

An Interview with Alejandra Venegas

by Madelon van Schie

How and when did your history as an artist began? Was this an organic process or can you identify a moment in which you realized that this was your path?

I was always attracted to art. In the house I lived as a child I was surrounded by it, which made it very easy to relate to. So, a natural process I would say.

Did your parents work with art, or are they artists themselves?

Yes, my father was a very renowned artist in the 90s in Mexico. He is a wood sculptor, painter and draft sman. My mother is a French migrant and loves outdoor landscape painting. My parents owned a lot of books about Asian art, Japanese woodblock prints, Tibetan Buddhist painting, traditional African woodcarving pieces and Egyptian hieroglyphs among others. They often made studies, copies in a way, of the sculptures and paintings in these books. They took me to exhibitions a lot too and whenever we travelled everyone of us would bring a notebook and some pencils to draw as much as we could. So, my first encounter with art was definitely via my parents.

The influence of traditional crafts is clear in your work. Your paintings and drawing furthermore seem to be formally informed by the work of Paul Klee. Are there (historical) Mexican artists you feel related to?

Yes, besides Klee there are several artists that may have some influence in my artistic development such as Wassily Kandinsky, Joan Miró, Marsden Hartley, Max Ernst, Henri Matisse, Emily Carr, Georgia O'Keeffe and Joseph Yoakum among others. The Mexican artist with whom I identify myself most is probably Dr. Atl. More than 60 or 70 years ago he portrayed many of the landscapes that inform my work, specifically the volcanoes around Mexico City. Furthermore, one of the great influences within Mexican art is definitely Pre-Hispanic art and in some ways Huichol art. I also admire the work of José Clemente

Orozco and Francisco Toledo.

You were born in the year after the devastating earth quake that struck Mexico City in 1985. Upon this event your parents decided to move to the country side. You stayed there ever since. Have you ever wanted to move to the city?

I always lived in the outskirts of the city. I think it is an ideal environment for artistic creation, far from distractions, although sometimes also far from the art circuit. However, all my life I studied in the city and I still go there often as well. Another benefit is the great amount of space I have available to make work, which in the city would be very expensive. The earth quake did mark a great change in our lives. My family lives much closer to nature now.

Speaking of earth quakes, your representations of mountains (especially in your paintings and drawings) seem to be defined by streamlike movements and by stapled and diagonal compositions.

Yes, I surely try to generate movement and dynamics in my work. This has to do with the idea of change, of transformation. Although we do not see it, a landscape moves all the time. It is the nature of this world. I am driven by a kind of melancholy about the passage of time, about the fact that nothing ever stops changing.

Are you trying to hold on to a sort of essence in your work, since you mention melancholy as an incentive?

I can start a series of works from a certain melancholy yes, but it is not just about that. Sometimes it transforms into something else during the process.

Into what? It would become more about achieving a sensory and affective experience through the landscape.

You seem to take a contrary position in a way, living in 'isolation', working with crafts and exploring a traditional subject as landscape painting etc. Do you see it that way?

It might seem that I am against the tide, but it is not my intention to demonstrate a countercurrent posture. I simply work with basic

ideas and tools that feel close to my reality. To me they seem valuable beyond trends.

Your work indeed stems from a very purist basis, formally inspired by a limited number of elements; mountains, water streams, clouds and planets. This could set the condition for a certain defined composition. At the same time, your work features an intuitive playfulness. This creates an interesting tension I think. In your rice paper works for instance there are controlled lines combined with more coincidental, randomly placed splashes. To a lesser extent, I see a 'contradiction' in the precise carved lines and the sometimes uncontrolled usage of colour in the wooden works too. Also, the way you unite natural, warm wooden tones and stridently bright tints feels as bringing together two extremes. Is the combination of opposites something you actively seek for?

Yes, it is really a pleasure for me to look for the balance that is provided by opposite elements. I do this intuitively, also whether or not I apply colour. When I do it, I love the explosion that is generated between colour and wood. With respect to the tension you mentioned, I am indeed always interested in considering certain limitations or rules, to later break them. In the beginning for instance it was my intention to represent the landscape through minimal elements or signs resembling calligraphy. I wanted to achieve an infinity of possibilities with minimal resources (drawing, line, ink, paper, and a few strokes). When working on paper for example you cannot erase or correct your strokes well, so I would either become very careful or stop trying to control the result. I now incorporate controlled, energetic, safe, insecure, slow or fast lines and strokes, all to achieve freedom.

Indeed, some of your works, especially the drawings but also some wood pieces, made me think of language, of automatic writing.

Yes, my strokes and cuts are like signs. It is an intuitive language. Contrary to your drawings and paintings, the technique of

working with wood prevents an intuitive creation.

