This text © 2009 Edward M. Gómez; all rights reserved.

Reinventing the Master: Cortázar's Variations on Orozco's Themes

(Published in *Los Desmembrados según Orozco, por Roberto Cortázar* (Mexico City: Museo Nacional de Arte, 2009, pages 96-107.)

by Edward Madrid Gómez

If, as the saying goes, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, then what does it mean to be inspired by and to refer to a particular, original work of art—a song, a poem, a dance or a picture—but *not* to explicitly copy it? To take it as a source of inspiration for an entirely new creation in the same or in a different medium, perhaps of the same genre or perhaps in a completely new form?

For centuries, painters, poets and composers have found inspiration for new works in art forms of the past, even of the recent past. Often, what they create based on what is old turns out to be enticingly, refreshingly new, even in the form of so-called variations on borrowed themes or motifs. (In fact, in both the folk arts and in the field of fine art made by academically trained artists, tradition often looms large and may inform how artists approach their subjects and materials.) In creating variations on original themes, artists take aspects of their source materials—melodies, phrases, gestures or parts of different images—and change or elaborate them, giving them new or different, but often still recognizable forms. Normally, they infuse them with new meanings.

That artists should change their source material by adapting it to their new creations' aesthetic or formal needs is the essential, interpretive aspect of making variations that distinguishes this practice from that of the postmodernist exercise of appropriation. Postmodernist artists who merely appropriate texts, images or other source materials from their original settings and then present them in new settings or arrangements intentionally alter their contexts to create new, often ambiguous meanings for their borrowed source materials. In this postmodernist game, removing a text or image from its original location and presenting it in a new context (sometimes as an integral element of a new and different work) is enough to invest the appropriated material with a new and different meaning. After all, postmodernist critical theory's fundamental assertion is that the meaning of anything—any written text, spoken language, image, event or gesture—depends on the various contexts in which it is presented and in which it is perceived. Such contexts can be cultural, social, economic, historical or political.

With his new works inspired by several paintings by the legendary Mexican modernist José Clemente Orozco, the contemporary Mexican painter Roberto Cortázar is not intentionally carrying out an appropriation exercise in a postmodernist mode. In fact, Cortázar, whose art is rooted in Mexico's long, rich tradition of figurative image-making (a tradition that stretches back to the region's ancient civilizations), has never primarily been motivated by any theory or any aesthetic doctrines. Instead, the art-making language he has developed, with its unique blend of

figurative and abstract elements, has evolved out of his technical experiments as a painter and draftsman, and out of his investigation and assimilation of a variety of influences, from the economical, expressive lines of such modern masters as Picasso and Matisse to the figure-altering techniques of the Irish-born, British painter Francis Bacon.

Like Bacon, who once remarked that “flesh is the reason oil painting was invented,” Cortázar approaches and handles his materials in a way that is both elegant and visceral. In fact, his decision to develop a series of new works based on Orozco’s paintings “El Desmembrado” (“The Dismembered One”), “Indias” (“Indian Women”) and “Cabeza Flechada” (“Head Struck with Arrows”) came immediately after he saw the exhibition “Flesh and Color” at the National Museum of Art (MUNAL) last year. (Orozco made all three of these paintings in 1947. They are part of a series called “Los Teules,” whose title means “gods” or “demons”; this is the name Mexico’s indigenous peoples gave the well-armed Spanish conquerors who arrived in their territory in the early 16th century and whom they did not regard as mere mortals.)

The exhibition Cortázar saw included drawings and paintings by European and Mexican artists from the Renaissance to the modern era, selected from the collections of MUNAL and the Museum of Fine Arts in Rennes, France. “As I came out of that exhibition, I saw these Orozco paintings in MUNAL’s permanent collection, and they really struck me,” Cortázar recalls. “Immediately I began to think about developing variations of these powerful images.”

