

Painting the Underworld Sky

Excerpt from
Painting the Underworld Sky: Cultural Expression and Subversion in Art
By Mateo Romero

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Hardly anyone objects, but I do.

I object to gun control laws, liquor laws, urine tests, fingerprints, computer-filed credit records, dog licenses, drivers licenses (let the highway be the judge), mandatory use of seat belts, mandatory installation of air bags, the DEA, FBI, CIA, NIA, INS, BIA, IRS, FAA, the National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, Department of Defense, curfews, blue laws, the omnibus crime bill, cooling-off periods (some like it hot), the draft, riot statutes, transactional immunity, nonprofit organizations (if the government approves of their actions, it is a moral certainty that I will not), RICO statutes, Department of Justice strike forces, obscenity laws, fagophobia codes, burial codes, tax exemption for churches, narcs, taxes, and borders as defined by authorities.

—Charles Bowden, *Blood Orchid*

It is said that which is called "the spirit of an age" is something to which one cannot return. That this spirit gradually dissipates is due to the worlds coming to an end. In the same way, a single year does not have just spring or summer. A single day, too, is the same.

For this reason, although one would like to change todays world back to the spirit of one hundred years or more ago, it cannot be

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done. Thus it is important to take the best out of each generation. This is the mistake of people who are attached to past generations. They have no understanding of this point.

—Yamamoto Tsunetomo, *Hagakure: The Book of the Samurai*

Night has come like something crawling up the banister, sticking out its tongue of fire, and I remember the missionaries up to their knees in muck retreating across the beautiful blue river and the machine gun slugs flicking spots of fountain and Jones drunk on the shore saying shit shit these Indians where'd they get the firepower?

—Charles Bukowski, *Run with the Hunted*

A canvas is really just a place to hang paint.

—James Lavadour



The Way to the Underworld Sky



How have we come to this place, this cold, hard, killing ground?

How have we come to this fourth world, a world of violence, darkness, greed, lack of compassion for human life, punctuated with brief flashes of light and hope? Today, our wars are waged over energy, not geographic boundaries. Today, our violence is against our own people, in the form of an economic peonage that so often coincides with the color of the skin. Some five hundred years ago, Columbus got lost at sea; landed on the island of Hispaniola; unloaded his mercenary killers of men, their warhorses, cannons, slaves; and started an epic holocaust of Native human beings throughout the New World. Although much talk is given to chemical and biological weapons in the present time, the originators of this concept are the descendants of the first homicidal prospectors of this continent, who handed out smallpox-infected blankets to Indians during the bitter north winters.

If you are a Native person in this time and place, you are the survivor of the last five hundred years of cold, hunger, lethal disease, and bullets (let's not overlook the obvious ones). You are part of a country that has dreamed about your death, hungered for it, lusted after it in so many stark, violent, hateful ways. And now, there is perhaps a brief break in this pattern of violence, as the public consciousness of the

country turns itself to new perceived threats, new terrors abroad, other dark-skinned people to hate. The way to the underworld sky is a long one, it covers much time and terrain, its pathway is littered with many bones and bodies from the trip. (Some bodies are still fresh, some bones bear the marks of unspeakable violence so don't look too close, some are still dying as we pass; say a prayer for our brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, and hurry past, eyes fixed ahead on the path.)

According to Alfonso Ortiz's description of the Tewa belief system, everyone makes it back to the underworld. Imagine that, an afterlife without judgment, guilt, sin. Beautiful. Mark me down in the books as a pagan idolater. For myself I have an idea that in the end we all wind up in the same place, the survivors and those who have fallen, the painters and the lawyers, the murderers and the holy men, walking the myriad pathways beneath the underworld sky, searching for that elusive place called home.

My family tree has rich and varied roots. Considering how accomplished my extended family is, I am oftentimes amazed at how little I know about art, cultural pursuits, the Puebloan religious calendar, dancing, and life in general.

My father, Santiago Romero, was born at Cochiti Pueblo. Although born to Keres-speaking parents who were actively involved in the ceremonial life of the village, Dad appeared iconoclastic in many respects. Most Indigenous people I know are engaged in some kind of process of cultural diaspora and return. We search for meanings and experiences beyond our initial cultural background, while still maintaining a philosophical/ideological core of values that is quintessentially Puebloan.

A product of the BIA boarding-school experience at the Santa Fe Indian School, and later the Marine Corps, my father carried a mainstream, ethnically/culturally challenged view of himself. This search for self ultimately led him to Berkeley, California, in the 1960s and to my mother. My brother and I are proof positive of his earnestness in this path.

