of Ríos, Becerra and González art has become both "the symbol of the self" and "an expression of cultural identity"(4).

Berta Sichel is a writer and an independent curator from Brazil living in New York City. She curated the exhibition "News from Post-America" in 1993 "Aperto-93" at the Venice Biennial. She is currently working on the exhibition "Sache, Sendero, Path" in collaboration with the University of Colorado, in Bolder. The three artists discussed in this article are included, among other eight, in this exhibition.

(1) *The Ancient Americas: Art form Sacred Landscapes*. Catalog Exhibition. Richard F. Townsend. ed. The Art Institute of Chicago. 1991. 59.

(2) Richard F. Townsend. ed. op. 335.

(3) Jauss, Hans Robert. *Tradition, Innovation, and Aesthetic Experience. The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. Volume XLVI, 3, Spring 1998. The American Society for Aesthetic. Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

(4) Thomas McEvelly. *Art & Otherness: Crisis in Cultural Identity*. 1992. New York. Documentext, 97.



CENTRO ATLANTICO DE ARTE MODERNO