



Photos reprinted courtesy of J. Michael Walker

She Spent Long Hours of Her Youth in Celestial Contemplation, 22" x 21", 1995 (colored pencil on paper).

Our Undocumented Lady of Guadalupe

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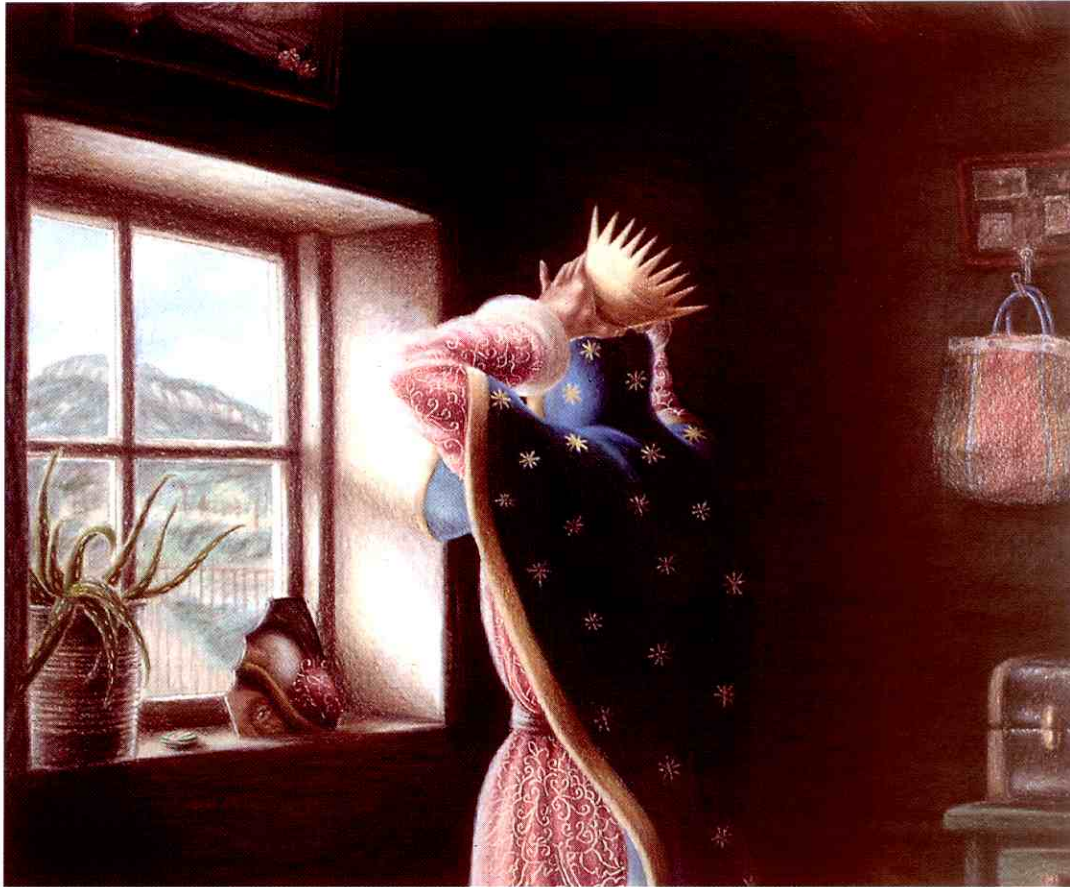
The figure of Our Lady of Guadalupe has gone everywhere Mexicans have gone. She has spread throughout the Americas. She has crossed the border into the United States with the undocumented immigrants; she has made

her nest in new corners and altars. She has experienced new social conflicts; she has increased in strength; and now she returns to her homeland crisscrossed by other stories and other codes that give her an undocumented identity in her own country. J. Michael Walker's pictorial work on Our Lady of Guadalupe¹ illustrates part of that identity. Breaking the pictorial codes that have hemmed her in

to the European virgin format and combining humor and respect for an ancient form of worship have given birth to a different Guadalupe figure. The playful eye of the artist settles on his subject and Our Lady recovers unusual movement and humor.

