

KATHY SOSA:  
A UNIQUE BORDERLAND PAINTER

Our expectation of “painting” is not too different from what was expected of it several centuries ago: a “representation” of the world we live in at a particular or specific time. Today however, we grapple to understand the *global* dimension of art and how it has changed over time, a time in which the term “visual culture” replaced painting, drawing, collage and other traditional genres’ for reasons that have less *to do with definition* than with *method*.

Of course, the world keeps changing just as the history of representational art has changed to the extent that the depictions of say a “landscape” or a “portrait” have adapted to a set of contexts that differ from artist to artist, from location to location. The benefits of diversity in art are obvious — it is more interesting, more vital, and above all more just to have an egalitarian range of voices.

Kathy Sosa’s social context is very much the “America” of our lifetime, an America that goes shifting as one travels from East to West or North to South and vice versa. Her work does what all the best of portraiture does, to present us with a specific moment of social history, or rather *her* social history as observed in her paintings and collages which formally alternate from either their Mexican or Tejano-borderland as well as its “American” ancestry, one that is charged with historically conflicting assumptions, such as race, class and most of all, identity. A mixture of identities is prominently present in Sosa’s portraits like *Angel De La Arbol No2 On My Mind Night Sky Angel* or *Arbol Blanco No3 On My Mind Nopalitos Varios*, both from her *Trees of Life* series whose titles point to the rich as well as peculiar variety of US Borderland visual and verbal *Mestizaje*.<sup>1</sup>

In another of Sosa’s series titled *Faces*, some of which are self-portraits while others remind us of the varied ‘mask’ traditions around the world, such as those in Mexico or even further like – for instance - the Japanese *No* theater in her #9 or #25 paintings or *Las Mascaras*; however, and more importantly, as we look beyond the surface of Sosa’s *Faces*, its sitters return our gaze and confront us with questions of how to see oneself in public: does this differ from our idea of self in private? Are Sosa’s models aware that their painted identities may be scrutinized in public or, or do they consider their modeling for the artist a private affair, not to be shared with the public?

In another series of *Women*, begun in the *Faces*, the viewer will observe a multiplicity of identities, thereby referencing and building a complex assemblage inhabited by communities of women on backgrounds that are never neutral but visually charged.

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<sup>1</sup> Reference to *La Raza C3smica* by Jos3 Vasconcelos, (1882 – 1959) called the “cultural *caudillo*” of the Mexican Revolution, was an important Mexican writer, philosopher, and politician. He is one of the most influential and controversial personalities in the development of modern Mexico. His philosophy of the “cosmic race” affected all aspects of Mexican sociocultural, political, and economic policies.

Needless to say, they are all inspired by specific women, including herself, each with their unique features.

Taking influence from Modern artists like Modigliani and Matisse<sup>2</sup>, or Henri Rousseau or contemporary artists such as David Hockney or Alex Katz, Sosa's paintings, appear to allude to a certain innocent Modernity. It brings the viewer to reflect that Innocence is a romantic luxury in America — gifted to some and withheld from others.

And, as we examine each and every work, the overriding theme seems to again point to issues related to identity — our collective or individual identity? Identity is, and always has been, a very suspect construction in which some are visible, others are hidden, while some are both.

The overall pictorial straightforward flatness in most of Sosa's imagery, makes her figures reside on surfaces that evoke much contemporary painting. However, in several works in the *Huipiles* series the background surfaces are a rich layer of imagery, such as those found on painted colonial wood-carved baroque saints or the highly ornate *Monjas Coronadas*, a portrait genre in XVII Century Mexico as well as certain patterns of Mexican indigenous loom weavings. And, they even remit us further back, to examples of the Italian Renaissance Madonna's.

However, Sosa's "sitters" or models are for the most part on backgrounds that reduce visual noise in order to focus the viewer's attention on their faces, topped by heavily adorned headdresses. As mentioned prior, what strikes the viewer is that they all stare right back at us, heightening our consciousness of looking, while we are at the same time reminded that these "portraits" represent actual individuals. This is Sosa's *method*: she has portrayed a distinct body of individuals for years and, as we look further, we realize that their idiosyncrasies suggest and elicit backstories we, as viewers, are not privy to. As such Sosa's art becomes a kind of narrative quiz, anchored in storytelling, we – her viewers – are left to try to complete by ourselves, as though presenting us with unfinished scripts.

Fashion and portrait photography also play a role and clearly influence Sosa's compositions, starting with the clothes her figures are donned with. Rarely drab, they feature dazzling patterns in bright colors, which contrast and add fascinating oscillations between flatness and illusions of form as in *Senora Lopez*, *Somos Huipilistas* and *Olivia's Offering*.

In her Series titled, *Trees of Life* Sosa has clearly let her imagination run loose, traveling far and in distinctly varied directions while bringing to life her mind's roaming's, much like that of the original characteristic tradition of the *Arbol de la Vida* artisan ceramists of Metepec, Mexico, whose fantasy and detailed narratives are infinite. Sosa's titles point

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<sup>2</sup> Contributing Editor at Art News magazine, Ann Landi, stated "...a successful synthesis of lessons learned from European Modernism with rich folkloric traditions. Modigliani, Matisse, and Mexico...", from a text on Kathy Sosa.

to those connections, as in *Archangel Contemplating Creation On My Mind* or *Corazon On My Sleeve On My Mind* or *Angel del Arbol No 2 On My Mind Night Sky Angel*.<sup>3</sup>

Visual art is almost always a translation of impressions of the physical world, on a continuum that ranges from the most realistic of figurative practices, such as Sosa's work, through the most abstract or nonrepresentational modes. These two endpoints are often portrayed as being in opposition. However, prior to the emergence of abstract art, the illusion of visible reality had been at the core of art making practices, with artists getting ever more accurate in depicting real things--or people--in real spaces and ... until Modernism presented a drastic departure from realistic depictions of the physical world. The conventional art historical narrative of Modern Art presents a story of a contentious shift from figuration into non-objective abstract art, creating a gap between the two. Only in the later part of the 20th century would this intellectual wound separating abstraction and figuration begin to mend, as artists emerged that embraced both. Today we can appreciate how the historical conflicts between the languages of figuration and abstraction ultimately enabled artists of the present moment to be "bilingual" and work in either abstract or figurative art. A consideration particularly relevant in Sosa's case.

Taken in its entirety, Kathy Sosa's body of work, presents us with a dazzling and uplifting opportunity to share her Borderland portrait-stories, all of which echo the welcome saying, "The most personal is the most creative".

Carla Stellweg  
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<sup>3</sup> Originally used during the early colonial period, the *Tree of Life* was intended to indoctrinate and teach the gospel to the indigenous population of Mexico. The first trees of life illustrated biblical passages, such as the story of Adam and Eve, This mechanism, to evangelize the native population, over the centuries became an often wild fusion of Spanish and indigenous techniques and designs.