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**YOLANDA LOPEZ: BREAKING
CHICANA STEREOTYPES**

Section:

ART ESSAY

[This essay is taken, in part, from Betty LaDuke's 1992 book, *Women Artists: Multi-Cultural Visions* (Trenton, N.J.: Red Sea Press, 1992,), which explores the life, circumstances, and work of over 11 women artists. It is a culmination of more than a decade of work and is the result of LaDuke's extensive travels through Asia, Latin America, Eastern Europe, and the United States to interview each artist in her own studio. Through both text and pictures, LaDuke examines the indigenous art of women, like **Yolanda Lopez**, who break boundaries and attempt to integrate spiritual and social meanings through their images. Although each woman's story is unique, by presenting them together, LaDuke intends to express a powerful link among their art: "Though they span vast differences in cultural heritage and aesthetic approaches, they do have a common bond, the use of the feminine form as a significant theme for their woven, sculpted, printed, painted, and mixed-media images. As a result of this shared focus, their life-affirming visions become catalysts for my discovery of links among women from diverse parts of the globe."

Betty LaDuke is also the author of *Africa through the Eyes of Women Artists* and *Companieras: Women, Art and Social Change in Latin America*./in accomplished artist herself, LaDuke's mythic visions are presented in the book *Multi-Cultural Celebrations: The Paintings of Betty LaDuke, 1972-1992*, by Gloria Feman Orenstein; several paintings from this book are reprinted in this issue of *Feminist Studies*.-editors]

Yolanda Lopez's art, "driven by love, rage, and a sense of irony,"[1] evolved in new directions between our two meetings in 1983 and 1991.[2] The small San Francisco apartment she shares with her husband, Rene Yanez, and their nine-year-old son, Rio, is cluttered with the art materials they share as well as an extensive collection of **Lopez's** found images. They range from ceramic knickknacks of sleepy Mexicans with large sombreros to examples of commercial packaging and advertisements featuring Latin American stereotypes. The ideas that **Lopez** generates from this collection are dynamic

in scope; evidence of this scope appears when brought to fruition as gallery installations or in the form of slide-lectures and videos. **Lopez's** current multi-media presentations, along with her drawings, graphic designs, and paintings of the past two decades, have had a significant impact upon her community where she is the educational director for the Mission District Culture Center. **Lopez** is also visiting instructor at the California College of Arts and Crafts. She has taught at the University of California, Berkeley, in ethnic studies and has been a California Arts Council member. In addition, she has participated in many local and national exhibits. Raising public consciousness of the misrepresentation of Chicanos in mainstream American culture has been one of **Lopez's** consistent aesthetic goals.

Yolanda Lopez was born in San Diego, California, in 1942 and recalls: "I've always made drawings. In first grade there was a chalkboard, and, while the boys drew airplanes and bombs, I did little farm kids with straw hats." Spanish was spoken at home by her mother, three sisters, and grandparents, who came from Mexico. Their economic survival was precarious, depending primarily on **Lopez's** mother who worked for thirty-two years, first in a hotel laundry as a presser and seamstress and later at San Diego's Naval Training Center. Her grandmother cooked for the family and grew many of the fruits and vegetables they ate. **Lopez's** schooling proceeded with difficulty as she did not understand English and had to "repeat the first grade two or three times." However, her artistic ability was recognized early, and in high school she was encouraged by one of her teachers to apply to the College of Marin, north of San Francisco.

Lopez experienced "culture shock" at the College of Marin and then later when she continued her studies at San Francisco State University. There she heard Blacks and Chicanos "speak out" on various political issues. She realized, "I didn't know anything about my own history or Mexican heritage." **Lopez** joined student organizations to promote ethnic studies programs and more minority scholarships. However, she asserts, it was not until she dropped out of school and moved to San Francisco's Latino Mission District that her "art, politics, and personal history all came together." In San Francisco, she became involved in organizing a neighborhood health clinic, providing legal aid for Mission residents, recruiting for VISTA, doing social work at the Bayside Settlement, Housing Project, and acting as court artist for the political trial of Los Siete ("The Seven"). As a result of these formative experiences, **Lopez** found a direction for her art and "a sense of audience, who I was doing my art for. The streets were my gallery. . . posters, leaflets, lapel buttons, and graphic art for neighborhood newspapers. I saw my work everywhere, and unsigned." Ironically, when **Lopez** later exhibited many of these political images in a group show at Galeria de la Raza in 1970, it was a "mind blower" to her that people had assumed all along that all these unsigned graphic expressions were the work of a man.