Santiago Romero was an accomplished three-dimensional watercolorist, at a time when Dorothy Dunn was teaching a flat, two-dimensional ethnographic style of painting at the Santa Fe Indian School. The Dunn School placed an emphasis on high-craft aestheticism, opaque watercolor paint on illustration board, with scenes of “untouched” Native life, dance, ceremonialism, and culture depicted. Other noted artists from this earlier school of Native painting included Pop Chalee and Allan Houser (Houser would later be quoted as saying that Dunn’s level of control over the Native artists in the program was stifling). Santiago was also an exceptionally patient and loving father.

His mother, Teresita Romero, was a noted Cochiti Pueblo pottery revivalist of amazingly gestural bee-plant lines, eccentric vessels of Native clay, appliquéd lizards, painted turkeys, human lifeforms, and voluptuous plants. Perhaps this is the most direct source of art that flows through me. My brother, Diego Romero, is also an extraordinary potter in his own right, author of the monthly neo-Mimbres–inspired comic strips appearing on the inside of pots (see fig. 1) for more than two decades now.

My father kept a journal of his time as a marine during the Korean

War. Stationed above the Inchon Reservoir, his Foxtrot Platoon was overrun by Chinese and North Korean troops. Only two men survived that battle. When I was a child, my father took my brother and me to Sacramento, California, to visit the other surviving marine veteran, missing both legs, who lived in a trailer on full disability. My father lost his left hand, as well as about 5 percent of his body tissue.

After the battle, my father walked thirty miles through the bitter Korean winter back to the UN front lines for medical treatment. In his utility

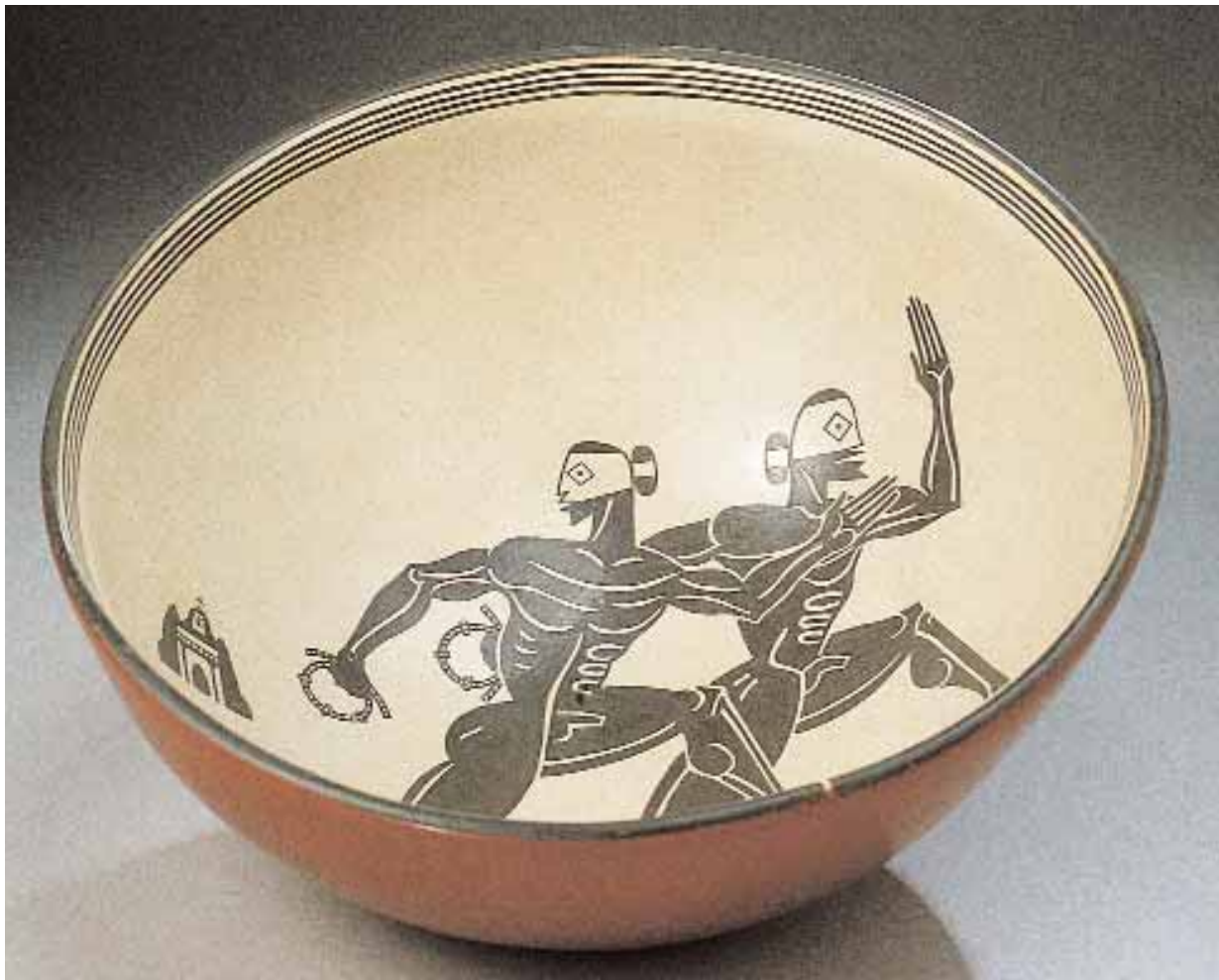
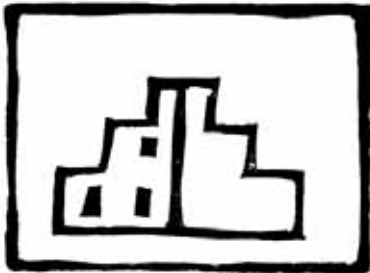


