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FEATURES

Nahúm Flores 'Inheritors'



Nahúm Flores, *Two Faced*, 2014, mixed media on canvas, 48" x 36"

Articsók Gallery

Nahúm Flores feels the need to communicate about his life experience through art. Many artists are content to develop a recognizable style and identity but he has the deft touch of authenticity. At once humble and humorous, he explores issues of life and death, colonization and displacement in a poetic manner, through his subconscious.

It is important to realize that he comes from Honduras, a region populated by the Mayan people and other aboriginal groups over time. These Pre-Hispanic cultures all left their mark but perhaps none with as much devastation as the Spanish Conquistadores who, in misguided religious zeal, burnt all the writings and attacked the cultural bedrock of the indigenous people. Only fragments survive of *Popol Vuh*, the '*Book of Counsel*', which outlines the rich animistic narrative that informed indigenous rituals and beliefs. Many Gods presided over continuous celestial and terrestrial cycles of birth, death and renewal. They tried three times to invent a 'workable' model man to inhabit a region conceptualized as 'underworld', 'earth' and 'heaven'. Mother Earth was seen as a living conglomerate of alligator, turtle, and toad. In the final attempt, man was constructed out of corn and four animals were singled out, the coyote, crow, mountain cat and parrot. The crow was seen as the messenger of the God of lightning and thunder.



Nahúm Flores, *These Eyes*, 2014, mixed media on canvas, 41" x 54"

This bird features in many of Flores' paintings, along with many images of shifting identity. Although it is a character drawn from this rich mythology, Flores is not simply illustrating the past. He interacts with his subject matter intuitively, allowing the personalities to emerge. Forms are fluid and lines that delineate a human can also denote snake-like qualities, depending on visual clues. Feminine and masculine forms flow together, amorphously, generating a place for the viewer's imagination.



Nahúm Flores, *Encounter*, 2014, mixed media on linen mounted on wood, 16" x 16".

Mayan language combined phonetic symbols with logograms in a system of glyphs, written on bark paper. A close look at Flores' art reveals an obsession with text and texture, particularly of walls, bark and earthly substances like sand, rock and dirt. All elements are recycled and given new life. He uses text both as a visual element and as a 'dialogue' within the painting. Scavenging worksites for discarded materials, Flores repurposes aluminum, plexiglass and wooden offcuts, or with greater ingenuity, sardine cans and flattened soda cans. The process comments obliquely on our Western society that is so wasteful of resources.

Another aspect of Flores' background is that he is part of a diaspora of displaced people. The border region he comes from was embroiled in the Sandinistas / Contras power struggle, sponsored in part by cold war ideologies. Individuals endured much suffering and this core of understanding is at the root of Flores' work. He has empathy with the living struggle, which his work exudes as a gentle expression rather than polemic. In his teens and alone, he migrated to Mexico, the US and finally found a home in Canada. Life is extremely hard for migrants and the work undertaken can be backbreaking. Flores has endured this and completed a degree in art at OCAD. This is an achievement in itself.



Nahúm Flores, *Site*, 2013, mixed media on wood, 12" x 17".

Flores employs a complex process of accretion in his work. He combines drawing with photography and found materials in mixed media paintings, seeking to draw out an image intuitively. Photographs of crumbling walls in Mexico and Honduras adorned with discontented graffiti from an ensuing social struggle are transferred to his canvases using a gel medium. The paper is scratched off to leave the emulsion embedded in the painting surface. Transparency is built up in areas to a glass-like consistency as he plays with a perception of depth within a flat surface. He writes short sentences on the paintings, drawing animals and birds like crows and vultures, significant to Mayan culture. The paintings seem to carry a narrative as if Flores is communicating something metaphysical in an ongoing drama about life and death.



Nahúm Flores, *Homage to Non-Conformity*, 2014, mixed media on recycled wood, 20”.

Los Errantes, or *The Drifters*, embodies Flores’ personal and historical journey. A work like *Homage to Non-Conformity* is a border crossing referencing the migrant experience, but it is also a counter-invasion by ‘aggressive tongues’. The outstretched tongue is symbolic in Toltec mythology and is a feature of serpent deities. There is a lot of humour in this visualization, as the US flag disintegrates in reverse, becoming part of the ground. In other works the small, drawn figures seem overwhelmed by the monochromatic ground. One senses an existential struggle to register as a person or thought within the overwhelming flood of history. Yet, the growth metaphor succeeds like a leaf sprouting from a corpse or a spiral line indicating a movement towards life.



Nahúm Flores, *Wander*, 2014, mixed media on doorskin, 32” x 24”.

Some works are more overtly optimistic as if the artist is willing elements into life, defying death and the anonymity of an impenetrable background wall or rock. *Triumph of the Myth* presents a crow perched on the nose of a severed head that is bandaged. The flat, textural structures within the picture plane are contrasted with the blue square, which indicates a movement towards the 'beyond'. Mayan myth is referenced in the severed head, perhaps symbolizing the Maize God, Hun Hunahpú, whose head was cut off in the underworld yet he managed to impregnate a maiden by spitting into her hand. She later gave birth to the Hero Twins, thus becoming a source of renewal.



Nahúm Flores, *Triumph of the Myth*, 2011, mixed media on canvas, 30" x 30".

Flores is one of the most interesting Latin American artists working in Toronto. He is also part of the collective called Z'otz*, which is Mayan for 'bat', another important mythological creature. He works alongside Ilyana Martinez and Erik Jerezano creating collaborative works that have received a great deal of attention in numerous exhibitions across Canada. They share an animistic sensibility, drawing content from indigenous cultures that are somewhat foreign to the Canadian sensibility. Our artistic culture is more comfortable within landscape and the US-dominated 'modernist' discourse. We have forgotten our own European animistic mythologies, replacing the gnarled and clawed tree-spirit of renewal with the 'benign', rosy-cheeked Santa Claus of commercial exploitation. Religious proselytization colonized pagan ways of mythologizing the environment in a way that has robbed us of an innate empathic relationship with nature. This seems due to the religious narrative that 'man has been given dominion over all creatures'. Artists like Flores present an environment that lives and breathes free from these restrictions. His vision offers the possibility, through storytelling, of finding a new symbiosis with all life.

Ashley Johnson