

## Spiritual Dynamics in the Mosquera Art Collection

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While the title of this exhibition pays homage to the one used by Kandinsky for his landmark 1911 treatise, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, the artwork presented here stands apart from that specifically advocated by the Russian master. Kandinsky wrote of an art free from real world appearances that manifests the transcendent, immaterial realm and serves to elevate the viewer's perceptions and soul. Only a handful of the pieces included in the exhibition are purely abstract; most feature representations of human figures, animals, landscapes, and the like. Further, while all art may be understood to be a product of an artist's vision and as a means of individual expression, not every work offered here emerged from a sense of urgency on the part of the artist to communicate essential truths about the world, the human experience, and what lies beyond. Yet each was selected for inclusion from among the works in the vast Mosquera Collection because Liza and Dr. Arturo F. Mosquera conceive of each piece as fundamentally spiritual.<sup>1</sup> Each has stirred something deep inside of them, heightening their perceptions and uplifting their souls. Driven by "inner necessity," a term used by Kandinsky to refer to the desire to materialize the unbounded nature of the spiritual, the collectors have sought to share these pieces with us.

The definition of "the spiritual" as it pertains to the works in the exhibition is generalized, broad, and highly personal, best seen as a mosaic or composite. Although it was curated specifically for Belen Jesuit Preparatory School, less than a handful of the works make explicit use of Christian iconography. References to Eastern philosophy, the zodiac, the occult, and talismans of various sorts are found.<sup>2</sup> "Spirituality" here refers to art that ignites the soul

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<sup>1</sup> The Mosqueras have long made a practice of acquiring the work of artists in depth, so that for any number of the artists whose works are featured here, multiple works addressing various subjects, often spanning years and even decades, are represented. The pieces featured in the present exhibition are a selection of those considered to be of particular spiritual resonance.

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that when "spirituality" is discussed in relation to art, it is generally in reference to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's 1986 landmark exhibition, *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890-1985*, which traced the origins of Western abstraction (the art of Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, Kasimir Malevich, Frantisek Kupka, Hilma af Klint, and others) to late 19<sup>th</sup> century ideas about black magic, spiritualism, and the occult, much of

and stimulates the imagination, art that invites us into an encounter with the world and with ourselves. The exhibition features art that has the capacity to transport us to states of reverie or awe at the wonders of the world and its creatures. It encompasses art that addresses what it is to be alive and to engage in life's journey, to have strivings, dreams, and deeply felt emotions. Yet, ultimately, as Charlene Spretnak wrote in her book *The Spiritual Dynamic in Modern Art* (2014), the spiritual "must necessarily extend beyond the sense of a self to a sense of our embeddedness in the larger context: the exquisitely dynamic interrelatedness of existence, the vibratory flux of the subtle realms of the material world, and the ultimate creativity of the universe."<sup>3</sup>

Our exploration of the myriad ways the highly divergent works in all media presented in the exhibition may be understood as "spiritual," will begin with a sculpture that points directly to a religious figure. Pablo Cano's *Guardian Angel* (2005) is a 5-foot-tall assemblage that consists of a red trash can, a vacuum cleaner hose, a Pepsi garbage can, a large silver trophy, and laboratory beakers, among other items, topped by a photograph of a woman's face. The angel's shoulders and upper arms consist largely of glass parts drawn from what appears to have been an old, ornate chandelier, while her diminutive forearms and hands are those of a marionette. While grounded in everyday reality by virtue of her materials, she has an otherworldly presence and beauty.

Religious structures are referred to in Alejandro Aguilera's *Arbol de Sueño* (*Dream Tree*, 2001), in which what appears to be a chapel carved into a tree trunk is topped by a tall, openwork metal armature, as if to symbolically suggest that the modern world rests on solid, ancient foundations. Karina Chechik's painting *Architectures of Light: St. Henry's Ecumenical Art Chapel, Finland* (2011) presents the upward-aspiring interior of an existing church that is illuminated by a seeming divine light. Cisco Jimenez's complex, multipart collage *Molecular*

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it inspired by mystical Theosophical doctrine. For a later, still more thorough examination of the subject, see footnote 3 below.