After nine years of intensive political activity, **Lopez** experienced "total burnout." She then returned to San Diego and her family in order to focus on her own personal development as an artist. There she

completed her bachelor of arts degree, and, after receiving a Ford Foundation Fellowship in 1973, she entered the graduate program at the University of California at San Diego.

Her earliest imagery evinced "double themes," "my own art work versus the work for school, as it took me a long time to get hip, to realize I could really do what I wanted to do." Chicana women in relation to mainstream society became the theme for her extraordinary three-part graduate art project. First, she created a series of larger than life-size drawings titled Three Generations of Mujeres. These four-by-eight-foot, realistic, non-idealized, monumental drawings of "ordinary women," Daughter: **Yolanda Lopez** (fig. 1), Mother: Margaret S. Stewart (fig. 2), and Grandmother: Victoria E Franco (fig. 3), were made to "work against traditional commercial stereotypes" of Latina women such as "the sexy bombshell or the passive, long-suffering mother."

In the extensive 1978 catalog to her graduate exhibit, held at the Mandeville Center for the Arts in La Jolla, California, **Lopez** describes these monumental drawings:

They stare right back at you. Three Generations: They know who they are and demand acceptance on their own terms An exchange happens between the image and the viewer. Each woman addresses the fact she is being observed. She is not shy or intimidated. The grand size of the image is complemented by the confidence each woman radiates, each in her own style As Raza, as Chicanos/Latinos we yearn to see ourselves reflected as part of humanity[3]

In describing the image of Grandmother: Victoria F. Franco, **Lopez** reminds us that "she is my grandmother. She is all our grandmothers," and that "qualities of a life lived with dignity and self-respect are not limited to my family. They are qualities shared by many women who are not part of the majority culture's concept of being female or feminine," and "as an artist it confirmed my belief that the subject of art resides within our own lives." [4]

The second part of **Lopez's** graduate project is a series of self-portraits titled A Don& Va Chicana? or "Where Are You Going Chicana?" **Lopez** depicts herself as Tile Runner, painted on canvas, approximately four by five feet, with acrylic and oil. These images are based on her jogging in order to lose weight and gain control of her body. In each painting the long, lean figure of **Lopez**, the runner, is depicted realistically, wearing shorts and a T-shirt. The intense California sun casts shadows on her form as she runs by the Mandeville Center (fig. 4). **Lopez** describes this series from the perspective of "a woman calling on her body in an assertive and physically disciplined manner as a power ally." [5] For **Lopez**, The Runner has a threefold significance: "It is female. It is Chicana. It' is a self-portrait. The metaphor extends from the symbolic fortitude of women to the literal image of a Chicana's struggle in a formidable institution." [6] **Lopez** compares a runner's "short-lived speed with women's psychological and physical sustaining power of endurance." She concludes: "Endurance is one of our greatest survival tools."

In her third series titled *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, **Lopez** utilizes the radiating light associated with Guadalupe, the perfect compassionate virgin and mother, as a means for creating symbolic transformation. She defies "the weight of tradition that immobilized woman as a mythic image and fixed her in the form of a statue, thus depriving her of any possibility of action or creative initiative." [7] However, in considering the surface disappearance of the ancient, indigenous, and supreme goddess of creation and her re-emergence as the Christian Virgin, **Lopez** notes that this ancient goddess was not totally suppressed but transformed.

The Virgin of Guadalupe was the Americas' first syncretic figure . . . the pan-Mexican icon of motherhood and *mestizaje*, a transitional figure who emerged only fifteen years after the Conquest as the Christianized incarnation of the Aztec earth and fertility goddess Tonantzin and heiress to Coatlicue, the "Lady of the Snaky Skirt," in her role as blender of dualities.[8]

Lopez transforms the Virgin of Guadalupe in her oil pastel series on paper, each approximately twenty-eight by thirty-two inches, celebrating the lives of ordinary women. In *Mother: Our Lady of Guadalupe*, the rounded, stoop-shouldered form of her mother is portrayed seated at her sewing machine stitching gold stars of hope upon Guadalupe's deep blue robe. An angel with striped red, white, and green wings, the colors of the national flag of Mexico, regards the viewer from under the robe on the floor. Tired and bedspectacled, the mother at rest from her work also gazes at the viewer with the rays of light normally reserved for Guadalupe softly radiating behind her. **Lopez** composed this painting in homage to all working mothers (fig. 5).

