



From Axayácatl to El Chapo

Rethinking Migration and Mexico's War on Drugs in Gabriel Garcilazo's *Dystopic Magical Codex*

Adriana Miramontes Olivas and Gabriel Garcilazo
Introduction by Adriana Miramontes Olivas

Abstract

In this conversation between Gabriel Garcilazo and Adriana Miramontes Olivas, Garcilazo explains his interest in appropriating popular culture and historical documents such as the sixteenth-century *Codex Azcatitlan*. His artwork *Dystopic Magical Codex* (2015) examines the recent war on drugs in Mexico and its consequences through spatial and temporal elements that reconsider concepts of borders, nations, and trade. The conversation is introduced in a brief essay in which Miramontes Olivas contextualizes Garcilazo's codex. She argues that Garcilazo criticizes state apparatus rhetoric on the war on drugs and harsh immigration policies, demanding the conceptualization of alternative solutions that could reduce both the carnage and the exodus of those living in fear. He also warns, as have other contemporary artists from Mexico, against new forms of colonization and master narratives that homogenize and hamper border-crossing and interaction among cultures.

About the Authors

Artist Gabriel Garcilazo (b. 1980 Cuernavaca, Morelos, Mexico) received a master's degree in visual arts from the Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas (San Carlos) of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México in 2015. He has exhibited in Mexico, Spain, and the United States and his artworks are in numerous collections.

Adriana Miramontes Olivas is a doctoral student in the Department of History of Art and Architecture at the University of Pittsburgh. She specializes in contemporary art from Mexico. Her research examines artistic responses that challenge the state apparatus as artists reflect on and protest the violence, corruption, and impunity that have devastated Mexico in the last decades. The focus of her research is site-specific installations, performance, and video art.

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During his term in office from 2006 to 2012, Mexican president Felipe Calderón conducted a national campaign against drugs.¹ Originally termed “a war on drugs,” it was later conceptualized as a “fight against organized crime,” and then as a national security strategy.² This campaign empowered the Mexican Army and the Federal Police to establish arbitrary checkpoints in and outside urban centers in search of weapons or drugs and allowed these agencies to enter homes without warrant and detain citizens they deemed suspicious.³ Calderón's campaign contributed to a landscape of increased fear and violence, as

detentions occurred without due process, and human rights were violated. This climate of institutionalized violence was exacerbated by criminal organizations that employed intimidation tactics such as placing warnings on corpses (*narcomantas*) and dismembering bodies.⁴ This scourge forced many citizens to relocate within the country or to move abroad, especially after receiving death threats or being kidnapped, as was the case in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, from which many people moved to the nearby border city of El Paso, Texas.⁵

¹ My thanks to Prof. Jennifer Josten, who generously read several versions of this article and provided valuable feedback. I am also grateful to Prof. David Tenorio and Jacqueline Lombard, *Contemporaneity's* Editor-in-Chief, for their suggestions and commentaries. I extend my gratitude to all of the anonymous readers for their helpful advice on this essay and interview and to Gabriel Garcilazo whose collaboration made this publication possible. Prof. Gregory Elliott and the Department of Art and Art History at the University of Texas at San Antonio funded my visit to Mexico City and Cuernavaca in the Spring of 2016; Prof. Teresa Eckmann invited me to join her and her contemporary art class on that trip, when I first encountered Garcilazo's work at Centro Cultural Jardín Borda. Finally, I thank the Department of History of Art and Architecture at the University of Pittsburgh for funding my research trips to Mexico through the Dean's Research Travel Fund in Spring 2017 and Spring 2019. During these trips I was able to see Garcilazo's codex at El Chopo and, two years later, to interview him.

² This change in rhetoric is addressed by several scholars, among them are Héctor Padilla and Fernando Escalante Gonzalbo in Héctor Padilla, “Ciudad Juárez: Militarización, Discursos y Paisajes,” in *Vida, muerte y resistencia en Ciudad Juárez: Una aproximación desde la violencia, el género y la cultura*, ed. Salvador Cruz Sierra (Tijuana: El Colegio de la Frontera Norte; México City: Juan Pablos Editor, 2013), 110; Fernando Escalante Gonzalbo, “Paisaje antes de la batalla: Notas sobre el contexto de la guerra contra las drogas en México,” *Revista Mexicana de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales* 58, no. 218 (May-August 2013): 95.

³ Padilla, “Ciudad Juárez,” 111.

⁴ According to Padilla, the delivery of these messages and the use of *narcomantas* is not only intended to threaten rivals and other criminals but also police enforcement, military, and civilian authorities as well as society at large. These warnings also announce future deaths, fires, and the destruction of restaurants, bars, and local businesses. In the most extreme cases of violence, bodies with *narcomantas* were found hanging from bridges and another one was found with a pig's mask. Other bodies were decapitated or mutilated, and the body parts spread around the city. Padilla, “Ciudad Juárez,” 107–16.

⁵ Ciudad Juárez is considered one of the most violent cities in the world. For more on this and its exodus, see Padilla, “Ciudad Juárez,” 109–10, and Kathleen Staudt and Zulma Y. Mendez, *Courage, Resistance, and Women in Ciudad Juarez: Challenges to Militarization* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 26–34.

Scholars have reported that in 2011 more than 220,000 people left Ciudad Juárez.⁶ Many of those who were unable or unwilling to flee the border region were killed, as in the cases of activists Josefina Reyes, Susana Chávez, and Marisela Escobedo.⁷



Figure 1

Gabriel Garcilazo's exhibition *Distopías: Gabriel Garcilazo* at Museo Universitario del Chopo, March–April 2017. Image courtesy of the artist. (photo: Gabriel Garcilazo)

The coexistence of institutionalized violence and criminal violence created a lawless environment in some parts of Mexico, the resulting chaos was then disseminated through the national and international media and persisted throughout the presidency of Enrique Peña Nieto (2012–2018). It is to this context, in which more than 121,683 people have died in Mexico in drug-related violence since 2006, that Gabriel Garcilazo responds and asks us to reflect upon.⁸ In his multi-part artwork *Dystopic Magical Codex* (2015), he questions the policies of a failed war. *Dystopic Magical Codex* is inspired by pre-Hispanic codices. Sixteenth-century codices in pre-Hispanic Mexico were handmade and hand-painted books originally pleated to create an accordion-style composition.⁹ Pre-Hispanic manuscripts were made on deer hide or bark paper; during the Spanish colonial era, they were made with European paper, its folios bound together like a book.¹⁰ In his modern-day codex, Garcilazo employed and displayed separate sheets of paper in individual frames (Fig.1). In *Dystopic Magical Codex*,

⁶ According to Kathleen Staudt and Zulma Y. Mendez, the exodus of Juarenses involved all sectors of society, from “marginal residents . . . to wealthy people.” Staudt and Mendez, *Courage, Resistance, and Women*, 26–33.

