



**"My Sovereign,
O Woman,
My Maiden"**

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December 10, 2010

The Artwork -

My Sovereign, O Woman, My Maiden

You might wonder what the digital code featured on the front of this document represents. It is called a QR Code ("QR" stands for Quick Response), and is a graphic device being implemented with gaining frequency, mostly by retailers as a way for consumers to gather more information about a given product. Consumers can now download an application to their personal G3 or G4 mobile phone that will scan this QR Code. Once scanned, this application will direct the consumer to a website that can provide full and detailed information about a product seen in a catalog, or even on the store shelf. It is easy to generate this code for any item by entering the redirecting URL information on a website formulated just for the purpose of generating QR Code graphics. Once entered, this site generates a custom code that, when scanned by the end consumer's phone with the application noted, will redirect them to the entered URL - that web page immediately appearing on the consumer's personal mobile phone.

The artwork for this thesis utilizes this graphic coding device not only as a visual basis to construct the object, but also uses the same redirecting technology to send the art viewer to an image that serves the purpose of this artistic expression. Just like in a catalog or in the store, if a viewer of this artwork is standing in the gallery, scans the art using this QR code "app", a new image will immediately be revealed on his or her mobile phone.

The physical work is a pieced, sewn compilation of 2 fabrics. The first is denim from jeans that belonged to a young woman migrant. These jeans were found

at the border between Mexico and Arizona, and were carried and/or worn by this woman as she made her way in hopes of crossing into the U.S. The other fabric is a ubiquitous white canvas that I frequently use in my art practice to cover lost or abandoned fiber-based objects that I find and collect. This piecing technique echoes the Euro/American tradition of quilt making, the sewing together of small bits of fabrics to create a new piece of re-cycled cloth. This cloth is generally sewn together with cotton batting and a cloth backing to create coverings for bedding or the home. The overall pieced cloth in this work is sewn together to create one large QR Code quilt.

In this case, when this work is completed, the quilt will be displayed hanging simply on the wall as if like an altar, with one singular candle burning below it. You might ask what the image is that lies waiting to be unlocked by the scanning of this QR Code quilt. When the viewer sees the redirected image they've scanned on their phone, they will find themselves looking at the image of La Virgen de Guadalupe.

The title of this work is taken directly from the Nican Mopohua, the ancient Nahuatl text that is considered "the bible" of the original story of the appearance of La Virgen to the native Juan Diego. These are the names he first calls La Virgen when she appears to him - "My Sovereign, O Woman, My Maiden".²

I find the words, and the 3 "categories" they connote in reference to La Virgen, especially significant to my research into the making of this piece.

2. Nican Mopohua translated text,
<http://www.lasculturas.com/lib/oth/NicanMopohua.php>

It is my goal within the discussion of this paper to demonstrate this particular significance and it's relationship to this artwork that has resulted in this study of Mestizaje and Guadalupe.



*QR Code Quilt Cloth
in progress*

*Denim jeans cut and
organized into matching
squares, shown with last
jean scraps not able to
be made into regimented
squares*

The “Mestizo Effect”

“But above all else we must impress on our memory the overriding rule that whatever God has revealed to us must be accepted as more certain than anything else. And although the light of reason may, with the utmost clarity and evidence, appear to suggest something different, we must still put our entire faith in divine authority rather than in our own judgement.”

René Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy*

In his book *Humanity*, Jonathon Glover cites this quote from René Descartes in discussing the workings of the belief system based on the call of authority - a higher one as carried out by a political one. In his chapter Obedience and Conformity he notes that many social/political decisions are based on uncritical obedience - that the actions of nations and those who serve them come from the belief in a “moral duty to obey”.³

Certainly it can be said, even though Glover’s examination focuses on human behavior from more contemporary times, these same obligations to Mother Spain existed and were carried in the minds and actions of Cortés in his conquest of the Aztec people of Tenochtitlan in 1521 and in the subsequent motivations of the Spanish to subjugate the indigenous peoples of Mexico. It was this belief in the moral duty to the spread of what the Spanish believed to be the one true religion, Christianity - and by the way, gain control and power over a New World - that ignited a colossal process of biological and cultural blending that we call mestizaje or mestizo processes.