I feel living, breathing women also deserve the respect and love lavished on Guadalupe It is a call to look at women, hard working, enduring and mundane, as the heroines of our daily routine We privately agonize and sometimes publicly speak out on the representation of us in the majority culture. But what about the portrayal of ourselves in our own culture? Who are our heroes, our role models? It is dangerous for us to wait around for the dominant culture to define and validate what role models we should have.[9]

In a second portrait, *Grandmother: Our Lady of Guadalupe*, **Lopez** portrays her grandmother seated on a chair covered with a blue-starred robe while a large aura of light emerges behind her. She looks at us as if to say: "This is how it is." Upon her lap, her crossed hands hold a snakeskin and a knife. These are both symbols of her enduring connection with the soil, in providing food for the family. Once again the winged angel emerges behind her as if trying to raise a garland of flowers for this virgin's head (fig. 6). In contrast to the sedentary forms of her mother and grandmother, in the third painting, *Portrait of the Artist: Our Lady of Guadalupe*, we see **Lopez** holding the blue cape over one shoulder with one hand, a live snake in her other hand, as she energetically seems to leap forward toward the viewer. She wears a dress that reveals her muscular legs. Rays of light emanate from behind her form, and her facial expression is confident and smiling (fig. 7). *Portrait of the Artist: Tableau Vivant*, 1978, is another self-

portrait, in which **Lopez** has created a "little scene for myself, like a stage set. I posed inside with my jogging clothes and paintbrushes and then had a friend photograph me." **Lopez** not only commands her body but seems to predict her role as an artist who is not afraid of encountering social and political issues or using her skills to promote social change (fig. 8).

Lopez's installations, festivals, and events have generated much local involvement and publicity. In the San Francisco Chronicle's review, "The Mission District Struts Its Stuff," the Mission neighborhood is described as "a mixture of swagger, style and visual vitality." [10] This comment refers to the 'The Mission Is Bitchin', a multimedia, three --day event, organized by **Lopez** and featuring art, poetry, music, dance, comedy, and panel discussions.

In reviewing New York's Decade Show, Julio Blanc notes that **Lopez's** installation, Things I Never Told My Son about Being a Mexican, and an accompanying video, When You Think of Mexico, "are typical of **Lopez's** devastating critique of the patronizing ethnocentrism that is encoded in so many images that the United States produces of Mexico, and of Latin America as a whole. [11]

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NOTES

1. Susan Gwynne, ed., *"Artistas Chicanas" (Symposium on the Experience and Expression of Chicana Artists, University of California, Santa Barbara, California, 13 April 1991)*.

2. All quotes unless otherwise stated are based on interviews with **Yolanda Lopez** at her home and studio in 1983 and 1991.

3. **Yolanda Lopez, Yolanda Lopez: Three Generations (San Diego, Calif.: Mandeville Center for the Am, San Diego State University, 1978)**.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*

7. Claire Tron de Bouchony, *Women from Witch Hunt to Politics*, ed. Birgitta Leander (France: UNESCO, 1982), 165.

8. Quoted in Lucy Lippard, *Mixed Blessings (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990)*, 42.

9. **Lopez.**

10. *"The Mission District Struts Its Stuff," San Francisco Chronicle, 28 May 1989.*

11. *Julio V. Blanc, "When You Think of Mexico, Latin American Women in the Decade Show," Arts Magazine (April 1990): 17.*

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Fig. 1. Daughter: **Yolanda Lopez** (Three Generations of Mujeres), charcoal and conte crayon on paper, 4 x 8 feet, 1977. Photo courtesy of **Yolanda Lopez**.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Fig. 2. Mother: Margaret S. Stewart (Three Generations of Mujeres), charcoal and conte crayon on paper, 4 x 8 feet, 1977. Photo courtesy of **Yolanda Lopez**.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Fig. 3. Grandmother: Victoria F. Franco (Three Generations of Mujeres), charcoal and conte crayon on paper, 4 x 8 feet, 1977. Photo courtesy of **Yolanda Lopez**.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Fig. 4. The Runner (A Donde Va Chicana?), acrylic and oil on canvas, 4 x 5 feet, 1978. Photo courtesy of **Yolanda Lopez**.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Fig. 5. Mother: Our Lady of Guadalupe, oil pastel on paper, 28 x 32 inches, 1978. Photo courtesy of **Yolanda Lopez**.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Fig. 6. Grandmother: Our Lady of Guadalupe, oil pastel on paper, 28 x 32 inches, 1978. Photo courtesy of **Yolanda Lopez**.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Fig. 7. Portrait of the Artist: Our Lady of Guadalupe, oil pastel on paper, 28 x 32 inches, 1978. Photo courtesy of **Yolanda Lopez**.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Fig. 8. Portrait of the Artist: Tableau Vivant, by **Yolanda Lopez**, 1978. Photo courtesy of Susan R. Mogul.

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By BETTY LADUKE

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