Radical Equivalence: Veronica Villegas’ syncretic creations

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A Veronica Villegas work is nothing if not architectural; in fact, one could think that her painting on a canvas is not unlike a stonemason laboriously stacking block after block of *chiluca*—a Mexican limestone building material—to construct the elaborate façade of Lorenzo Rodríguez’s Baroque masterpiece Sagrario Metropolitano, the tabernacle adjoining Mexico City’s iconic Catedral Metropolitana. Powerfully asserting its presence on the northern side of the Plaza de la Constitución in downtown Mexico City, it is one of the urban area’s many cultural hearts. Being a resident of Mexico City, Villegas was strongly drawn to it, with its elaborate, visually frenetic façade of cherubs, saints, and local flora, like the *chalchihuite*, piling atop each other in tall, blocky columns.

These charged architectural features feature prominently in Villegas’ work, with its saints and cherubs—as if taken directly from these façades—symbolizing the Catholic Church’s historical privilege and power as Baroque art and architecture’s main patron. Reconstituting Renaissance architecture to dramatic ends, the Baroque movement was brought to Mexico in the 18th century from Spain and Italy. In Mexico City, it wasn’t merely a religious idiom but conveyed the “triumph of the aristocracy too,” as Lawrence Herzog notes in *From Aztec to High Tech: Architecture and Landscape Across the Mexico-United States Border*. As I will detail below, Villegas adopts these signifiers of Catholic authority to effectively disempower them by combining them with other, more fringe religious icons from indigenous and African contexts, as well as from popular culture. Creating an even playing field, so to speak, for various religious and folk traditions to be present at once, one does not dominate the other, but rather, in the Latin American spiritist tradition, a radical equivalence is present. It evidences how seemingly incompatible traditions—say, the occult and the Catholic Church—cross-pollinate to create strange, new cultural hybrids.

Villegas’ *Sand Almanac* polyptych combines saintly icons with musings on Tarot card divination; *Cinco de bastos II* (2016) revolves around the cards’ 7th arcane, the Chariot, and the deck’s “minor” arcana (cards featuring symbols as opposed to images). Men on horseback, as if pulling an unseen chariot, form the dynamic top part of the collage work, while angels and kings compose the more figurative elements of the composition, and are interspersed with Tarot cards featuring coins and cups, symbolic of victory and abundance. *Cinco de bastos I* (2016) continues this celebratory tone, as nude figures dance in the central section of the work, holding up a Chariot card. Above and below them in tidy rows are Five of Wands cards, which illustrate conflict and potential gain. In light of the rest of the work, it seems success has been achieved. *Sueño-Lince* (2016), meanwhile, takes as its starting point the Tarot cards’ 21st “major” arcana, the last one, which features a nude woman dancing at its center, surrounded by a quartet of the fixed astrological signs—Scorpio, Leo, Aquarius and Taurus—that also represent the four corners of the universe and the four elements. In traditional Tarot divination, the card details the cyclical nature of all things, and the perfect unity of all opposing forces. For this work, Villegas has turned the female figure into a kind of *mystagogue*, a guide to the spiritual world who can cross between heaven, hell, and the material world in pursuit of harmony. Rather than utilizing a central figure, however, Villages has represented this mystagogue with columns of indigenous masks native to the people of Guerrero, Mexico, who recreate a myth about a jaguar—or *tecuani* in Nahuatl, an indigenous language—that steals community goods until stopped by a local hero. To Villegas, this story “is related to instinct, witchcraft and the occult.”

The occult makes frequent appearance in the artist’s work. Her *Cajitas* (small boxes) series of paintings feature haphazard stacks of the namesake object. Each box is marked by a hole in its center, which for Villegas signifies an opening for spirits to enter; these objects function for her as spirit containers. In *Cajitas* (2017), one such box, painted pink, is held by a female saint, whose form is repeated several times and overlaps at different angles to suggest movement, as if she’s bowing. Atop each of her heads rests a hat that looks like a miter—the ceremonial headgear worn by bishops and abbots—decorated with traditional African masks. The right half of the painting is nearly entirely occupied by small piles of little, green boxes drawn in ink, while the left half is filled with tiny African masks, also in ink. Drawn simply with a flattened sense of depth, Villegas’ style implausibly combines Mexican Muralism and its Mayan antecedents with someone as dissimilar as Raymond Pettibon, whose ink and paper drawings combine detailed, almost comic-book like images with scratchy, headline-like text.

