

Betsabee Romero & Acts of Faith by Cynthia Valdez

Lagrimas negras
Antiguo Colegio de San Ildefonso
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It takes a certain amount of optimism to behold a mountain of clay and see the possibility for form to emerge. Likewise for a blank canvas, wall or sheet of drawing paper. In the same way, it takes a faithful artist to create a tribute to memory out of a cast-off tire. That faithful artist is Betsabeé Romero.

Although I have never met or talked to Ms. Romero, I like to imagine her as that friend who will accompany you to the flea market and deftly dig through all the junk to inevitably uncover a number of enviable finds. She would probably just as likely be that person who comes over to your tiny, dingy new apartment and help you uncover its hidden beauty by applying simple, deliberate changes. She might also be the one to come over armed with scissors and spray bottle when your new stylist decides to interpret your "just a couple of inches off the top," as "I'd like the newest aspirational hairstyle, please." But I digress.



Betsabeé Romero has been creating little acts of faith in the form of art objects for the last 15 years or so and luckily, San Ildefonso has chosen to present some of these to the public. But if creation is an act of faith, this is because it has been necessary. Betsabeé Romero saw the ruins and junkyards and marginalized communities in her native Mexico and decided to do something with all of this. She took tires and junked-up cars and transformed them, made them more than a sum of their parts —the tires became testaments to Mexico's past, ornamented and incrustated sometimes with pre-Hispanic motifs, sometimes with glass, roses, bread. Vehicles became gardens, picnic tables, eroticized objects.

Symbols, above all are what Romero seeks to discuss. In *Simbolo Masticado*, ("Chewed-up symbol" would be a loose translation) a tractor tire is carved with the image of an eagle on a cactus eating a snake, from the Mexican flag. The pattern has been filled in with brightly-colored *chicle*, which most commonly can be found sold in little cellophane-wrapped packets by small children, as anyone who has driven through the Mexican border can testify. The piece references not only the decline of agriculture in Mexico since 1994's NAFTA was instituted, but also to consumerist society which sucks out the flavor and throws out the rest, as Romero has explained.

The act of looking is also questioned in a number of Romero's works. In *De reojo* (rearview) the female gaze is represented by 500 rearview mirrors overlaid with gold leaf motifs. The mirrors are spread out over three walls of a room, while on the fourth a video of a car ride in Ciudad Juárez is projected. The multitudinous

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landscape is far from mundane when one considers the hundreds of women who have died mysterious and violent deaths in that notorious border town.



While the words "recycle" and "readymade" might come to mind when describing Betsabeé Romero's oeuvres, the verb I prefer is repurpose. Romero's work is the end result of a kind of alchemical, almost utopian vision that proposes we take the lemons the world has given us and make mojitos. Or better yet throw a mojito party —Betsabeé Romero isn't the sort to hole herself up in a studio and emerge with a few precious gems now and then. In a project on the border of Tijuana and San Diego, the artist worked on *Ayate Car* with residents of the Libertad community. Together they stuffed 10,000 roses into an old Ford and painted the body with floral motifs then parked it near the border.

Betsabeé Romero's tires, vehicles and car hoods doubling as ex-votos have all been repurposed with a religiosity that communicates the artist's deep convictions. She seems to be repeating, over and over the same litany, echoing off the walls like a Hail Mary prayer —individualism is dead. In *Tú y yo I*, (You and I I) two passenger seats have been fused together side by side, one facing forward and the other backward. The sculpture has been reupholstered in a sumptuous floral motif. Is this the past and future side by side, looking one another straight in the eyes for the first time? Is this the reconciliation that can occur when we make choices based on what we have learned instead of what we could gain on a personal level? Let us hope so.

-Cynthia Valdez

(Images: Courtesy of the artist and Antiguo Colegio de San Ildefonso)

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