

John Burstein

John Burstein is founder-director of the Galería MUY, an independent arts space in San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico.



CHALLENGING THE WORLD FROM THE COMMUNITY

OCTOBER 16, 2020

Challenging the World from the Community: Maya /Zoque Artistic Praxis in Chiapas

The term “g/local” opens up perspectives in today’s art criticism, even while subtly concealing deeply-rooted hegemonic systems. How can we undo the hierarchies of *universal* art theory and identity-based *subaltern* artistic practice?



PH Joel, *Retrato del hombre civilizado* (2019)
Mud incense-burner, painted, 45.5 x 33 x 17.5 cm
Photo: Pablo Farias

In my experience as a cultural promoter for the Maya and Zoque art of Chiapas, I find two conceptual threads intertwined in the practices of these artists: the Maya/Zoque and the contemporary. Though they derive from distinct origins, these genealogies are distributed in the form and

content of contemporary art and the new social role of the Maya/Zoque artist.

This is also the source of another dialectical relationship in today’s contemporary art world: between indigenous artists and the mythologized figure of the Indian in visual culture. The critical processes of appropriation and deconstruction have become such a constant practice that by assuming hybridity, artists become free to explore their autonomous Maya side as an option rather than a condition.

I am referring to the agential resistance that W.E.B. DuBois, in the African-American context of the past century, theorized in terms of a “double conscience.” The Maya and Zoque people experience infinite variants on dual belonging, corresponding to the formulas of hyphenation by which in some contexts a person is Maya-Mexican, while in others they are Mexican-Maya, and in this way, their identity is replicated and retracted into an endless array of possibilities that allows them to occupy several social and conceptual spaces at the same time. The recognition of the indigenous political subject permeates the content of many artists in Chiapas. With its agency established, it opens itself up to intersectional affect and solidarity.

Today, a radical synthesis is needed. The binary terms of the past have lost their signifying capacity to give order to reality. These supposedly natural categories dissolve into nothing. Historically excluded subaltern actors have begun to assume a potent presence in the *alter*-world, where they take on leadership roles in order to imagine themselves beyond the modern colonial world system.

