

BY ROBERT STORR

STRATAGIES

Enrique Chagoya is an all-American artist. That label may come as a surprise to those for whom the distinction between hemispheric consciousness of the Americas—plural with an exclamation point—has been reduced to a fraction of its import by transforming an adjective that applies to everyone within that vast geographic and cultural zone to a synonym for residents or, still more restrictively, citizens of the United States. Nevertheless, invoking such a loaded term may help set the compass that will most accurately locate Chagoya and his work insofar as it semantically expands those borders it does not otherwise dissolve. Indeed, now that walls are being erected along the southernmost of U.S. borders, words, images, and mind-enlarging concepts are the best tools we have for rendering the artificial barriers of Fortress America¹ porous so that Americans in all their motley and marvelous variety may recognize and communicate with one another across and despite them.

The one thing that all Americans have in common is their hybridity. This is also true of all but a few island peoples in the world; however, more than anywhere else it is written on the faces of Americans. And when the ink seems invisible, that plural heritage is legible in their customs, mannerisms, rituals, music, art, literature, recorded history, and, finally, most tellingly, in any vain attempt to demonstrate a unique origin or essence. Take, for example, the case of the North American politician who, in the company of fellow whites, recently used an anomalous but plainly pejorative epithet for people of color—“macaca”—thereby setting in motion the chain-reaction revelation that he had learned the expression from his mother, who was Tunisian born and of Sephardic Jewish lineage. It was not what his conservative Christian audience was expecting to hear or a fact he had intended

to let slip. Not at all incidentally, it was the Sephardim and the Moors—former rulers of the Iberian Peninsula—who were expelled from Spain by Queen Isabella when she decreed a uniformly Catholic empire in 1492, the same year she sent Christopher Columbus on the voyage that would end in the discovery of a “new world.” Scratch the surface of Spanish civilization and Hebrew and Arabic texts emerge. Scrutinize the impacted strata of Enrique Chagoya’s catchall work and you will find such texts as well.

Thus, although greatly prized, ethnic and cultural purity was a myth when Spanish explorers and colonists arrived in the New World. And what little remained of it started going to pieces as soon as they hit American shores. As the “casta” paintings of Latin America vividly attest, miscegenation with indigenous peoples spread, slaves brought from Africa produced children with the already mixed-race soldiers and settlers, and waves of European and Asian immigration eventually arrived to enrich their blood. Of course, rivers of blood were spilled in the process, much of in order to revive that myth of purity in societies whose ever-mutating composition had had long since put the lie to it. And today blood is still being shed and lives are continuously being stunted by such fictions, but only propaganda abetted by force can possibly maintain their absurd hegemony.

How, then, can we release falsehood’s stifling hold? The arsenals of protest are stocked with many weapons, but not all of them are effective all of the time. Nor is each of them equally well suited to everyone who is the victim of an ideological untruth, or, less dramatic than personal grievance, perhaps, but just as legitimate, everyone who finds him- or herself incapable of swallowing the Big Lie

whole. Naturally, when the word “protest” is linked to art, it usually conjures up the iconography of righteous anger. By contrast, Chagoya’s tools for dismantling the “common nonsense” of cultural exclusivity and superiority are laughter and reconfigured memory. To the extent that Chagoya has chosen these means over other options, his work mounts not only a devastating critique of essentialism in all its “good guys” versus “bad guys,” “us” versus “them” variations, but also shuns the temptation of creating counter-propaganda.

In this connection both national and generational specifics are important. Nowhere outside of the Soviet Union did the aesthetics of militancy receive greater patronage or attract greater talents than in Mexico. There, on and off from the 1920s into the 1960s, when images of revolutionary heroism were called for by events or mandated by the state, truly innovative artists met the challenge, notably the Big Three muralists, Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, José Clemente Orozco. By the 1970s Rivera and Orozco were dead, Siqueiros was churning out grandiose kitsch, and the Institutional Revolutionary Party had co-opted the legends of popular rebellion while repeatedly demonstrating its determination to extinguish any spark of popular resistance to its ever more authoritarian rule. Just how willing to do this the IRP had become was gruesomely apparent in the massacre of student protesters in 1968 and 1971, the later of which the young Chagoya witnessed firsthand.

