

Kathy Vargas's Concrete Sorrows Transparent Joys¹

Lucy Lippard*





Photos reprinted courtesy of Kathy Vargas

Corazón de luto (Heart of Mourning), 26 x 16 in., 1998 (hand colored gelatin silver print).

*Everyone is fragile.
Every sorrow is concrete.
Nothing is distant or nameless.*

Kathy Vargas

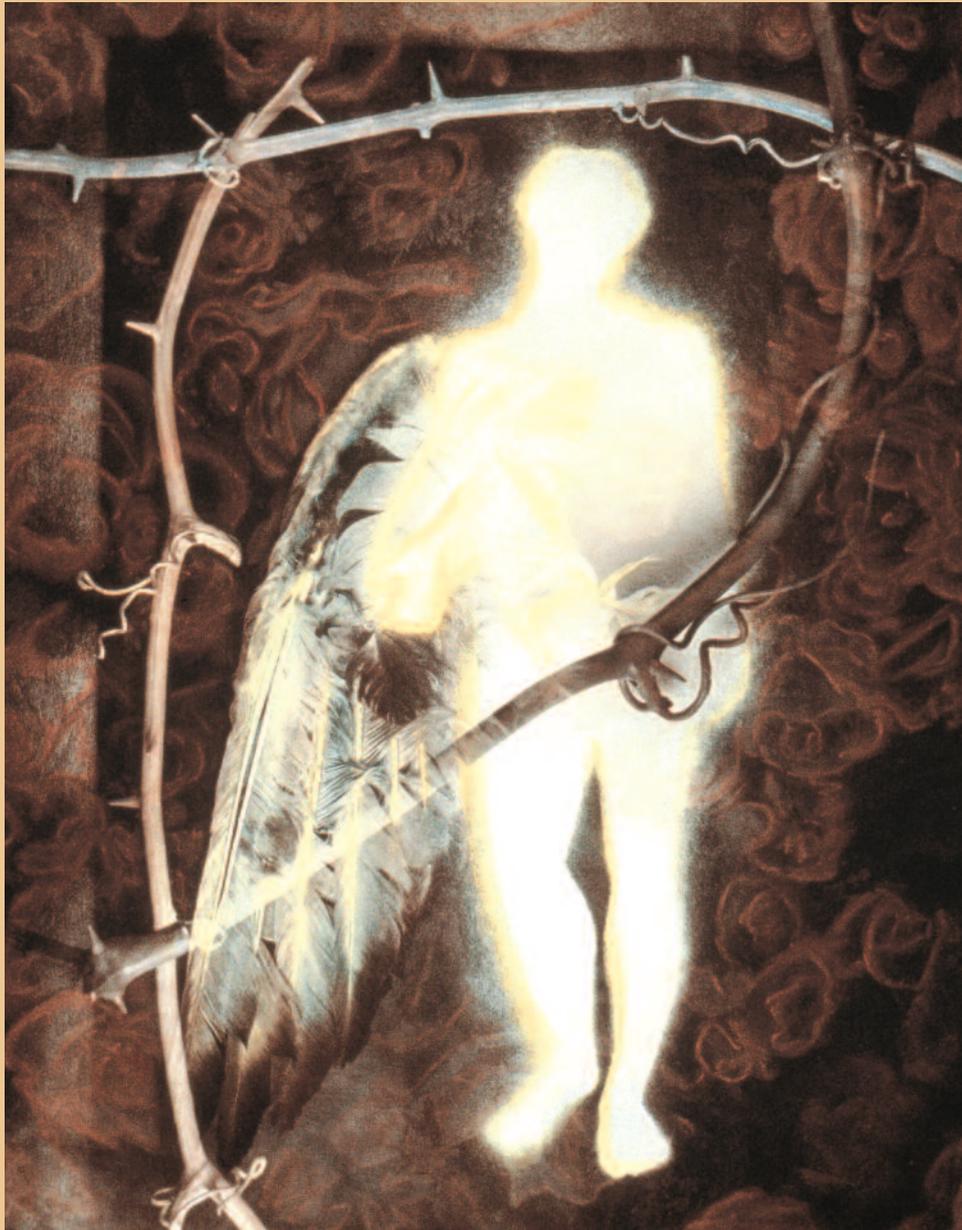
Kathy Vargas works in a twilight zone between laughter and tears, light and dark, taking life as it comes, folding its unexpect-

ed events into her art. She has focused the gifts of her Chicano (Indo-Hispano) cultural roots upon a lifelong meditation on death and love—not as fear and sex, but as the transcendent forces that mold all lives. Her hand-tinted photographic montages and still lifes are nearly monochromatic, subtly evoking color in a manner that is as pansensuous as it is visual.

