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ART REVIEW

Touching on the Breadth Of Hispanic Art Today

By Holland Cotter | Aug. 23, 1996

Like most exhibitions built around roomy, broad-spectrum themes, "Ceremony of Spirit: Nature and Memory in Contemporary Latino Art" at the Studio Museum in Harlem cannot count sharp conceptual focus among its virtues. What it offers instead is a gathering of strong individual artists whose work is helping to define the complex range of contemporary Hispanic art flourishing in the United States today.

The show, which originated at the Mexican Museum in San Francisco four years ago and has been on the road since, was organized by the California artist Amalia Mesa-Bains. The 16 artists included have roots in Mexico, Chile, Brazil, Panama and the Caribbean, but all of them now live in the United States.

Much of the best work here -- the most economically shaped and rigorously concentrated -- is grounded, metaphorically at least, in some aspect of Hispanic-American tradition. The sources vary, but images associated with popular art, with personal and cultural history and with religion (pre-Columbian, Roman Catholic, African) recur.

The small, tin-framed oil paintings by the Chicano artist Santa Barraza, for example, take votive icons as their model but substitute family portraits for Christian saints. In one lovely piece, the face of the artist's sister rises from a cluster of medicinal aloe vera leaves while the Virgin of Guadalupe, the great symbol of Mexican identity, floats protectively over the desert landscape.

Ester Hernandez adapts a secular folk form in a large, beautiful painting that simulates the design of a Mexican woman's woven mantle. In this case, though, the intricate black-and-white abstract patterns include shapes of tiny helicopters and skeletons as subliminal messages of political struggle and resistance.

The message delivered in Pepon Osorio's sculptural installation "To My Darling Daughters" is, by contrast, immediately visible and emotionally direct. It takes the form of a farewell letter from a suicidal mother written in looping letters across the seat of a living room couch. The result -- a cry of despair inscribed on an object of domestic comfort -- is a terse, powerful monodrama phrased entirely in visual terms.

Other artists similarly use elements of everyday life to carry complicated ideas. A glass-fronted knickknack cabinet titled "Vanitas," by Patssi Valdez, is also a reliquary and a coffin. And Marcos Raya's "God Is on the Phone" grafts plastic consumer throwaways onto African masks and Christian icons in an installation that suggests both a surreal studio apartment interior and an ecumenical altar with an inventive mind of its own.

Ms. Mesa-Bains, the show's curator, is well known for her own influential, meticulously detailed altarlike assemblages. And although she doesn't include her own work in "Ceremony of Spirit," one is not surprised to find that religious images, usually put to ambivalent, unorthodox uses, figure prominently throughout the show.

They are there in Cesar Augusto Martinez's paintings, which have the shape of Renaissance triptychs but celebrate folk healers and Aztec gods. And they are there in Aida M. Mancillas's watercolors, which retell the story of the 16th-century Spanish prelate Bishop de Landa, who destroyed countless Maya documents and later remorsefully tried to reconstruct their contents.

Reclaiming a more recent history is the intent of Alvaro Garcia's shrinelike sculptures made of metal ceiling scraps salvaged from Brooklyn tenements. And the transformation of a troubled past into a hopeful present comes across in two

paintings by David Zamora Casas, one an anxious meditation on sexual identity, the other an image of an androgynous angel with a trim beard, a bright dress and flamingo-feather wings.

The Brazilian-born artist Josely Carvalho reaches outside a Hispanic context in an installation made in response to wars in Bosnia and the Middle East. Islamic arches frame photos of ruined cities and prayer rugs bear images of weapons in a pacifist statement made affecting by its visual restraint.

Such restraint is not evident in several other large installation pieces.

Succumbing to the occupational hazard of an unwieldy medium, they tend to swamp ambitious and clearly deeply felt ideas in overproduced visual effects. Regina Vater's minimalist homage to African-Caribbean deities is the lucid exception here.

Yet even in the pieces that don't work, something comes across -- a range of concerns, an expressive flavor, a critical passion -- that sets them apart from much contemporary art in New York galleries and museums.

Certainly it is important that the artists included here emerge from a culture in which religion is not only a formative influence but also a fluid medium in which ancient and modern, Western and non-Western impulses are preserved.

Whether viewed with mistrust or devotion, this spiritual source is a force to be reckoned with.

As are the social realities facing Latin Americans today. Guerrilla struggles in Mexico, the resurgence of the Maya in Central America and the threatened status of immigrants in the United States not only give political art a continued currency but also often infuse it with a life-and-death urgency that can seem expressively immoderate in New York's cooler conceptual climate.

To its credit, "Ceremony of Spirit" makes no attempt to change that impression. Far from being assimilated in any artistic mainstream (whatever that may mean in this pluralist age), the artists chosen by Ms. Mesa-Bains sail a distinctive and swift-flowing parallel current. The exhibition may not measure its width or plumb its depths, but it does offer further vivid evidence that it is there.

"Ceremony of Spirit: Nature and Memory in Contemporary Latino Art" remains at the Studio Museum in Harlem, 144 West 125th Street, through Sept. 15.