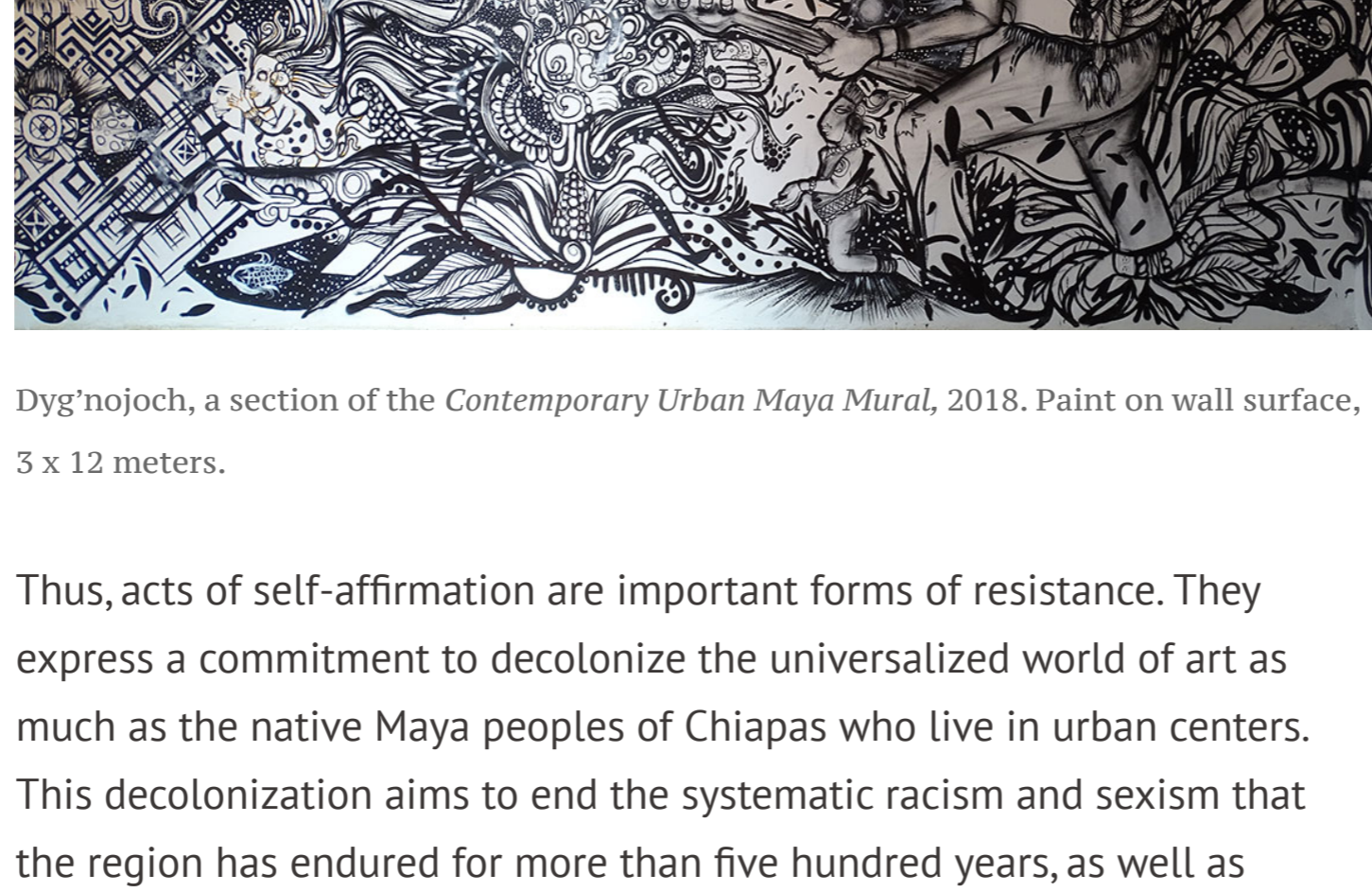
The *Zapatismo* in Chiapas over the past three decades coincided with an important moment of reflection for many native communities. Subject to the paradigm shifts that came about in the early 1990s, the indigenous world of Chiapas transformed from a model of (neo)liberal citizenship to a socio-political organization that embodies the daily struggle to cast aside patriarchal violence and the imposition of Western culture. This resulted in a cultural expression determined by the intertwining claim for autonomy and sovereignty as well as the self-affirmation of increasingly intersectional identities.

The art of Maya and Zoque creators that flourished over the past three decades has, therefore, been built on a dialectical relationship between “*artworld art*” and the great tradition of popular art within these communities. This distinction, which must inevitably collapse (as García Canclini has shown), is above all essential. A creative liberation emerges from the dialog between the artist and the non-indigenous world. We now see popular art installations in contemporary spaces and works by *mestizxs* or white producers in collaboration with people from native groups or their cosmovisions.

What does this tell us about the problematics of the *g/local*? It’s worth emphasizing that artists from Chiapas never reject “artisanal art,” rather, they are nourished by it. Nowadays we are seeing more and more “art/isan” collaborations.

In political terms, we are within the terrain of resistance, not just the struggles for land, but also the fight for the construction and recuperation of an identity that transcends the discourses of otherness. In the field of indigenous culture, hybridization emerges as the epistemological basis for a creative agency.

Take language, for example. As much as the Zoque and Maya languages are important sources for the world’s ontological construction, almost without exception, it is the Spanish language that surfaces in dialogs between artists and audiences.



Dygn’nojoch, a section of the *Contemporary Urban Maya Mural*, 2018. Paint on wall surface, 5 x 12 meters.

Thus, acts of self-affirmation are important forms of resistance. They express a commitment to decolonize the universalized world of art as much as the native Maya peoples of Chiapas who live in urban centers. This decolonization aims to end the systematic racism and sexism that the region has endured for more than five hundred years, as well as affirming autonomy and intercultural horizontality.

These decolonial gestures abound in the contemporary Maya and Zoque art exhibited in *Galería MUY*. The works of PH Joel and Dygn’nojoch emphasize and problematize this Maya renaissance. These two artists employ a syllogistic strategy—they both blend classical Maya visual codes with the contemporary: a Maya king who travels intergalactically or who, in an allusion to these apocalyptic times, wears a surgical mask.



