HOME AND AWAY: LATIN AMERICAN ART

Gabriel Orozco and Damián Ortega
Wilfredo Prieto
Report from Lima
Adriana Varejão and Jac Leirner
CONTRIBUTORS

ROBERT STORR
A contributing editor at A.i.A. since 1981, Robert Storr is professor of painting/printmaking and dean of the School of Art at Yale University. He was a curator at New York's Museum of Modern Art (1990-2002) and director of the 2007 Venice Biennale. Storr has also taught at the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University, the Rhode Island School of Design and Harvard University. For this issue, Storr discusses two of Brazil's leading women artists, Adriana Varejão and Jac Leirner.

EDWARD J. SULLIVAN
Curator and New York University art historian Edward J. Sullivan is the author of the forthcoming From San Juan to Paris and Back: Francisco Oller & Caribbean Art in the Era of Impressionism (Yale University Press). His curatorial projects include "Observed: Milagros de la Torre" (2012, Americas Society, New York, and Museo de Arte de Lima, Peru), and an upcoming show featuring Mexican artist Juan Soriano at the Meadows Museum, Dallas. In this issue, Sullivan reconsiders Latin American identity.

ANNA BLUME
Anna Blume is an associate professor of art history at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York. She is the 2011-12 recipient of the SUNY Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Teaching, and her article "Maya Concepts of Zero" appeared in the March 2011 issue of the American Philosophical Society's Proceedings. Here, Blume dispels popular myths about the Maya calendar.

GABRIEL OROZCO & DAMIÁN ORTEGA
Mexican-born artists Gabriel Orozco and Damián Ortega are longtime friends and colleagues. For this special issue, the two discuss their early careers—including Orozco's mentoring of Ortega—and their more recent projects.

GERARDO MOSQUERA
An independent curator and art critic based in Havana, Gerardo Mosquera is a cofounder of the Havana Biennial and a former curator at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York. Author of numerous texts on contemporary art and art theory, he also serves as the artistic director for PHotoEspaña, Madrid. Mosquera's subject here is Cuban artist Wilfreda Prieto.

ADELE NELSON
Adele Nelson is an assistant professor of art history at Temple University in Philadelphia. Author of Jac Leirner in Conversation with/en conversación con Adele Nelson (Fundación Cisneros, 2011), Nelson has written a number of articles on Brazilian art, including an essay on the early history of the São Paulo Biennial and forthcoming studies of critic Mário Pedrosa and artist Lygia Pape. In these pages, Nelson examines the new wave of private museums in Latin America.

MIGUEL A. LÓPEZ
Miguel A. López is a writer, researcher and independent curator. A founding member of the Southern Conceptualisms Network, he has curated exhibitions such as "Losing the Human Form: A seismic image of the eighties in Latin America" (2012-13, Reina Sofía Museum, Madrid) and "What if democracy happens?" (2012, 80m2 Livia Benavides Gallery, Lima). For A.i.A., Lopez explores the burgeoning art scene in Lima.
MAYA TIME
Cyclically linking gods, kings and corn, the Maya calendar bears no evidence for pop culture’s doomsday readings of the year 2012.

BY ANNA BLUME

ALTHOUGH HE BURNED thousands of Maya books in the Yucatán in 1562 and tortured Maya scribes, even the Spanish bishop Diego de Landa marveled at that culture’s concepts and representations of time. Three hundred years later, the first Maya glyphs deciphered by scholars like Ernst Förstemann and J.T. Goodman in the few books that survived Landa’s fury were numbers used for astronomical calculations.

Well into the 20th century, Mayanists persisted in the presumption that the Maya were essentially stargazers, more interested in the confluence of celestial cycles than in the contingencies of everyday life.

It was at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in the 1930s that a young architect turned Mayanist, Tatiana Proskouriakoff (1909-1985), began researching the Maya site of Piedras Negras, in Mexico. Her work culminated in a 1960 publication in which she affirmed that the Maya were, and to that day remained, masters of calendrics. However, she argued, not only were they watching heavenly bodies but also quotidian existence. Proskouriakoff’s alternative reading of dates revealed that ancient Maya rulers supported a scribal class that had carved into stone royal births, ascensions and deaths along a continuum of time that stretched deep into both the past and the future.¹

Fifty years later, in this same museum, Mayanists Loa Traxler and Simon Martin have curated an exhibition whose central purpose is to engage a broad audience in a Proskouriakoffian understanding of Maya time as expressed in theological, astronomical and historical terms. With psychics and soothsayers announcing the end of the world in 2012, citing the Maya as their source, Traxler and Martin organized “MAYA 2012: Lords of Time” to expose the fallacy of this prediction, dispelling it through an immersive demonstration of the mechanics and uses of Maya time.

Within three large galleries of a museum dedicated as much to archeology as to art, the curators have mounted displays that range from extraordinary objects such as an eccentric flint still covered in bits

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

Ceramic censer lid depicting Copan founder K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo', ca. 695, 28 by 16 by 15 inches. Courtesy Honduran Institute of Anthropology and History.
CHRONICLES

of the cloth it was wrapped in before its burial, to interactive digital installations. Throughout the show, this oscillation between aesthetic contemplation and media stimulation has an odd and jarring effect. At one moment, we are fully absorbed in contemplating an original, exquisite object, drawn in by its aura; at the next, we are manipulating a large touch screen that leads us through an excavated tomb. Clearly, this is an exhibition aimed not only at various age groups, but also at cultivating very different and sometimes antithetical kinds of looking and thinking.