3. Jonathon Glover, “Humanity, A Moral History of the Twentieth Century”, Yale University Press (2000), ppg 265, 266, 335, 336

When I imagine the plight of the woman who owned the jeans that were found at the border, I can never fully understand her life - her concerns, her motivations for her migration to the U.S. I have this irrational notion that I've "rescued" this object - that rescue somehow transferring my compassion for this imagined young maiden. There is discomfort for me in the very use of her clothing, not to mention the fact that I've disintegrated her jeans into tiny fragments to suit my own purposes. I've violated her in some ways, but still, I've gone ahead and done so, forcing the bits of her clothing to intermix with my own white cloth fragments to create a new blended cloth, a cloth that I imagine - but not one that she ever did.

Serge Gruzinski describes it as the "mestizo effect" . . . Mixing, mingling, blending, crossbreeding, combining, superimposing juxtaposing, interposing, imbri-cating, fusing, and merging . . ." These processes are much more complicated than biological mixing, or imagining history as the clash between "Spaniards" and the "Aztecs". As Gruzinski notes, it takes "nomadic scholarship" to adequately study the full range of affects of the mestizo processes.⁴

Certainly, the obvious intermixing was of a physical nature. Woman bore the brunt of this, as Gruzinski notes, "Indian women were easy prey for the invaders, who had often violent and fleeting relations with them without worrying about the young offspring they left behind. Rapes, concubines, and, more rarely, marriages generated a new category of population - mestizos. . ."⁵

But in order for the conquest to be complete, the Spanish knew that it was the spiritual world of the

4. Serge Gruzinski, "The Mestizo Mind", Routledge, New York and London (2002), ppg 19, 20, 25

5. Gruzinski, pg 42

indigenous people that must be converted. "By breaking idols and demolishing pyramids, the invaders demonstrated the total impotence of the old gods. . . It was the brutal beginning of a desanctifying of beings and things . . . How could indigenous peoples interpret . . . imagery coming from a Europe about which they had absolutely no notion?"⁶

When first promoted in 1556, the cult of Our Lady of Guadalupe among the Indians, met with strong opposition from the Franciscan order. Spanish clergy charged with pagan conversion "worried about the mélanges that might arise from a poor understanding of Christianity, from unseemly idolatrous practices, or from confusion of sacred and profane . . . Indians treated the new images in the same way as they had treated pre-Hispanic paintings and statues. The eye they brought to the Christs, Madonnas, and saints was closely related to an outlook cultivated over centuries . . . To the outrage of missionaries, new converts were responding with idolatrous worship; in other words, they were developing a mestizo practice."⁷

At first sighting of this new integrated cloth displayed in altar fashion, one might assume that this is some ode to the newest high tech communication. Knowing about this is the way we get along in this new world, co-mingling our familiar language of words and letters with this curious new symbol that will link us to important information. But this new visual world can recall anything - data and imagery of the sacred can now hover invisibly, secretly in cyberspace waiting to be recalled as a reminder of our rooted faith, passions and histories.

6. Gruzinski, pg 45, 46

7. Gruzinski, pg 181, 182, 189, 191

In so many ways, the imagery of La Virgen de Guadalupe epitomizes mestizaje. Her presence is sovereign - recalling the memory of Tonantzin with her appearance taking place on the sacred Mount Tepeyac.⁸ She is clothed in European style dress, yet she has the brown skin of the indigenous. The ancient text of her apparition declares that she spoke to Juan Diego in his native tongue, Nahuatl - he being a newly converted Indian. "Lowly" as he was, he was chosen to deliver the message to the highest authority of the church. She has embraced the indigenous, with the conqueror's religion.

The Power of La Virgen

Ironically, even though, as noted earlier, women's bodies have been used and you could argue, have suffered the most in the processes of mestizo, it is them on whom the responsibility of safeguarding the culture of the invader's religion has mostly fallen. Jeanette Rodriguez notes: "Mexican-American women have been marginalized as women, as mestizas, as Chicanas; thus religion is a significant dimension of their human experience. . . . Although the contemporary Mexican-American woman has not experienced a firsthand vision of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the apparition is the primordial experience that is kept alive in the cultural and psychological memory of the community." Rodriguez continues in citing historian Margaret Miles, "Our Lady of Guadalupe expresses a Mexican-American woman's values of being female, a mother, brown-skinned, mestiza. Her image compensates when a woman feels herself lacking and petitions her for strength, endurance, patience, or compassion."⁹