Cecilia Gómez, *Jajkuxlejaltik (Life is Long)*, 2018. Black cotton yarn, cotton yarn with fiber, cotton/silk yarn, banana stalk fiber, loom wood, 5.30 x 0.50 meters.

Transnational feminism has also added to the transformation of contemporary art in Chiapas, as the critical reflections of female Maya artists have strengthened a very important strain of anticolonial language. Artist Säsäk Nichim, for example, has produced a series of photographs based on the dying of wool. Nichim creates abstract symbolic images based on the gestures made by two women with their hands, intertwined in allusion to their shared organization and spirit. Cecilia Gómez, on the other hand, devotes herself to sculptural textile art using a traditional tape loom five-and-a-half meters in height. In her work, Gómez explains that the weaving enables her to articulate a protest regarding women’s situation in the communities. Since the loom is associated with the division of labor, the artist seeks to highlight the emotional and professional load that falls on women’s shoulders as the reproducers of life and the larger social fabric.



Säsäk Nichim, *Stusaik lek stots (Sorting the Wool)*, 2018. Photograph, 0.56 x 0.71 meters.

While these are but two examples, the practices of many women artists who participate in the activities of *Galería MUY* help deconstruct the hierarchies held in place today by gender repression, such as the machismo embedded in community and family power relations. Their agency and their declarations, transformed into artistic objects, are also performances. They become hybrid figures—between the local and the global—by shaping works of art that contribute to the construction of *herstory*, history told from a female perspective, while at the same time embodying self-liberation from patriarchal morality.

For native people, decolonization opens up a process of discovery based on territoriality, but it has other important territories to claim. Our eyes are now opened so that we can envision worlds distinct from the modern colonial system. In contemporary indigenous “post-postmodernism,” the defense of land and the egalitarian reconstruction of gender are not opposing and irreconcilable poles—they are united in resistance to the modern-colonial system and its threats to human dignity.

Galería MUY is a cultural project in San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico, dedicated to the production and promotion of the contemporary art of the Maya and Zoque people. Our exhibition space allows us to share with the public both temporary shows as well as a selection from the permanent collection, featuring 20 emerging and established artists working in media including painting, sculpture, photography and video, installation and performance. Creators collaborate in monthly meetings with other Maya- and Zoque-speaking intellectuals and other attendees, in which they reflect on the changes associated with globalization, decoloniality, gender relations and the resistance and spirituality of native people. The Galería has the objective of bringing in audiences from the communities of Chiapas through exhibitions, film showings and social media. The MUY also values dialog between indigenous artists and the global contemporary art world. Galería MUY was awarded the Hennessey Prize for “best project” at the Material Art Fair in Mexico City in February of 2020.

John Burstein is founder-director of the Galería MUY, an independent arts space in San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico, devoted to the promotion of contemporary art of the Maya and Zoque peoples of Chiapas. Having studied semiotics and cultural anthropology at Harvard College in the 1970s, and social development and international relations at Columbia University in the 1980s, Burstein affiliated with and founded several civil society organizations in Chiapas and Mexico City devoted to issues of Indigenous collective rights, sustainable development in Indigenous communities, and binational Mayan migrations. Burstein specialized in native literatures (working in Tsotsil-Maya) early in his career and since 2014 his has been an activist curatorial practice in the visual arts, exploring areas such as art and politics and art and Indigenous epistemologies.

Notes for a Horizon-tality: Toward the Possibility of Becoming Together as an Assemblage is a project that responds to our multiple and seemingly multiplying emergencies. Since the growing uncertainty of living in a world in crisis seems to continuously threaten the possibility of the future, this editorial initiative seeks to contribute to the growing scholarship on this topic from the perspective of Latin American contemporary art.

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Kai oxi ch' abäl ke taq re' pe Chixot
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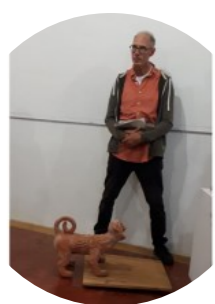
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The World, a Broken Jug
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Challenging the World from the Community
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CONTRIBUTORS



Founder-director, *Galería MUY*



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Website: www.galeriamuy.org

[A book on Maya and Zoque art](#)

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