Grounding our respect for Maya systems through an analogic sympathy, the curators begin by teaching us how to calculate our Gregorian-calendar birth dates according to the equally precise Maya system of counting days. We learn that the Maya did not predict any kind of cataclysm on Dec. 21, 2012, let alone the end of the world or a profound new beginning, as many have claimed. For the Maya, this date merely marks the completion of one very long period of 5,125 years, similar to our own turn of a millennium. As far as we know from the many ancient Maya calendars found in books, on stone monuments and, most recently, in painted murals at Xultun in northern Guatemala, excavated in 2011, the Maya were profoundly interested in the unit of the single day and in sequences of days. These they would count and record to represent, predict and correlate the observable movements of the sun and moon, Venus and Mars. The Maya literally bundled their days into diverse quantities and patterns, with time itself having no set beginning or end.

AFTER THESE LESSONS in Maya calendrics, the exhibition shifts into a magnificent display of sculpture, mostly from the Classic Maya site of Copan in present-day Honduras, where archaeologists from the Penn Museum, the Peabody at Harvard and the Instituto Hondureño de Antropología e Historia (Honduran Institute of Anthropology and History) have worked together intensively since 1989. Here the curators develop the theme of "Lords of Time," revealing how, through the mediation of ceramic vessels, carved monuments, and items of durable stone and iridescent shell, scribes and artists glorified the lives and power of rulers by specifically connecting their daily existences to carefully mapped-out celestial cycles. Monumentalized in stone or represented in delicate carvings on small objects, powerful individuals were linked to astronomical phenomena.

Two essential motifs, water and maize (corn), which are intrinsically associated with cycles of rainfall and harvesting, are dominant in representations of rulership and power in most Classic Maya cities, including Copan. Copan's first ruler, K'inch Yax K'uk' Mo' (reigned 426-37), is portrayed as the rain god Tlaloc, with his distinctive goggle eyes, on the 28-inch-tall lid of a large 7th-
century ceramic censer, one of many such ruler portraits buried in tombs or displayed during public ceremonies. Censers like this one would waft incense smoke through the pyramid complex, where gathered participants and spectators included the maize farmers who also quarried the stone foundations of the city and dredged the mud that would later be sifted into the fine clay used in ceramics.

Just as rulers at Copan were depicted with godlike attributes, gods were often personified as rulers. The show’s sculpted volcanic-tuff image of the maize god is one of several portrayals that were set into the upper facades of architectural structures throughout Copan. Here he has an oval-shaped face and high forehead framed with large circular ear flares, standard markers of ideal beauty in images of rulers and members of the court. He wears a pendant of the sun god around his neck, which indicates that even the maize god pays homage to the sun. The Maya conceived of maize as grown in one season, cut down and “sacrificed” as food in another, only to rise again, echoing in the span of the seasons the overarching rhythm of the daily birth and death of the sun.

While rulers were understood as deriving their power from association with the gods, their worldly strength was forged in political alliances within and outside Maya territories. Such alliances were ensured by gifts or trade goods such as those found in K’inich Yax K’uk’ Mo’s tomb, which included ceramics from distant city-states. Here, for example, archeologists discovered a deer-shaped ceramic vessel, fired in an earthen mound, which had originated in the Kaminaljuyu region, over 186 miles west. It was found containing the remains of cacao and a refined shell scoop in the shape of a hand. The deer is shown with its eyes wide open, ears perked, nostrils flared and tongue sticking out over its lower teeth, a representation similar to drawn and painted images of deer being hunted in landscapes on other Maya vessels. This particular object renders the deer on its side with its legs stretched out, as if the animal were experiencing its last intensely present moment of life.

Now suspended in time, the body of the deer serves as an offering vessel for cacao, a chocolate drink at the center of Maya mythology. Dying like the sun every evening or the maize god with each harvest of corn, the deer gives itself over as part of an elaborate offering that is understood as yielding the daily return of sun, maize and all that is important for the sustenance of life.
The Maya, the conquest that began with Linda's book-burning has not ended; they dance it over and over again in commemoration, even as they engage in the broader complexities of a political, economic and cultural present that remains hostile to their existence.

One mask, representing a deer, has actual antlers lodged in the gray-painted wood. Such masks are worn in the dance of the deer and jaguar that is still performed in the town of Santiago Atitlán in Guatemala. In this dance, the deer offers up its life to the jaguar, which in turn sacrifices itself in the water at night, just as the sun sets into the ocean. It is one of the many dances depicted on the surfaces of Classic Maya pots. Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote that “natural species are chosen not because they are ‘good to eat’ but because they are ‘good to think.’” Still an active element in Maya life, the lessons of sacrifice as represented by the deer remain an elusive cipher of Maya thought.

We imagine the Maya as having a secret to tell us about the moment we live in. Yet our misinformed beliefs that the Maya are extinct and that they predicted our extinction in 2012 are dual aspects of a single mindset. We imagine the Maya speaking to us from a grave on the other side of a fallen civilization. Perhaps we hope that our civilization will also fall in a mysterious instant and thus relieve us of the burden of an overwhelming present and inconceivable future.

In the highlands of Central America, where over five million Maya still speak over 30 different Maya dialects, not only are the Maya alive and well, but—astoundingly—they have maintained a certain self-sufficiency and continuity with the past. No longer pyramid-builders, but still maize farmers, they remind us that Maya time is a very real and complex matter of corn, animals and humans, whose lives unfold in the ongoing sequence of days.


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