

## TAPESTRY OF HISTORY

### COLLABORATIVE MURAL CREATED IN GUATEMALA IN JANUARY 2008

We started this year 2008 with an invitation: to return to Guatemala to work in a collaborative and community-based project with people from ECAP (Equipo de Capacitación y de Ayuda Psicosocial) and several other human rights agencies that came to Guatemala City to create a workshop on “muralism”.

The mural created last year in February in Antigua, Guatemala, by survivors of massacres, left a legacy of beauty and commitment towards the communities. Franc Kernjak, Lidia Yoc and Olinda told us about the impact that the mural caused while it transited among the different communities from where the participants were from, Chajul, Nebaj, Chimaltenango, Ixil, Ixcán and Rabinal.

This new initiative of muralism in 2008 convoked a group of 25 people. They were social psychologists who work with ECAP assisting victims of violence and massacres; social workers; people who work in human rights agencies and activists who are part of human rights organisms.

The site for the mural was the office of ECAP. It measured about 45 feet long by 6 feet tall. The participants had never done art previously to this project but everyone had been moved about the work created last year and they were willing to partake in this new project.

On Monday, January 21, the workshop started. It was the day of presentations. We shared the work we do in our School of Art and Open Studio of Perquin, El Salvador. Claudia Verónica Flores Escolero, Rosa del Carmen Argueta and Rigoberto Rodríguez Martínez, artists and teachers of our school, showed artwork created by children, youth and adults in our classes and community and collaborative workshops, placing emphasis in the murals that we have created all over Morazán. América Argentina Vaquerano, Dina, who could not come with us on this trip, created all the visual material, power points, and publicity material besides being our “logistic” specialist in the organizing of this trip

In order to continue formulating connections between history, art and activism, I showed work of Argentine artists who use art as a way to denounce, to provoke, to initiate debate about taboo and fatal subjects such as violations of human rights, massacres and the legacy of violence generated by institutionalized state terror.

A cultural aspect from Guatemala, quite different to El Salvador, for instance, is the silence of the victims. I lack authority to address this complex and multifaceted issue. Empirically, however, what I can say is that it is very different to work with Salvadoran people than to do the same with Guatemalan communities. Guatemalan people are reserved, a lot more careful when they choose to speak, less willing to share their thoughts or their feelings.

On the second day, Tuesday January 23, I asked the group, as a way to reflect, what had stayed with them from the day before? What images had accompanied them? What thoughts?

Remarkably, the participants spoke as if they were opening their souls. They gave information not only about what had made an impact during the presentations but they also shared with the group, personal and private accounts filled with sadness and lament. They told us about their desire to use those memories as part of the subject of the mural.

From that moment on, each drawing was a testimony.

Each line a memory. Each image a name.

The collective memories became alive in sketches and with no effort, this group of people who had never done art started populating 45 feet of stretched canvas with images that were generated in community and collaboratively.

The central image painted by Paulita, who later collaborated with Haidee and Olinda, is, perhaps, the synthesis of the main message of the mural: An indigenous woman with her garments trapped in a mortuary bandage, lies under a tree that seems to acquire life through the death of this woman whose soul, as a Nahual, is escaping from her in a subtle whisper. The tree of life has in its center a bright circle shining like a sun. Initially, this circular shape was thought to be a clock but in the development of the mural, the idea of time became more abstract, more poetic, it became a statement for that which has no end, for eternity.

As in the mural painted last year, this one has a frame with designs generated from the embroideries of a *huipil*. The artists involved in the drawings of the abstract shapes of the frame were so demanding that they were christened "The United Nations of the Huipiles". Each decision became a diplomatic process.

In the extreme left side of the mural, Santos from Chajul, painted a beautiful textile from Nebaj. Under the vertical textile, there is a Spanish Conqueror. The scale is eloquent: 500 years of Conquest had occurred but today the presence of the indigenous culture is present, it is prominent and larger than the Conquistador on his beautiful white horse.

Some of the recurrent images emerging from early ideas were those referring to empty garments, absent clothing, dresses without people. Each of the participants of this workshop knows well enough the tragedy of massacres and the sadness of exhumations. It is always moving to find in mass graves or in clandestine cemeteries, the remains of life accumulated in garments, in children clothing, in the smallness of tiny shirts that had belonged to the assassinated babies. It is a cruel testimony filled with tenderness.

Jacinta painted a huipil of such veracity that there were some people who thought that she had attached a real huipil from Nebaj on the surface of the mural. Its delicacy, its embroideries and the complexity of detail are showing Jacinta's wonderful skills as an artist.

Franc started his sketch from a group of absent clothing that later was painted by Inés. The empty garments followed by a chromatic circle, embody the mandate of ECAP: to assist the victims. Underneath the chromatic circle, Lidia painted a group of people some of whom have their eyes covered, some others are showing a demanding expression, some others have their mouths wide open as a claim for attention, they are demanding justice.