But not all of modern Mexican tradition had been exhausted or corrupted by compromises with power. Increasingly, as the collective aura of the muralist triumvirate faded, one figure stood out in the minds of those coming of age in the 1970s, while other artists of the past previously assigned secondary roles stepped forward into the limelight. Chief among the latter group were the printmaker José Guadalupe Posada and Frida Kahlo, who has since eclipsed her husband, Rivera, as the most famous Mexican painter. Simultaneously, youth reordered the muralist hierarchy by recognizing

Orozco rather than Rivera as the biggest of the Big Three. There were many reasons for this shift, but in the present context two are particularly germane. The first factor was Orozco’s hostility to political orthodoxy of the Left as well as the Right coupled with his skepticism about the inherent virtue of human nature, a skepticism that included deep mistrust of “The Masses.” (Such alienation from “The People”—or, at any rate, from their archetypes—radically complicates the logic of artistic engagement, for how can one celebrate the ultimate victory of “historical necessity” without them?) The second factor was Orozco’s refusal to play the “race card” and denigrate everything having to do with the Spanish Conquest while romanticizing everything about pre-Columbian civilization. So while Rivera portrayed Cortés as a miserably deformed syphilitic in contrast to colorfully folkloric, uniformly handsome Aztecs, Orozco depicted the armored empire builder in all his cruelty but painted the naked man on nearly equal terms with his Indian consort Malinche, thereby enthroning the pair as the symbolic Father and Mother of a “mestizo” nation.

To the degree that these were ideas in the wind in during the mid-1970s when Chagoya abandoned the study of political economy for the practice of art, the manner in which he has interpreted and restructured them pictorially have no obvious precedents in Mexican art, especially in the graphic arts to which he has devoted much of his energies. From the 1940s on, the printmakers who banded together to form the Taller de Gráfica Popular produced an impressive body of work paralleling that of the muralists in both political conviction and formal conservatism. For the sake of conveying clear messages to the public, the Taller abstained from any aesthetic play or semiotic ambiguity that might confuse the conventions and codes they relied upon to get the point across, that point being the rhetorical question “Which side are you on?”

Meanwhile, not everything in black and white was that black and white morally and socially, or that earnest. Subversively, often riotously mordant caricature has a

long history in Mexico, and generally its practitioners have seen to it that whatever the ill-starred prey may be, the artist's teeth shred flesh and sink to the bone. In addition to talking about Posada in an interview for the Archives of American Art and sampling his vigorous, vulgar, yet remarkably complex work, Chagoya has spoken of José Luis Cuevas, whose elegant line seduces but frequently renders his grotesques merely ornamental, and Eduardo del Río—known by his pen name, Rius—whose brilliantly comic style is also brilliantly didactic. Yet, no matter how outrageous or whimsical their work can be, these caricaturists, like the Taller artists and the muralists (with Orozco again being the exception in this regard), all forged a consistent manner.

At the outset of his career, Chagoya sought one of his own, though even then he gleefully laid hands on ready-made iconography whenever it suited his fancy or served his needs. Thus, in 1984 Mickey Mouse starred as Ronald Reagan in charcoal lampoons of the Republican New World Order, and twenty years later, Disney's Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs made their appearance as George Bush and his cabal with Osama bin Laden doing a cameo as the witch—in other words, playing the archetype of the Evil-doer in Pop drag. Falling midway between these two examples chronologically, *Hand of Power* (1993; p. 57) riffs on Mickey again, pairing his gloved three-fingered hand with the stigmatized hand of Christ lifted from the Mexican retablo tradition and painting it, as such votive pictures are, on a metal sheet. These mismatched quotations adumbrate what was to become Chagoya's basic approach, and paintings and collages such as *The Governor's Nightmare* (1994; p. 59) and *Hidden Memories at Giverny* (1995; p. 61) both consolidated his technique and expanded the scope of his references. However, it was by combining painting and collage with printmaking—specifically letterpress, lithography, photoengraving, woodcut, and chine collé—that he arrived at the full formal equivalent of the pictorial and textual layering and grafting he had found his way to in stages through painting, and so to the larger

conceptual breakthrough that amplified his compositional methods. And it was the ancient American codex format reworked through multiple dimensions of word and image appropriation and classic as well as contemporary reproductive and re-presentational means that created the vehicle for his simultaneous excavation and polemical re-stratification of American history and American culture. Here the likes of El Niño de Atocha bumps up against Little Nemo, and—since Chagoya looks back to the Old World in its newer realities while scanning the oldest emblems of New World—the Belgian boy adventurer Tintin commingles with the likes of Tlaloc the Aztec rain and fertility god.