<sup>3</sup> Charlene Spretnak, *The Spiritual Dynamic in Modern Art: Art History Reconsidered, 1800 to the Present*, London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014. For a review, see <https://theawakenedeye.com/tag/charlene-spretnak/>

*Coatlicue* (2013) also takes architecture as subject. Among the artist's aims in this piece was the desire to show the manner in which the modular forms with which the image of the Aztec earth goddess Coatlicue are traditionally rendered, presaged and influenced ancient, modern, and futuristic urban architecture.

Several segmented skull-like forms appear in Jimenez's collage and skulls, traditional symbols of death and mortality, figure prominently in the exhibition. One is seen in Franklin Cassaro's tiny round *Cranio* (*Cranium*, 2002) made of tin foil and another in Christian Duran's painting *Easter* (2007), which presents a large skull seen in profile spewing capillary-like plant growth. As per its title, which references the time of Christ's resurrection, the latter is an image of religious inspiration that fuses death with regeneration. Arturo E. Mosquera, the son of the collectors, who recently met a most tragic early demise, is represented by several works in the exhibition, one of them being the expressionistically painted *Death* (2021). Here, the jaunty, vitally alive image seems to make use of an alternate interpretation often offered for the skull—that of the braincase as a symbol of wisdom and courage. The skull as an emblem of death is again exploited in Ali Prosch's video memento mori, *Vanitas (Worms and Flesh) For Ancient Light* (2017), in which a still shot records objects on a table that include a death's head, flickering candle, slowly crawling worm, flowers, makeup, crystals, and various items of ritual. As the artist once said, the video "...offers a meditative view of a contemporary witch's table. Beauty and the grotesque coalesce in wretched harmony."<sup>4</sup> Among the objects in Prosch's *nature morte* is the Hamsa Hand, an open hand with an eye at its center, which is an ancient Middle Eastern symbol intended to ward off the evil eye and bring health and happiness. Yet another Hamsa Hand is seen at the top center of Julio Antonio's painting *Iconic Bubble* (1997), in which mask-like faces and skull-like heads set in a large circle (the "bubble") float above a schematic landscape.

Kevin Arrow spent a year living in the Himalayas helping to restore a Buddhist shrine, after which several of his paintings took the form of Buddhist mandalas: symmetrical, intricately segmented circles that represent an ideal universe, which are intended for

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<sup>4</sup> Ali Prosch in "Check out Ali Prosch's Artwork," *Voyage LA*, December 3, 2018, <http://voyagela.com/interview/check-ali-proschs-artwork/>

devotional meditation and contemplation. In the painting shown here, a tiger, the Chinese emblem for the year of his birth and a symbol of strength and courage, pounces on an elk in each of the four corners of the work. Gene Moreno's *Black Zodiac* (2007) is a hanging assemblage consisting of a crazy quilt of found fabrics overlaid with a chaotic tangle of ribbons, chains, found objects, and symbols of assorted kinds. The title refers to the dark, demonic, lesser-known side of the astrological chart. A fiendish presence is seen in the glaring, double-eyed, snouted being in Sara Stite's *Sacrum* (2007), a large, gorgeously rendered mixed media work on paper. The title, which means "sacred" in Latin, may also refer to the pelvis, which appears to have given form to the lower portion of the creature's face. The dark side of dreams is evoked by Juan Pablo Ballester's close-up photograph of an eye *Sin Titulo* (*Untitled*, 1996) that may initially appear to have been shot through with electric current. Close examination, however, reveals that the pupil, iris, and sclera have been replaced by an image of the sea. Water spills out of the eye in the form of a tear.