In all of Vargas's work, to this day, the delicate beauty of the first impression gives way to an acknowledgment of the pain, and even ugliness, that is inherent in beauty, if only by suggestion of duality. Thorns counter blossoms, dismemberment

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Photo previous page: *Este Recuerdo—My Grandmother and Me*, 24 x 20 in., 2003 (hand colored gelatin silver print).



Angel Denny, 60 x 36 in., 1997 (hand colored print).

counters wholeness, disjunction counters harmony. In her carefully composed images, the spiritual and the political—too often seen as antitheses in North America—coexist in syncretic harmony. Racism, feminism, AIDS and censorship are the issues that have driven her. Yet even as she acknowledges suffering and would love to change the world, Vargas's political sophistication, her sense of humor and a certain wisdom combine in a serene acceptance of the way lives play themselves out, perhaps inherited from her Zapotec and Huichol ancestors. Which is not to say that she is free of anger at injustice.

Personal and social implications are stratified in each of Vargas's photographs. In 1987, pondering sarcophagi from Palenque, she was struck by the contrast between the Mayan confrontation celebration of death and what we see on the nightly news, "so full of death all over the world [yet] everyone here refused to look at it, wants it clean and sterile and removed, something that isn't real. I want to shake them and say 'look at it; it's a great offense to humanity; stop killing.'" This is what Vargas's work is all about. This is the purpose of these beautiful, deceptively gentle images, to make us realize our communal madness, to encourage the

patience, fortitude and courage to resist injustice, to make contact with each other.

Her first photograph, taken when she was 21, is a shadowy portrait of a neighborhood woman who had suffered a stroke. Almost immediately she began to work in series. She explored her own environment and became a tourist in her own town. In 1980-81 she did a huge series of local household shrines and yard art. Always fascinated by people, and having lived most of her life in the house on Martin Luther King Drive she has now inherited from her parents, Vargas the photographer began, naturally enough, in the documentary tradition, looking at her own family, vernacular architecture and surroundings.

These works illuminate her roots in a poor east side neighborhood of Latinos/Mexicanos and African Americans, rich in culture, plagued by social problems. "My parents raised me in a bed of roses,"

she has recalled. "But the thorns were always close at hand." Despite sporadic attempts to leave, she is deeply rooted in San Antonio.

From 1985 to 2000 Vargas was director of the Visual Arts Program of the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center on the traditionally Latino west side of town. From 1973 to 1977 she was a professional rock-and-roll photographer, as well as working in commercial fashion and product photography and in television. The world of rock-and-roll became a major, mostly invisible, influence to which she returns constantly in memory. ("I always find rock-and-roll very comforting when I think about death," she wrote recently.) In the mid-1970s, Vargas was a member of *Con Safo*, a local organization of Chicano artists (which she continued to support after leaving the group and of *Ladrones de la Luz* (*Thieves of Light*).

By the end of the 1970s, her work had matured and turned inward. She returned to school at the

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Broken Column: Mother (detail), 24 x 20 in., 1997
(hand colored gelatin silver print).



The Living Move-Mary Ann, 24 x 20 in., 2001
(hand colored gelatin silver print).

University of Texas in San Antonio, receiving her BFA in 1981 and her MFA in 1984. She began the work for which she is now nationally known. The titles of those early works (*Attachments*, *Tantalizations*, *Suspension*, *Silence*) evoke an emotional rather than a physical space and time. "A quick glimpse into a distorted mirror is good for the soul," she says.

As Vargas's concerns became more overtly philosophical, objects and spaces merged in a floating realm of photographic reality that replaced the social realities of the earlier series. The dead plants, birds and other creatures became apparitions in an undefined space. In fact, she speaks matter-of-factly of seeing spirits, or ghosts, even in her workplace. Once she saw "a cloaked man (death) flying behind the car she was driving." Her grandmother, who died in 1992 just short of her 104th birthday, often conversed with the dead. Vargas's mother, saw angels and demons as she "charted death."

These stories, like her father's tales from Zapotec culture, gave form to the work that Vargas began in the early 1980s. The *Discard This Image* (1984) and *The Priests* series (1987-89).