What does this Anglo-Chicano artist—"the adopted son of Mexican culture," as he calls himself—make the virgin say?

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Morning Toilette of the Virgin of Guadalupe, 21" x 26", 1995 (colored pencil on paper).

In Walker's art, Our Lady of Guadalupe turns into a real, concrete figure, a woman from the countryside, like the ones living in the Tarahumara Mountains, where he says he fell in love with Mexico. The virgin takes on, then, the face of an indigenous woman, strong and sure of herself, with shining eyes and a sweet smile.

"She doesn't resemble the virgins of the Renaissance, virgins surrounded by servants in a palace, with fine cloth and gold ornaments everywhere," says Walker.

Our Lady of Guadalupe works; she does the housework; she irons her cloak with an iron heated on the coals of the fire or on a griddle; she reads letters from her faithful flock. She is a Mexican mother

who receives letters and postal money orders from her son working in the United States, possibly an undocumented immigrant. In one piece by Walker, the virgin and Mexican women take on a political function. Our Lady becomes the collaborator of Don Miguel Hidalgo in the cause of independence when he comes to her home one night to ask for her help.

In Walker, the virgin is humanized; she is a mortal. He gives her a history: she is a little girl, a young woman and an adult all at the same time. In one drawing, her father, Saint Joachim, holds her in his arms. In another, she is an adolescent looking at the stars, and in several more she is an adult woman at her toilette before beginning the day's labors.

Walker's Guadalupe work thus becomes a space for transgressing the pictorial paradigms that have marked the figure of the virgin south of the Rio Grande.

Mexico boasts a broad variety of representations of Our Lady of Guadalupe: some darker-skinned, others lighter-skinned; some with angels, some without angels; some appearing to Juan Diego, others with the archangel Saint Michael; in some, she is depicted as described by Saint Luke and in others, by the Holy Ghost; in some she is poised over a cactus and an eagle; and many, many others.

But there are no representations like Walker's, which place her in the framework of daily life, making her the equivalent of a real woman, a flesh and blood



The Virgin in the Arms of Saint Joachim, 23" x 16", 1995 (colored pencil on paper).

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woman, with the features and clothing of an indigenous woman, a woman from the countryside.

The different pictorial representations of Our Lady of Guadalupe correspond to different conceptions of women and to the rules of different artistic styles that dic-

tate what kind of woman can be represented as a virgin and the way in which she must be represented at every specific stage and context.

In Mexican history, the construction and gradual transformation of the figure and myth of Guadalupe has become a

particular battle ground with its own special rules. Different social groups have joined battle on this field of valor (the Spaniards, the creoles, the mestizos and indigenous peoples) to try to gain greater legitimacy at different stages of our history: in New Spain, during the fight for independence and during the Reform and the Revolution. The following are some of the rules of the game: those that establish the traits to be emphasized about the virgin and the other characters in the Guadalupe myth; those for incorporating new characters, objects and places; and those for combining these elements.²

Some studies of contemporary visual and audiovisual examples of the Guadalupe myth found in the mass media and pictorial exhibitions show the new rules of its creation and the limits of the current Guadalupe discourse. These studies argue that Walt Disney's narrative and audiovisual formulas can be used in narrating the myth of Our Lady of Guadalupe, whereby the figure is made the equivalent of a fairy godmother in the purest Cinderella style. However, representations of the virgin that invite the viewer to interpret her as a sex object cannot be exhibited anywhere, much less publicly, without invoking a strong negative reaction, as happened in 1987 with the storm of censure of Rolando de la Rosa's pictorial work depicting Our Lady of Guadalupe with the face of actress Marilyn Monroe.³

The Guadalupe icon continues to inspire a great many Mexican, Mexican-American and U.S. artists. Catalogues of recent pictorial works both in the United States and Mexico show the recurring use of the symbol of Our Lady of Guadalupe in our time. The majority of the

works give no specific content to the Guadalupe icon.