The stuff of dreams, bouts of the imagination, and journeys inward are found in several works in the exhibition that are figurative and quasi-narrative in conception and structure. In Ana Albertina Delgado's *Escape Adentro* (*Inner Escape*, 1992), a woman kneels seemingly in contemplation before a large flaming or churning orifice. The mushroom-like table beside her recalls another inward journey, one that is referenced in Odalis Valdivieso's marvelous video *Intersection* (*Traveling Fontana*, 2001). During the first moments of the film, which are seen in black and white, the camera slowly zooms in on the slit in one of Italian master Lucio Fontana's abstract "Spatialist" compositions, works intended to symbolically transport viewers to spiritual realms. Valdivieso, however, carries us into Disney animation's *Alice in Wonderland* world, one alive with bright colors, upbeat rhythms, and pulsating images. Yet another dreamlike journey is found in Jaie Hwang's video, *I am the smallest planet of my own* (*story tell*, 2004) in which a donut, butterfly, tricycle, goldfish, flamingo, seahorse, spaceship, among a host of other objects and animals float above landscapes in evocations of childhood experience and wonder. Alicia Carletti's painting *Secret Garden* (1994) presents a Surrealistic fantasy of childhood that harks back to an earlier era. Here, a young girl in an old-fashioned dress with a Peter Pan collar

confronts a display of gigantic faded roses, toy fish, and a circus monkey, all of them seemingly animate.

An aggressively haunting image is seen in Asser Saint Val's Surrealist dreamscape of 2011, which is part of an extended series of works by the Haitian American artist in which he references scientific research devoted to neuromelanin and the pigmentation of Black skin. Using a variety of materials (among them shoe polish and coffee) to enhance his paintings' "skins," he creates images of flying machines composed of mechanical, human, botanical, and other elements that travel over landscapes. Glexis Novoa's *Benares* (2013), presents a magical city at the edge of the sea, many of whose structures (Brancusi's *Endless Column* notwithstanding) seem to have been inspired by bulbous undersea creatures. A moon or planet hovers close to shore. Meticulously drawn in graphite on stone, this work suggests a relic from an earlier age, the rendering of city lost in space and time.

As Charlene Spretnak wrote in *The Spiritual Dynamic in Modern Art*, "Throughout time and across cultures, people ... have experienced a spiritual dimension of nature where they were able to quiet their mind, immerse themselves in nature's presence, and open themselves in communication with this larger context." Finding spiritual solace in nature and landscape is expressed in any number of works in the exhibition, among them Gustavo Acosta's *Soñar en Manchego* (*Dreaming in Manchego*, 1995), which presents a nocturnal vision of a parade of flamelike trees extending into both the heavens and distance. This painting offers nature's counterpoint to the nave of Chechik's sunlit church interior discussed above. Jay Ore's *A Million Miles Away* (2008) features a majestic, star-filled night sky in which constellations are surprisingly and rather endearingly given the form of a pair of ants. In his at once vigorously and tenderly rendered graphite and acrylic painting *Swipe Over Ring* (1979), Baruj Salinas evokes the power and majesty of the ocean's creative and destructive force. Although modest in scale, this work stands in the aesthetic tradition of the Sublime, a centuries-old concept pertaining to landscapes of greatness or grandeur that inspire awe and wonder.

The Sublime may also be experienced in Raul Perdomo's large scale painting, *In a Time Beyond Man's Follies Even the Angels Fear to Tread* (2010), which appears to present an abstracted confluence of subatomic particles floating in endless, undefined space. Perdomo has

indicated that his imagery is appropriated from an expansive range of sources ranging from molecular physics and cosmology to MRI scans and cartography. He has explained that by combining science fiction with scientific means of inquiry in this and other works, he seeks to examine “the paradoxical quest of redefining meaning lost in a time of phenomenal technological progress. I am trying to create an imagined language, which charts the interrelated consequences between structured orders and chance randomness.”<sup>5</sup>