⁷ José Manuel Valenzuela, “¡Ni una más! ¿Traiciona al feminismo la lucha contra el feminicidio?,” in *Vida, muerte y resistencia en Ciudad Juárez: Una aproximación desde la violencia, el género y la cultura*, ed. Salvador Cruz Sierra (Tijuana: El Colegio de la Frontera Norte; México City: Juan Pablos Editor, 2013), 233–34.

⁸ “Mas de ciento veintiun mil muertos, el saldo de la narcoguerra de Calderón: Inegi,” *Proceso*, July 30, 2013, <https://www.proceso.com.mx/348816/mas-de-121-mil-muertos-el-saldo-de-la-narcoguerra-de-calderon-inegi>.

⁹ Angela Herren Rajagopalan, *Portraying the Aztec Past: The Codices Boturini, Azcatitlan, and Aubin* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2019), 7–9.

¹⁰ James Oles, *Art and Architecture in Mexico* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2013), 26–28.

Garcilazo portrays trade routes that transport drugs and the weapons brought to Mexico for the war on drugs—which has empowered numerous criminals—as well as the routes humans follow to escape the ensuing violence. In showing this constant exchange and mobilization of goods and beings, I argue that Garcilazo uses his art to demand his viewers to reconsider how issues such as substance abuse, immigration, and the war on drugs are discussed and addressed by the government and mass media in Mexico.



Figure 2

Gabriel Garcilazo, *Dystopic Magical Codex: Codex 1 (Cocaine plant)*, 2015. Charcoal and ink on paper. 66.5 x 41 cm. Private collection. Image courtesy of the artist.

Contemporary Codices and the Ubiquitous Presence of Mickey Mouse

Dystopic Magical Codex is composed of thirty-four separate charcoal-and-ink drawings on paper. The smallest is approximately 9.5 x 12 inches and the largest 39 x 27.5 inches. The only textual information in Garcilazo's codex is a series of chemical formulas employed in the creation of drugs.¹¹ *Dystopic Magical Codex* begins with *Codex 1 (Cocaine Plant)*, a representation of a cocaine plant in the middle of a mound (Fig. 2). It ends with *Codex 34 (Weapons in Mexico)*, which represents the aftermath of a battle in which a skull, a decapitated head, and armed men dominate an otherwise isolated landscape. As such, Garcilazo's codex as a whole testifies to a context in which weapons trafficking, forced migration, and commercialized drugs are ubiquitous. In conceiving and depicting his own historical moment Garcilazo examines contemporary popular culture and looks at the past to appropriate historical documents that speak of similar living conditions in which people have engaged in territorial conquests, licit and illicit trade, and multidirectional migrations.

In *Codex 14 (Immigrants from Central America Join the Same Route)* (Fig. 3), Garcilazo shows the subjugation of men as they are being constrained and held by their hair. Other subjects hold weapons and point toward unarmed figures. Surrounding these people are numerous footprints that testify to their mobility. Garcilazo draws on conventions from Mexica (also known as Aztecs) sixteenth-century painted codices—such as holding captives by the hair or portraying footprints to signal migration—that were produced by indigenous artists in central Mexico before and after the Nahua-Spanish war (formerly known as the conquest 1519–1525), to represent their migration and exile.¹² The scene in *Codex 14 (Immigrants from Central America Join the Same Route)* culminates on the right side, with the portrayal of women escaping their homeland and children traveling in the same direction while holding their Mickey Mouse toys in their arms. On a sign, a Mickey Mouse glove at the fringe of the railroad (which could signal the freight train *La Bestia*) indicates the direction of the journey throughout Mexico and all the way to the North to the border of the United States.¹³

Other contemporary artists who have appropriated both historical documents and modern popular imagery, such as Mickey Mouse and Superman, include the Mexican-born Enrique Chagoya (b. 1953) and Guillermo Gómez-Peña (b. 1955), both of whom collaborated with Felicia Rice to create *Codex Espangliensis* (1998). Chagoya's images and Gómez-Peña's texts sit side by side to create a complex hybridity in a design created by Rice and inspired by pre-Hispanic codices.¹⁴ *Codex Espangliensis* is a screenfold limited edition handprinted on amate paper.¹⁵ It was later mass produced in 1999 as an artist book that retained its screenfold

¹¹ The incorporation of chemical formulas used in the production of drugs is similarly presented by Garcilazo in *Vasijas* (2015), also exhibited in Mexico City in *Distopías: Gabriel Garcilazo* at El Chopo University Museum from March to April 2017.

¹² The Aztecs were the inhabitants of Aztlan who migrated in the twelfth century to modern-day Mexico City in a journey that took more than two hundred years. The Aztecs later became known as the Mexicas. For more on this subject, read Herren Rajagopalan, *Portraying the Aztec Past*, 2, 165.

¹³ "La Bestia," or "The Beast," as it is commonly called, is a network of trains that travels more than 1,400 miles across Mexico from its southern border with Guatemala to its northern border with the United States. The trains are not passenger trains and thus many undocumented migrants who manage to climb on them die or get injured during the perilous journey.

¹⁴ Felicia Rice, "Bookwork," in *Codex Espangliensis: From Columbus to the Border Patrol*, ed. Enrique Chagoya, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, and Felicia Rice (San Francisco, CA: City Light Publishers, 2000), 9.

¹⁵ Gómez-Peña, *Codex Espangliensis*, 6.