In the left area of the mural, there is a building. Looking at it from my ignorance it appears to be a colonial building. For our Guatemalan friends, however, it is a testimony of terror. This building represents the National Police station that served as clandestine center of detention. Felipe had the idea of its inclusion and delegated in Mariola its rendering. Mariola undertook the task with the seriousness of an architect painting and repainting, walls, windows and balconies. Luis Felipe designed a torture room hidden under the building. There is a red human figure asphyxiated within grey walls providing information, eloquently, of what had happened in that place.

Maria José, Carmelita and Inés created, collaboratively, a female figure. This woman has no mouth, no nose. She has disproportionate huge eyes placed in an empty face, looking frightened. This woman, populated by red lines in a mapping of blood, has a circulatory system that travels through her body from the roots of her feet towards the very center of her body where the growth of tender leaves speak, quietly about rebirth. From her open arms and generous exposed hands, the woman gives away photographs narrating violence: burning communities, disappeared people, raped women, a complete family of parents, children and even a dog, before they were killed by military repression.

Over the years, I have found artwork that seems to capture as in a perfect verse, the essence of an idea. This woman surrounded by death, traveled by a circuit of blood and rebirth is one of the most remarkable images I have ever seen of cultural and political resistance in Latin America.

Santos, Juan and Hugo, designed a landscape where the beauty of nature confronts the presence of clandestine cemeteries. There is an ample, white and beautiful church. Adjacent to it, in a "*camposanto*", there is an "official" cemetery. While one looks at this landscape, it is possible to identify locations of accumulated earth containing skeletons looking at us as if they were asking our help to reach light. Jacinta painted a terrorized woman hidden behind a tree who sees skeletons in the deep waters of a peaceful river. There is helicopter above the woman. From its motion, soldiers are throwing people into the river. They will never emerge.

Towards the right side of the timeless tree of life, Rosa del Carmen Argueta, artist from the School of Art and Open Studio of Perquin, painted an homage to our dear friend Santiago whose untimely death left us orphans of his calm

presence, his detailed landscapes and his commitment to his community. On the mural Santiago is holding a brush that spills magenta paint from his right hand which acquires the shape of a ribbon of light extending itself from above the tree of life.

Santiago, beyond volcanoes and hills, is holding in his left hand, triumphantly, a plant of corn. Towards the right of Santiago, Delfina, Antonia and Sara, assisted by Carmelita and Olinda painted a group of indigenous people. Men, women and children are marching in protest holding a sign with no words, just with the images of clothing without people. They carry, with reverence, photographs of the disappeared. They are marching towards justice. Immediately adjacent to the marching group there is a Ladino man, in jail, the thick bars of the prison hide, in part his face. This man is a “repressor”. His pained gestures seem to indicate that he, finally, is suffering a disserved sentence.

The first day that we started sharing ideas and images, the presence of the “Screamer” appeared as a strong woman, fearless, decisive, ready to defy silence in order to demand, to shout, and to confront. Virginia painted one of those Screamers, with strident orange whose yellow voice in the form of wavy lines, left no doubt about her intentions.

Lancerio documented the process with photography. Carlos Bazua, a dear friend who is an anthropologist working in Guatemala, was willing to capture the process on tape, hoping to create a documentary about this amazing project.

Matilde painted a naked, pregnant woman. In her ample womb, a baby is growing. An enormous soldier next to the woman has snatched her other child, a toddler of about a year old. The military man has a weapon and he threatens the woman and her child to death. It is a brutal scene. Sadly, this image is well known amongst Guatemalan indigenous people because the brutality of the armed forces of this country was not mitigated while treating women or children. They killed with the same ferocity, men, women, youth, the elderly and even infants. The massacres left no survivors. Matilde painted a dead corn plant next to the woman in danger. The amount of poetry and tragedy that this image contains eludes description.

Hugo in collaboration with Catalina painted a Mayan Calendar, delineated in black lines over a transparent background of blue and green speaking of open spaces, ever-lasting landscapes and eternity. Above the Mayan Calendar, a friend from ECAP painted another “Screamer”. Originally designed by Mariola, this Screamer is a young woman with open mouth, dressed in *huipil* and *corte*. She carries signs demanding respect for Human Rights and attention towards the process of Justice.

Catalina painted on the extreme right side of the mural a colorful spiral, a chromatic scale that emphasizes the passing of time, serene, constant and hopeful in the obtaining of a dignified future, peaceful and plentiful.

For us, artists from the School of Art and Open Studio of Perquin, it has been an honor and a great joy to have shared this week of creativity in Guatemala with our friends gathered by ECAP.

To all of you, THANK YOU VERY MUCH!!!!

Claudia Bernardi  
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Perquin, January 30, 2008.

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