

BY DANIELA PÉREZ

SIMULTANEOUS DIMENSIONS

One of the most critical episodes in Mexican history tells the story of the eradication of a culture and the imposition of a new one upon its ruins. Templo Mayor, the main Aztec temple in Teotihuacán, was almost entirely destroyed in 1521 during the Spanish Conquest. It remained buried for centuries. Then, in 1978, it was rediscovered by electrical engineers who were laying underground cables to the northeast of the Metropolitan Cathedral, a building that had been constructed between 1573 and 1813. In downtown Mexico City today, one can glimpse the panoramic visions of the past almost effortlessly, since “nothing is sufficiently old or convincingly new.”¹ Over the years, the Spanish as well as the indigenous peoples figured out ways to guarantee the persistence of symbols, reinforcing what some have referred to as the palimpsestic metaphor in Mexican culture.² These symbols may be considered strategic forms for dealing with cultural differences throughout various episodes in Mexico’s history. Over time, sacred spaces, materials, and symbols have been used and reused in various ways, allowing for a sense of continuity within difference.

In Enrique Chagoya’s palimpsestic work, with its evident overlaying of figures from different times, the past reemerges as the artist mixes characters from diametrically opposed spheres, making them complimentary and enabling them to portray alternative historical possibilities. Although *Enrique Chagoya: Borderlandia* presents a selection of works realized during the last twenty-five years, since his move to the United States in 1979, Chagoya’s practice has developed a strong personal imprint. The works evidence the impossibility of using strict or limited time frames, as temporalities are forced to coexist and territories overlap.

Borders may be understood as sites where social and spatial distinctions converge. Yet within the land of borders, limits and strict distinctions can also become muddled, allowing the emergence of a borderless terrain. Chagoya’s works emphasize the blurring of borders that takes place when diverse layers connect. His compositions portray a space of juxtaposed scenarios rather than a sequential account of events in time. While Chagoya makes strong use of historical perspectives to establish possible narratives of cultural continuity, his images are highly dependent on contemporary perspectives.

Strictly speaking, a palimpsest refers to a manuscript onto which more than one text has been written, so that the earlier writings are still visible through the more recent ones. In a similar way, Chagoya’s images may be approached as complex layerings of icons that carry within their forms their embedded meanings. Furthermore, as he does in his codices, he appropriates visual models and moments from the past, acknowledging a disconnection in a new arrangement of images, enabling a practice that exceeds the mere symbolization of written narratives. In the artist’s imagery, we recognize inevitable cultural syncretism as well as a conscious selection and use of powerful symbolic figures, resulting in unique interpretations of historical events.

It was the practice of the early evangelizers in Mexico to layer powerful icons one onto the other, mixing Tonantzin with Guadalupe and Quetzalcóatl with Cortés. Today some historians strongly support the thesis that indigenous people were willing to believe in the Virgin of Guadalupe because of her strong resemblance to the Aztec goddess of the earth, Tonantzin. Chagoya’s visual

constructions, such as the 1994 oil painting *Promesa* (*Promise*) (p. 64), allow us to understand through a seemingly unrelated grouping of characters—Jesus Christ, Olive Oyl, Superman, Tlaloc, the Lone Ranger, Spanish missionaries, and, of course, Mickey Mouse,³ among others—some of the “invisible essences” behind the meeting of cultures. In Chagoya’s own words, “I’m looking for the irrational side, like in the work of crazy minds, so-called outsider artists. The irrational way of looking is a very important way to understand the invisible essences of the world. These include the individual as well as the social context, which change constantly, unpredictably.”⁴ Keeping this in mind, we may consider that Chagoya deals with the numerous layers present on the surface of the palimpsest to propose new “writings,” since much of what is there—except for the history written by the dominant culture—has become for many viewers nearly invisible.

Enrique Chagoya has lived in the United States since the late 1970s. He has situated his practice within a geographic boundary that has allowed him both suitable proximity and advantageous distance for the critical reconsideration of fundamental elements in the visual history of Mexico, the United States, and Europe. Chagoya’s social and cultural situation—not holding onto a single identity but absorbing the influences of many—allows him to carry out a fruitful critique, developed through comic sarcasm, of environments and surroundings that he understands well. His conscious (ab)use of iconography and stereotypes gains much strength from his knowledge of the implied meanings behind the materials, techniques, colors, and forms that he selects. These elements, when gathered together into a work of art, help articulate Chagoya’s urge to introduce a possible third side to the coin while also bringing forward key moments and decisive representations in the history of art.

