

Commentary

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Day of the Dead 1990 by Stuart Gentling

This painting is in many ways a self-portrait of the artist. The objects reflect his ^{own} interest as an artist-collector ~~with~~ ^{having} deep associations with the history of Mexico, both the ancient, pre-Columbian cultures of the country and the Mexico of today.

The Altar like arrangement of the objects pays homage to Mexico's famous November 2 national holiday called "The Day of the Dead". This celebration is a cultural carry over of the Aztec festival, ~~mictlantecutli~~ ^{mictlantecutli} (The Great Feast of the Dead). Our own All Saints Day is a ^{more subdued} North American equivalent.

VANITAS

MOMENTO

MORI

This contemporary Vanitas or Memento Mori is dominated by a large oil-cloth suit and skull mask representing ^{Mictlantecutli} Mictlantecutli, the Lord of the Dead, spreading his arms protectively over his objects below. A Mexican Cavalry bicorne hat dating from the 1830's (the time of Mexico's victory over the Texans at the Alamo) is cocked over the empty eye socket of a human skull. The ^{sun} blacked skull of his horse leers at the viewer from behind the ~~mask~~ ^{felt} felt, braid and new Turkey feathers. A skeleton bishop preaches to his ~~skeleton~~ ^{of the} skeleton congregation. ~~On the lower right corner~~ At the Bishop's feet sits a dark volcanic stone figure of the Aztec fire god ~~(Mictlantecutli)~~ ^{Mictlantecutli} who in ancient times was always placed at the center of offerings as he is here. He is the oldest god, and he smiles his almost toothless grin, because he is drunk from being offered

too much intoxicating pulque to drink.

In front of the fire god is a reddish skull of volcanic stone. It is the god Tlazcaltli, god of the night, of war and discord, the god of judgement, shown as a single skull symbolizing his birth date on the Aztec Calendar, the date "Ce Miquiztli" or "one death."

The plaster mask wreathed in marigolds and fuscias is a life-mask of the artist. The marigold is an Aztec festival flower which they called "Cempoalxochitl" and used to decorate their temples, altars and graves.

Behind the bottle of mescal (a common drink offered on the Day of the Dead) is a white stucco head of the Mayan Sun God Kinich Ahau. He is shown emerging from the mouth of an ^{earth or} sky serpent, an important symbol of rebirth. The sun is literally dawning on the eastern horizon. Behind Kinich Ahau is a Feathered Shield made by Scott and me also representing the Ce Miquiztli ~~birthday~~ birth day date of the Great Creator - Destroyer God, Tlazcaltli.

Beneath the shield is another ^{Aztec} stone skull which was once attached to a temple platform, possibly a tzompantli or skull rack. In front of this skull is a .38 caliber pistol with all but one of the bullets removed and scattered on the table. This Russian roulette metaphor for me hints at the vagaries of ~~most~~ artists' lives in general. Next to the pistol are two ancient Aztec drinking cups for pulque. Their black and white colors represent the ^{directions} north and the west - the two most important entrances to the underworld. The skulls and cross bones

that ~~the~~ ^{The red} plaster wall behind the still life is a color that the Ancients gave to the underworld.

motifs refer to the all-devouring earth ~~the~~ from which all new life emerges. The Carnations and ^{skull} Candle holder complete the altar-like feeling of this ~~still~~ still life and recalls many of the house altars of present day Mexico.

The overall ~~feeling~~ ^{mood} of this painting is supposed to be one of festive sarcasm, a kind of laughing in the face of ~~our~~ the inevitable mortality of our lives and our "glorious" achievements.

○ El Supremo 1988 This painting was begun as a preliminary study for "Day of the Dead. The artist purchased this 1830's military bicorn 15 years ago in Oaxaca Mexico. It may very well have been worn during the war with Texas that led to Texas independance from Mexico.

○ Shells 1988 This painting recalls the artist's trips to Martha's Vineyard in the 1970's. The house where this was painted has since been torn down by Jackie Onassis, who then built her new house on the spot.

Shells are universal images and symbols of fertility ^{and}. Their interior spirals suggest infinity. Besides my many fond memories of this place (the old Hornblower estate at Squinnochet pond) I was very moved by this ^{view of} small landlocked pond, beyond which lay the vastness of the sea, and then ultimately the limitless sky. ~~The~~ The contemplation of infinity is a game of the mind. The shells on the window ledge contain the same infinite vastness.

~~of~~ within them. ~~Hamlet~~ One of my favorite ~~Sage~~ quotes from Shakespeare's Hamlet is Hamlet's remark, ^{that goes something like this, "I could..."} "I could be bounded in a nutshell and yet consider myself a master of infinite space."

- Vineyard Pond 1975 A watercolor done on Martha's Vineyard, later used as a study for "Shells."

- Equinox 1974-80

The weathered, shingle side of this barn faced the sea not ^{FAR} far from where "Vineyard Pond" was painted. The gray walls ~~the~~ relieved by a ^{HINT} hint of color ~~the~~ in the granite foundation stones and the winter grass ~~from~~ gave me a sense of ~~what~~ that reserve and strength I saw among the ^{New Englanders} ~~Vineyard inhabitants~~. Every thing seems firm and still in this work, but there is movement, ^{The reflections} ~~reflections~~ of clouds and sunlight hinting of an equinoctial (sp?) change of seasons.

