

# Maya Paintings as Teachers of Justice: Art Making the Impossible Possible

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This article examines Maya paintings as historical documents, political platforms and conduits for cultural transmission in two local Maya communities. Particular attention is paid to the recent history of genocide of Maya peoples in Guatemala and the production of paintings as visual reminders of cultural loss and regeneration, as well as visual means to protect Maya future generations. Collaborative ethnography and decolonizing methodologies (Lassiter, 1998; Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999) are used in this study; thus, Maya artists speak through written dialogues and interviews in first voice regarding massacres that were kept clandestine for three decades. This paper addresses the potential and capacity for paintings to relay concepts of social justice. In two Maya contexts, paintings are seen by artists as didactic works that express outrage and concurrent hope. Art is used to transform that which feels impossible into possibility(ies).

As a female, narrative-based painter, I wanted to study painting outside of a formal setting primarily influenced by a European-American teaching model. I was interested in the idea of mentoring that sprung directly from studio practice, in a studio setting, with painters whose work was predominantly informed by personal and cultural narratives. Therefore, I went to study with two Maya painters, Pedro Rafael González Chavajay, a Tz'utuhil painter from San Pedro La Laguna, Guatemala, and Paula Nicho Cúmez, a Kaqchikel painter from San Juan de Comalapa, Guatemala. Over a period of four years, I was mentored in painting within each of the artist's studios. Initially, when I began my studies in Guatemala, I knew that there were political problems and that the country had endured warfare, but I had no idea of the severity, nor of the actual terror that gripped the nation, especially the indigenous peoples.

As an art educator in the United States, it is natural to reflect upon

the theme *Im/possibilities* from within the context of the academy where North American education often squashes controversy and represses social justice issues as a means to comfort the status quo. The call for JSTAE submissions states:

The strikethrough in possibilities concerns the slippery routes taken by the ingenuity of art educators who have navigated censorship, erasure, and obstacles in social theory orientations to art education in today's socio-political climate. Those who achieve the "impossible" tend to focus their energies on possibilities rather than limitations.

Possibilities encompass the big picture, and what the future holds for our profession (Knight & Wightman, 2006).

As a painter, student, researcher and art educator, I went to study art in two informal settings – Guatemalan Maya artist's studios. Therefore, I would like to take the opportunity, in this instance, to expand the framework for examining the journal theme, *Im/possibilities*, moving it out of the academy, and into rural Maya indigenous community contexts. What happens when Maya painters, who are also teachers, experience three decades of genocide of their peoples and attempt to navigate "censorship, erasure and obstacles" and "focus their energies on possibilities rather than limitations" through making paintings as a means of illuminating atrocities that have taken place, so as to liberate, in some form, their communities?

In San Pedro La Laguna and San Juan de Comalapa, Guatemala, life and the surrounding visual culture function as textbook. This text is not separated from lived experiences, the artwork, the artist, the teacher or the teaching methods. Therefore, when indigenous peoples in the numbers of 200,000 have been exterminated at the hands of a tyrannical government, unfortunately backed by the U.S. government (NISGUA, 2007), then education is not only urgent, but activist out of necessity. In fact, education rooted in social justice becomes essential for survival. There is the prospect that through

revealing, art can liberate, teach, and create possibility, where otherwise there is none.

## **The Maya Painting Movement in Context**

### **A Brief Overview of Guatemalan History**

Maya populations have been under siege since the Spanish invasion of the 1530s. This state of siege has affected Maya indigenous communities in all of their aspects, including art making. The following brief description of the last four decades in Guatemala might serve to lend some perspective to the growth of the painters' movements in the Lake Atitlan and highland regions of Guatemala. During the course of my conversations with the painters living around Lake Atitlan and San Juan de Comalapa (Staikidis, 2004, 2006), I received accounts, actually horror stories, about life during the recent war. They told of children not being able to go out for days on end due to the army's occupation of the streets, young men being forcibly recruited into the army after leaving an early evening Mass, relatives being physically tortured and brutally murdered in front of family, and all manner of personal losses suffered at the hands of the Guatemalan army and clandestine death squads.

In the epilogue, written in 1999, to Jennifer Harbury's book, *Searching For Everardo: A Story of Love, War and the CIA in Guatemala*, she writes that the *Truth Commission in Guatemala* report concluded that the Guatemalan military had carried out a thirty-five year campaign of genocide against the Maya peoples and was responsible for 93 percent of the atrocities committed. A total of 200,000 civilians were murdered or "disappeared" and more than 600 massacres occurred. In thirty-five years of war, not a single army prisoner survived. One million Maya were forcibly incorporated into a civil patrol system that was required of all rural males. The scorched earth operations, particularly in the early 1980s, resulted in entire villages being wiped out - men, women and children. Extreme

brutality was directed against Maya women, who were tortured, raped and murdered. Large numbers of girls and boys were victims of extremely violent killings (Friemoth, 1999). Seventy thousand internal refugees were corralled into permanent containment areas under military control; thus, the Guatemalan military ensured its domination over every aspect and facet of everyday life (Friemoth, 1999; Kinzer, 2006; Sanford, 2003; Simon, 1987). Harbury (1997) notes, "the United States was found to have contributed to the repression by funding, training and closely collaborating with the military" (p. 329). Government repression in Guatemala reached its peak in the early 1980s (Simon, 1987, p. 13). The final 3,600-page United Nations' Historical Clarification Commission (CEH) report blames the 200,000 deaths on the "racist" policy of the Guatemalan government and holds responsible the country's military and paramilitary forces for the killings, tortures and disappearances. It also accuses the US of directly and indirectly supporting a "fratricidal confrontation" by providing sustained training, arms and financial aid. Although the US role peaked in the 1981-1983 period, it did not end until the peace accords were signed in 1996 (Friemoth, 1999).