Sure, you are right, wood carving might seem much less immediate and intuitive than drawing or painting. Yet, in principle the pieces are the result of intuitive incisions. Basically, I think that what I am looking for is a balance between the intuitive and the conscious. Between what I want and what happens unexpectedly. This means that I sometimes follow what I would call 'the memory of wood', or all these lines and streaks that are formed naturally and that often remind me of landscapes.

I think it is fascinating how you incorporate these natural irregularities. It makes it much more than just a panel and gives your work a more sculptural character.

Yes, it definitely goes beyond being just a panel. For me it is a meeting place between painting, sculpture and drawing. It is a place where limits are somehow erased. It has many possibilities.

Where do you find the wood? And what do you typically search for with respect to this medium?

I find the wood in different places, from trees cut down in the middle of the city, wood that I get on trips or just dry trees that I locate somewhere. Many are typical woods of Mexico, from the south from Mexico, from the Pacific coast. I choose the wood for its colour, for the streaks, for its shape. I do not have special requirements with respect to it.

Is wood a new material for you to work with?

I have been practicing wood carving for many years in the past, but I never incorporated it in my artistic practice. For a long time, I was mainly dedicated to painting, and I thought I should be committed to that constantly. But about a year ago I felt it was time to explore wood as a medium a bit more, so I started with making reliefs professionally.

Have you ever thought of making woodcuts?

At the moment I have not made engravings on wood, but it is a project that I would very much like to do. I love graphic work on wood, it is also a great inspiration.

The mountains, water and the

air seem to give you an endless stream of inspiration, in between the figurative and the abstract, the real and the surreal. Can you explain what these elements represent to you?

In eastern landscape compositions, the middle space of a composition, in between elements such as mountains, water and clouds, represents a space where transformations occur, where the mountain can become water and vice versa, where extremes become one thing.

This relates to a few remarks you made earlier that I think are important. Such as about the presence of movement and transformation in your work, the union of extremes, the fading of borders and the search for infinite possibilities based on a limited number of elements. It also relates to Taoism, right?

Yes, besides being intrinsic qualities of art, these are ideas close to Taoism and Buddhism about nature's way of being. Taoist landscape painting seeks to internalize the outside world. Mountains and water are elements that constitute the two poles of nature, they embody the fundamental laws of the macrocosmic universe that maintains organic links with the microcosm. Furthermore, mountains, and the idea of climbing a mountain is also a symbol of spiritual growth or of the search for knowledge. And in pre-Hispanic cultures, paradise was inside a mountain, represented as a place of abundance, called Tlalocan.

And there is the mountain of the land of Cockaigne, the Big Rock Candy Mountain...

Yes, these stories are fascinating. It made me think of the title of this exhibition, 'Timicho'. This is the Nahuatl name of a little mountain in my grandparents' village, meaning stone (titl) and fishes (michin). It is called this way because it is formed by rocks that resemble a school of fish from a few kilometers away.

The fact that you often work with the vertical picture plain may be related to the presence of mountains in your work and life too?

Yes, this format immediately evokes the composition of the landscape in which I live. Mexico City is surrounded by mountains and when I go to the city I literally have to go down the mountains (and later climb them again). So, it is true I experience the landscape vertically. Besides, in relation to what I explained before, I think the format is very symbolic because it refers to different levels in between the earthly and the spiritual.

It reminds me of Japanese landscape depictions too and, moreover, it is the format usually used for portraits, which does not seem to be a coincidence either. Some of your landscapes have a strong anthropomorphic and surrealist appearance.

You are right, accentuating the relationship between the landscape and the portrait is important to me. There is a presence within the landscape of the human, of the animal. For me the landscape is the concentration of everything that is alive, of everything that breathes and moves. It relates to the microcosm that is man. Painting the mountains and water therefore is to portray man, not so much his physical appearance, but that of his spirit.

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Madelon van Schie (1982, Amsterdam) is an independent art historian, researcher and curator with a focus on art from Latin America. Her latest projects include the exhibition *Rivers flow out of my eyes* (a group show at tegenboschvanvreden in Amsterdam, 2019), *Roots* (a solo show with Inge Meijer at Casa Kanú in Bogotá, 2018) and *Gaia in the Anthropocene* (a group show at Garage in Rotterdam, 2018). She wrote for (online) magazines such as *Metropolis M*, *Yuca*, *Kunstlicht*, *8weekly*, *Mr. Motley* and *Artishock*. Van Schie also works as a curator for the *Defares* Collection and as researcher/writer for the *ProWinko ProArt* Collection. She studied art history at the University of Leiden, the VU in Amsterdam and the *Universidad del Salvador* in Buenos Aires. In addition, she completed a research master's degree in Latin America studies at the University of Amsterdam.