The search for meaning in the universe, in the world, and in one’s life journey is the focus of several works in assorted media included in the exhibition and particularly in video. It is found, for example, in Elizabeth Withstandley’s *Search for the Miraculous, Part 1: One Day in Death Valley* (2018), the first segment of a complex, multi-directional trilogy. The video seen here shows a young boy as he slowly makes his way across the landscape of Death Valley at sunset, while reciting lines from a wide range of Hollywood films, most involving the nature of existence. A fragment of one such quotation, from the movie *Synecdoche* (2008) is, as follows: “And they say there is no fate, but there is. It’s what you create. And even though the world goes on for eons and eons, you are here for a fraction of a second.” Amalia Caputo’s video *Relentless* (2016) shows two women, one younger dressed in white and the other somewhat older dressed in black, endlessly running up, down, and around the stairs that encircle an elevator cage, the intention being to manifest the passage of time, life, and womanhood. In Humberto Castro’s *The Walker* (2013), the camera follows a man’s bare legs as he travels over a variety of surfaces, from shallow waters and sand on the seashore to grass, gravel, a paved road, and more. He is presumably an Everyman, one who proceeds on an ever-changing, but anti-climactic journey. In contrast, Adriano Buergo’s painting *Roto se congela (Broken Freezes Over)*, 2001), gives form to a dramatic and poignant moment. In the late 1980s, while he was still living in his native Havana, Buergo began the Roto (“Broken”) Series, which took as its protagonist a component of a no-longer-functioning American air conditioning unit that was turned into a primitive, working fan. Roto symbolized adaptability, resilience, and the struggle for survival in an environment of deprivation and hostility and became a surrogate for the

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<sup>5</sup> Raul Perdomo, Artist Statement, <https://www.raulperdomo.com/artist-statement>

artist's self. Roto followed Buergo when he moved to Miami in the 1990s and has appeared in his art in many incarnations.

A meditative quietude infuses the imagery of Lilliam Cuenca's *On the Other Side* (2003), one of several works in the exhibition that focus not on the human condition, but on the animal world. In this work, an unidentifiable creature swims in a swath of white in a composition of seeming encroaching darkness. It appears to offer an image of heroic survival. In Jorge Camacho's painting *Rapaces (Raptors, 1984)* a bird of prey flies over and, by virtue of its color and form, is submerged in and at one with the landscape. Maria Fernanda Cardoso's video *Chickenface, Fishface, Batface* (2001-2003) presents an at once amusing, grotesque, and awe-inspiring look at the wonders of the natural world. It offers close-up views of a wide variety of animals, some of which resemble humans.

A merging not of an animal, but of an insect and the human is found in Miguel Ronsino's *Mariposa gota de sangre (Butterfly Drop of Blood, 2006-2007)*, which is steeped in Christian iconography. In a painting infused with gorgeous, jewel-toned colors and both highly textured and meltingly lush brushwork, Ronsino describes the form of the winged creature. At the same time, the central element in Ronsino's triptych is clearly that of a human figure and it is immediately understood that the artist is giving representation to the resurrection of Christ. The butterfly's release from the cocoon, which is accompanied by a drop of a red, blood-like liquid, is a traditional symbol of the risen Christ. Thus, the painting brings us full circle back to the start of this inquiry into the spiritual dimension of the work included in the exhibition. It recalls Pablo Cano's winged *Guardian Angel* and Christian Duran's *Easter*, which also signifies the rebirth of Christ.

As we have seen, however, "the spiritual" in art extends beyond a concentration on religious imagery to include a wide range of artistic expression that invites us into encounters with nature, the cosmos, and ourselves. The work in the exhibition testifies to the creativity of artists, who employ a multitude of means by which to convey meaning. The exhibition stands too as a testament to the vision of the collectors, to their openness to experience, and to their consciousness of the spiritual dynamics of art and life.

That this presentation of artwork from the Mosquera Collection focuses on the spiritual —what Spretnak eloquently described as “a sense of our embeddedness in the larger context: the exquisitely dynamic interrelatedness of existence”—is of special relevance today. At a time that sees our nation frighteningly divided, a war raging in Eastern Europe, a pandemic virus endlessly mutating, the looming threat of environmental disaster, and much more that is disheartening and disempowering, a heightened awareness of our connection to each other and the world around us is both urgent and necessary.