This has had horrific consequences for Guatemala's Maya indigenous populations who number 60% out of 15 million inhabitants. By 1985, 440 Maya villages had been wiped out (Harbury, 1997; Manz, 2004). And in its final report, in 1999, the CEH (Guatemalan Truth Commission) concluded that army massacres had destroyed 626 villages, 1.5 million were displaced by the violence, and more than 150,000 were driven to seek refuge in Mexico (Sanford, 2003). The army went after the villagers, knowing very well that this uprising was deeply rooted within the Maya peoples themselves. Many villagers were forced to betray their neighbors by becoming informants in order to pay for food to feed their families. Simon states:

Present day counter-insurgency has probably done as much

to alter Indian life as the Spanish Conquest and its aftermath, and one cannot help but wonder if the culture that the Mayas have sustained since the sixteenth century will endure even fifty more years. (1987, p. 15)

Since the Spanish invasion, Maya indigenous peoples have systematically been denied their land, then been forced to work it for pathetic wages by Spanish landowners, the Catholic clergy, eighteenth century coffee barons and, later, by the Guatemalan army. Harbury (1997) compares the situation in Guatemala to apartheid South Africa where the ruling white minority made indentured servants out of the majority. But she also states that the Mayas' blood ties that have bound them together have kept their hearts and minds alive during the cruelest times. She states:

Even now the Mayas clung to their own languages, some twenty-six ancient mother tongues, they wrapped themselves in their own hand woven fabrics, and they worshiped defiantly in their secret temples hidden far up in the volcanoes...Battered and starving and ridiculed, they have never surrendered. (p. 9)

Since 1995, there have been more than 200 exhumations of other clandestine cemeteries of massacre victims in Guatemala. Each of these exhumations has included the filing of a criminal case with forensic evidence against the Guatemalan army and its agents (Sanford, 2003). Although the war officially ended in 1996, people who work for unions and human rights, and are otherwise politically involved are still unsafe. On March 21, 2003, this statement was issued by "Rights Action":

Witnesses claim that on March 8<sup>th</sup>, National Civil Police shot a CUC land activist in the back, then the leader of the paramilitary group shot him at close range as he lay injured on the ground. The police then captured a fellow farmer and land activist, now imprisoned, and charged him with

murder and illegal weapons possession. (p. 2)

Violations of political, economic, civil, and social rights and threats against activists who seek peaceful solutions are on the rise. "Rights Action" states, "we fear and predict more illegal and violent evictions and other acts of repression in the near future" (Org #5 Guatemala, 2003, p. 2).

### **A Brief Description of the Maya Painting Movement**

The term "Arte Naif" is often used to describe a movement of Maya artists who began to paint in the 1920s. The predominantly male movement began in Maya communities towards the west coast of the country. The first artists were farmers, carpenters or sign painters who felt the need to express their visions of life through painting. Pioneer painters sprang up simultaneously in five communities: San Juan de Comalapa, San Pedro La Laguna, Santiago Atitlan, Totonicapan and Patzicia. Since that time, a painting movement has also emerged in a community called San Juan La Laguna. The painting movements in Guatemala seemed to arise from a similar simultaneous need to represent and support the Maya cultural roots of the artists' communities. At the time of the birth of these painting movements, in the 1920's, the towns were isolated from each other. Most Maya traveled to other communities on foot. Very few tourists visited San Pedro on Lake Atitlán and even fewer had reason to travel to San Juan Comalapa. This relative isolation permitted very different Maya painting styles to evolve (Johnston, 2006). Since the end of the genocide and the commencement of the peace accords (mid 1990's), a large tourist movement has taken hold of the Lake Atitlán region. This tourist movement has most definitely impacted the Maya painting movements, but its results are too far-reaching to discuss in this paper. However, there is no doubt that the damaging effects of cultural tourism merit further discussion and will be dealt with in a later paper.

