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Neotropical Fabulation

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Neotropical Fabulation

by Teo Monsalve



About the Artist

Teo Monsalve is a visual artist with a focus on painting and collage. By exploring themes related to the natural world, Monsalve is invested in entangling a conversation with a variety of topics including history and landscape painting, the idea of the exotic as well as the sublime experience of nature. The predominant concerns in his practice are engaged with ideas of interculturality, interspecies relationships, geographical context, and metamorphosis, both mythological and botanical. Weaving multiple narratives, drawn from his home country of Ecuador and his experience of living and studying in Canada, Monsalve brings to his practice a range of influences reflecting a multicultural voice and his mestizo relationship with the Americas and the larger global sphere.

Neotropical Fabulation

Teo Monsalve

Numerous overlays of paint, rough surfaces, smooth surfaces, make me realize I am preoccupied with texture as well. Too, I see the barely contained color threatening to spill over the boundaries of the object it represents, and in other objects and over the borders of the frame. I see a hybridization of metaphor, different species of ideas popping up here, popping up there, full of variations and seeming contradictions, though I believe in an ordered, structured universe where all phenomena are interrelated and imbued with spirit.

—Gloria Anzaldúa

Neotropical Migration (2020) is a two-dimensional project where I draw parallels and differences between human and bird migrations (see Fig. 1 and 2). Analyzing the natural phenomenon of bird migrations has allowed me to visualize my ideas about my personal migratory experience and use the natural world as a referent in how to deal with empathy toward the contemporary migratory crisis. The project takes the form of collages that explore an interdisciplinary dialogue of aesthetic transformations, where I aim to generate elastic and hybrid narratives that lend themselves to fluid ways of sharing knowledge. Through my material practice, I weave and juxtapose diverse visual universes together so that they might emerge as new ecosystems expanding beyond their established meanings whether in biology, astronomy, anthropology, and so on.

My aim is to open a dialogue with histories of representation like painting history and natural history, to challenge their aesthetic structures and re-imagine them in a contemporary art context. The collages are assembled on natural history prints from divergent historical moments and the sources that inhabit them come from science magazines, textbooks, and other hegemonic objects. I use the method in this case as a liberating act. Cutting through these prints is a performative action that liberates the subjects represented in them so that they might become something new.



Figure 1. Monsalve, Teo. *Neotropical Migration*, 2020. Installation shot in No Lugar. Photo by Francisco Suarez.



Figure 2. Monsalve, Teo. *Neotropical Migration*, 2020. Installation shot in No Lugar. Photo by Francisco Suarez.

Reflecting on this historical dynamic, I came to *Integumentary Portrait*, which is a collage developed on top of a plate from the *History of the Indian tribes of North America* (see Fig. 3). This plate holds biographical sketches and anecdotes of the principal chiefs; embellished with one hundred and twenty portraits from the Indian Gallery in the Department of War at Washington, D.C. (USA).

The original plate was a portrait of Monchosia or White Plume a Kansas Chief by Thomas L. McKenney. *Integumentary Portrait* (2018) thus presents a hybrid character (birdman), the character looks as if the human is wearing a mask of a bird and perhaps morphing and becoming the bird. The actual bird transmutated in this collage is composed by a plate that depicts a male *Ruff* (*Philomachus pugnax*) painted by Sarah Stone in 1788. The result is a haunting image that evokes fear and respect; here a kinship between man and bird is embodied, the integumentary systems of both beings are interconnected, opening up a conversation about skin, identity, and ecology through interspecies relations. Artist Tomas Ochoa writes:

The European idea of racial superiority with respect to those conquered was fundamental to the establishment both of the intersubjective relations as well as to classify the world and nature. Thereby, the colonial view remains in the savage and primitive body as if it was a Botanical species, either are part of nature, the scenery, and are to be dominated and exploited to serve the imperial expansion project. (Ochoa 2012)

I draw inspiration from this text and suggest that by liberating the subject from a taxonomic gaze and introducing them into a realm of radical imagination that a new visual reading takes place. I treat the images with a great deal of respect. The intention is to take them away from the place of specimens for study and instead I try to relate to them on a personal level. *Integumentary Portrait* (2018) is also the beginning of a series of collages that challenge the idea that everything presented to us in museums and places of cultural production are facts and not a fictionalized version of the dominant culture.