Figure 3

Gabriel Garcilazo, *Dystopic Magical Codex: Codex 14 (Immigrants from Central America Join the Same Route)*, 2015. Charcoal and ink on paper. 59 x 76 cm. Private collection. Image courtesy of the artist.

format. It extends over twenty-one feet and includes a variety of images and text in English, Spanish, Spanglish, and Nahuatl. As Garcilazo would later do, Chagoya examined sixteenth-century codices and appropriated representational devices from the *Codex Mendoza*, *Codex Borbonicus*, and *Lienzo Tlaxcala*, the last of which plays a prominent role in a scene in which a soldier, Batman, and Mickey Mouse drive in a war tank (Fig. 4). This armed group is joined by the Tlaxcaltecs (indigenous group in the modern state of Tlaxcala) who walk behind the tank.¹⁶ The unified front proceeds to attack and kill the Mexica who surround them in battle.¹⁷ Despite this chaotic war scene and his blood-stained glove, Mickey-Mouse keeps a smile glued to his face.

Tlaxcala was one of the few territories that resisted control by the Mexica and, in the sixteen century, the Tlaxcaltecs allied with the Spaniards to defeat the Mexica leader Moctezuma II and his people. By 1520, Moctezuma declared himself subservient to King

¹⁶ Kat Austin, Carlos-Urani Montiel, and Victoria J. Furio, "Codex Espangliensis: Neo-Baroque Art of Resistance," *Latin American Perspectives* 39, no. 3 (May 2012): 97.

¹⁷ Richard F. Townsend, *The Aztecs*, 3rd ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 2009), 55.

Charles V of Spain, but the Mexicas outside the palace complex, where he was under arrest, continued to fight. In this scene from *Codex Espangliensis*, the frame that surrounds the tank can be interpreted as the palace complex taken by the Tlaxcaltecas and the Spaniards, who also installed a crucifix on the Great Pyramid of Tenochtitlan and an image of the Virgin, as is seen here.¹⁸ The Mexicas, who attacked with darts, arrows, and stones, are here portrayed surrounding the army of invaders. Hernán Cortés and his army later escaped the city by night, but the battle continued when the Mexica retaliated.

As in Garcilazo's works, Chagoya's and Gómez-Peña's inclusion of characters from history and popular culture thwarts the representation of a linear account. The narrative in *Codex Espangliensis* develops across geographical territories and time periods to address a variety of themes, such as religion, immigration, and border policies, as well as to question colonial and neo-colonial practices that reappear in contemporary society in disguise. Art historian Jennifer González explains that *Codex Espangliensis* introduces "a shift in vocabulary from geographical imperialism to cultural imperialism, from George Washington to Mickey Mouse, from 'Columbus to the Border Patrol,' a shift that maintains structures of power through a disguised language of diplomacy, popular culture and advertising."¹⁹



Figure 4

Enrique Chagoya, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, and Felicia Rice, *Codex Espangliensis*, 1998. Artists' book limited edition. 19 x 24 cm. Image courtesy of Chagoya, Gómez-Peña, and Rice.

¹⁸ Townsend, *Aztecs*, 220–36.

¹⁹ González, "Introduction," in *Codex Espangliensis*, 3.

The Mexica Migration and the Convergence of Time in *Codex Azcatitlan*

Dystopic Magical Codex is in dialogue with sixteenth-century codices, in which one can observe the migration of the Mexica, sacrificial victims, and adoration scenes.²⁰ It is primarily informed by the *Codex Azcatitlan*, which dates to the 1560s or 1570s. *Codex Azcatitlan* was made in New Spain, a territory that partially encompassed what is today known as Mexico. Though its authors are unknown, scholars believe it to be the work of at least two Mexica artists. The Mexica migrated from Aztlán in 1168 and founded the cities Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco around 1381 in present-day Mexico City.²¹ The title of the codex, *Azcatitlan*, derives from its first folio in which the word “Ascatitla” is inscribed. It was named by scholar Robert Barlow, who wrote the first study of this manuscript.²²

Codex Azcatitlan was first recorded in the eighteenth century within the private collection of Italian collector Lorenzo Boturini Benaduci and later entered the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.²³ *Codex Azcatitlan* is unfinished; its twenty-five plates show a visual heterogeneity that incorporates native and European influences.²⁴ The Mesoamerican convention includes the depiction of figures in strict profile, a route traced by footprints, and a “spaceless landscape,” in which figures appear to float in space. Among the European pictorial techniques seen in *Codex Azcatitlan* are the use of the horizon line, the superposition of figures or changes in scale to indicate perspective, and routes represented by a path rather than footprints, among others. According to Federico Navarrete, the visual heterogeneity, hybrid pictorial techniques, and narrative contrasts show the expertise of the *tlacuiloque* (artist-scribes) in both traditional and modern approaches to painting as well as a complex narrative addressed to different audiences, as the Mexica interacted with Europeans.²⁵

Codex Azcatitlan illustrates the Mexica building temporary shelters, fighting other ethnic groups, and going on fishing and hunting expeditions during their two hundred-year migration.²⁶ Once settled in Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco, the prominent figure of the god Huitzilopochtli disappears from the narrative, and the focus shifts to rulers such as

²⁰ Angela Marie Herren (Rajagopalan), “Writing Collaborative Histories in Early Colonial New Spain: A Study of the Multiple Artistic Hands in Codex Azcatitlan,” *The Latin Americanist* 56, no. 1 (March 2012): 34, <https://doi-org.pitt.idm.oclc.org/10.1111/j.1557-203X.2012.01140.x>.

²¹ According to Alejandro Lugo and other scholars, Aztlatlan in the modern day of Nayarit might be the land of Aztlan. It was identified in 1530 by Nuño de Guzmán, but until the eighteenth century it was imagined by the Europeans as an unknown place. Aztlan is considered the homeland of the Aztecs, and the Mexica were the only ones who claimed Aztlan as such. Others, such as Gloria Anzaldúa, define Aztlan as the U.S. Southwest. See Alejandro Lugo, *Fragmented Lives, Assembled Parts: Culture, Capitalism, and Conquest at the U.S.-Mexico Border* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 30, 31, 56; Herren Rajagopalan, *Portraying the Aztec Past*, 2, 49, 131; Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 4th ed., (San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 23.

²² Herren, “Writing Collaborative Histories,” 23–35.

²³ Herren, “Writing Collaborative Histories,” 26.

²⁴ The migration section is considered finished, but the absence of color and missing dates in the imperial, colonial, and postconquest sections have led scholars to believe it was not completed. Still, scholars can interpret the information presented, the events, and leaders portrayed based on other codices and historical documents. See Herren Rajagopalan, *Portraying the Aztec Past*, 67.