The painting movements may be seen as groups of artists who perceived, and still perceive, their missions to be those of documenting Maya cultures, preserving community values and creating historic memories for posterity. According to Johnston (1999),

As the Maya peoples enter the twenty-first century, with computers and television, many of their traditions are disappearing or threatened. These paintings visually document those traditions. Some of the subjects painted by artists are not traditions they know of personally, but traditions which they have been told of by their parents and grandparents. (p. 2)

Thus, the themes of the founding artists are still being painted by their descendents.. Although the Maya indigenous peoples of southern Mexico and Guatemala were invaded by the Spaniards, they never surrendered. They adapted to the new situation, still managing to preserve their cultural heritage in whatever ways possible. Johnston (1999) notes:

Their painting is important because it is an art form, albeit of recent origin, of an ancient indigenous culture which has survived to the present. The Mayas may have borrowed the technique of painting in oil, but the style of this art came from within their own culture with little influence from Western schools of art. It is a style entirely unique in the world of art. (p. 2)

There has been virtually no writing done on the possible connections between the birth of the Maya painting movement in Guatemala, its flourishing, especially from the mid-eighties onward, and the continual onslaught of horrors the Maya populations experienced during the past three decades of genocide. Although weaving has been an artistic tradition for thousands of years amongst Maya women, its functions have been very different from those of painting. Prior to the Spanish invasion, weavings were read as graphic

“messages.” Later, woven *guipiles* (traditional woven blouses) that Maya women and men wore originated as a means of identifying plantation owners’ human property. There are two hundred different *guipil* patterns that have served as regional identification for each indigenous community (Simon, 1987). Weaving, then, is multifunctional for Maya societies, related most directly to clothing for daily living, embellishment for ceremony and a signifier for community identification and pride.

In contrast, it appears that the painting movement was born out of a need for creative expression in another medium, and a desire to hold onto, as well as glorify trampled-upon and threatened Maya histories and traditions. I suggest that its growth has in part been an effort to preserve Maya cultures, in addition to a need to thwart the sense of doom caused by the massacres being perpetrated against Maya populations. Painting has been a vehicle to present and commemorate the identities, as well as the atrocities, experienced on a daily basis by Maya populations. In other words, painting has served as a platform for protest.

The triad of three closely located Tz’utuhil communities where the painting movement has flourished was also one of the hardest hit areas during the time of the army massacres. The last massacre in Guatemala in the early nineties took place in Santiago Atitlan, the town next door to San Pedro. In fact, Santiago Atitlan was the first and only community in the country to successfully demand that the army be withdrawn after it opened fire and killed thirteen townspeople. This scene is depicted in Pedro Rafael González Chavajay’s painting, *The Massacre in Santiago Atitlan* (see Figure 3). While studying painting in this area, and hearing stories told by the painters themselves, as they described the iconography in their paintings and the devastating events that had occurred in recent times, I came to feel that a connection exists between the attempted violent destruction of Maya cultures and the flourishing of Maya



painting (Staikidis, 2004).

### **Questions Call for Close Attention to Individual Voices**

Adapting apprenticeship-mentorship in an indigenous context as a method of inquiry was a conscious way for me as researcher, artist and student to examine my own positionality within the research process. In the field of art education, Desai (2002) speaks of ethnography that focuses on discourse and practice dealing with particulars rather than generalizations, and that gives attention to the subjectivity of the ethnographer. Artistic mentoring as an ethnographic model creates a two-way relational dynamic in which the autobiography of the researcher is present at all times. The art lessons become interchanges within which skills in addition to transcultural viewpoints are exchanged. This study was based upon Tuhiwai-Smith's (1999) inquiry model, which includes mentoring, and is designed for researchers working in an indigenous context who are either indigenous or non-indigenous, and who share a concern for using research methods that are non-invasive.

A word of qualification here before I go on: speaking of cultures as isolated entities is not part of a postcolonial ethnographic or postmodern construct. Lassiter (1998) states that cultures can no longer be defined by outsider anthropologists as isolated entities, rather "questions call for close attention to individual voices, 'other countries' rarely made active in conventional ethnography" (p. 8). Certain areas of anthropological thought have been inspired to work on "relations of inequality, forms of dominance, political mobilization, resistance movements, the critique of ideology, and the practices of everyday life" (Rosaldo, 1993, p. 108). In speaking of the definition of culture, Ingold (1994) notes,

What we do *not* find are neatly bounded and mutually exclusive bodies of thought and custom, perfectly shared by all who subscribe to them, and in which their lives and works are fully

encapsulated... The isolated culture has been revealed as a figment of the Western anthropological imagination. (p. 330)

Therefore, concepts such as cultural “cohesion” and “transmission” that I dare to bring up may be considered unorthodox and inaccurate in the light of current ethnographic investigations. Paintings in Maya contexts do embody “relations of inequality, forms of dominance, resistance movements and the practices of everyday life” (Rosaldo, 1993). *And* they also transmit traditions of Maya cultures. The Maya artists that I spoke with saw their cultures as separate from the dominant culture. Maya youth are moving to cities to study and earn a living, and in so doing, discarding, at least superficially, the customs of their families living in the more rural areas. Family structures are breaking apart due to migration. The majority of Maya men in San Pedro la Laguna and San Juan de Comalapa do not wear traditional clothing, but the women do as a matter of pride. The speaking of Maya languages in rural areas is maintained within households in specific regions, but maternal languages are endangered in less rural areas; hence, the demand on the part of Maya indigenous peoples to establish bilingual programs that teach Maya first languages in the schools.