*Cajitas III (Marte)* (2017) also features a saint, raising one arm up high just before striking a serpent, which writhes beneath her. Above, a line of angels looks down from a cloud. These sections of the work are an “intervened” religious icon, which she typically finds at markets; the kinds of icons she chooses are usually of saints not sanctioned by the Catholic Church; or, they’ve been corrupted by other religious belief systems that run contrary to the Church’s; or they have cult of personalities not affiliated with Church teaching. She notes, “Salesmen sell shrines devoted to certain saints, some of whom are pretty offensive to the Mexican Catholic Church; they consider them blasphemous, although people turn around their faith and strengthen it with their own abstract notions of the divine.”

With *Cajitas III (Marte)* (2017), Villegas cut the icon out and glued it onto paper before drawing and painting around it. Compared to the detailed, colorful, and impeccably illustrated imagery of the icon, Villegas’ contribution looks impulsive and raw, as if they were doodles scribbled in a school notebook. Her very simple, geometric boxes are arrayed around the saint’s feet. Winged cherubs fly in from above alongside several Eyes of Providence; perhaps most known for being featured on the US dollar bill, the Eye of Providence represents the eye of God watching over humanity, and its later use by the Freemasons led to a popular conspiracy theory that they were fundamental to the founding of the United States. Collapsing the Catholic faith, the occult (in the form of the cajitas), and nationalist conspiracy into one work, Villegas suggests that the line between all three can be very thin, and that religion itself can be easily coopted and adopted for one’s own political purposes. If anything, Villegas’ generous re-appropriation of religious imagery is proof of how easily it can be appropriated for any purpose.

The way religions and religious figures, like saints, can be construed and even fabricated in the name of religious devotion and cults of personality is explored with Villegas’ depictions of Saint Bárbara in *La torre de Santa Bárbara* (2017) and Jesús Malverde in *Cajitas II (Malverde)* (2017); both “saints” never actually existed historically, but nonetheless their myths are venerated by the devout. According to legend, Saint Bárbara was beheaded by her own pagan father for her Christian faith. In *La torre de Santa Bárbara*, she’s depictedholding a chalice in one hand and a sword in the other. Cajitas surround her on all sides, while at the top a storm cloud emits a bolt of lightning, a reference to accounts that her father was struck by a bolt of lightning after killing her. Despite the fact that she was removed from the General Roman Calendar due to doubts about her legitimate existence, she’s still venerated in many quarters, including in the Afro-Cuban religion of Santeria, where she’s syncretized with Chango, the deity of fire, lightning, and thunder. “The sword and the tower in Saint Bárbara iconography,” Villagas notes, “is associated with Santeria. *La torre de Santa Bárbara* explores the influence of the Cuban diaspora in Mexico.”

Malverde, meanwhile, is a cult figure in the Mexican state of Sinaloa. Legend goes that he was a mythological, 19th century bandit who stole from the rich. A popular idol with drug traffickers, one of his many nicknames is the “narco-saint.” Like Saint Bárbara, this is another instance of veneration for someone who never actually existed. Moreover, it’s curious that Malverde has been given saintly qualities despite him being quite far from a saint—a criminal—confusing what can and should be properly defined as religious. In *Cajitas II*, an icon of Malverde is reduced only to his face—which is instantly recognizable by his mustache—and is crowned by a large miter, again covered in African masks. Below him, like in other cajitas works by Villegas, is a field of wildly proliferating small boxes with holes. Two large masks flank Malverde’s face, and above them rise a column of boxes, crowns, and licks of fire.

