Creatures del Monte

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CREATURES DEL MONTE

A Thesis

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by
Alejandro Arauz
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In memory of Adonis Lopez and Antonio Lopez
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Abstract

To visually represent the multifaceted hybrid identity; a multidimensional artistic approach was necessary. I considered all the physical, psychological and cultural truths of my family. I explored our relationships, our behaviors and our responses as we simultaneously identify with the Latino and Anglo North American cultures and exist within its ever-changing parameters. Two streams of thought emerged in my artwork. One explores the characteristics and bi-cultural composition of my immediate family. The other looks at recalling past and distant members of my extended family as our points of origin while identifying the visible and invisible forces that shape our characters. Our natural response to mix the Anglo and Latino is reflected in my artistic process by developing a visual image through various mediums.
“*Del Monte*” is a Latin American term used to describe people from the wilderness of the mountains. The aim is to explain the basic nature and characteristics of the “*campesino*” (farmer, peasant) and the wilderness that bears him. To some extent these are my origins. I am the product of migration and feel that I reside beneath the canopy of the Anglo and Latino wilderness, yet I am not alone. I use members of my family to display the various forms that our identities take. An important fact about my immediate family is that we have hybrid personalities; we identify with the Anglo and Latino cultures at personal, familial and social levels. As a result, two streams of thought have emerged in my artwork. One explores the characteristics and bi-cultural composition of my immediate family. The other looks at recalling past and distant members of my extended family as our points of origin. Our *Monte* is the Anglo and Latino wilderness and we are creatures that maneuver in it. I explore the origins of our hybrid identities as they manifest themselves physically and rationally. The Oxford English Dictionary defines hybrid as “a thing made by combining two different elements,”\(^1\) and identity as “the fact of being who or what a person or thing is.”\(^2\) For this exhibition I combined processes and relied on personal and familial experiences from our two backgrounds to construct the various forms of our identity.

The identities that members of my immediate family have developed have to some extent been partly unconscious. As of late, we have consciously gained more control over what and whom we identify with. I see that we are performing acts of “exclusion and inclusion,”\(^3\) consciously shaping our character. Personally, I needed to investigate our behavior, ancestry and surroundings to give our present forms a framework. Naturally, my search has resulted in artworks dealing with my

\(^1\) OED Online <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00181778>
\(^2\) Ibid.
immediate and extended family, where I gained a sense of footing to my ancestral base. Visually speaking, portraiture allowed me to capture both the physical image of an individual and my analysis of them. I took apart my perceptions, our surroundings, our bodies and our personalities, and pieced together representations that speak to our physical and psychological realities.

It is human nature to want to belong, and as I reflect on our progress, I see that we have become efficient creatures that commix in order to gain a sense of belonging. I began my research by posing questions. **Can the shared state(s) of mind of siblings raised in a duo-cultural environment be visually portrayed?** **Can I describe the individual’s position with respect to the family unit and cultural identity?** **Can I capture a hybrid consciousness?** To visually describe the many facets of our hybrid identity, I needed a multidimensional approach. My artistic process reflects our human nature to mix. My process involves handling the image through various physical and digital stages. The answers to these questions are reflected by artworks in this exhibition. A photographic derivative is evident in my works, but in the physical breakdown of the image and mixing it with other mediums it becomes holistic. The photographs include current images that I have taken of my family, but also include older family photographs. They become paintings and lithographs, yet they do not lose their photographic qualities.

In the prints, I allude to natural phenomena and landscape to describe the panorama of the mind. Plants, grass, smoke, textures, surfaces, objects and animals symbolize people, virtues, time, traits, personal taste and the presence of living energies that exist in our interior. Through abstraction and cubist-like elements I develop a hybrid image. The images start as photographs of the individuals; then I manipulate them in Photoshop and later print the new images and assemble a collage. At this stage, I make cuts and rips to suggest a rational state and address formal issues to ultimately create the composition. When the collage is assembled, I scan it and make it digital again, since the format allows further changes in Photoshop. I then Xerox-transfer the image onto a lithographic stone and begin additive and subtractive alterations. In the transfer I lose some detail, but I expect and embrace the loss. The loss of detail reconfigures my relationship to the image, yet it
is still very familiar. It is here where I explore mark marking and travel between truth and interpretation until the work approaches completeness. I compare the uniqueness of each reassembled form, and through intricate visual elements I reveal the traits that we share.

My paintings, like the prints, take a similar path, yet the process is more intuitive and reactionary. I electronically print images on various thin and semi-transparent papers and stretch (fine) oil on both sides to achieve transparency. I begin by painting on the canvas, then collage, and switch back and forth, building the image. In the process, I make cuts to create angles, separate values and develop surface overtones that hint at what is beneath. I hand sand the sheet of paper against random textured surfaces as a metaphor to the random adoptive habits of the human being. Max Ernst’s “frottage” inspired me to use this technique, reinvent it through my lineage and apply it to my own work.