While based in San Francisco, a city in which nearly 40 percent of the population is foreign born, Chagoya

has become very interested in the point at which cultures come together to form something different. His works elaborate on the current demand for a constant reassessment of social relations as various cultural configurations arise within different contexts. Chagoya approaches transborder interaction not as a site marking the impossibility of intercultural understanding but as a space that admits the contradictory logic of distance and proximity as played out through the exchange of actions, practices, and activities. Cultural frontiers are portrayed not as barriers but as challenging points of intersection, appropriation, and resistance that reconfigure our already complex and questionable identities. In order to reconstruct the memory of a vast accumulation of moments, Chagoya has developed an autocritical practice in which he reapplies preexisting icons, unfolding them so that he can examine them more closely from all sides. By doing so, he avoids the representation of absolutes and instead leaves room for constant questioning of systems of legitimization. Chagoya’s narratives are always multiple, and the image transfers that he incorporates are extracted from different contexts, then elaborated into his own palimpsestic expressions through a variety of pictorial and printmaking techniques.

In 1968 the massacre of Tlatelolco took place in Mexico City ten days before the inauguration of the Olympic Games. Although Chagoya was just fourteen years old at the time, this event had a significant impact on his artistic work, as it lay bare the politics of the Mexican state. On October 2, while students from various universities carried out a protest demanding freedom of speech in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas, a horrendous riot broke out. Although the figures vary greatly from source to source, as many as three hundred people were killed when the national police force, ordered by President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz to put an end to the demonstrations, did not approach their task peacefully or with the rights of the protestors in mind. It is interesting to note that the Plaza de las Tres Culturas had received its name just a few years before, in 1964, as part of an effort by the Mexican

government to promote a cohesive Mexican identity. The name of the plaza stands for the conflation of three cultures—indigenous, Spanish, and mestizo—in a single location. Yet, according to Octavio Paz,⁵ who defends the idea of the persistence of the Aztec past in the Mexican present, the violent Aztec ritual of human sacrifice practiced at Tlatelolco permeates the space that became the site of the final Aztec resistance under Cuauhtémoc; the same plaza was the site of the 1968 massacre and, of an earthquake that destroyed a large part of the government-built Tlatelolco housing projects in 1985.

The 1968 fight in favor of social transformation was renewed in the period between 1971 and 1973, when different sectors of society—including students, farmers, workers, and members of other unions—united and became radicalized by a series of popular demands. People were tired of the recurrence, since colonial times, of repressive political systems and social manipulations that served political ends. Also, various educational institutions in Mexico City organized a massive protest on June 10, 1971 in solidarity with university students from Nuevo León. These students were struggling against a law imposed by the federal government that constituted a serious educational downfall in terms of institutional autonomy and a considerable reduction in the local budget allocated toward education. More than ten thousand people gathered in the streets to demand autonomy and freedom for political prisoners from 1968.⁶ Once again, as at Tlatelolco, the demonstration ended in a brutal attack, this time by the paramilitary group known as *los halcones*, which had been trained in the United States and served as part of the government's official strategy, now under president Luis Echeverría, to end any uprisings. Although little is ever said about the 1971 event, it is believed that close to one hundred people died. This time, Chagoya had joined the protests. While he was lucky to escape the massacre without injuries, his proximity to the demonstrations made him realize the way the atrocity had been concealed almost entirely by the dominant media. This incident—along with his high

school experiences, his social anthropological studies, and his activism at the university enabled Chagoya to develop a heightened sense of social consciousness from an early age.

It is important to focus critically on the years when Chagoya still lived in Mexico, since a great deal of his curiosity about social problems arguably arose from his personal experiences and the environment of which he was part at that time. For four years during the 1970s, Chagoya studied political economy at the UNAM (National Autonomous University). There he was surrounded by political refugees as well as by several intellectuals from Latin America who were teaching there. It was at this time that he began creating political cartoons for both union and student newspapers. In the late 1970s, Chagoya met a U.S. American sociologist, Jeanine Craemer, whom he married and with whom he moved to the United States in 1979, after obtaining his U.S. residency permit. He had previously spent some time in McAllen, Texas, but settled in Berkeley, California, where he decided to study art after being disappointed by the programs offered in economics. It was then that Chagoya realized he could finally start making work he would not have dared to make in Mexico because of the danger involved in expressing one's ideas in a repressive political regime.

