

TINA MEDINA

Pochismas



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

AUGUST 4 - SEPTEMBER 10, 2005

AUSTIN, TEXAS

TINA MEDINA

Pochismas

Having first met Tina Medina after viewing her work in the inaugural exhibition of the new Latino Cultural Center in Dallas, I was taken by her candidness and desire to embrace the struggle of “walking a tight-rope” between cultures, as she expresses it. Confusion, mistaken identity, and ambiguity are all part of the skins she willingly occupies and embraces. Humor and pain are two currents that flow through Medina’s works as they do through many other Mexican-American and Mexican artists. These binary sentiments often meet to form a larger stream of consciousness. Tina dips into these two elements and blends them into a cocktail of images that evoke a fantasia of culture.

Pochismas, the title of the exhibit, comes from the word “*pocho*” a slang term used by Mexicans to refer to Mexican-Americans who speak Spanish poorly or incorporate English or Americanisms into their speech. It can also refer to someone of Mexican descent whose lack of knowledge or understanding about the history and heritage of Mexico render them culturally impotent. Many Mexican-Americans adopt the term affectionately, thus making it less derogatory. Medina’s work navigates the territory between cultures and addresses the difficulties of ambiguity. Borrowing from both the Aztecs codices and the familiar American comic strip, her images are simultaneously appealing and provocative. The Aztec codices chronicled the daily life, clothing, customs, mythology, and history of these peoples during and after the Spanish conquest. Strangely, the codex drawings formally resemble comic strips, both in color and the sequential nature

of their narratives. Medina’s drawings are reminiscent of cell-animation or cartoons frozen in time. Her images are often drawn in the center of a square, delicate handkerchief. The handkerchiefs can be read in multiple ways. They remind the viewer of transience: the travels of a hobo or the waving of a scarf in a farewell. The drawings also recall the aesthetic of *pañero* art, an art form that developed as prison sub-culture. Incarcerated artists often create drawings on handkerchiefs (for lack of other materials available to them) to send sentimental messages to their families. These many connotations evoke a state of suspension and of not being grounded in a home.

A sense of identity is often tied to language. Medina explores the relationship of the self to language through oral and visual humor, often mingled with frustration. The phrase “*nopal en la frente*,” is frequently used to refer to a person who has strong *mestizo* (a mix of European and Indigenous) features, but would rather not be identified in that way. The origins of this phrase are historical

and bizarre, and the original context has been obscured. The image of Aztec men and women with prickly-pear (*nopal*) cactus paddles tied to their foreheads appears in their codices. The period of time between the last day of the old year and the first day of a new year was inauspicious. The Aztecs would create cactus masks as talismans to ward off malevolent spirits that slipped into the world of the living during this time. The cactus paddles were carved so that the soft, fleshy side lay against the skin, and the prickly side formed a mask. This tradition was discarded, but re-introduced centuries later as a talisman used by Mexicans crossing the U.S. border. It was believed that by tying a piece of cactus onto their body as protection, the *nopal* would work as an amulet. Hence, the meaning for a person of Mexican heritage who may deny their cultural ties is a person who carries a “*nopal en la frente*” or a “cactus on their forehead.” The cactus identifies the individual as a person whose features are strongly rooted in a Mexican heritage, but who also faces the world with resilience and endurance.



Lil' Cannibal. 2004, Screenprint, iron-on transfer and stamp on handkerchief. 15 1/2" x 16"

The *nopal* cactus, then is a symbol of sustenance and pain. The Aztecs utilized its flesh and fruit on their long migration from the Southwest into the Valley of Mexico. Rooted in their mythology, the vision of an eagle perched on a *nopal* cactus devouring a snake would also come to symbolize their new home and empire. This emblem is emblazoned on the Mexican flag. Finally, the fruit of the cactus whose juice and flesh is a shocking fuchsia can also be viewed as an allusion to the images of a heart in pain or the suffering associated with the crown of thorns.