**Can the rational of siblings raised in a duo-cultural environment be visually portrayed?**

![Fig. 1 The Yokes (The Entrance, A Revealing Split and The Grazer), lithograph, 2007](image)

*The Yokes* is my response to the first question. Each panel was individually created while keeping in mind that it would belong in a group. In it, surface and texture describe skin, hair,
landscape, atmospheres, patterns and objects. They are sculptural forms with visual entry points that take you to the heart of the image. This was an idea used by Joseph Conrad in *The Heart of Darkness* and his metaphor of the Congo River acting as a pathway to the core. It is both an inside and outside place that is witness of our coming to terms with our sense of duty. In our minds, this is a new territory. We realize that within these parameters the behavioral forms that will sustain us in the future will mature here. Personally, the yoke symbolizes our sense of duty and the undefined tasks ahead. In *The Grazer*, the subject acknowledges the yoke by feeling it with its hand. Its visual ambiguity and placement allow for a wide range of interpretations. These images are negotiations between what and where the subject is in regard to our realizations and rationales.

![Game on Grass](image)

**Fig. 2** *Game on Grass (The Guard, The Screener and The Defender)*, lithograph, 2008

*Game on Grass* is similarly concerned with the first question, except that it focuses on an activity that created a bond between my brother, my cousin and me. The physicality of basketball (and sports in general) led to my awareness of my body. Unlike the other prints, two of the three forms are captured in motion and are empowered with a sense of mobility. My aim was to represent the physical and mental change of our forms as we moved into a familiar territory. These are the
established forms that our personalities have taken in this field. In traveling across relationship, cultural and situational lines, our personalities change and therefore our forms too. I began our attachment to basketball and it continued with my brother then cousin. Now my fascination is in reflecting how we took pride when the other accomplished more. Basketball gave us a bond that also led us to drift apart. Nevertheless, in our monte we have a place and bond we come back to. In comparing the Game on Grass triptych to The Yokes, similarities and disparities can be determined through visual interpretations. In the mind these two fields border one another, but Game on Grass is familiar territory and The Yokes not so much.

Fig. 3 Balancing, lithograph, 2007 Fig. 4 Sembra, lithograph, 2007

Balancing and Sembra are portraits of my parents. In both images I included sections of my face in their portrait. It is an important element in these works, because not one day goes by without me seeing a personal quality of mine reflected in them as an original. In Balancing, the form alludes to the seesaw effect when energies are transferred. In our attempt for balance, our physical and psychological forms fluctuate, becoming more dense or depleted; as a result, we change the perspective of the person on the other end. It is my representation of our personalities as one and our
minds regulating its slope.

The *Sembra* portrait comes from many memories and experiences, in particular the experiences when I visited Nicaragua for the first time in 15 years. In the coffee fields that my father planted in his youth I had a moment of reconnecting with the past. The coffee beans were a blood-red color, and the coffee plant were easily taller than I. At that moment I could only think of him in his teenage years planting these seeds on the side of the mountain. His love for plants and the *monte* was so tremendous that as a child I grew my own crops along the side of our house to imitate him. Unfortunately in Canada he hurt his hands working in a factory, and that was all I could think when standing in the *monte*. I stood there among my brothers and sisters. This artwork is an homage to the color of the coffee beans and pay respect to hands that planted them.

![Fig. 5 Trono Mecedor (Rocking Chair Throne), lithograph, 2008](image)

In my visit back to Nicaragua two summers ago, I came to understand that my father’s parents belonged to the *monte*. Despite various attempts to get them to relocate, they have not moved. I realized that they belonged there and that these were my origins, but that (at least for now) I did not
belong there. In crossing over to artworks about my extended family, my thought process changed. I could not recall or begin to construct an image of these people. I lacked reference points, an element that was abundant when using my immediate family. Even though this print is a sort of portrait, I relied on building from the photograph and injecting it with experiences associated with them but mostly foreign to me. Originally this was a photograph of my grandparents, with my father standing in the middle (his hand is visible on the side of the female’s head). The simplicity, honestly and intent of this photograph led me to use it in my work. I objectified their figures using the outline of the chair to encompass their personalities. While in the Nicaraguan monte, I visited the Catholic mission they attended. The primitive decorations, the architecture and the raw materials used to build this mission left a deep impression on me. I used all these influences, realizations and impressions to develop this print. The patterns that appear in this print appear in *The Defender* (third panel of *Game on Grass*).