²⁵ Federico Navarrete, “The Hidden Codes of the Codex Azcatitlan,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 45 (Spring 2004), <https://www-jstor-org.pitt.idm.oclc.org/stable/20167625>.

²⁶ The two-hundred-year journey is recorded in several other manuscripts, including the *Codex Aubin* and *Codex Boturini*.

Cuacuapitzauac, the first ruler of Tlatelolco, and Acamapichtli, the first ruler of Tenochtitlan. Thus, in addition to the theme of migration, *Codex Azcatitlan* depicts imperial history and the founding of the major Mexica cities. It also portrays the 1519 arrival of Hernán Cortés and his troops to Mexico City and the ensuing battle in 1521, ending in 1527.²⁷



Figure 5

Codex Azcatitlan, c. 1501–1600. European paper, 25 plates folio 18v.

210 x 280 mm. México. Collection Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Image courtesy of Bibliothèque Nationale de France, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b84582686/f25_image

Like many sixteenth-century Mexican painted books, *Codex Azcatitlan* includes specific dates, events, and names in pictographs, text, and European visual traditions. It rejects a linear version of history and instead explores a confluence of eras and spaces—or what Angela Herren Rajagopalan calls a “cosmic frame,” in which diverse elements are portrayed throughout the manuscript to reference temporal and spatial shifts.²⁸ One example of this cosmic frame is the place-glyph that represents Aztlan, the ancestral homeland of the Mexica, which reappears at the beginning and end of the manuscript.²⁹ Another example is the portrayal of the festival of Toxcatl, which presents viewers in the festival, the battle that ensued, and its aftermath.

In a scene from the imperial period of *Codex Azcatitlan*, Axayácatl, the ruler of Tenochtitlan, appears seated on the left-hand side of the page on a highly decorated *teptzoicpalli* or chair (Fig. 5). He devotes himself to watching the battle taking place before him in 1473 as his armed forces battled the Tlatelolcas.³⁰ Near him on the left, Tenochca warriors (from Tenochtitlan) hold their shields and weapons as they attack and invade

²⁷ According to Herren Rajagopalan, the last event depicted, takes place in 1527, when Cortés's cousin was tortured by fellow Spaniards and when the bishop of Tlaxcala, Fray Julián Garcés, arrived in Mexico City. Herren Rajagopalan, *Portraying the Aztec Past*, 99–101.

²⁸ Herren Rajagopalan, *Portraying the Aztec Past*, 70.

²⁹ Herren Rajagopalan, *Portraying the Aztec Past*, 107–09.

³⁰ The dispute started as early as 1472 and ended in 1473, when the Tlatelolcas were defeated. This was perhaps intended to give the Tenochcas greater control over the market. Herren Rajagopalan, *Portraying the Aztec Past*, 56.



Figure 6

Gabriel Garcilazo, *Dystopic Magical Codex: Codex 13 (The Journey through Mexico)*, 2015. Charcoal and ink on paper. 70 x 100 cm. Private collection. Image courtesy of the artist.

Tlatelolco's temple.³¹ The image depicts the death and downfall of Axayácatl's rival Moquihuix, the last ruler of Tlatelolco. Moquihuix's fragmented body is shown falling down the pyramid as his blood spreads filling the nearby steps of the Tlatelolco temple.³² The site of the 1473 battle of Tlatelolco is also depicted in Garcilazo's *Dystopic Magical Codex*, in *Codex 13 (The Journey through Mexico)* as is the juxtaposition of different temporal and spatial moments (Fig. 6).³³ Here, Garcilazo portrays a former president and drug leader in Axayácatl's *teptzoicpalli* and, instead of Moquihuix's defeat, depicts the massacre of student activists in Mexico as well as trucks used for the transportation and trafficking of drugs and migrants.

³¹ Navarrete, "The Hidden Codes," 156.

³² For further information on imperial and conquest scenes in the *Codex Azcatitlan*, see María Castañeda de la Paz and Michel R. Oudijk, "La Conquista y la Colonia en el Códice Azcatitlán," *Journal de la société des américanistes* 98, no. 2 (2012): 59–95, doi.10.4000/jsa.12322, <http://journals.openedition.org/jsa/12322>; Elena FitzPatrick Sifford, "Mexican Manuscripts and the First Images of Africans in the Americas," *Ethnohistory* 66, no. 2 (April 2019): 223–48, <https://doi-org.pitt.idm.oclc.org/10.1215/00141801-7298747>.

³³ On October 2, 1968, at the Plaza de las Tres Culturas in the Nonoalco-Tlatelolco housing development in Mexico City, university protesters were attacked by the government. Statistics differ, but it has been reported that between forty-nine and seven hundred students were killed and many other students disappeared. The university students were protesting for the autonomy of the National Autonomous University UNAM and the release of political prisoners, among other issues. For more information on the massacre and the events, read Elaine Carey, *Plaza of Sacrifices: Gender, Power, and Terror in 1968 Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005), and George Flaherty, *Hotel Mexico: Dwelling on the 68 Movement* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2016).

In *Dystopic Magical Codex: Codex 13 (The Journey through Mexico)*, the references to Mexico are explicit. Garcilazo has replaced Axayácatl's head with two heads: that of former president Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988–1994) and the drug lord Joaquín Guzmán Loera, also known as El Chapo. Instead of wearing the turquoise blue diadem of Mexica rulers, El Chapo wears a feathered cap. El Chapo/Salinas hold a staff that is traditionally seen in codices and is associated with sovereignty.³⁴ Salinas participated in the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which took effect on January 1, 1994, further opening the country for transnational commerce and subsequent neoliberalism.³⁵ Thus, Salinas and El Chapo are both aligned with transnational trade, an assignment that locates the artwork in recent times, but spanning several decades. This overlapping of historical periods contests notions of linear time as well as concepts of a fixed history. Thus, through his portrayal of El Chapo/Salinas, and his appropriation of *Codex Azcatitlan*, Garcilazo demands that viewers rethink not only history, but also issues such as immigration, commerce, and the war on drugs.