José Guadalupe Posada (1852–1913) was an artist whose work has influenced Chagoya immensely. Posada also spent many years of his life working for newspapers and periodicals, and played a fundamental role in the development of graphic techniques in Mexico while also making use of figures based on antiestablishment heroes from both the past and the present. Numerous graphic artists in Mexico, including José Clemente Orozco (1883–1949), Diego Rivera (1886–1957), and members of the Taller de Gráfica Popular (People's Graphic Workshop), found inspiration in Posada's work, particularly the way in which he created highly influential and widely distributed works that use humor to portray current social issues and concerns. Like Rivera, who included Posada in two

of his most important murals,⁷ Chagoya grants a primary position to the representation of Posada in one of his ten etchings from the series “Homage to Goya II: Disasters of War.” In *Goya conoce a Posada (Goya Meets Posada)* (p. 77), Chagoya brings together two of the most influential figures for his personal career and the history of art, particularly that of engraving. Chagoya’s series, named after Francisco Goya’s (1746–1828) famous *Disasters of War* from 1810–14 dealing with the Napoleonic invasion, was begun in 1983 and unites two politically engaged artists from different contexts. Chagoya borrows what could be considered Posada’s and Goya’s most passionate elements from their popular prints: the iconic *calavera* (skull) known as *Catrina* and Goya’s bulls. These figures emphasize national and traditional celebrations in Mexico and Spain, respectively, which Chagoya updates in his satirical version of the etchings (mainly realized while at Berkeley). Although real time and place obviously prevented Posada and Goya from meeting and shaking hands as they do in Chagoya’s work, in this representation, Chagoya successfully gathers within a unique space two figures who have taken powerful critical stances toward crimes carried out for and against humanity and developed outstanding forms of protest against the commonly accepted human values.

Chagoya repeatedly reminds us that history is only an ideological construction, and that as such it is composed of replaceable myths—myths that can retain their currency only when they maintain a certain level of ambiguity and allow various reinterpretations. Through the implications and possibilities brought forward by contemporary border crossings, the artist proposes to deconstruct and simultaneously construct mythologies that reside in our fractured memories. Chagoya thus emphasizes the fictitiousness inherent in visual representations, particularly those that can be endlessly manipulated through image transfers. For example, *Untitled (Pocahontas)* (2000; p. 82), is an image that functions like a game; it offers the viewer endless possibilities to choose from in order to configure a face.

This portrait enables the viewer to elaborate his or her own version of a mythical character like Pocahontas, with all the various accounts of her life story. Chagoya selects a couple of indispensable elements, such as the feathers and the gown, to hint at the character that he represents. The story of Pocahontas—a Native American woman who eventually goes to England, where she dies—is apparently the source of many romantic myths because she never learned how to write and therefore could not enter her own history into the record. This enabled several legends to be transmitted over generations (similar to the stories that developed about La Malinche, an indigenous woman who accompanied Hernán Cortés as his interpreter and wife), including the 1995 film realized by Disney. One of the few historical sources available regarding Pocahontas is the writings of John Smith, an English colonist. Smith claims that Pocahontas saved him when a group of Powhatan hunters were about to execute him. Skepticism about the veracity of this story has increased with time and the relationship between these two individuals appears to exist mainly in fictionalized accounts of Pocahontas’s life. Chagoya’s portrait of Pocahontas goes beyond mere repetition of an image from a popular tale and instead allows contradictions to coexist, including, for example, as one of the woman’s possible facial features a Pinocchio nose—the elongated nose that appears on the wooden marionette to symbolize that he is lying.⁸ Its presence in this work points out the mythology or false history that surrounds Pocahontas. Chagoya accentuates mythical traits and turns them back upon themselves in transcultural scenarios, demanding that we reassess our relations with and understandings about one another. If cultural frontiers can be visualized as zones in which contrasting views in various temporalities can intersect, we can see layers of symbolism that can be read in many different ways. Chagoya’s image of an undefined Pocahontas reappears in *Road Map* (2003; p. 83), which depicts a land of fractured geographies. In this map of times, monuments, and histories, Chagoya symbolizes power through systems of scale. The frictions and cultural misunderstandings that have developed between Mexico

and the United States are partly a consequence of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848), in which Mexico ceded close to 50 percent of its territory. In *Road Map*, through an absurd exaggeration of dimensions, Chagoya accounts for the potential hostility between these territories.