However, other interpretations today attempt to attach a particular meaning to the Guadalupe figure. Among them are the ones related to the Catholic Church's project of re-evangelization. That is why the Pope came to Mexico in 1990 for a second time and beatified Juan Diego in the political framework of the government Solidarity Program with Televisa's spectacular staging.⁴ The symbol of Our Lady of Guadalupe also appears as an important emblem of the struggle of the Zapatista National Liberation Army. For Catholic Chicanos, too, the struggle against racial discrimination in the United States is inconceivable without the symbol of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The Chicano movement took up the figure of Our Lady and its latent ability to mobilize that has come down from the times of the fight for independence, the Revolution and the Cristero War. This figure has accompanied the Chicanos since 1965 through strikes and marches. In this process of reconstruction of a legitimate identity, Our Lady of Guadalupe has become "the Chicano-Mexican's strongest religious, political and cultural image."⁵

Our Lady accompanies, then, the Catholic hierarchy, Chicanos and Zapatistas, as well as contemporary artists.

Where is the Guadalupe art of J. Michael Walker situated vis-à-vis the different artistic currents and social movements that use the symbol of Our Lady? What other characters appear in his pictorial stories? What new objects appear in his work and spring to the eye of the viewer? How are these pictorial elements combined? Where is Walker situated? What happens to the virgin



Ironing, Thinking, 58" x 32", 1995 (colored pencil on paper).

when Walker looks at her from the United States and from the Tarahumara Mountains?

Although Walker's work comes from Los Angeles, it is not directly linked to the Chicano interpretation of the figure of Guadalupe. In his work, the virgin

does not take on a specific openly political meaning. "I would not feel comfortable presenting Our Lady of Guadalupe raising her fist in a march."

Despite this, it can be said that Walker's work does coincide with some representations of Guadalupe by Chicana femi-



Letter from Her Son, 34" x 28", 1995 (colored pencil on paper).

nists who question certain ideas about women as passive.

In the 1970s, the Chicana feminist vision made itself felt in the field of art, and new interpretations of religious icons like that of Our Lady of Guadalupe arose in the United States, revitalizing the art of the movement and placing a question mark over stereotypes of women as victims of circumstances to turn them into models for action.⁶ In other views, like that of Bay Area artist Yolanda López, the virgin is presented as a common, ordinary woman, going about her daily life. In this way, concrete U.S. women appear as the virgin: *Margaret F.*

Stewart: Our Lady of Guadalupe, 1978, *Victoria F. Franco: Our Lady of Guadalupe*, 1978.⁷

This kind of representation persists in Chicana pictorial art, as could be seen at the exhibition "Contemporary Images of the Virgen de Guadalupe," in August and September of 1997 at Los Angeles City College. The painting *The Virgin with the Groceries* by Wayne Healy is a clear example of this kind of work.

Walker's virgins take on board some of the rules of Guadalupe pictorial creation of this Chicana feminist current, establishing their own specificities. While López uses women who live in the United