Growing up, I was always considered to be more Arauz then Lopez (Lopez being the name of my mother’s side of the family).

![Fig. 6 Repairman on Break and Mop Mender Working, mixed media diptych, 2008](image)

These are painting of my mother’s father Don Toño and her brother Adonis. Again, in exploring my disconnection, I found fundamental associations linking my incomplete memories of them to our personas. The tasks they are performing speak to their livelihood and how it would appear in their everyday life. These activities are foreign to me, just as mine would have been to
them. The significance rests in realizing the task and responsibilities given to us by our *monte.*

Even though my mother’s side of the family are city people, the city is still a type of wilderness.

Through these paintings I acknowledge that the actions of Adonis and Don Toño influenced our lives. By rebuilding refrigerator motors, my uncle was able to provide for us when my father left for Canada. Just the same, my grandfather would transport food for us in a wheel barrel to our house and fix mops; their actions sustained us for a period of time. The simplicity, honesty and visual qualities of these two photographs led me to join them. I decided to make paintings instead of prints, so I could treat the surrounding area of the figure and designate “painting” to my mother’s side of the family.

![Fig. 7 Cantinos, mixed media on canvas, 2007](image)

These five paintings are portraits of each member of my immediate family. They are a pivotal point for my thesis. We are always connected to one another despite physical, personal, social, and cultural drifts in our character. In contemporary life identity has become fractured, complex, and splintered, and it is in a constant state of redefinition. The materialistic layering in these works counters modernity's reduction of the individual and groups. In casual talk a friend regarded me as “Cantino”, that is, a mix of Canadian and Latino. I considered humorous, intriguing and truthful as an overarching definition of us.

These paintings answer the last questions. **Can I describe the individual’s role with respect to the family unit and their cultural make up? Can I capture the hybrid consciousness?** Three of the five portraits acknowledge the viewing audience as if informed of the reason why they are being
viewed. I began these paintings with that idea in mind, and that I would be describing our identities with two mediums not commonly used in portraiture. I aimed to create relationships between paintings and at the same time individualize them. I parallel mixing these two mediums in portraiture to our personality’s synthesis of the Anglo and Latino. Up close the portraits appear as if the skin was magnified, scored, weathered, treated and even decomposing; however, from afar the viewer fills in the empty areas, putting together the pieces to complete the picture. Depending on the distance of the observer, information about each individual’s composition is revealed. The arrangement reflects a universal sensibility towards family. At the ends are masculine figures and at the heart is the mother and offspring.

![Fig. 8 Transfers and Take-off, images from a 25 min video, 2008](image)

I began these videos focusing on the body and keeping in mind the artworks I developed. It allowed me to present a moving and reactive consciousness as things of the mind appear on our physical surface. The images on my chest are the prints *Balancing* and *A Revealing Split*. *Transfer and Take-offs* marks my starting point of prints into performance, continuing the cycle of processing the image through various mediums. I was influenced by how tattoo imagery is used on the human body, particularly in Latino culture. Video offers various elements I was interested in exploring. One of them is audio, which activates the textures and surfaces of the prints and paintings, heightening the feeling of skin through sound. As in the Xerox transfer, I lose detail, and as in the paintings, when removing the image from my chest the undertones in my skin are exposed. The video shows tender,
violent and ritual-like reactions consisting of slaps, caresses and rubbing. It is a comment on print media and the human figures used in “S & M” scenarios as a way to market and reach the viewing audience. The new forms that these prints assumed have to do with knowing that they were going to appear on the body. In tattooing, importance is given to displaying a recognizable and symbolic image in regards to its already pre-assigned location. *Balancing* took a more identifiable shape of a bird (eagle) and *A Revealing Split* a sort of nest (object). Through video I document the next stage of these forms as they evolve. For future works I plan to work backwards to create prints by taking still images from the video and develop prints. Video allows me to continue the process cycle for the print and painting series. This new direction is a new chapter for my body of work.

To me, family is a rich source of inspiration for my work. With it I travel the spectrum of the real and invented, the conscious and subconscious, past and present, personal and cultural. In it I acknowledge the visible and invisible forces that shape our characters. From it I gain a sense of self, regarding family, human nature and our surroundings.
References

“Hybrid” OED Online <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00181778>

“Identity” Ibid.

Alejandro Arauz born during the Sandinista revolution in Managua, Nicaragua, and raised in Kitchener, Ontario, Canada, since the age of eight. He received a Bachelor of Fine Arts in painting from the University of Windsor under the tutelage of Daniel Dingler and Susan Gold/Smith. He attended Eastwood Collegiate Institute where he took pride in athletic achievements in basketball. He grew up drawing and doodling, and seriously considered art after his final year in high school. Art is life, but what is life?