As El Chapo/Salinas observes the battle and massacre occurring before him/them, two men wearing black full-face masks and holding shields proceed to attack a protester in the temple whose sign reads "43." Next to the protester, the fragmented body of a man falls off the pyramid. These figures reference the September 2014 mass kidnapping of forty-three male students from a teacher's college in the town of Ayotzinapa in the southern state of Guerrero. The students, who were on their way to a demonstration in Mexico City commemorating the state-sponsored massacre at Tlatelolco against Mexico's student and worker movement on October 2, 1968, were detained by the local police and then turned over to a criminal organization. To this day their whereabouts remain unknown and charges have not been made due to inconsistencies in testimonies, altered and lost evidence, and the involvement of government agents in the events. *Dystopic Magical Codex: Codex 13 (The Journey through Mexico)* reflects the impunity and inefficacy that has permeated the criminal justice system in Mexico in the last decades, a corrupt state apparatus, and the silencing of protesters. It also speaks to a failed war on drugs and the need to reconsider both national and international policies on drugs, trade, labor, and borders to prevent more violence and further trafficking of humans.

Conclusion

Dystopic Magical Codex has temporal and spatial elements such as ancient pyramids, modern-day weapons, and Mickey Mouse imagery that allow viewers to identify and contextualize it while subverting hegemonic discourses on history, trade, and politics. The reappearance of these elements in artworks such as Garcilazo's underline the coexistence of temporalities in contemporary societies and contest master narratives. These artworks also raise questions about colonialism, imperialism, and new forms of dominance.

³⁴ El Chapo was convicted in 2019 in a U.S. court. His participation in the drug business dates to the 1970s.

³⁵ NAFTA further eliminated trade barriers between the U.S., Mexico, and Canada. Yet, as it was explained by Patricia Fernández-Kelly and Douglas S. Massey, when it was implemented in the 1990s "U.S. investments already controlled two-thirds of the Mexican economy" as U.S. companies had already opened export processing plants (also known as *maquiladoras*) in border cities such as Ciudad Juárez through the Border Industrialization Program (BIP) in 1965. Thus, according to Fernández-Kelly and Massey NAFTA did not mean the liberalization of trade, but an opportunity for U.S. investors to control trade and for the Salinas administration to "shape new alliances to revitalize the troubled Mexican economy and improve the standing of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional," among other things. Read "Patricia Fernández-Kelly and Douglas S. Massey, "Borders for Whom? The Role of NAFTA in Mexico-U.S. Migration," in "NAFTA and Beyond: Alternative Perspectives in the Study of Global Trade and Development," special issue, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political Science* 610, (March 2007), 103, 104.

In *Dystopic Magical Codex*, Garcilazo combines Mexica, colonial, and contemporary imagery juxtaposed with modern technology and weapons to present a social critique that speaks to the trafficking of weapons, drugs, and humans in present-day Mexico. It asks viewers to reflect on the consumption and production of licit and illicit goods as well as on the consequences of governmental corruption, failed strategies, and current migratory practices. Garcilazo's *Dystopic Magical Codex* invites us to rethink notions of borders and the circulation of goods and beings as well as Mexico's contemporary conditions, in which tens of thousands of people have died and others live in an environment of fear and intimidation. It asks us to reexamine current policies that cause stereotypes to proliferate and disregard human lives in this violent economic and socio-political context.



Figure 7

Gabriel Garcilazo, *Dystopic Magical Codex: Codex 4*, 2015. Charcoal and ink on paper. Polyptych (4 drawings), 35.5 x 33.3 cm. each. Private collection. Image courtesy of the artist.

Interview

Adriana Miramontes Olivas: From March to April 2017, you presented *Distopías: Gabriel Garcilazo* at the Galería Arnold Belkin at the Museo Universitario del Chopo in Mexico City. Could you explain the title?³⁶

Gabriel Garcilazo: *Dystopías* comes from the main artwork, which is *Dystopic Magical Codex*. I titled it in reference to the theme [or notion] of magic, slightly citing Magical Realism in literature but also to the dystopia of Mexico, especially during the war on drugs—basically a civil war, which seems the opposite of utopia. This is how the title of the artwork was conceived, and the curator at El Chopo [Itzel Vargas Plata] used this word for the title of the exhibit, which encompasses the concept of a contemporary dystopic Mexico.

AMO: From December 2015 to April 2016, you exhibited *Código Vaquero* (Cowboy Codex) at the Centro Cultural Jardín Borda in the historic downtown area of Cuernavaca in the State of Morelos, Mexico. I saw several similarities between *Distopías* and *Código Vaquero*. How were these exhibitions different?³⁷

GG: The thematic selection of *Distopías* was intended to be only about issues of migration and violence, so some artworks were removed from this exhibit such as *Código Vaquero*. The main artwork of both exhibits was *Dystopic Magical Codex*.

AMO: Why do you appropriate codices? When did you first encounter codices?

GG: I have always liked history, I am a bit of a fan. I have also always liked the charm that the images in the codices have. So, my interest is both historical and visual. Just as now I am interested in alchemy, back then I was working with codices.

I first saw codices as a boy, but at home, not at school. My mother is a historian, and my father is a philosopher. Thus, I have an interest in researching history. My mother has numerous books about codices and pre-Hispanic images. At home, history was always a topic of conversation, as well as of reflection.

I also believe that today the information overflow is creating people without memory. We fail to retain information, and this happens every day. Everything is dismissed so quickly. It is important to think about history today. That is one of my motivations for working with those documents.

³⁶ This interview was conducted in Spanish on March 20, 2019, in Mexico City in the gardens of the Franz Mayer Museum and was translated by the author and edited for the purposes of this publication.

³⁷ Gabriel Garcilazo's exhibit at Museo Universitario del Chopo was reviewed in *La Jornada* and *El Universal*. Read: Merry MacMasters, "Artista retoma códices prehispánicos y aborda problemas del México actual," *La Jornada*, April 17, 2017, <https://www.jornada.com.mx/2017/04/17/cultura/a09n2cul>; Leonardo Domínguez, "Distopías de Gabriel Garcilazo en el Museo Universitario del Chopo," *El Universal*, April 15, 2017, <https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/articulo/cultura/artes-visuales/2017/04/15/en-el-chopo-distopias-de-gabriel-garcilazo>.

AMO: Why do you use the *Codex Azcatitlan*? Why do you specifically appropriate this manuscript and not any other? What makes it unique?

GG: This codex is precisely about the foundational myth of a city I visit and with which I interact: downtown Mexico City, I see ancient ruins and their juxtaposition with colonial and contemporary buildings. The ancient ruins coexist in the present and this convergence of styles, histories, and times inspired me. I do not have a lot of contact with the Maya, it is not something I live with. Perhaps if I lived in Mérida, I would have used a Maya codex.