Although art educators and ethnographers working outside of cultures have studied them and speak of cultures as no longer being entities unto themselves (Ballengee-Morris, 2002; Clifford, 1988; Desai, 2002; Geertz, 1973; Myers, 2001), Maya artists perceive that their cultures are being lost and there is a felt need to visually represent community values. Adelina Nicho Cúmez, a painter from San Juan de Comalapa states,

The colonizers have ripped us apart, they have attempted to break us during this era of colonialism. In the schools we are at level zero in terms of culture. They have never included our cultural values in their curricula, and now on the cultural level we must salvage these

values and demonstrate them to our children. (Personal communication, June 24, 2003)

Thus, independent of ethnographic assignments regarding cultures, questions arise that reflect the loss or maintenance of Maya cultures.

### **These Images are Fused to the Canvas and Fused into Peoples' Hearts**

As a student and painter, I found that Tz'utuhil and Kaqchikel paintings are shaped in response to personal and cultural narratives. What I also realized was that the way that a painting is constructed both formally and contextually is linked directly to the histories that it reveals, to the places, and to the clothing. Because I was studying with two master painters, they also taught students with whom I spoke and interacted. Pedro Rafael's students were numerous and became my teachers based on a novice-expert structure that naturally led them to teach me or work directly on my paintings over time to transmit skills and spirit involving color, place and story. In the midst of community life, I talked with painters who were my teachers, and they told me their stories, hidden at first, but shared over time as trust was established. We exchanged many stories, but this writing will specifically refer to what I was told by the painters about a genocide that took hold of the Guatemalan Maya peoples from the seventies through the nineties.

I have permission to share these stories now as the all-pervading terror has subsided. For the Maya painters with whom I spoke, the author of a painting is its narrator, both visual and vocal. Paintings are visual recollections, comments, prophecies, histories, teachers, and cultural edifications that reveal the concerns of the artists and their communities. Paintings are also direct platforms for expressing outrage, protest, and feelings about injustice in the face of terror and persecution. The male and female painters with whom I spoke

considered themselves to be carriers of cultural traditions that they preserved in the form of paintings, realists who had a profound mission and responsibility. As I became close to my mentors, their lives opened up, as did mine, and I realized that Tz'utuhil and Kaqchikel Maya artists living in communities that were victims of genocide over the past three decades had developed strategies of self-protection and community preservation that were manifest in individual paintings.

### **Our Values Must be Salvaged and Presented to Our Children**

As previously noted, the Maya painting movement began simultaneously in the 1920s in three highland communities in Guatemala. At that time, in all three areas, the iconography of the artworks dealt with festive colors and community events or Maya ceremonies that reminded the viewers of the prime points of Maya life whether religious, agricultural, culinary or celebratory. At no time is a Ladino person (a non-indigenous Guatemalan) depicted in any painting as part of a daily life or celebratory scene. Within the paintings presented in this paper, the only Ladinos are represented as the army assassins in *Massacre en Atitlan* and *The Last Recruitment of 1995*. Otherwise, only Mayas are depicted in their traditional clothing and occupations. The fact that only Maya cultures appear in the paintings, after five hundred years of invasion and indentured servitude, might signify that each painting serves as a means of cultural protection, a way to assert cultural identities, a voice to speak out on behalf of indigenous independence, a vehicle through which cultural knowledge, integrity and continuity might be in some way preserved. Antonio Vasquez, a painter from San Juan la Laguna, and Pedro Rafael's student, notes that art functions to leave a record for the future. Adelina Nicho Cúmez notes that not only does a painting leave a record for the future, it serves as a means to transmit values:

This is very important. We must aim at leaving the future

generations with a record. Teachers or parents can take students on a trip to the museums to see what the typical dress was that the ancestors wore, students may be brought to see paintings to understand the past. (A. Vasquez, Personal communication, May 21, 2002)

Since the peace accords, there has been talk of respect toward cultural diversity and so we must demonstrate our Maya spirituality. Colonialism has attempted to destroy us. Our values must be salvaged and presented to our children. We must consider that painting is an ancestral talent that is transmitted from generation to generation. (A. Nicho Cúmez, Personal communication, June 24, 2003)

Additionally, the encroachment of new technologies and cultural tourism are perceived as threatening institutions for Maya artists because the Maya ways of life as they have been lived for thousands of years are threatened, so the desire to paint one's history and one's life results. Pedro Rafael observes:

The colonization was an attempt to destroy our culture. When I was a young boy, I had a teacher who wrote on the wall on a sign that it was prohibited to speak in Tz'utuhil [my maternal language]. The Ladinos marginalized us; they assaulted us; they imposed their clothes and language upon us. The paintings enable us to remember that these are our roots [points to coffee harvest]. They help us to reflect on our customs and traditions and give us a sense of pride. We do not want to deny them. These paintings say "We are." and "This our culture." (Personal communication, July 10, 2003)

Paintings can capture, and perhaps crystallize, the essence of Maya life for generations to come. Pedro Rafael stated that his community does not have historians who have written about Tz'utuhil life,

and so believes that paintings are a self-defined, accurate means of representing Tz'utuhil history. Therefore, paintings become unique documents for recording truths and histories, thus acting as forums for authentic self-definitions:

Paintings are histories that are truths. When such cultural truths are conveyed to canvas, the painting becomes the document which does not disappear. The history stays permanently transmitted to and fused with the canvas and then whatever doubt, one need only refer to the painting for verification. Whenever consultation is needed, the work may be consulted to ascertain truth. (Pedro Rafael González Chavajay, Personal communication, June 5, 2002)

