

Betty LaDuke
COMPANERAS: WOMEN, ART, AND
SOCIAL CHANGE IN LATIN AMERICA

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The term Companeras translates into English as companions or comrades. Betty LaDuke keeps some intriguing ones in her journey through the tumultuous regions of Latin America. Reading her account of her search for the art and artists of the fourteen countries through which she leads her reader is rather like having one's face washed with the six o'clock news. The names and the places are all painfully familiar, but the slant is new. Instead of claims for military hardware and pleas for more millions to pour into the coffers of war, the reader is exposed to the personal stories and recent works of the quiet but passionate women artists who work behind the international spotlight in both urban and rural settings during a period of rapid political and economic change. LaDuke covers a gamut of ancient traditional crafts handed down through generations and sidling up to university-educated trends of professional modern artists.

Betty LaDuke is neither an anthropologist nor an art historian, but rather a teacher and a working artist, whose personal style and content are both directly affected by her companeras. She was stimulated by her students' reactions to her "Women and Art" class at Southern Oregon State College, but dismayed at the limitations of available literature and slides, so she sought examples of women's art to expand her course of offerings. Gifts of Latin American women's art sent her on the particular treasure hunt she recounts for us here. Her format is that of an anthology of stories about the artists, their

media, and the circumstances in which they live and to which they react through their art.

It is her view that tourists from so-called "plastic" Western societies travel to these third world nations in search of the beauty and endurance of traditional art forms. This creates a demand for the skills to continue to be handed on to new generations, which keeps those skills alive and not only enduring, but also changing and updating in response to the current needs of the society and the economy they buttress. Ancient crafts are adapted to new functions; intricately woven bags that once carried tortillas now hold schoolbooks or tourists' belongings. Through the creation of these crafts the women can express pride in their Indian and black African heritages and develop self-sufficiency for their families through the income they earn.

Among the painters interviewed, a common characteristic regardless of style is a strong emphasis on the figure. Some of the painters have professional training, others have no formal education. Most have child care and homemaking responsibilities; many hold jobs unrelated to their art although those with formal training frequently are teachers. Pervasive themes the women artists subscribe to include: gender, sexuality, motherhood, and the life cycle. Approaches range from critical social commentary to the recording of common experiences affecting all female populations. Paintings, murals, posters: according to LaDuke each form of expression is designed by these women

artists to strengthen the world all our children will inherit.

The artists of many primitive Latin American countries are nearly all women who are finding new strength through organization. Churches, unions and workshops are helping them to learn marketing strategies and to gain control of the profits from their sales. International human rights and solidarity groups also help. Women are finally finding university faculty positions opening up to them more frequently and as they gain representation they also gain visibility. The author states that this presence continues outside academe into the world community of

galleries and museums. Opportunities continue to expand as the impact of the women's ideas and messages is felt, and even as the outstanding quality of their work gains them respectability.

The lives of the companeras revolve around their art on a daily basis. They display a fierce tenacity of priorities and an honorable courage to even be able to produce it, considering the other demands on their energies that relate directly to survival. As life endures, their art endures. As the living changes, so the art changes and we all grow. Perhaps the six o'clock news will take on a new dimension with this growth.

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