More recently, Villegas portrayed Saint Expeditus as a legion army in *Lead Angels (Saint Expeditus)* (2017). Popularly depicted as a Roman soldier crushing a crow with his foot, the saint is said to have been a Christian martyr in the 4th century, killed for his faith, though whether he actually existed is dubious. In her painting, one of her largest, Villegas has copied the icon dozens of times to form neat, orderly rows of the soldier at the bottom of the canvas, above which a large angel sits, its wings unfolding across the entire width of the work. Considering this figure a mystagogue, it has been summoned to help in a time of crisis, as Saint Expeditus is the patron saint of urgent causes. As Villegas herself has explained, this “Angel of History (*Engel der Geschichte*) was, to [Frankfurt School theorist] Walter Benjamin, a divine creature which had its messianic gaze pointing to two different times, one…to the past, and the other confronting the future while it endures a melancholic present.”

*Ángeles de Plomo II* (2018) revolves around Saint Death (*Santa Muerte*), a purported “Narco Saint” not unlike Malverde whom the Catholic Church deems Satanic; represented by a skeleton dressed in a robe and holding a scythe, the saint is a syncretic blend of an Aztec death goddess and the European grim reapress. Her cult in Mexico has grown substantially, as marginalized populations—from sex workers to the LGBTQI community—pray to her for protection from harm. In this work, she’s mainly represented by two crowned skulls on the left hand side of the canvas emitting rays of the Holy Spirit—which is ironic, considering the Church’s stance on the “saint.” Much larger in scale is the church’s official angel of death, St. Michael, who’s seen battling Satan, depicted here as a kind of black creature. In one hand the saint holds a sword, while in the other he holds a scale, which traditionally represents his duty to weight souls upon their death. Surrounding both are hand-drawn cajitas. In giving form to both ambassadors of the afterlife—the folk saint Santa Muerte and her Church-sanctioned corollary, St. Michael—Villegas legitimizes both as equal.

This tension between the properly religious and its unauthorized equivalent was explored more fully, in real-time, for Villegas’ intervention *Altar itinerante* (2016). For this relational Mexico City project, she asked people on the street to write down their thoughts on San Judas Tadeo, a popular saint in Mexico City, after which they placed it on a movable shrine. Villegas then placed the shrine around different sacred spaces in the city. Much like Malverde or Santa Muerte, San Judas Tadeo is a popular cult figure among drug addicts and criminals, and likewise embodies Mexico’s unique synthesis of religious devotion and street culture. San Judas’ unsavory reputation among the Catholic faithful largely originated from Mexican copies of Italian prints of the saint, which switch his staff-holding hand from right to left—a sign of evil in folkloric circles. Subsequently, he has become very popular among youth, stirring controversy for the kinds of crowds he attracts at the Temple of San Hipolito in Mexico City, his unofficial church. As Padre Jose de Jesus Aguilar, director of radio and television for the Archdiocese of Mexico noted in an interview, “At the services we see Christians, very devout Catholics, and people who participate very seriously in their roles as citizens. But we also see an extreme group of people who you can’t really call Catholics, but who use the symbol of San Judas to commit all kinds of acts that are completely against the notion of the faith—robberies, assaults, drug use, and that sort of thing.”

By creating a shrine to a controversial figure largely constructed by street-made ephemera, Villegas perpetuates San Judas’ underground and un-sanctioned devotional system, going against norms set by the Roman Catholic Church. Villegas’ moral position is clear: that popular culture has and always will be a part of the church, and that there will always be tension between the well-off devout and the poor and under-privileged who resort to crime, often by necessity, to get by. That Villegas’ altar travels, and is largely ephemeral in form, furthers its vital alternativity; altars are traditionally made of stone, and are permanently located.

Another iteration of the project occurred on the border between Mexico and the United Stated, in Ciudad Juárez. This time, Villegas made dozens of drawings herself, placing them on the concrete walls of the Rio Grande in a tight grid. Applied with wheat paste, the ephemeral mural resembled urban street art, and, in the words of Villegas, “Symbolized the thousands of petitions made by people who daily cross the border between the two countries in order to study, work, or pursue a better life, running from conflict zones in Mexico and Central America.”

In the current political climate, which is dominated by antagonism towards immigrants and a US foreign policy emphasizing nationalism over international cooperation, Villegas’ work seems especially vital. Combining folkloric images with more traditional religious iconography, Villegas stresses the cultural equivalence of different religions and spiritual movements, and that their ready combination serves an important purpose for many people. As evinced by Villegas, culture is cross-pollinated in surprising ways.