### **Paintings are Histories that are Truths**

All painters, whether of the older or younger generation, spoke first and foremost as representatives of Maya cultures. Luciano Sitan Sicay comments:

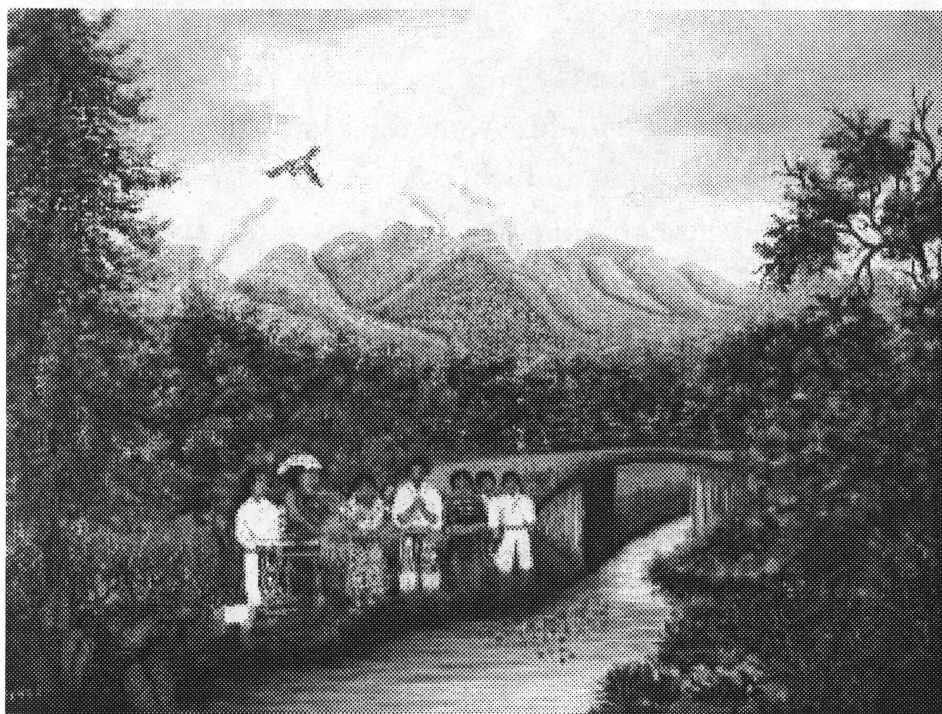
What can I do, I asked myself, to represent my culture? I loved art. So I thought I will represent my culture through my paintings in order not to forget the richness of what our ancestors have lived. And from there I had to walk slowly to learn what I had to learn in order to be able to fight for my culture's representation. (Personal communication, May 29, 2002)

Estela Nicho Cúmez, observes:

The message of all my works is that I want to leave evidence. Each *guipil* often only has a life of ten to twelve years, and then it's left to history. The story of each *guipil* disappears and this is what I want to preserve through making paintings of them. (Personal communication, June 30, 2003)

And Paula Nicho Cúmez states:

Why am I making these works? Because this culture is being lost and this is what hurts me. One must leave painted what our people have lived, how they began their lives. For the elders, all has its spirit, all is alive, all has feeling. This is what I want to conserve through my paintings, and this is what I must preserve for my children. Mothers and fathers are not told their own stories, the stories of their culture; this is what I see and observe. The stories are lost. Since we were little, my parents and my grandfather educated us so that we have held onto our culture. Our culture must never be allowed to disappear. (Personal communication, July 23, 2005)



*Figure 1. Baptism of a Child by Paula Nicho Cúmez.*

**Image Description:** This painting captures the moment when a Maya Kaqchikel family comes together by the river to

baptize the Kaqchikel infant. Many Maya families have adopted Christianity brought to them by European and North American missionaries.

I asked each painter whether he or she believed that a painting was a story or a history and how he or she viewed his/her role from these two distinct vantage points. All painters with whom I spoke felt that their role was that of historian. Stated simply, a painting is a history to which later generations can refer when they want to know how something actually happened and what a certain culture actually wore, what they did, how they did it, what their culture produced and so on (see Figure 1). Each artist was distinctly aware that it was up to him or her to communicate the traditions of Maya cultures, to capture them in paint. Adelina Nicho Cúmez states:

I believe that painting is a *medium*, a means, a platform through which we *must* fuse what the Maya culture was before, what it is now, and what we want to leave for our children. I believe that the same happens with a writer, someone who writes histories, with letters instead of paint. I feel that painting is also a means, although not written, rather a graphic form that conveys what we see with regard to our culture. Looking back at the culture that our grandparents had, which isn't seen or practiced today, we want to retrieve it in all of its aspects in order that our children and our grandchildren will be able to realize what our culture is. (Personal communication, June 28, 2003)

### **A Need to Fight for Justice**

Certain painters also spoke of exploitation of the Maya by the Ladinos and the need to express their concerns



about the many ways that the indigenous peoples are utilized “as animals” (Mario González Chavajay, Personal communication, July 16, 2005). I arrived at Mario’s studio and he brought out a large painting, *Invasion of the Farms* (see Figure 2). He said that:

This is an important issue for indigenous peoples; they are treated abominably. Were it not for the indigenous peoples who work the land that belongs to others, there would be no food produced in the country. I cannot be silent about these injustices. My paintings seek to communicate the injustices that have taken place against the indigenous peoples of Guatemala. (Personal communication, July 18, 2005)



Figure 2. *Invasion of the Farms* by Mario González Chavajay.