Since then, the artist has not merely copied Orozco’s original images or rendered them in his own style. Instead, influenced by what he regards as the special, expressive power of these paintings, which Orozco created shortly before he died, and by the multiple meanings he finds in them, Cortázar incorporated aspects of the innovative Mexican modernist’s technique into his own. In his new works, he has used these technical characteristics, adapted from Orozco, to call heightened attention to the subjects of the original artworks.

Cortázar firmly believes that these Orozco paintings are some of the most important works in the entire, long history of Mexican art. He explains that this is because Orozco, who was best-known as a muralist whose monumental, public works urged his countrymen to embrace democratic reform and helped give visible form to an emerging sense of Mexican national identity, was primarily a moralist. The art he produced during the Mexican muralist movement from the 1920s through the 1940s had pronounced educational and propagandistic objectives. “The works of the muralists served as a visual catechism in support of democratic reform and the building of a modern nation and society based on justice, equality and the rule of law,” Cortázar notes. “In his great public works, Orozco was committed to teaching and defending these principles.”

Orozco also explored many of these same eloquent themes—justice, the quest for national identity, survival in the face of adversity—in his easel paintings, often in compositions that were less dense and complex, but whose spirits were no less forceful than those of his large-scale murals. Generally speaking, in comparison with the more angular lines and rigid compositions of many of Orozco’s emblematic murals, the brushwork of many of these works on canvas or on board feels looser and more spontaneous. In his very last works of this kind, as Cortázar has noted, Orozco’s approach feels unabashedly free and even experimental. For the contemporary

Mexican painter, looking back at the arc of the great muralist's career, perhaps this was no accident.

Cortázar observes: "As Orozco approached the end of his life, after painting the large, ambitious, public murals for which he had become internationally famous, his moralizing muralism transformed itself into a more personal kind of ethical expressionism." Well-recognized as one of his country's most visionary modern artists, who had used his art to promote the political and social values in which he had passionately believed, toward the end of his life Orozco appeared to loosen up and create several works that were less didactic or polemical. Their meanings appeared to be more ambiguous and more personal, too.

With this development in mind, Cortázar believes Orozco's late works, like "El Desmembrado," "Indias" and "Cabeza Flechada," are not routine expressions of the artist's long-standing preoccupation with the liberation of the Mexican people (from various oppressive forces) or with their sense of collective identity. Certainly, those were two of his art's familiar themes. However, Cortázar suggests, in these three paintings, the liberation and the sense of identity to which Orozco alluded were his own. Cortázar notes: "Toward the end of his creative life, when he no longer felt obliged to use his art to communicate political messages or to teach society about proper conduct, Orozco became free as an artist and as an individual. In liberating his art from the constraints of muralism's polemics, he found the freedom to express himself and to examine subjects other than those on muralism's moralizing agenda." (Two items on that agenda, Orozco recalled in his *Autobiography* (1945), included calls to "socialize art" and to "repudiate easel painting." He added, however, that the reformist movement's proponents had no idea about how to realize those objectives.)

In "El Desmembrado," for example, Orozco appears to address the theme of Mexican identity more ambiguously than ever through oblique symbolism. As Cortázar sees it, this almost abstract image of an exploded, androgynous human figure represents modern Mexican society, whose various members—from darker-skinned *indios* of indigenous origins to lighter-skinned *güeros* of European ancestry—"are still split up and still not fully integrated into a cohesive whole." Cortázar is fascinated by the way Orozco used little more than a vivid, dominant, red-orange color (whose use in Mexican art dates back to the polychrome civil architecture of ancient Tenochtitlan) to define the shallow depths of this mysterious image's pictorial space. (Cortázar's reading of the symbolic meaning of "El Desmembrado" begs the questions: If, a century after the reform-minded Mexican Revolution, Mexican society remains fractured, did the muralists' nationalism-fostering effort in some ways fail? And, with this picture, did Orozco himself dare to hint at this self-critical question?)

Similarly, "Indias," with its strange, cubist-flavored, double perspective—its composition looks down at the image's two female subjects from two different angles—may be seen as addressing the very roots of Mexico's national identity, for as Cortázar says, "The two nude figures are indigenous Mexican women; they are mothers and symbols of a brutal fertility, and in this stark presentation, they allude to the mixing of different peoples that has shaped Mexican society." (If the buxom women represent an almost bestial fecundity, by contrast, the pile of human remains that lie at their feet offers an unsubtle reminder that all human life inevitably ends in death.)

