

BETSABEÉ ROMERO: Tradition and Transition

For more than ten years, Betsabeé Romero has focused her work towards the elaboration of a critical discourse concerning the semantics of symbols and rites within various cultures and global consumerism. Likewise, she has demonstrated an interest in taking on the issue of public art versus contemporary art, focusing on its permanence and its relation to various audiences.¹ As a citizen of Mexico City and a constant traveler, she has been continuously exposed to various societies worldwide, and she juxtaposes what she learns from her travels with the cultural elements that compose her own background. Her most recent exhibition, *Lágrimas Negras* (Black Tears), which has been exhibited in several countries, was curated by Julián Zugazagoitia, who said that “In each of her projects, Romero reaffirms her ties to images and iconographies which come from a Mexico in centuries of transition.”²

Born in Mexico City in 1963, Betsabeé Romero studied Fine Arts and History of Arts in Mexico City and Paris. She has had more than fifty exhibitions worldwide, including *Road Show* (Ramis Barquet Gallery, New York), *Eco: Mexican Contemporary Art* (Reina Sofía, Spain), and *Lágrimas Negras*.³ Although she resides in Mexico City, Romero leads a nomadic lifestyle; she spends time living in different communities and thus absorbing as much culture as she can. This practice has greatly influenced her work, which relies heavily on themes such as identity, human migration, environment, and popular religion. These

¹ Arte Mexico, "Betsabeé Romero." Last modified 2011. <http://www.arte-mexico.com/betsabee/bio.html>

² Zugazagoitia, Julián. *Betsabeé Romero: Lágrimas Negras*. Puebla, México: Fundación Amparo 2008.

³ Idem.

themes are manifested through diverse mediums: refashioned cars, carved tires, painted hoods, incised mirrors, and papier mache. It is through the use of these materials that the artist studies the tensions between local traditions and industrialized, consumerist societies, and thus brings them together. Throughout her work, Romero uses different cultural motifs (Mexican, Islamic, Hindu, and more) as a way of eradicating symbolic limits and challenging the consumerist world⁴. She is able to humanize mass productions by evoking mechanisms of memory and working directly with communities. Furthermore, Romero attempts to rescue the past in order to comprehend the present and confront the future. She strives to “make implicit the deconstructive act of memory and to leave an imprint in the collective consciousness.”⁵ In order to achieve this, Romero travels to different communities and produces artworks with the help of the people living there. These pieces are socio-political, religious, and/or environmental commentaries of the place where they are produced.

Betsabeé Romero defines herself as a mechanical artist, which is only fitting, as her main motif is the automobile. In an interview, she said:

“The automobile is an object that has served as a form and cultural mechanism for me and it puts me in contact with publics that are normally foreign to contemporary art, seeing that we are citizens of the world, beings in transit and circulating within the codes of territorial relationships. The idea of drivers, passengers, and speed are historical and cultural concepts with which everyone has an intimate relationship on a daily basis.”⁶

⁴ Coulson, Amanda. "Betsabeé Romero." *Modern Paintors*. (2006): 58-60.

⁵ Zugazgoitia, Julián. *Betsabeé Romero: Lágrimas Negras*. Puebla, México: Fundación Amparo, 2008.

⁶ Zugazgoitia, Julián. *Betsabeé Romero: Lágrimas Negras*. Puebla, México: Fundación Amparo, 2008.

She creates pieces with various parts of cars, and mainly uses Volkswagen Beetles for her pieces. This choice of car is significant and symbolic because it is the quintessential Mexican car (as seen on all taxicabs). *Exodus* (2007) (**Fig. 1**) portrays a series of recycled cut-off Beetles that seem to be engulfed by the ground of the hillside they “climb,” each one with bundles of immigrant’ possessions strapped to them. This caravan epitomizes the struggle of the immigrant, cleverly titled *Exodus* to draw an ironic parallel between the Mexican immigration into the United States and the Israelite expulsion from Egypt. Likewise, the *Ayate Car* (1997) (**Fig. 2**) is a satire for the archetypal dream for a better tomorrow. It displays a 1955 Ford Victoria filled with 10,000 dried roses that has been painted with traditional folkloric Mexican patterns and iconographic 19th century virgins⁷. It is placed in Tijuana, Mexico, next to the border, which connotes hope for a new life. It looks arid and hostile, and thus makes a strong commentary on the treatment of immigrants in the United States. For this piece, Romero traveled to different communities in Tijuana and had the car painted by the locals. This reinforces the idea of a community coming together to recreate Mexico’s historical past and juxtapose its current social problems, thus making the spiritual meet the practical; the past meet the present⁸.

Romero also works extensively with tires and rubber: two materials that contain a heavy history and pave the way for great metaphoric representation. Wheels are vehicles of the past; they have been crucial for human development since humans began using tools, and have been used by most-if not all- cultures. They also represent the human

⁷ Coulson, Amanda. "Betsabé Romero." *Modern Paintors*. (2006): 58-60.

⁸ Ivonne, Pini. "Betsabé Romero." *Art Nexus*. 9. no. 79 (2010): 5-10.

need for speed-a race to consumerism. On the other hand, rubber is a natural resource viscously taken from the environment and turned into an industrial product that was originally obtained through low-paid labor and slavery (hence the name of the exhibit *Black Tears*)⁹. Works such as *Piel de azúcar (Sugar Skin)* (2004) (**Fig. 3**) and *Símbolo Masticado (Chewed Symbol)* (2005) (**Fig. 4**) are composed of said materials. They are tires that have been engraved with traditional Mexican symbols: *Sugar Skin* portrays Mayan iconography and *Chewed* depicts the national symbol which is also on the national flag (an eagle resting on a cactus with a snake in its peak)¹⁰. They have also been painted with chewing gum by different communities. This chewing gum is also made from rubber- a sap from a tree in the Peninsula of Yucatán, Mexico. The use of gum here is notorious because the people who made them are literally engraving their DNA into a work of art, heightening the idea of a communal society coming together as one to celebrate its past. These pieces can also be read as commentaries on how different cultures engrave their memories on the commonplace objects that they use-particularly the tire. It is as if humans are engraving their memories into each turn of the wheel.

Mexican artist Betsabeé Romero displays a strong commentary on the constant battle between tradition and globalization; the spiritual and the practical, between past and present. Through the use of automobiles, painted hoods, mirrors, tires, etc., she manifests themes such as identity, time, popular culture, spirituality and religion, and migration. She works actively with communities to produce works that represent a battle

⁹ Zugazgoitia, Julián. *Betsabeé Romero: Lágrimas Negras*. Puebla, México: Fundación Amparo, 2008.

¹⁰ Idem.

between social-political issues and traditional rites of various cultures. It is through her work that she is able to bring a sense of hope and community to the places that she travels, leaving her own imprint on the lives of those she works with.

CITED WORKS



Fig 1, Betsabeé Romero, *Exodus*, 2007



Fig 2, Bestabeé Romero, *Ayate Car*, 1997



Fig 3, Betsabeé Romero, *Piel de azúcar (Sugar Skin)*, 2004



Fig 4, Bestsabeé Romero, *Símbolo Masticado (Chewed Symbol)*, 2005

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