**Image Description:** In some cases, Maya people have moved onto Ladino farms or become squatters in areas that are not cultivated. As shown in this painting, lands are taken over by Maya people because they have no

other place to live.

Painters also discussed the feelings of indignation about the previous decades of massacres, which were perpetrated against the indigenous populations, and stated that it is the responsibility of artists to document these atrocities as a form of recording historically what has taken place at the hands of the Guatemalan army:

I paint about tragedies that occurred here in the seventies, eighties and nineties, in our Tz'utuhil area, the murders in Atitlan. This is history. At that time, they murdered people unjustly; they killed innocent people. For the artist this is extremely painful and he is able to express all of this in his works. It's dangerous, but it is important and it helps us to remember what happened during that time. I have said many times to my family that if one day I don't come home, if I don't return, it is because something has happened. Because as we were saying, many things happened. And there are still problems lurking. (Personal communication, June 19, 2003)

Pedro Rafael González Chavajay told me:

I made a painting called *The Massacre in Atitlan* [Figure 3]. I had to leave something behind that all could see. That was my objective in making this painting [he gestures toward the canvas]. The painting is a way for people to witness what happened. This wasn't documented in a book, but I as an artist had to leave a document of this incident in a work of art. (Personal communication, July 16, 2005)

In order to paint *The Massacre in Atitlan*, Pedro Rafael traveled abroad because he had reason to believe that his life was in danger. He went to San Francisco in the United States in order to finish the painting. He felt he had to paint *The Massacre in Atitlan*, because he had experienced firsthand the tyranny that was taking place in his

town and surrounding community. He also felt that he could not remain silent in the face of such violence. He thus sought safety to finish this painting that he began in San Pedro, but dared not finish there (see Figure 3).



*Figure 3. The Massacre in Santiago Atitlan, December 3, 1990 by Pedro Rafael González Chavajay.*

**Image Description:** The people of Santiago Atitlan went to an army base to protest an incident that had taken place. The army opened fire killing thirteen Maya people ranging in ages from ten to sixty-five. This incident caused an international furor. As a result, the army removed its base from the town. A month later, the army wanted to return and the townspeople denied them entry, a first in the history of Guatemala.

So we see that paintings are vehicles for activism and education.

They involve taking risks and represent political acts that are life threatening. Although visual objects, they are seen as texts that exist to inform and awaken. It might be useful here to refer back to the JSTAE call for submissions:

The strikethrough in possibilities concerns the slippery routes taken by the ingenuity of art educators who have navigated censorship, erasure, and obstacles...Those who achieve the "impossible" tend to focus their energies on possibilities rather than limitations. Possibilities encompass the big picture, and what the future holds for our profession. To predict the future, we must actively create it.

The Maya painters who dared to represent the terror in their communities were striking through in ways that navigated not figurative but literal censorship, erasure, and obstacles that threatened their lives. They could have kept quiet, but as artists and educators, they felt a necessity to raise the awareness of both cultural outsiders and the members of their own communities. This was not only a defense against the onslaughts of the dominant culture, but a reminder of what had so recently happened. The acts of these painters are indications that courageous protest ushers in hope; hope for change, and hope for survival. These paintings proclaim that all peoples are entitled to live, and live justly.

### **And I Said, I Will Not Lose This**

One day while talking with me, Pedro Rafael describes a ceremony much like that taking place in Ixtamer's *Pascual Abaj* (see Figure 4), and I said, 'I will not lose this.' 'I must see it.' 'We will go,' he said. And all of the people arrived in a circle, they started to pray, to talk with the Maya gods. The people came with offerings: fruits, corn, and the ceremony around the fire. They do this in the night. (Pedro Rafael González Chavajay, Personal Communication, July 10, 2003)



Figure 4 *Pascual Abaj* by Antonio Ixtamer.

**Image Description:** The Maya family has gone to an ancient sacred rock to perform a ritual for blessing their family and they have brought some candles and a chicken for sacrifice. Perhaps they brought a basket of seeds blessing the seeds for a good harvest the following year before planting.

And in speaking with me while discussing Ixtamer's work, Johnston (2005) notes,

This painting of Antonio Ixtamer's is titled *Pascual Abaj* [Figure 4]. It seems as if it's an archetype for the relationship of the Mayas with the Spanish culture. Ixtamer expresses a very important feeling. You see the church, it's

all lit up, it's white, it's the dominant culture. Yet there are Maya people who have gone to the site, it's dark, it's hidden, but it's their ancient Maya culture that they're respecting there, and it's frowned upon by the Catholic church. Yet they've continued with this custom, so it's kind of hidden. And it's dark and they're hiding in a way to kind of protect their culture. To me it kind of exemplifies the whole relationship of the Mayas with the dominant culture. (Personal communication, January 5, 2003)

Attempts at extermination of indigenous cultures worldwide have been relentless. Indigenous peoples have been forced to adapt to the invading culture's religions, politics, dress, traditions and educational philosophies. Marginalization has forced Maya indigenous communities into states of poverty. It is not surprising that one way to fight back has been through the use of visual art.