All three of the Orozco works that provided the main inspiration for Cortázar's new series of paintings and graphic works present images whose meanings are not immediately clear. However, for Cortázar, "Cabeza Flechada" may be one of the most personally meaningful pictures Orozco ever painted. That is to say, the contemporary Mexican artist believes the painting was deeply meaningful to its creator, just as it holds a special value and meaning for Cortázar himself.

At first glance, the picture recalls one of the most common subjects in Catholic art's canon of bloody saints and martyrs: Saint Sebastian, the 3rd-century Christian stalwart who survived an onslaught of arrows from the forces of the Roman emperor who persecuted him for his faith. (Later, he was beaten to death.) Cortázar sees the arrow-assaulted head in "Cabeza Flechada" as a symbol of the artist in society in general and of Orozco, in particular. He suggests that, despite the fame the celebrated muralist enjoyed for his monumental, public works, he still felt that the artist in modern society was someone whose role and contributions were largely misunderstood and underappreciated by the masses. Therefore, perhaps "Cabeza Flechada" may be viewed as a kind of thinly disguised, unexpected and agonizing self-portrait.

Considered together, "El Desmembrado," "Indias" and "Cabeza Flechada" may be read as visual essays that address the overlapping themes of collective and personal identity. At the same time, for Cortázar, the *manner* in which these works are painted is their most urgent and essential characteristic. "The muralists were so dogmatic and self-censuring," he explains, "but in these late paintings, with a new sense of gestural freedom, Orozco dropped the dogma, found a new creative freedom and produced a group of works that are unique within the international history of modern art."

Orozco had painted several more literal self-portraits before, but Cortázar believes that making these paintings liberated the mural-painter artistically and allowed him to more deeply explore one of his most intriguing subjects—himself, both in relation to Mexican society and as one of its more unusual, most creative members. Cortázar observes: "These late Orozco works possess a strength, a distinctive identity and a consistent quality that allow them to hold their place alongside other definitive works of modern art from Europe or North America from the same period. What's remarkable is that Orozco arrived entirely on his own at the point at which he could make these extraordinary paintings." Both the experimental nature and the independent spirit of these works have captured Cortázar's imagination and informed the interpretations he has developed of their respective images and themes.

The liberated—and liberating—character of these late Orozco works has a special value for the contemporary artist, too. For as milestones in Mexican modern-art history, Cortázar believes they symbolize the beginning of a break with muralism's strict, doctrinaire dictates, a break that allowed Mexican modernism to enter into a fuller, more open and more vigorous dialog with other, international art trends. (In fact, not long after Orozco painted his late works, the Mexican artists of the movement known as "La Ruptura" broke more aggressively with the historical-narrative, nationalistic tradition of the earlier muralists.)

On a personal level, for Cortázar, the value of Orozco's late works is even greater still. That is because, as he puts it, with them the famous muralist actually helped set Mexican modern art free

for the benefit of later Mexican artists. Cortázar explains: “Today, thanks to a daring artist like Orozco, artists of my generation are absolutely free. I can paint whatever I wish to paint and I am rooted in a knowledge of art history that makes me aware—and appreciative—of the achievements of those who came before me.” So it is that Cortázar’s new, Orozco-inspired works are no mere exercises in imitation. Instead, they are examples of one of art’s richest and most enduring traditions—that of one artist paying a respectful homage to another, across generations, in an inventive and engaging exchange of images and ideas.

Edward Madrid Gómez is a critic and author based in Mexico City and New York. He has written for the *New York Times,* the *Japan Times, Art in America, ARTnews, Art & Antiques, Art + Auction, Reforma* and many other publications in the U.S.A., Europe and Japan. He is the author of the monograph *Roberto Cortázar: 344 figuras y una en un espacio* (Landucci, 2001).