- Gordon's Run 1988

Snow comes only once or twice a year to Fort Worth. With even the lightest snowfall kids come out and try the nearby hills. This scene on Hidden Road near my house was grooved by a fairly heavy snow which left wonderful patterns on the juniper bushes in the foreground.

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Cruz, Cantos y Flores 1990 by Stuart Bentley

This painting was inspired by a recent visit to the wonderful ^{house} ~~house~~ of Mr. and Mrs. Elton Hyder in San Miguel de Allende Mexico. While sketching this Colonial style cross in the lower garden, I was ~~suddenly~~ pleasantly surprised by a visitation of ^{my children} broadbilled hummingbird which had been attracted to the flowers placed as offerings on the cross.

My background in Pre-Colombian Mexican art ^{and history} helped me to appreciate a rather pleasant vision of the coming together of two important parts of Mexico's historical heritage - The Pre-Colombian Aztec and the post Conquest Christian.

You see, the hummingbird among the Aztecs was a nahualli (animal ^{form} ~~being~~) of the sun. In fact the supreme ~~god~~ solar-war god of the Mexican Aztecs was called ^{Huitzilopochtli} ~~Huitzil~~. Huitzil = Hummingbird, and Opochtli = Left or on left hand side. When the ^{viewer} ~~viewer~~ looking westward ~~in winter time~~ beholds the sun on his left, it is winter time, the time for war. Huitzilapochtli, then, refers to the sun in the southern latitudes.

The hummingbird was also thought to bury itself in the mud in colder climes, to hibernate (a symbolic death) and to re-emerge when seasons warmed. The hummingbird ^{thus} ~~then~~ had powerful death and resurrection magic. The Aztecs noticed that the Christian Jesus also possessed this magic, and therefore considered Christ a representative of the sun and an incarnation of the Great Aztec God-priest Quetzalcoatl (the plumed serpent or precious twin) who had left Mexico and promised to return from the east.

On the Aztec Calendar date, "~~one reed~~" or
~~Ce Acatl~~

Ce Acatl or "one reed"

(1519)
The very year that the Christian Conqueror, Cortez,
landed on the east coast of Mexico.

The thorn-like shape of the Hummingbird's
beak links it to thorns in general. Among the
Aztecs, thorns (huizt) were used to draw blood
from the people to offer as nourishment to the gods.

The ^{thorny} tips of the maguey plant at the base of
this cross in the painting were used to draw blood
in auto sacrifice. The ~~plant~~ ^{maguey} itself is one of the
plant manifestations of Teomantzin (the Aztec
mother of the gods.) It was at her temple ruins
after the conquest that the Virgin Mary manifested
her self to Juan Diego the Indian boy and declared
herself the protector of Mexico - The Virgin of
Guadalupe. The pink ^{wild} Roses which she gave
the boy ^{to show his bishop} as proof of this winter miracle can
be seen in the background of this painting under
the Nopal (Prickly pear) Cactus.

The Nopal itself is a kind of Aztec
world tree, the very plant that The Eagle ~~climbed~~
perched upon on an island in Lake Texcoco,
~~where Cortez~~. The Eagle and the Nopal
were the signs that The nomadic Aztec
Ancestors had finally found their homeland.
Sometimes the eagle is shown with a serpent in
its beak. The fruit of the Nopal ^{also} resembled the
human heart which was given in sacrifice
to nourish the gods.

Among Christians, the cross also represents
the world tree, and the quintessential place
of sacrifice. At the base of this sculpture are
^{carved} scrolls (associated with ^{the} "Ce Acatl" or "one reed" image
of Quetzalcoatl's birth date. The sculpted shells at the base

which was to become the Capital of the Aztecs, Tenochtitlan

also are the emblem of the priest-god, Quetzalcoatl. The stone circles just beneath the margined offerings at the foot of the cross are also symbols of ~~the life of man~~ ^{the} preciousness and light and "of fire and water," the basis for life.

The flowers, the butterfly, the bird are all images associated with ^{various} ~~the~~ Aztec ~~concepts~~ concepts of the paradise that awaited certain persons after death, The Aztec heaven of you will. The same association of paradise with the garden is, of course an old world idea too.

Hidden today in many ^{mexican gardens} ~~missions~~ are unconscious metaphors which ^{speak to the initiated} ~~are an integral~~ part of Mexico's past and present. Thorns and Flowers ~~the~~ explain much about mexican culture, both ancient and modern. My painting is very much a ^{contemporary} garden scene, but to those who know about Mexico and her past and care about ^{it}, it is also ~~that~~ HUITZILAN, the place of thorns and sacrifice and paradise.

0 Rain 1988

Painted near Gordon, Texas in
~~Ector~~^{Ector}ath County. This view is typical of the
many fine rains that can turn this normally
barren land into a temporary paradise.

0 Cruz, Cantos y Flores 1990

In this painting
which I began in the Mexican Garden
of Friends Elton and Martha Hyder in
San Miguel de Allende, I have highlighted
the coming together of two cultural traditions —
the Ancient Aztec and the European Christian
tradition. The cross, the thorns, the hummingbird,
butterfly and flowers have great meanings
to both cultures.

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