In Medina's caricatures and portraits, the nopal cactus is re-fashioned in an entirely new dictionary of meanings. In *Spy Glasses*, a cartoonish image of a codex-stylized woman features an Aztec hair-style that mutates into tubular, cactus-like projections. These projections suggest night-goggles or binoculars, possibly referencing border crossings or super-hero powers, such as x-ray or infrared vision. In *Be Specific*, Medina makes a more direct allusion to *paño* art by rendering her self-portrait softly in pencil. Superimposed on her forehead is a bold image of the nopal, which sprouts like a unicorn's horn from her brow. She appears as a mythological or supernatural creature. Seemingly unaware of the nopal stamped upon her forehead, she is surrounded by a red aura of spines, reminiscent of both religious iconography and the prickly surface of the nopal. The spiny aura suggests both power and pain radiating from the face. A caption below the portrait, "*Be Specific*," indirectly reminds the viewer of the frustration of being "mis-read" by both cultures. Humor and tension also appear in *Encroaching*, where the subject appears to be engulfed in hell-like flames, surrounded by the solid red silhouettes of nopal cacti. The image is vaguely reminiscent of the "*anima perdida*" or damned soul, a popular Catholic image of a woman burning in flames. In other works, Medina creates caricatures that draw on the American cartoon vernacular, including as huge eyes and ears. Female hairstyles grow into trumpet-like horns or Micky-esque ears. Exaggeration of the senses – ears, eyes, mouths, etc. – are funny and disturbing. The figures suggest a desire to speak loudly, to be heard, to be seen, but as in comic strips, speech is



Nopal En La Frente. 2003, Screen and relief print on handkerchief. 20" x 16"

only suggested; the figures themselves are strangely silent.

Medina's installation pieces speak, serenade, and catch the listener in a web of sounds. Interference is created between two houses, one white, one blue, that play traditional American and Mexican music as they face one another. The installation traps the listener in a garbled composition. Yankee Doodle Dandy and *Banda*, a musical cousin of American marching band music, appear to face off in a battle of the bands to no avail. The new composition created in the space between the two "homes" fluctuates between the harmonious and the unintelligible. In another installation piece, Medina's voice

is heard as she practices Spanish. The listener is an oral voyeur who is allowed into the intimate, funny, and frustrating navigation of language. The creation of hybrid, mythical images drawn from history and pop culture is curiously not unlike the process of the new identity created by the Aztecs as they were transformed into mestizos, a hybrid culture. Language (sounds) and images complemented each other in the slow, cinematic evolution of their new world; their language, Nahuatl, was incorporated into Spanish and English (still evident in words such as chocolate, coyote, tomato). Syncretic images mingled Catholicism and the Aztec religion, and ancient ritual was reinterpreted in modern ways, as in the example of the nopal-talisman. Medina engages herself in this dance of identity through her highly personal aesthetic. Humor helps her adjust to her hybrid skin. By not taking herself too seriously, she is free from the constraints of socially imposed identity and can invent herself in whatever way she desires. Her hybrid images are endowed with superpowers: x-ray vision to penetrate two distinct worlds, the coded language of pocho speech, and the talisman of nopal-mutations that protect them through inventive, new meanings.

Sara Cardona
Writer 2005

TINA MEDINA
Resides in Lewisville, TX

EDUCATION

- 2004 M.F.A., School of Visual Arts, University of North Texas, Denton, TX.
2000 B.F.A., School of Art, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2005 *Pochismas*, Women & Their Work Gallery, Austin, TX.
2003 *Mix! Series 2003*, Solo Exhibition, The Dallas Center for Contemporary Art, Dallas, TX
2000 *Boca: Drawing Installation*, Solo Exhibition, Waters Art Space, Lubbock, TX

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2005 *Texas National*, Stephen F. Austin State University, Nacogdoches, TX (catalog) Juror James Surls.
2004 *Women in the Middle: Borders, Barriers, Intersections*, National Women's Studies Association Conference, Walker's Point Center for the Arts, Milwaukee, Wisconsin (catalog)
Ink Under Pressure: Printmaking 2004, Orange County Center for Contemporary Art, Santa Ana, CA.
Nopalita: MFA Exhibition, Cora Stafford Gallery, University of North Texas, Denton, TX.
La Virgen de Guadalupe Art Exhibition, Ice House Cultural Center, Dallas, TX.
Paño Art Invitational, El Centro College, Dallas, TX.
Pulse, The Corridor Gallery, Tarrant County College, Arlington, TX.
10th Annual El Corazón Art Exhibition, Bath House Cultural Center, Dallas, TX.
2003 *Inaugural Juried Exhibition*, Latino Cultural Center, Dallas, TX. (catalog)
10th Annual New Texas Talent Juried Exhibition, Craighead-Green Gallery, Dallas, TX
Blush, 500X Gallery, Dallas, TX.