Fig. 1. Diego Romero, *Knotkeepers*, indigenous clay, commercial paint, kiln-fired.

greens, my father passed through the white-clothed Chinese communists, huddled around fires in garbage cans. The Chicoms turned away from him, thinking that he was a ghost, and let him pass.

When I was a child, my grandmother Cornelia saw a PBS special on Dartmouth College's Native American Studies Program. I matriculated to Dartmouth in 1985. I had intended to study architecture, but found myself attracted to the immediacy of figure drawing. I studied with noted painter Ben Frank Moss, and construct master Varujan Boghosian. I remember most the long, uninterrupted winters to paint, the weekends of heavy drinking, and the beautiful changing colors of the leaves on the river as we rowed crew in the mornings. When the leaves changed color they seemed to be alive, on fire, consuming. I return periodically to guest lecture at my alma mater, but it seems so small now, as if it only had a place for me for those brief four years of my life. In the end, one can never go back, just forward and sideways.



I received my Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of New Mexico, where I was privileged to study with my friends Jose Rodriguez, Lydia Madrid, Alfonso Ortiz, Jerry Brody, and the wonderful artists at Tamarind Institute. During this time I also met my wife and closest friend, Melissa Talachy of Pojoaque Pueblo.

I am seduced by bold, muscular painting, to the act of intuitive, direct expression with paint. I have learned from my journey a love of children, a love of thick, gestural paint, and a profound appreciation of Native religion, especially Puebloan song and dance.

Although I am from Cochiti Pueblo, I live with my wife in her village, Pojoaque Pueblo, with our three children, Erik, Jo Povi, and Rain. Sometimes in the summers Vance, my first-born Lakota son from a previous marriage, spends some time with us as well. In more conservative Pueblo social conventions, the wife usually follows the husband to his village,



Fig. 2. Melissa Talachy, *Dragonflies and Airplanes*, indigenous clay, commercial luster, pit-fired.



Fig. 3, Upper. Melissa Talachy, indigenous clay and slip, pit-fired.

Fig 4, Lower. Melissa Talachy, indigenous clay and slip, pit-fired.

assuming his clan affiliations and status. There are rare exceptions to this. In the end, home is where you feel most at ease, without the rationalizations that go along with it. It offers a profound sense of well-being when you walk through the door.

Here I feel most at ease, surrounded by my wife Melissa and my children with a lovely Northern New Mexico view of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, and the companionship of my close friends and colleagues George and Jim Rivera, my brother Diego Romero and his wife Lisa Tiger, Salish carver Ed Noisecat, and my childhood friend Dr. Reed Scudder and his mother Pat Amlin. On a good day, the kids are at school, my wife is working on her pottery (see figs. 2–4), and I’m painting the landscape just outside my door with my toy poodles for company.

My metaphor for the Pueblo world, both past and present, is a stream. Composed of many diverse and varied currents, connected together at all points simultaneously, yet with a degree of distinction in the currents. Some people, villages, artwork, dances might seem at first glance to be more central, essential, or forceful within the flow of the stream. In the end, it is enough for me to say that, when I had the chance in my life, I chose to be a part of the flow.

If my metaphor for the Pueblo world is a stream, then painting could be a metaphor for the act of making art out of this experience. Painting the various stories and parts of the underworld sky is, in essence, a landscape painting. We see directly and empirically observe and then document the moments in time, the flow of the stream, the sunrise and set of the underworld. And we add a touch of ourselves, our spirit, our vision, our soul. In this respect, we are the plein-air painters of the metaphysical.