Both the *Tira de la Peregrinación* (The Pilgrimage Strip) (also known as the *Boturini Codex*) and the *Codex Azcatitlan*, which is the one I used, narrate the foundational myth of Tenochtitlan. The *Codex Azcatitlan* has more information about the arrival of the Spaniards and the conquest. Since I saw several versions of the codex that were continuously updated, I thought it was appropriate to create a version of the history of contemporary Mexico using those images. Since the original codex shows migrations in Mexico, I decided to represent the process of contemporary migration within Mexico as well as drug and arms trafficking. Despite these being serious topics, I like to work with humor, a dark humor, and to represent events that could be funny but are important topics. I like that combination of elements in my work.

This codex [the Azcatitlan] is also relevant because of its numerous updates. There are three or four known versions of this codex: one is pre-Hispanic and the other dates to the Spanish conquest, which includes a medieval-European influence brought by the Spaniards. That is why I am interested in this codex; history was being updated in the different versions, along with the painting technique. The projects were requested by the Spaniards who were priests, as the Church commissioned them to preserve these histories.³⁸



Figure 8

Gabriel Garcilazo,
Dystopic Magical Codex:
Codex 5, 2015. Charcoal
and ink on paper.
Polyptych (4 drawings),
35.5 x 33.3 cm. each.
Private collection. Image
courtesy of the artist.

³⁸ It is crucial here to stress that numerous artworks were destroyed with the Conquest, and only about fifteen pre-Conquest manuscripts survive. While many priests and friars demanded the destruction of works, there were exceptions to this eradication. One example of a friar engaged in the preservation of artworks and the creation of manuscripts is friar Bernardino de Sahagún who commissioned the four-thousand-page *Florentine Codex*. For more on this, see Oles, *Art and Architecture in Mexico*, 26–31.

AMO: In *Dystopic Magical Codex*, we see different historical eras, distinct temporalities, where the past is juxtaposed with the present. Pre-Columbian individuals hold shields, but they also carry large caliber weapons, cellphones, and bombs (Figs. 7–8). At the same time, ancient pyramids from past civilizations are portrayed near helicopters and motor boats. Could you explain how your interest in these distinct temporalities developed?

GG: It comes from my experience of living in Mexico City, a city that has great dynamism and contrasts. Conceptually, in the city there is also a historical encounter between the past and a contemporaneity that might not be too different. One parallel is in terms of violence, because these codices are highly violent with sacrifices and dismembered victims. Hence, I present a historical reflection, I raise a question. I always state that my work is not a critique, it is about asking questions or presenting ideas. The public observes the artwork and can interpret a critique or other information in it. I like that my work can have multiple layers of meaning and that it can be interpreted in different ways.

AMO: In addition to the references to the past and present, in your work *Dystopic Magical Codex*, distinct processes of hybridization such as the phenomenon of migration are present. But migration is not a new phenomenon, it has been practiced throughout centuries. What prompted your current interest in migration?³⁹

GG: Migration is precisely the topic of the *Codex Azcatitlan*; it is what historically connects all epochs of humanity. There have always been migrations in the world and in Mexico.

That is one of the themes that keeps reappearing [in society]: only our clothes are different, we are still violent and continue to migrate. There can also be a more romantic reading: there was violence [in the past], but it may have had a spiritual connotation. This is what interests me: raising questions as well as examining similarities and/or differences. I believe one of the similarities is migration.

AMO: Walter Mignolo considers modernization a process of coloniality. He wrote, “Coloniality points toward and intends to unveil an embedded logic that enforces control, domination, and exploitation disguised in the language of salvation, progress, modernization, and being good for everyone . . . ‘modernity/coloniality’ [should be conceptualized as] two sides of the same coin and not as two separate frames of mind: you cannot be modern without being colonial; and if you are on the colonial side of the spectrum you have to transact with modernity—you cannot ignore it.”⁴⁰ In your work, indigenous people have not been subjugated or eradicated; to the contrary, they are empowered individuals who take over the leadership role and they appropriate modern technological instruments, most likely from other countries (Figs. 7–8). I would like you to comment about your representation of the indigenous people, their current disagreements, and their protests.⁴¹

³⁹ According to Néstor García Canclini, hybridization can occur in several ways, among them he cites “unplanned hybridization,” which includes migration and tourism among other forms of interaction. Néstor García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), xxiii–xxxiv.

⁴⁰ Walter Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 6–7.

⁴¹ Because the artwork is inspired by *Codex Azcatitlan*, I refer to the figures as “natives.” Yet, I read Garcilazo’s subjects as “Mexicans” without trying to homogenize the citizens of this extensive and diverse country in which numerous groups of people interact and in which there are more than thirty languages spoken.

GG: The representation of indigenous people was influenced by the codices, especially the *Azcatitlán*. I did not want to make many changes to the codex.

AMO: Are there references to the current indigenous groups who are defending their rights, language, and traditions?

GG: In *Dystopic Magical Codex*, I did not necessarily address indigenous issues, it was more about appropriating the codex to speak about contemporary issues which are a mixture of themes. However, another artwork exhibited at El Chopo in *Distopías* was the pyramid *Deconstruction/Colonization* (2015) (Fig.1).⁴² In this artwork, I do speak specifically about the migration from rural areas to the city, which includes people who are often low income, who have a more direct indigenous ancestry, and who are the heirs of this culture that I mentioned.

AMO: The participation of the United States in the Mexican “war on drugs” and other Dirty Wars throughout the Americas has been well documented. During Operation Fast and Furious more than 2,500 weapons were sent to Mexico.⁴³ Could you tell us more about operation Fast and Furious? Are there references to it in your artwork?

GG: There are references to arms trafficking but not necessarily to that case. *Dystopic Magical Codex* is divided into several segments: the cocaine is transported from Central America, then arrives in Mexico, and from Mexico it is taken to the United States. The last images of the codex are about the transportation of weapons from the United States to Mexico, thus it is a continuous cycle.

According to my research, the roads used by migrants and by drug and arms traffickers are the same. It is a continuous flow. Obviously, this all has to do with the collateral damages that we already witnessed under former president Felipe Calderón (2006–2012). The delivery of weapons to Mexico, a country in which it is illegal to own weapons and in which it is not as easy to acquire them as in the United States, is part of the collateral damage from drug trafficking.