States as models, Walker uses women from the Mexican countryside. Women from the Tarahumara Mountains dominate his view and his works. Another character appears together with these women, giving a certain humorous touch to the drawings: the angel. Walker invites the virgin and the angel to walk through the adobe mountain villages. He distances them from their cloistering halo. The angel stops posing at her feet and becomes her companion. He helps Our Lady read letters from the faithful, and when she receives the postal money order from her son working in the United States, the virgin and the angel become human together. They cast off their clerical demeanor, thus gaining in expression and feeling. Their many faces in different renderings illustrate the waverings of their heart. The virgin reading the letter from her son is not the same one who reads the petitions and thanks of the faithful. The angel is not the same either. The concern in the former drawing gives way to joy in the second. New objects from the daily life of the poor in the Mexican countryside penetrate the drawings in which Our Lady and the angel act: the jute shopping bag with plastic handles, the aloe vera plant against "bad vibrations," the broken mirror used to adjust the crown, the old trunk, the *Maria* cookies, the cloth napkin with the crocheted border, the lined primary school notebook paper the son's letter is written on, the thick airmail envelopes, the old iron, the shelf with the picture of Saint Joseph and the Christ Child, the votive candle in a glass decorated with flowers, the metal bucket planted with a "Virgin Mary-cloak" plant on the windowsill and the pot and the pewter mug. These pictorial elements, charged with realism

mixed with humor and loving eyes, are what stamp the beginning and end of Walker's view. They show the artist's location and the points on which he identifies with the situation of common Mexicans, with the faithful poor.

His perspective carries the marks of Chicana feminism: seeing life from the point of view of daily existence. This very outlook cannot but have political connotations in the broad sense of the term as applied to culture. Walker's art constitutes a cultural recognition of what up until now has been little recognized, if it is perceived at all: the daily life of women in the countryside. A subtle and penetrating transgression.

The life experience of J. Michael Walker in the Tarahumara Mountains and the value that he places on this indigenous, feminine Mexican culture is poured into the faces of the virgin and the realistic details that surround her in his drawings. This is the other framework of interpretation from which the figure of Our Lady takes on another political dimension, that of representing undocumented Mexican women in Mexico.

The rules of producing religious icons also form part of Walker's Guadalupe and make their own contribution: the seed will be reworked and revolutionized. In Walker, Our Lady of Guadalupe, who has always been brown-skinned, loses the European features that continued making her a clerical, solemn figure. The little plastic shoes and the very dark, indigenous face of a baby Guadalupe in the piece in which Saint Joachim is holding her cannot be erased or forgotten.

We are witnessing a simultaneous process of secularization and sanctification. The virgin is secularized, but the



Reading Letters from the Devout, 20" x 22", 1997 (colored pencil on paper).

In Walker, Our Lady of Guadalupe,
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real, concrete poor Mexican woman personifying her is sanctified. The virgin is demystified as a supernatural being and the day-to-day life from which she emerges is given value. The virgin loses solemnity, but gains warmth and humor. The Our Lady of Guadalupe who returns through Walker from Los Angeles to Mexico is an undocumented virgin in her own country. ■■■

NOTES

¹ The Guadalupe work of Michael Walker was exhibited in the National Folk Cultures Museum, December 1997, in the show "Visions of the Virgin."

² See Margarita Zires, "Cuando Heidi, Walt Disney y Marilyn Monroe hablan por la Virgen," in *Versión* no.2, a magazine published by the UAM, Xochimilco campus (Mexico City: 1992), pp. 57-94; Margarita Zires, "Reina de México, patrona de los chicanos y emperatriz de las Américas —Los mitos de la Virgen de Guadalupe— Estrategias de producción de identidades," in *Opción* (Mexico City, 1992) and in *Iberoamericana* no. 3/4 (Frankfurt am Main, Germany, 1993); and Margarita Zires "Los mitos de la Virgen de Guadalupe, su proceso de construcción e reinterpretación en el México pasado y contemporáneo," in *Mexican Studies/Estudios mexicanos* vol. 10 (Los Angeles, 1994), pp. 281-313.

³ Zires, "Cuando Heidi."

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Gloria Anzaldúa, "Entering into the Serpent," in Judith Plaskow, *Weaving the Vision* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), pp. 77-86; and Zires, "Reina de México," and "Los mitos."

⁶ Richard Griswold del Castillo, Teresa McKenna, Ivonne Yarbrow-Bejarano, *Chicano Art. Resistance and Affirmation, 1965-1985* (Los Angeles: University of California, 1991) p. 324.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 326.