The paintings themselves are much more than salable entities as becomes apparent in the conversations with Maya artists. Paintings are platforms for celebration of culture and protest, ways to resist domination and to express cultural values, customs, as well as ways to reiterate power in the face of racism and destruction. As Desai (2002) notes, "narratives that speak about resistance and domination make visible the ways knowledge through experience can lead towards social change and these narratives therefore may be empowering" (p. 312). In this way, Desai advocates reading of artworks based on peoples' experiences that take place within particular historical contexts and so must be acknowledged as reflective, critical and political. Maya paintings are vehicles for political activism and communications about the genocide that took place against indigenous peoples within Guatemala:

Hitler was responsible for the genocide of the Jews. Well, what took place in Guatemala was the genocide of the Maya. They pitted us against our own people recruiting

us off the streets, kidnapping us, and making us fight a war against ourselves. These were the actions of the army and the dominant Ladino culture against the indigenous peoples. (Pedro Rafael González Chavajay, Personal communication, June 2, 2002)

The process of piecing together my observations with the views of my mentors enabled me to revisit my original contentions that the growth of the Maya painting movements were in some way connected to the era of violence that threatened and destroyed Maya communities. When presented with the idea that there was a link between massacres of indigenous peoples and the growth of the art movement, painters were not convinced that there was. Some attributed the growth of the movement to tourism. Yet, when asked about the reasons they painted about the massacres, no painter declared that the paintings were made to sell to tourists, nor were they for sale to tourists. In fact, the paintings were hidden from view and only came out to be shown when the subject was carefully touched upon with someone whom they knew and trusted. It was then that painters declared it was their responsibility to reveal the atrocities committed against their cultures in the form of paintings. In other words, painters dared to paint themes that revealed the horror of their times. In this way, paintings became pathways into a world that was secluded from the public eye for many decades while indigenous peoples were slaughtered by the army and clandestine forces. Below is the second of Pedro Rafael's paintings (see Figure 5) depicting women's grief at the violence wreaked upon their innocent husbands.

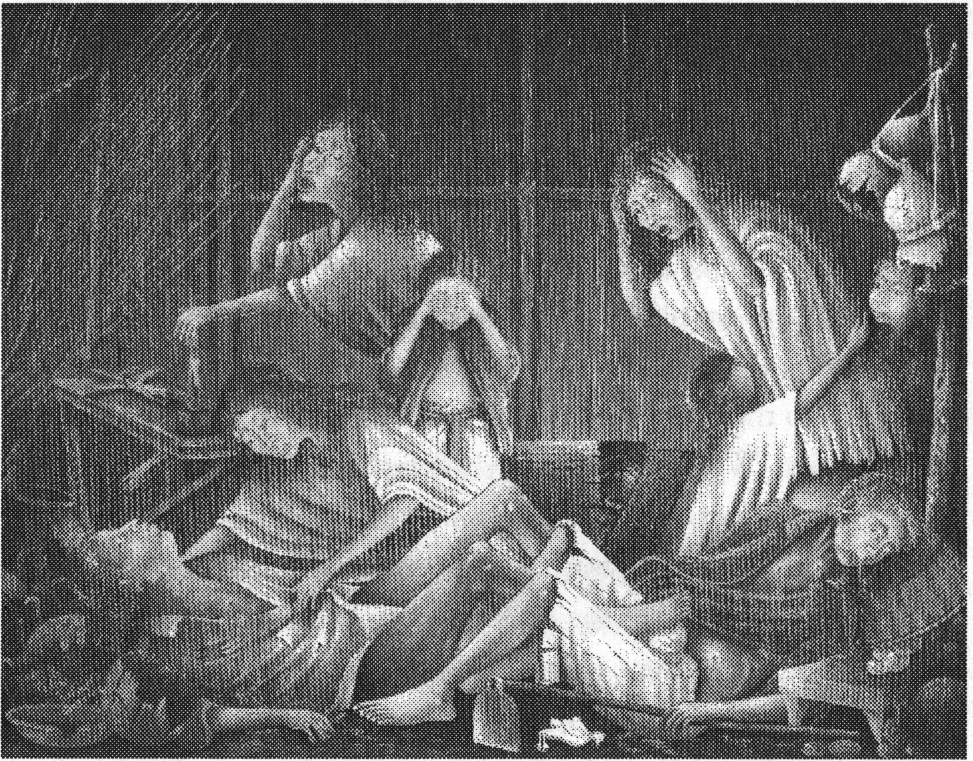


Figure 5. *Tragedy* by Pedro Rafael González Chavajay.

**Image Description:** Between 1980 and 1990 death squads operated in the highlands. This painting, in in Santiago Atitlan, shows women returning to find their men murdered and their homes ransacked. Using the pretext of someone being “a subversive,” the army killed many innocent people.