Regardless of the form the artist selects for reevaluation, his practice motivates the deconstruction of dominant paradigms, both in our society and within systems of artistic representation. When apparently well-known icons are used as tools for deciphering, it becomes obvious that we actually know very little about them. Perhaps what Chagoya most successfully achieves is to provide evidence of the blindness or myopia that arises from the automatic interpretation of culture. It is obvious that Chagoya does not condone superficial encounters with images. While fascinated by those that recur within various contexts, he opts to decipher, question, invert, and magnify them, shuffling and recombining them to create a narrative that both derives from and challenges traditionally accepted official histories. In the words of the artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña, with whom Chagoya identifies, collaborates, and shares a cultural background: “I believe in the border culture of recycling and re-contextualizing.”⁹ Even when realities seem turned upside-down in Chagoya’s works, these apparent contradictions can lead to unexpected harmonies. While it may seem that Chagoya takes almost everything that he can find in the marketplace and the world of commerce, including magazines and comic books, and combines them all together, he often carefully selects a relevant object. For example, he uses Andy Warhol’s Campbell’s Soup can to rewrite his history of *The Enlightened Savage* (2002; p. 89). In this case, Chagoya keeps the traditional red-and-white labels, but his read “Cannibull’s” and in ten different flavors—from “Curator’s Liver” to “Museum Director’s Tripe”—identify aspects of the professional art circuit. Chagoya deliberately applies the idea of cannibalism through the possibility of devouring the “civilized,” such as the art dealer, the art historian, and

the art collector. In Western culture, the consumption of human flesh is considered the stereotypical behavior of the “uncivilized.” Once again, Chagoya inverts the roles while making reference to Warhol’s iconic imagery.

While the 1968 and 1971 student movements did not result in immediate drastic social changes in Mexico, they nevertheless marked the beginning of important critical modes of artistic expression, influencing the careers of artists such as Enrique Chagoya, who rejects any form of visual repression. As is evident in some of the works mentioned here, Chagoya does not always portray graphic political violence in his art, privileging instead the palimpsestic metaphors behind the trespassing influences and borders between worlds. Still, the obvious overwriting and his scraping on the surfaces remind us of the words of Theodor Adorno:¹⁰ “like blood stains in a fairytale they cannot be rubbed off.”¹¹ There is no doubt that Chagoya digs through the layers of different sites with a shovel that is always severely analytical, in order to elaborate concepts of representation that bring forward his social concerns. Perhaps he is unable to suggest a completely new mapping of the world, since in each representation something will forcibly slip out, but while exposing the overbearingly exotic and stereotypical, he certainly undermines it.

NOTES

- 1 Carlos Monsiváis, *El Centro Histórico de la Ciudad de México*, (Madrid: Turner, 2006), 22.
- 2 In this text "palimpsestic" will refer to the remains of history that are metaphorically layered. The past and the present are therefore allowed to coexist in the form of distinguishable and visible marks.
- 3 Mickey Mouse, "born" in 1928, is perhaps the most persistent icon of American popular culture. As such, he carries the heavy cultural implications of a capitalist society. As Carl Jung has said, he also resembles, "a pretty nice fellow, who never does any harm, who gets into scrapes through no fault of his own, but always manages to come up grinning." Craig Yoe and Janet Morra-Yoe, *The Art of Mickey Mouse*, (New York: Hyperion, 1991), 6.
- 4 Kathan Brown, *Why Draw a Live Model?* (San Francisco: Crown Point Press, 1997), 12.
- 5 Octavio Paz (1914–1998) was a prominent Mexican writer, poet, and diplomat who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1990. In one of his best-known books, *El Laberinto de la Soledad* (The Labyrinth of Solitude), written in France in 1945, Paz presents an analytical study of Mexican identity. In 1968, he resigned from diplomatic service in India as a protest against the government's repression of the student demonstrations.
- 6 Félix Sánchez Hernández, a worker from the Sanborns chocolate factory who was in prison at Lecumberri, said, "I didn't even know the content of what I declared. On the ninth of October of 1968 I went into the Prison of Lecumberri and I have been here since then." See Elena Poniatowska, *La noche de Tlatelolco*, (Mexico City: ERA, 2006), 44.
- 7 Posada's portrait appears in Diego Rivera's huge mural *México en la historia* (1929–30), located on the central wall of the stairway of the National Palace in Mexico City. The portrait of the Mexican engraver also appears in *Dream of a Sunday Afternoon* (1947) in Alameda Park in Mexico City; here he stands next to his famous *calavera*.
- 8 The story of Pinocchio portrays the particular values of nineteenth-century middle-class Italians, who understood the importance of obtaining an education so that one is not treated as an ass and/or a mule.
- 9 Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *Dangerous Border Crossers* (New York: Routledge, 2001), xiv.
- 10 Theodor Adorno (1903–1969) was a philosopher, musician, and social critic.
- 11 Quoted in Sarat Maharaj, "Perfidious Fidelity: The Untranslatability of the Other," in Jean Fisher, ed., *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts* (London: Kala Press and the Institute of International Visual Arts, 1994), 34.