⁴² The sculpture *Deconstruction/Colonization* is built out of wood, plastic, and glass. Garcilazo has exhibited another similar sculpture (in Cuernavaca) made with wood and a tire. According to Itzel Vargas Plata, the use of materials such as these and the creation of informal housing solutions is a “type of colonization or appropriation of spaces.” For more on informal settlements and Garcilazo’s sculpture read the exhibition catalogue entry: Itzel Vargas Plata, “Código Vaquero,” in *Gabriel Garcilazo: Códice Vaquero* (Cuernavaca, Morelos: Secretaría de Cultura del Estado de Morelos, 2017).

⁴³For more on Rápido y Furioso and weapon-trafficking operations see José Manuel Valenzuela Arce, “Estado Adulterado/La Juventud Expropiada,” in *Topografías de las Violencias: Alteridades e impasses sociales*, ed. Susana Bercovich and Salvador Cruz Sierra (Tijuana, B.C., México: El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 2015), 149-160; José Manuel Valenzuela “Remolinos de viento: Juvenicidio e identidades desacreditadas,” in *Juvenicidio: Ayotzinapa y las vidas precarias en América Latina y España*, ed. José Manuel Valenzuela (Tijuana: El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 2015): 36-37; Jorge Carrasco Arraizaga and J. Jesus Esquivel, “Confirmado: El gobierno de Calderón sabía de ‘Rápido y Furioso,’” *Proceso*, September 28, 2014.



Figure 9

Gabriel Garcilazo, *Dystopic Magical Codex: Codex 7 (The Road to Venezuela)*, 2015. Charcoal and ink on paper. 66.5 x 66.5 cm. Private collection. Image courtesy of the artist.

AMO: Both the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and the Procuraduría General de la República (Attorney General of Mexico, PGR) appear in your artworks, as can be seen in the acronyms of these agencies found in the men's caps and shields, respectively (Fig. 9 and Fig. 10). What is their role in the battles and violence that you depict?

GG: In the end, it is all similar to a theater performance. *Dystopic Magical Codex* is also like a theater scene depicting the war on drugs in both Mexico and in the United States. At the end of the Cold War, U.S. president Ronald Reagan (1981–1989) made up a new enemy to keep up with the arms race that has characterized the United States as well as the power of having a common enemy: the people. In Mexico, dreadful discoveries from previous presidencies are being made public and, just like Reagan invented a war on drugs, Calderón continued it here in 2006. They are the absurd protagonists in an absurd war. Humor therefore has a lot to do with it, because it is both tragic and comic to see this performance of the war on drugs that makes no sense; it is a senseless dystopia.



Figure 10

Gabriel Garcilazo, *Dystopic Magical Codex: Codex 11 (The Arrival to Mexico)*, 2015. Charcoal and ink on paper. Diptych 70 x 100 cm. Private collection. Image courtesy of the artist.

AMO: Could you further explain *Codex 13 (The Journey through Mexico)* (Fig. 6)?

GG: It is a section of *Dystopic Magical Codex*. This section has a two-headed god who appears in the *Codex Azcatitlan*, and I added the faces of former Mexican president Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988–1994) and the drug lord Joaquín Guzmán Loera, also known as El Chapo. The idea is that they are two sides of the same thing and it is absurd to pretend to fight against something that, in reality, is being nourished or sponsored by the other.

There is also a massacre in the pyramid and a banner with references to the forty-three students from Ayotzinapa. Thus, there are references to the present and to history. There are also several passenger buses. These vehicles are often used for transporting the drugs that cross through Mexico, among other methods.

AMO: Why is there an allusion to London in the shirt of one of the figures?

GG: When the war on drugs was taking place, several drug lords were captured and they all wore these polo shirts. They have a logo with a figure on a horse playing polo and the word London inscribed. I saw that coincidence and included it as a joke.

AMO: Is it a reference to social class?

GG: Yes, to the desire to be someone else. Many people become involved in the drug business because they do not have a possibility to improve their living conditions or gain upward mobility. Once they have money, they want the most expensive and luxurious items.

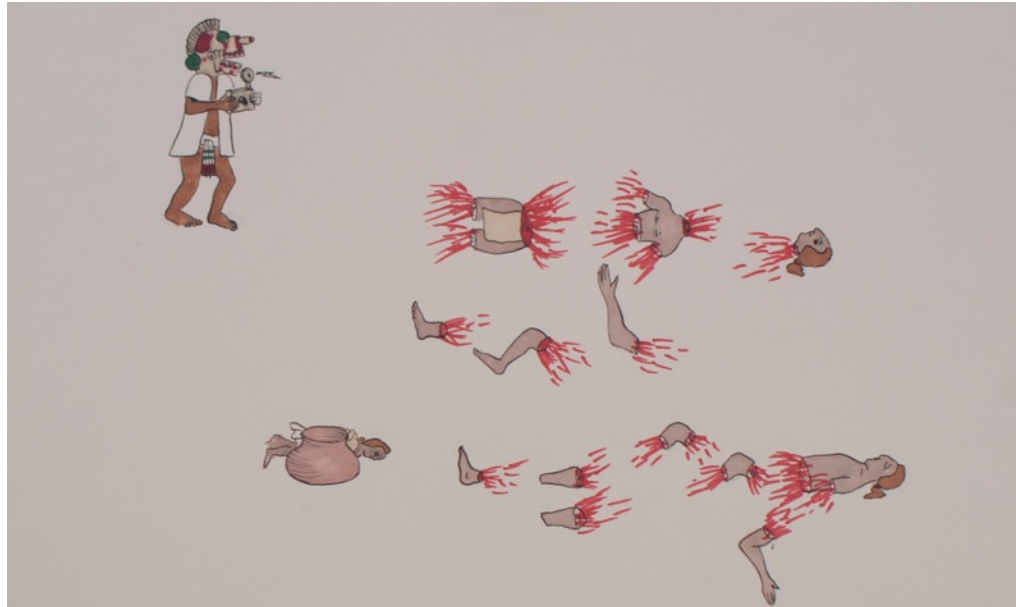


Figure 11

Gabriel Garcilazo, *Dystopic Magical Codex: Codex 17 (Collateral Damage)*, 2015. Charcoal and ink on paper. Polyptych (8 drawings), 25.3 x 41 cm. Private collection. Image courtesy of the artist.

