

2008

Metaphors of the Heart

Sharon L. Kennedy

Interim Curator at Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska- Lincoln

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sheldonpubs>



Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#)

Kennedy, Sharon L., "Metaphors of the Heart" (2008). *Sheldon Museum of Art Catalogues and Publications*. 46.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sheldonpubs/46>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Sheldon Museum of Art at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sheldon Museum of Art Catalogues and Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

SHeldon
MUSEUM OF ART
SHELDON ART ASSOCIATION

Metaphors of the Heart



LUIS GONZÁLEZ PALMA, *SOMBRAS DE UN NINEZ* (THE SHADOWS OF HIS YOUTH), 2004, KODALITH AND GOLD LEAF IN RESIN, PRIVATE COLLECTION

Luis González Palma

March 28 - June 1, 2008

The images in *Metaphors of the Heart* are the creations of impassioned photographer Luis González Palma. The Mayan and Mestizo subjects of Palma's portraits radiate beauty and spiritual strength and at the same time an intense sorrow that tugs at the heartstrings. His photographs of empty rooms are lonely yet elegantly dignified spaces. For the viewer, the emotional connection is immediate.

Palma's life in Latin America, a place rich in cultural heritage and political struggles, and his Catholic upbringing might explain his desire and perhaps also his need to express these dualities in his photographs. Palma was born in Guatemala in 1957. His country's civil war had a profound effect on his young adult years. Trained as an architect Palma also studied filmmaking but his schooling at the University was interrupted by the threat of strife. His Catholic rearing and interest in the passion and suffering depicted in religious iconography, as well as pre-colonial religious mythology, add a mystic reverence to his imagery.

Palma's career in photography began in 1984 when he borrowed a camera to photograph dancers and their movement. This led to an interest in performers and circus personnel, costumes and drama. An early objective for Palma was to challenge standard photography and to create a reality infused with artificiality.

In 1987 he began copying his images on wood, cloth, manuscripts and even stone. And, although Palma photographs indigenous people, he makes a conscious effort to avoid a documentary style. His subjects are often friends and acquaintances who participate in the drama created by the artist. Yet, Palma's intent is sincere. For him the indigenous faces of his chosen subjects are metaphors for sorrow and pain. The silent communication of the gaze in his portraits represents the fear and silence in which Guatemalans have lived their lives.¹

Early influences on Palma include baroque religious paintings of Guatemala as well as the works of English pioneer photographer Julia Margaret Cameron (1815-1879). He adhered to Cameron's philosophy



FIGURE 2. LUIS GONZÁLEZ PALMA, *MILAGRO (MIRACLE)*, 1993, SEPIA-TONED PHOTOGRAPH WITH COLLAGE, UNL-F.M. HALL COLLECTION

of seeking to record the inner human psyche as well as its outer appearance. This appeal of internal or spiritual strength might be a result of the turmoil of his early years. When explaining his inability to move about freely because of the fear of being killed, Palma said: "... a lot of life turns back in on oneself and becomes an interior life rather than an exterior life."²

In addition to the elegance he found in the early photographs of Cameron, the contemporary photography of Joel Peter Witkin and Mike and Doug Starn also influenced Palma. The magic realism of his work also has been compared to Latin American literature such as that of author Gabriel Garcia Marquez and poet Luis Borges. Palma has written and published his own poetry, some of which accompanies his artwork.

The earliest works in *Metaphors of the Heart* are from Palma's series called *La Loteria I* (The Lottery 1). This card game, introduced by Spanish conquerors to teach Spanish language to the Indians, is still popular at rural fairs throughout Guatemala. Of the nine images placed in three rows like those on a



LUIS GONZÁLEZ PALMA, *SEBASTIAN*, 2003, HAND-PAINTED GELATIN SILVER PRINT, COURTESY OF WEINSTEIN GALLERY, MINNEAPOLIS

bingo card, three are included in the exhibition: (fig. 1) *La Rosa* (The Rose), *La Luna* (The Moon) and *El Rey* (The King). Palma's Mayan subjects possess dignity, pride and inner beauty while taking on the persona of characters in the game. He achieves a sepia tone in these works by painting asphaltum, a brown solution of oil or turpentine mixed with asphalt, over a black and white photograph. For Palma, the sepia tone represents Guatemalan churches blackened by candle smoke. It is also symbolic of aging bark sheets in which ancient Mayans wrote their books.³ To enhance select areas he removes the color with an alcohol-based solution. For example, in *La Rosa*, the roses and part of the woman's eyes are highlighted in white giving her an intensity that the artist desired. The reverential treatment and painstaking handwork seen in Palma's photographs have been likened to the work that goes into making icons. Likewise, the lasting, spiritual appearance that the artist's subjects exude, along with their conventional pose and piercing gaze could be compared to iconic figures found in a place of worship.