It is significant that the artist arranges such jarring encounters—using juxtaposition, superposition, or variable unfolding of his accordion formats—on a surface that is vertically compact but horizontally capacious; that is to say a surface that, although it makes room for mighty men in tights, is the implicitly antiheroic opposite of the architectonic and explicitly heroic framework of Mexican muralism. Substituting the page for the wall, this compression of information favors Chagoya's fundamental preoccupation with the undeniable heterogeneity of identity. If, as Scott McCloud, author of *Understanding Comics* and creator of comics himself, and others have argued, the pre-Columbian codices are the “comics” of American antiquity, then Chagoya's codices are their contemporary update and transformation, even as they function as a critical variant on history painting in which the tropes of the Grand Manner and the Great Man are cut down to size yet rejuvenated by graphic concentration and alternately rude and subtle wit.

And by erudition, since the visual pleasures and the underlying polemical purpose of Chagoya's work have everything to do with the discovery—or rediscovery in a new guise—of his specific sources. In this domain he deftly turns the tables on the viewer/reader who comes looking for a simple game of High-Low poker. Meanwhile, he puts the same reader/viewer on notice that he isn't

just dealing another round of Po-Mo relativism either. It matters what a text balloon says and which language it is written in—English, Spanish, French, Latin, or, as noted, Arabic or Hebrew. For example when Clark Kent pleads with his caped alter ego for help, he speaks Spanish. If you are Anglo-American this will likely come as a surprise, but if you are Mexican or Mexican-American and grew up savoring the same fantasies in your own tongue it is perfectly natural. Moreover, the fact that in this specific situation Kent is not being menaced by a Lex Luthor but instead by a super-sized Aztec warrior gives the whole thing a delicious twist. And what is the backstory on the “Other” side of this confrontation? Who is the warrior—a king whose exploits were being recorded for posterity, a mythic figure, or just a common soldier? Now consider another example featuring the same sources: What does it mean when Superman speaks to a Chicano boy in English and throws his arm around him while the boy explains how he crossed the border at the urging of a dying father who told him he would find a better life on the other side? Is Superman his new father, his protector in the United States, and a paternalistic emblem of North American power in relation to developing countries South of the Rio Grande? Meanwhile, what is the reader/viewer to make of the bubble-headed, pistol-wielding vaquero to the left of the Superman excerpt? Where in the history of comics does this character Don Catarino come in? For that matter, what relation is there between the Aztec figures surrounding the Superman frame and the migrant workers flanking the Man of Steel inside it? Are the peaceful field hands linear descendants of the priests from the original codex who seem to be sacrificing one of their own? Furthermore, how do Little Black Sambos and Persian miniatures come into the picture—except with the aid of Chagoya, who infiltrates them? And what is the sense of heading one such page “Border Patrol”—except to emphasize that the artist patrolling the frontier actually seeks to erase it?

That will never entirely happen. Too many have too much invested in the maintenance of racial and cultural dividing

lines—not to mention political and economic ones—to allow them to break down altogether or even become as porous as they could. Nonetheless, the natural as well as unnatural processes of osmosis, grafting, cross-fertilization, and corruption ensure that inclusiveness will always override exclusivity and variety will inevitably undo homogeneity. Like it or not, the all-American American is a vigorous mongrel, though the primary hereditary strains and their exact proportions differ in each of us. The same can be said of American art, which is why the golden calf of formal purity worshipped fifty years ago toppled beneath its own weight. And it is why monuments raised to the chimeras of contemporary identity politics will fare no better. An impish archeologist of lost civilizations and lost illusions, Enrique Chagoya revels in cultural detritus, deliberately misplacing the cheap shards and true relics he finds. The clearest sign that one has grasped the purposefully playful spirit of this activity is to consider how much further the pieces might be scattered and how much deeper the soil from which they emerged might still be churned. Doubtless Chagoya himself is thinking about just those possibilities.

NOTES

- 1 Futuristic board game created in 1986 that presents a scenario where the United States has to defend its territory against the invasion of three allied enemy forces, including the Central American Federation.