AMO: What is the role of the press in Mexican society and the dissemination of violence? (Fig.11)

GG: The press also participates in this theater that I mentioned. In Mexico not all but most of the press is paid for by someone.⁴⁴ There is also a curious interest in sensationalism in Mexico. I see how yellow press sells, it is a profitable business. I do not know if sensationalism is related to culture or if it is a general human condition, but it is something that attracts buyers. During the war on drugs, yellow journalism showed everyday horrible images of shooting victims.

AMO: Do you think that as Mexicans we are desensitized to violence?

GG: Yes, we are desensitized and we normalize it. It is a natural reaction. If violence is often perceived as very dramatic, it would be unbearable. The brain needs to think "this is

⁴⁴ As with any generalizations, it would be erroneous to assume all press is corrupt. Mexico is one of the most dangerous countries for journalists in the world and many have been killed or live in exile. A recent article by the BBC argued only Afghanistan and Syria have witnessed the deaths of more journalists in comparison with Mexico. See Marcos Martínez, "Cuántos periodistas han muerto desde que asumió la presidencia López Obrador," *BBC*, February 28, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-47402149>.

normal, this is what happens," otherwise one would go mad. Likewise, if horrific visual information is constantly delivered, one ends up normalizing it.

A few years ago, there were shootings everywhere and sometimes walking on the street one could encounter a shooting victim or dead men hanging from bridges. This often happened in the state of Morelos. I once saw a shooting right in front of me. It happened from one car to the other. Their weapons looked like submachine guns from the military, I honestly do not know what they were. It happened shamelessly in broad daylight. I turned around and fled the scene. Yet, there are fellow citizens who witnessed even worst cases of violence such as encountering decapitated heads in trash bags near their homes.

AMO: I cannot avoid noticing that many of the roles played in your artwork are by men, although the gender identity of some of the figures remains ambiguous. Why can many of the individuals be identified as "men"?

GG: They are mostly men because I was using images from the codex, although there are numerous women, especially in the section that represents migration. It was a society which at that moment was completely dominated by men, I guess that is the reason.

Violence is usually perpetuated by men. Thus, it is also related to that.⁴⁵

AMO: You spoke about this earlier in our conversation, but what are your goals in representing the theme of violence and migration in *Dystopic Magical Codex*?

GG: My objective is to represent that encounter between the past and the present and to generate questions. Those are my main goals. To raise questions, to find coincidences, differences, and perhaps more. To reflect on whether we are repeating history, if we are moving forward, or if we are achieving anything, and if we are, what we are achieving. These are some of the questions I set out not only in this work but in all of my oeuvre.

AMO: To which contemporary artists is your artwork related?

GG: To many! Artists have coincided in their ways of thinking, questioning, and seeing or representing the world. I believe that is a positive thing because it means I am aware of my historical moment. There are numerous artists, and I believe that we work toward questioning our contemporaneity.

⁴⁵ In writing about the construction of masculinity and the public conception of criminality, Salvador Sierra Cruz states that organized crime is mostly identified with men. Men occupy many of the high-ranking positions in criminal organizations as well as most of its membership. He also states that many of the participants are not only men, but marginalized and lower-class men. In Ciudad Juárez, a city once labeled the most dangerous in the country, 95 percent of homicide victims are men; see Salvador Sierra Cruz, "Memorias de Dolor: Violencia Social y Homicida en Ciudad Juárez," in *Topografías de las Violencias: Alteridades e impasses sociales*, ed. Susana Bercovich Hartman and Salvador Cruz Sierra (Tijuana: El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 2015), 89–90.

AMO: Who have been your artistic or intellectual mentors?

GG: When I was studying art, Gustavo Pérez Monzón enormously influenced me and my generation.⁴⁶ He was like our artistic sensei. Even though my work does not relate to his, he influenced me in his way of working, teaching, and asking us to think about the artwork. He is among the most relevant, but there are more.

Many people have influenced me in my personal milieu, such as my parents and my grandmothers. My grandmother used to make retablos, or ex-votos, as a hobby.⁴⁷ She made them as a political critique. She commented on the news or made fun of them by making ex-votos like those found in churches. She would include images from the newspaper of the former president Vicente Fox (r. 2000–2006) giving an offering. Just recently when I was reviewing my work I noticed it was influenced by what my grandmother did even though she never took it seriously. Still, she can be considered one of my influences.

AMO: Your work is intrinsically political. What do you think of current president Manuel López Obrador, the government's foreign policy regarding Venezuela, and the diaspora of migrants from countries in Central America?

GG: I think it is too soon to judge. I think there are issues that are being handled better. I agree with the two main policies that are the focus of this administration: human rights and transparency. These have been among the most obscure topics from previous governments in Mexico: disrespect to human rights and zero transparency. If the new policies do work, they would benefit the country, but it is still too soon to make further comments.

In terms of the diaspora, migration has always existed. If migrants stay here in Mexico, it could be even more helpful than them leaving for the United States or other countries.



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⁴⁶ Gustavo Pérez Monzón (1956) belongs to a generation of Cuban artists known for its interest in formal experimentation and the inclusion of new themes in Cuban art of the 1980s. He participated in the exhibit *Volumen I* on January 14, 1981, at the Centro de Arte Internacional de la Habana, an exhibit that marked the beginning of the so-called new Cuban art, both within Cuba and at an international level. In the 1990s Pérez Monzón moved to Mexico, where he currently resides. For more on Pérez Monzón and the *Volumen I* exhibit, see Olga María Rodríguez Bolufé, *Ojos que ven, corazón que siente: arte cubano en México: 1985-1996* (Ciudad de México: Universidad Iberoamericana, 1997), 45–67.

⁴⁷ Ex-votos are offerings made after a promise has been fulfilled. Ex-voto paintings were commonly placed inside churches as a sign of gratitude or as testimony after the favor or miracle had been granted. As explained by Clara Bargellini, "Ex-voto paintings express gratitude for divine interventions . . . the literal meaning of ex-voto (from a vow) –testifies to everyone in the community, for as long as the painting survives that a miracle has taken place." Clara Bargellini in *Painting a New World: Mexican Art and Life 1521-1821* (Denver, CO: Frederick and Jan Mayer Center for Pre-Columbian and Spanish Colonial Art at the Denver Art Museum, University of Texas Press, 2004), 232.