8. Jeanette Rodriguez, "Our Lady of Guadalupe-Faith and Empowerment among Mexican-American Women", *University of Texas Press, Austin, 1994, pg 39*

9. Rodriguez, *pg 48, 59*

In her book *The Decolonial Imaginary*, Emma Pérez asserts that “women are conceptualized as merely a backdrop to men’s social and political activities . . . women’s activities are unseen, unthought, merely a shadow in the background of the colonial mind.”¹⁰ And Rodriquez, “The history of the Mexican-American woman is a legacy of conquest and resistance, shaping the uniqueness of her perceptions, emotional states, images of self, values, gender roles, and expectation - all of which affect her relationship with Our Lady of Guadalupe.”¹¹

I’d like to think that this work, with the use of quilt block piecing traditionally associated as “women’s work”, will kick the viewer with this notion in the ass. Using the technique of quilting which is typically thought of as a cover, this work provides covering of another sort. With it’s quirky use of technology by way of a very hand-made method, and its connection with the image of La Virgen de Guadalupe out in cyberspace, the work seeks to recall the complicated history of Mexico, the role of women in this history, and their modern and enduring connection to Our Lady.

It is this history of the struggle of women in the midst of mestizaje that has reinvigorated the use of La Virgen in the making of artwork by contemporary Chicana artists. This new genre of feminist artists are “telling alternative stories” about the realities of their lives. I would submit that just as the early church allowed for the layering of ancient myth with Christian idols to solidify the indigenous understanding of Christianity, these artists are employing the tradition of La Virgen and all the connotations she brings, and

10. Emma Pérez, “The Decolonial Imaginary - Writing Chicanas Into History”, Indiana University Press, Bloomington & Indianapolis, 1999, pg 39

11. Rodriquez, pg 59

are layering a new vision of how they see living with the power of La Virgen in a contemporary woman's world - artists whose work is included in Laura Pérez's book, *Chicana Art* - Alma Lopez, Ester Hernandez, and Yolanda López.¹²

Today's Chicana artists are reclaiming the support, strength and faith afforded by the presence of La Virgen. In the end, they are laying claim to the humanity that has gone invisible for centuries, hidden within the written histories of "bigger" events of men. In his essay, *Framing an Icon: Guadalupe and the Artist's Vision*, Felipe Ehrenberg writes:

"This is the stuff of faith, of a faith in one of the most powerful images ever designed, the "diptych image of syncretic power" that needs in fact no religion to uphold it, of a faith carefully constructed through the years, through the centuries, and which responds in an immediate manner to the idiosyncratic requirements of downtrodden societies, strongly matriarchal by tradition."¹³

In the process of completely cutting up every last bit of usable denim, I noticed a crinkling in the front pocket. Inside, I found a bus ticket from Guadalajara to Los Mochis. The fare was \$575.00. It was purchased on November 10, 2008. The jeans were found in early January of 2009 at the Arizona/Mexico border south of Sierra Vista. It's hard to make out, but the name on the ticket is Aracella Vasquez - or close to it. As I apply heat and the dampness of steam to press the sewn squares into neat

12. Laura Pérez, "Chicana Art - the politics of spiritual and aesthetic altaries", *Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2007*, ppg 150, 265, 270, 274-277

13. Ana Castillo, editor, "Goddess of the Americas - La Diosa de las Américas", *Riverhead Books, New York, 1996*, pg 172

compliance, I can smell the once-owner of these used-to-be jeans - Aracella. The scent is of her body mixed with a fragrance, the bottle for which was found along with this clothing and the smell of dirt. This is as close as I'll ever get to knowing who she is. This artwork employs a modern trick to pay homage to La Virgen - and I've disintegrated Aracella's jeans to do it. I hope in doing so, I have not perpetrated an act of violence on her. Instead, I hope her presence in this piece and the candle lit in her honor affords her the comfort of La Virgen, Our Lady of Guadalupe.

And so, in the end, in La Virgen we see *My Sovereign* - the Mother of Jesus, most holy Mother of us all, *O Woman* - a reflection of the "every" woman, a woman just like us, *My Maiden* - the young, invigorated woman we all feel inside, in need of protection, of soothing and unconditional love.