The 1993 photograph titled (fig. 2) *Milagro* (Miracle) from the Sheldon's collection reflects the artist's fascination with the Guatemalan circus and performance. Dressed in a traditional, elegant costume, the individual stares directly at the viewer and rivets our attention. To capture such powerful images, Palma builds a rapport with his sitter and considers the process a collaborative effort between photographer and subject. He recognizes that he is not Mayan nor does he speak the language. He simply wishes to share the historical and emotional sorrow of the indigenous Guatemalans.

A photograph taken one year later in 1994, *Latania II* makes a direct reference to the political violence in

Guatemala. During the 1980s, as civil war continued throughout the country, the militaristic government made aggressive moves to stamp out leftist activity. Indigenous people as well as writers, artists and organized workers with leftist leanings were targeted. People disappeared and were never seen again. During this time it is believed that 200,000 people were killed.⁴ *Latania II* represents the silence and fear that pervaded the country. In the background of the image Palma places small photographs of unidentified men and women into numerous rows. In the center he inserts



LUIS GONZALEZ PALMA, *COMO UN SECRETO SE SEDUCE A SI MISMO* (LIKE A SECRET HE SEDUCES HIMSELF), 2005
KODALITH AND GOLDFLEAF IN RESIN, COURTESY OF THE WEINSTEIN GALLERY, MINNEAPOLIS

a large-scale photograph of a woman who gazes at the viewer. She represents the individual within the masses. She is the victim as well as one of those left behind. Below the image, Palma drapes a solitary blood-red ribbon.

Palma's more recent work, dating between 2004 and 2005, was produced in Argentina where he now lives. In a series of empty interior shots, evocative rooms and vacant chairs symbolize the absence of someone who was once there. The images of dilapidated architecture and its furnishings and decorative elements reference Spanish colonialism. Like much of his work,

the mood is solemn, heightened by Palma's process of printing on clear ortho film, laid over a deep red board covered with sheets of gold leaf and encased in resin. The rich color shows through the gold in every crack or seam and accentuates the lines on multiple surfaces such as wood grain, lace texture or peeling wall paint. The resin adds age to the pieces and is a metaphor for memory.

Luis González Palma has been deeply moved by his life experiences. The atrocities of civil war as well as the extraordinary resilience of those who have suffered are expressed in the photographs of *Metaphors of the Heart*. In explaining these dualities in his home country Palma said:

"I live in a country where there is so much mysticism and so much violence at the same time, where you are enjoying nature, the helicopters are flying overhead and you know they are going to bomb some region; where you know that as you are working, someone is being killed or someone is being baptized."⁵

Sharon L. Kennedy
Interim Curator

Metaphors of the Heart was made possible through the generous support of the Wake Charitable Foundation, the Sheldon Art Association and the Nebraska Arts Council.

Special thanks to Karen and Robert Duncan, Kathy and Marc LeBaron, Linda Esterling and Steve Wake, the Schneider Gallery of Chicago and the Weinstein Gallery of Minneapolis for lending photographs to this exhibition.



FIGURE 1. LUIS GONZÁLEZ PALMA, *LA ROSA (THE ROSE)*, 1989, HAND-PAINTED SILVER PRINT, PRIVATE COLLECTION

ENDNOTES

¹ Landmark Arts, *Silence of the Gaze*, exhibition guide and panel discussion text, March-May, 1999, Texas Tech University, p. 6.

² Landmark Arts, p. 5.

³ Orive, Maria Cristina, *Luis Gonzalez Palma*, La Azotea Editorial Fotografica, Buenos Aires, Argentina, 1993, p. 10.

⁴ Landmark Arts, p. 3.

⁵ Wood, John, "The Death of Romanticism, the Birth of New Science, and the Poet of Sorrows." *In Poems of Sorrow*. Compiled by Luis Gonzalez Palma. Santa Fe, N.M.: Arena Editions, 1999. p. 5.