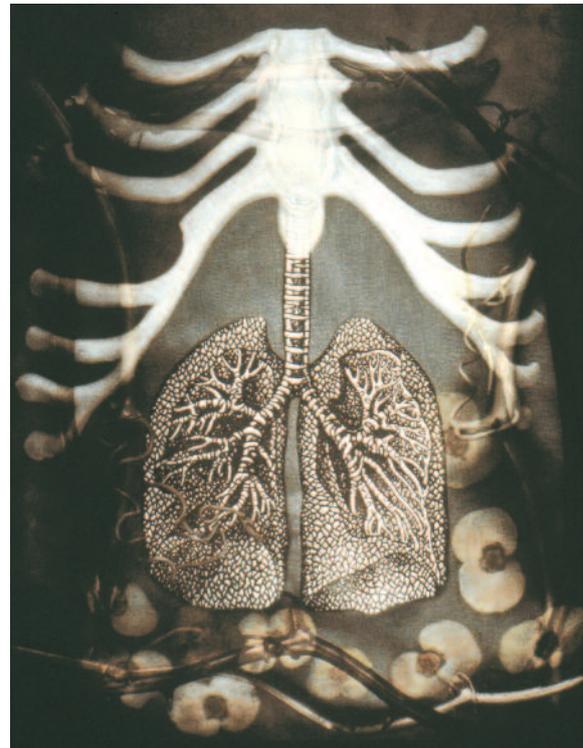
The deaths of family and old friends have, sadly, sparked Vargas's best work, giving her a place to hang her preoccupation with death and love. While the humorous *Seafood Saints* series (1989-92) may seem an anomaly, it was made at a time when death was becoming more visible in the artist's life. She was amused by a conversation with "a man named Karp" about eating frog's legs, which evoked both giggles and thoughts on cannibalism, which in turn evoked thoughts on war (the Gulf War took place in the interim) and Wall Street and the dolphin/tuna controversy.

This series is not only about commodities, but literally about blurred boundaries (animal, vegetable, mineral, human, inhuman) and made her

Objects and spaces merge in a floating realm of photographic reality.



Discontinuous Series, 24 x 20 in., 2002
(hand colored gelatin silver print).



Cuerpo de milagros # 4 (Body of Miracles # 4), 24 x 20 in.,
(hand colored gelatin silver print).



I Was Playing Out My Fantasies When Reality Reared Its Ugly Leg # 2, 24 x 20 in., ca. 1990-1991 (hand colored gelatin silver print).

question her own life. “I was forced to a humorous confrontation of my own conspicuous consumership – and there’s a lot of it.”

In *I was Playing Out My Fantasies When Reality Reared its Ugly Leg*, the stuffed musician frogs (a Mexican folk/tourist art form) have their hands nailed to their instruments; wear tutus that have

the weight of “those Botero/Venus of Willendorf legs.” But like everyone else, the deities are also bound to money’s song.

Pre-Columbian thought pervades Vargas’s work, though rarely direct, and virtually invisible to viewers unfamiliar with her preoccupations. What she learned from pre-Columbian art was the use of



3 Frog Plate Lunch, 20 x 24 in., 1990 (hand colored gelatin silver print).

been danced to shreds – perhaps a kind of Red Shoes commentary on the life of the artist in a capitalist society, the alternatives being sellout and starvation.

At the same time these almost grotesque figures were also a reference to a pre-Columbian space, with the musicians as “underworld” deities. The dollar signs/musical notes and the stock market report represent modern reality or earthly concerns, and the sky deities are perversely represented by

symbols: “to allude to a whole cosmos or belief system by a simple symbol. Their U shape could be an entrance to the cave, to the earth, to Mother Earth, to burial, death and rebirth. I like doing that too: the double symbol of a heart and a *milagro*, love and prayer, praying for the beloved; the double role of thorns as pain and as a symbol of Christ, death and rebirth.”

With the advent of AIDS and the death in 1989 of her friend Ted Warmbold, progressive editor of



The Living Move—Gabriela. 24 x 20 in., 2001
(hand colored gelatin silver print).

the now-defunct *San Antonio Light* newspaper, and collector of Mexican folk art, Vargas realized, “Everyone is fragile. Every sorrow is concrete. Nothing is distant or nameless.” She became involved in the AIDS crisis as a friend, an activist and an artist, although up to then her politics had been more subliminal in her work. The result was the striking series *Oración: Valentine’s Day/Day of the Dead* (1989-90) which brought together the most deeply embedded themes of her art (and life) – love/friendship and death, Eros and Thanatos.

From this time on, her images generally became larger in scale, less pale, lacy and ephemeral, the central images more defined and powerful, the colors deeper. And portraits were beginning to re-enter her repertory. At the same time, Vargas was commissioned to participate with Jim Goldberg, Nan Goldin, Sally Mann and Jack Radcliffe in the Corcoran *Gallery’s Hospice* exhibition, curated by Philip Brookman.

Rather than succumbing to darkness and making ugly images, Vargas sees making art in the face of death as part of a healing process. Her photographic secular shrines were not only for those who died in a hospice, but also for those who remembered them, among whom the hospice workers themselves figure prominently. Each memorial

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consists of a collage memorial portrait and a simple image shrine.