In 2007, healing is still not complete. Art works that portray injustices suffered by Maya indigenous cultures provide a means for excavating the barbarous acts and exposing them to the world.

Simultaneously, art making is an act and a vehicle for the regeneration, re-affirmation and reiteration of cultural identities. Paula’s reflections upon her painting *Certeza* (see Figure 6) encapsulate both views:

Rigoberta Menchu speaks a lot about the indigenous peoples and our human rights, and so this idea came to me to fuse the following images to the canvas. All of the faces in the sky are



spirits, spirits of people that died in the era of violence in 1980 in all of the towns of Guatemala. There were people who were

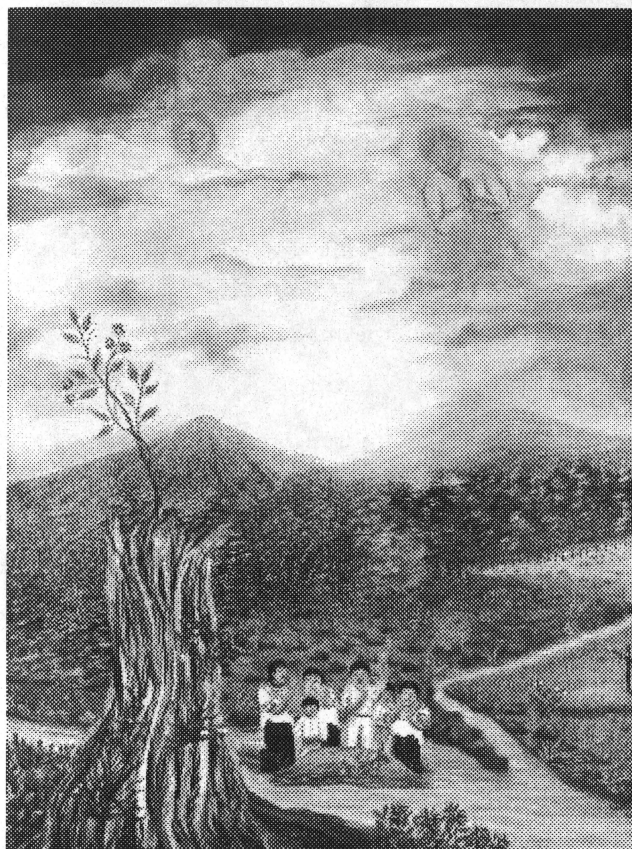


Figure 6. *Certeza* by Paula Nicho Cúmez.

abandoned, who were left without families. One speaks of human rights, one speaks of who or what we are; then, another class of people comes to tell us that we must do this or be this or they will kill us, or they will murder us, because that's what happened here. And we see that this part of the painting is dead, but it has flowered once again over here.

Like Rigoberta has

said, pull out all of our

roots, pull out everything that we have been and are, go ahead, yet a day will arrive when everything that we are will flower again. These images are fused to the canvas and fused into peoples' hearts. That is the meaning of this work. (Personal communication, June 25, 2003)

historical document? Where did this happen? One must investigate. The artist must do research. Paintings must be investigated works. Otherwise the new generation will only look at them like paintings, they will learn nothing. (Personal communication, July 12, 2005)

The “postcolonial age” supposedly creates room for a multiplicity of voices and viewpoints, yet indigenous cultures across the globe continue to be influenced, exploited and eroded by dominant cultures’ attitudes and actions. Reactions to such persecution and marginalization manifest in many ways. One of them, in Maya Tz’utuhil and Kaqchikel cultures, is the flourishing of art movements that ratify the beauty of their “ripped apart” cultures. As Ballengee-Morris (2000) notes when speaking of the significance of art for the Nandeva tribe of the Guarani Nation of Brazil:

Art is the physical manifestation of the culture, the ultimate tool to explain cultural, social, spiritual identity, and to unite the cultural/ethnic groups for social reformation. Art is a visual language that is capable of transmitting messages to its people...The arts are viewed as a social reformation tool that can educate both the indigenous and the non-indigenous about the Guarani’s history, heritage and culture. (p. 109)

Maya painters who express the realities of massacres against Maya indigenous peoples during what they call “the era of violence” are social reformists who attempt to educate both the indigenous and the non-indigenous about this particular time period which is still experienced by painters as an open wound. One day, while we were painting, Paula Nicho Cúmez told me the story of her mother’s arthritis and paralysis:

My mother watched the army shoot her brother and his son, her nephew. She was doubled over on the street and she saw them shot with her own eyes. She was frozen

watching, fearing for her life and waiting to see if the soldiers would break into our home next. All the children were inside. She was frozen in fear. From that time on, her hands and arms became paralyzed. She is now an invalid.

(Personal communication, July 19, 2003)

When Paula described the painting (see Figure 6) she made in which the living mourned the dead, the spirits of their ancestors floating above in the sky, she did not want to elaborate. This horrific time period seems to be sealed off from discussion. Works of art reflecting the genocide of the Maya then become visual treatises, or educational documents, teachers that both portray and tell of the injustices suffered by Maya indigenous cultures, as well as relaying the beauties and philosophies inherent within them.

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