Synthesis

I feel Synthesis (2019–2020) resonates with the quote at the beginning of this essay from Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera the New Mestiza* (2012). For example, the paintings explore ideas about landscape through the lens of relational ontology and object-oriented ontology. I generate interspecies, human-plant kinships in order to conjure metaphors that help me relate to the geographic space where I am from. Through

a material process I propose paintings that come together as assemblages. These paintings embody different material layers that also act as conceptual layers. The materiality is the gravitational force of the paintings. They are not only painted; it is not the touch or the brushstroke that characterizes them. I stage a game between painting and collage where the material edges are also formal spaces in the composition.



Figure 3. Monsalve, Teo. *Integumentary Portrait*, 2018. Photo by Teo Monsalve.

The collaged elements in the paintings are handmade cabuya paper that my father and I have been making for over a decade. Cabuya is the fiber that comes from the Agave plant. The Andean Agave is a symbolic plant from the Ecuadorian Andes. It has had a cultural relevance both in popular culture as well as a motive throughout the painting history of the country.



Figure 4. Monsalve, Teo. *Penco*. 2019. Photo by Teo Monsalve.

The plant has a multiplicity of uses that have woven it through the cultural fabric of the Andes. The substance of the paper situates the paintings in a geographic coordinate and context. In a material dimension, the landscape is embodied in the painting. For example, *Penco* (2019) is a mixed-media painting made with acrylic, oil, and marbled cabuya paper on canvas (Fig. 4). In the painting, a biomorphic character emerges in-between layers of paint and paper. The paper is used as a formal pictorial space in the composition, and the materiality geographically situates the painting. The paper acts in the painting as symbol whilst being the landscape itself.



Figure 5. Monsalve, Teo. *Emergent Cartography*. 2020. Photo by Teo Monsalve.

Emergent Cartographies (2020) are two paintings that are part of this series (see Fig. 5 and 6). The paintings are made directly on to the cabuya paper. It is a material reflection on the mestizo identity, the inherent contradictions that it embodies, and how to think about it via a painting exercise. The paper has gone through a process called marbling, it consists of diluting oil paint and pouring it into a water tub, then the paper has to be immersed in the tub. The rejection of the water to the oil generates a texture that functions as the pictorial space. I compare this process to what Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui



Figure 6. Monsalve, Teo. *Emergent Cartography*. 2020. Photo by Teo Monsalve.

calls the Chi'xi identity: "Ch'ixi, a reality or identity where multiple cultural differences coexist in parallel, that do not fuse together but rather they antagonize or complement each other."¹ The paper is, just like me, a mestizo, a Chi'xi, a juxtaposition of cultures that emerges as an assemblage.

Conclusion

It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories. (Haraway 2016, 12)

These two projects give a small glimpse as to how my art practice is also a channel to connect conceptually and materially to the natural world. The material process for the final pieces becomes an elastic and emergent way of thinking through making. Gathering and producing the materials that embody the work oblige me to relate to the landscape in new ways as well as to observe with a critical lens the cultural construction of nature. We are in a point in history when more than ever we have to start inhabiting the worlds that will change the paradigm and help us survive in this destroyed planet.

Notes

¹ Rivera Cusicanqui (2010, 6–7). Author's own translation. Original text reads: "el modo en que lo mestizo o lo ch'ixi da cuenta de una realidad donde 'coexisten en paralelo múltiples diferencias culturales, que no se funden sino que antagonizan o se complementa'. Una mezcla no exenta de conflicto, ya que 'cada diferencia se reproduce a sí misma desde la profundidad del pasado y se relaciona con las otras de forma contenciosa'."

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