- 2002 *Disclosure: Contemporary Drawing*, University of Dallas, Irving, TX.
7th Annual Young Latino Artist Exhibition, Mexic-Arte Museum, Austin, TX
2001 *On Display*, City of Lubbock Public Libraries, Groves Branch Library, Lubbock, TX
2000 *BFA Exhibition: Surfaces*, Texas Tech University, Landmark Arts Gallery, Lubbock, TX
1999 *Student Juried Show*, Texas Tech University, Landmark Arts Gallery Lubbock, TX

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 2004 *Women in the Middle: Borders, Barriers, Intersections*, Walker's Point Center for the Arts and University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Union Art Gallery, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, p.35-6, ills. (exhibition catalog)
" 'El Corazon, exposicion de arte en el Bath House', " *El Extra Spanish Language Newspaper*, Dallas, TX, p.5 ills.
2003 *2003 Inaugural Juried Exhibition of Dallas/Fort Worth Latino Artists*, Latino Cultural Center, Dallas, Texas, p. ix, 31-34, ills.(exhibition catalog)
2000 *Texas Tech University McNair Scholars Journal*, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas, p. 153-160, 161-5, ills. (publication)
Will Frederick, "Surfacing Artists to Showcase Work," *Texas Tech University Daily* (May 4, 2000), p.3.

AWARDS

- 2004-5 *500X Gallery Member*, Dallas, TX
1999/2000 *Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program Scholar*, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX
1992/1994 *Upward Bound Scholar & Graduate*, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX



This Panel: *Mrs Smith in the Barrio, (La Misunderstanding)*. 2004, Ink, iron-on transfer, and stamp on handkerchief. 10" x 10"
Cover Panel: *Be Specific*. 2003, Acrylic, enamel, graphite, pen and crayon on handkerchief. 15" x 16"



Buscando. 2004, Acrylic and graphite on handkerchief. 22" x 22"

WOMEN & THEIR WORK

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Judy Birdsong (*Co-President*)

Alexandra Wettlaufer (*Co-President*)

Lori Beveridge

Fern Santini

Elizabeth Danze

Jane Lilly Schotz

Rebecca Hudson

Sherry Smith

Lauren Levy

Hillary Summers

Lila Browne-Whitworth

STAFF

Chris Cowden, *Executive Director*

Kathryn Davidson, *Associate Director*

Lisa Choinacky, *Operations Manager*

Katherine McQueen, *Programs Co-ordinator*

Debe Bentley, *Gift Shop Manager*

Tamara Blanken, *Preparator*

This project is supported in part by the generous support of the Andy Warhol Foundation. Special thanks to BAH! Design.

Now celebrating its 27th anniversary, Women & Their Work presents over 50 events a year in visual art, dance, theater, music, literature, and film. The gallery features on-going exhibitions of Texas women artists and brings artists of national stature to Texas audiences. Since its founding, Women & Their Work has presented 1,751 artists in 233 visual art exhibitions, 102 music, dance, and theater events, 13 film festivals, 19 literary readings, and 277 workshops in programming that reflects the ethnic and cultural diversity of this region. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in *Art in America*, *ArtForum* and National Public Radio and was the first organization in Texas to receive a grant in visual art from the National Endowment for the Arts. Women & Their Work reaches

over 2,500 school children and teachers each year through gallery tours, gallery talks with exhibiting artists, participatory workshops, in-school performances, dance master classes, and teacher workshops.



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

1710 LAVACA ST.

AUSTIN, TEXAS 78701

(512) 477-1064

wtw@texas.net

www.womenandtheirwork.org