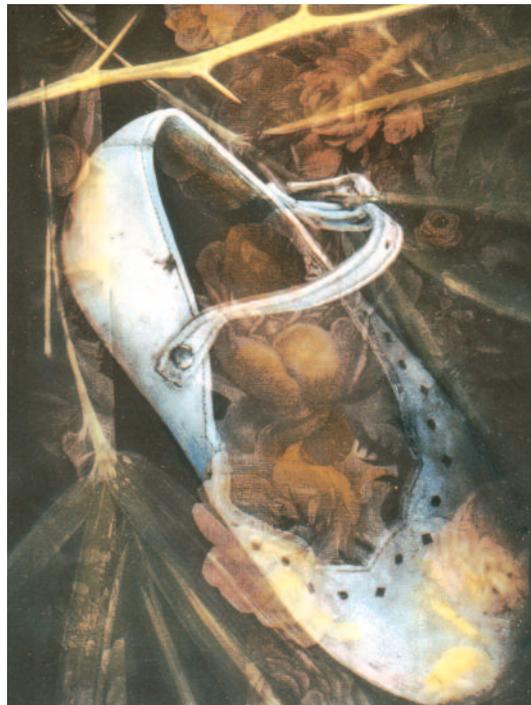
Though it seems somewhat incongruous, given the lyricism of her work, Vargas has been temperamentally drawn to minimalism because of its inherent theme of absence: “What isn’t there becomes the ‘weight’ for what is there, the anchor.”

Folk art, almost the antithesis of minimalism’s stripped-down cerebralism, is another major influence to which Vargas’s actual work bears little direct resemblance. Folk art is a very political issue. Deploing the condescending attitudes that locate folk artists as exotic savages, she contended in 1989 that the folk artist is “probably the ‘secret’ politician of the arts, in that [s/he] preserves and respects cultural diversity and cultural integrity, validating cultural experiences.”

Vargas’s own work is not overtly political. “I don’t use a lot of ‘reality’ in my photos,” she writes. “I don’t take pictures in/of the world, but I refer a lot to events in the world. I’m not taking pictures on the front line of the Persian Gulf, but I am talking about it, and about AIDS and apartheid. I’d like to think that I’m fighting death that way.”

My Alamo was a second departure from the still lifes, which stood in for but rarely pictured people. Commissioned by Chon Noriega for the Mexican

Vargas recreated her childhood with fictional figures, blurred again in passing, combined with nostalgic artifact.



I Was Little, Shoe, 10 x 8 in., 1998
(hand colored gelatin silver print).

Museum in San Francisco, it is one of the most coherent series Vargas has made to date.

Her recollections of the Alamo are sad, humorous, and biting. “But it’s a bite I didn’t invent”, she writes. “It’s a bite that recurs in the inherent aggression and often racism that is part and parcel of standing before war monuments and thinking oneself to be on one side or another, either by choice or because history gives us no choice.”

The tableaux are immensely successful because the visual strategy of motion and stillness is carried through on so many levels. *The Miracle Lives* series was also begun in 1995. Like the *My Alamo* series and the *State of Grace: Angels for the Living/Prayers for the Dead* installation created after her mother’s death in 1997, it centers on moving figures, which can be seen as either ghost-like or life-like. Either way, they are elusive, simultaneously present and absent. While the still lifes began once again to take center stage, life—and death—conspired to have the portraits continue.

In the *I Was Little/They Were Big* series (1998), Vargas recreated her childhood with fictional figures, blurred again in passing, combined with nostalgic artifacts: a little girl’s dress and shoe, her mother’s dress and shoe. These haunting pieces, which evoke almost anyone’s childhood, seem to

have provide a bridge back to Vargas’s trademark still lifes. The most recent works from the *Cuerpo de Milagros* series often merge real body parts (a heart, teeth) with the little silver symbols, blurring the boundaries, balancing on the thin edge between planes, making clear yet again that Vargas’s religion is the search for meaning rather than any static belief.

I find I haven’t written as much about love as about death. Although they are equally important in Vargas’s work, they are not equably visible. Love of even the most generalized and generous kind is a private emotion in this society, while death, although its richness is denied, is all too evident. Despite Vargas’s verbal grace, it is the subtle brilliance of her visual expression that makes its mark. To a mutual friend mourning a husband of 50 years, she wrote, “Stop looking for the answer to death in books. There is no explanation. Just make some art – make it about your pain and your joy....After all, art is life. And one always answers death with life.” **MM**

NOTE

¹ Excerpts from Lucy Lippard’s essay “Concrete Sorrows, Transparent Joys,” published in *Kathy Vargas, Photographs 1971-2000* (San Antonio: The Marion Koogler McNay Art Museum 2000).