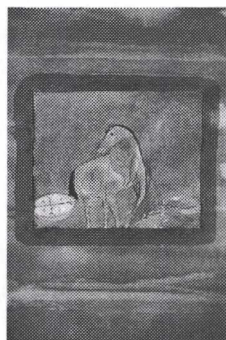


From Oral Narratives to Images: The Painting of Mapuche Dreams of Heavens

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A year ago when I was a Senior Fellow at the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard University, I embarked on a project which united both my anthropological and artistic training. This project required the study of the emergence and operation of the aesthetic in two forms of production: in the narration by Chilean Mapuche of dreams of visits to heaven -a place believed to possess an extraordinary beauty- and in the emergence and operation of the aesthetic in my own pictorial representations of the images conveyed in the dream narratives. To observe the emergence of the aesthetic among Mapuche narrators, I examined 70 dream narratives of heaven which I recorded as people narrated them in different types of social gatherings during fieldwork conducted during 1985-87, 1990 and in 1991. In order to explore my own aesthetic production, I painted 38 paintings from January to November 1998 based on the dream narratives of ten narrators. These paintings have been

exhibited at the Meridian Gallery in San Francisco (November 11- December 11 and 1998), Center for Latin American Studies at UC Berkeley (November 17-March 31 1999), are currently on view at the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies at Harvard University (March 9-June 30, 1999).



The Beauty of Heavens

The beauty of heavens is socially shared as individual dreamers describe their unique visions of this extraordinary place when they narrate their dreams of visits to heaven in different types of social gatherings. These dreams tend to be narrated spontaneously as soon as they have occurred among family members, at shamanic healing rituals, and at festive occasions as part of the *nut'kaman* or narration of extraordinary events. Each description of heaven is unique as it represents an individual vision of heaven. There are however, four major ways of representing and locating heaven: as a city which is located up in the clouds, as place at the bottom of the ocean, as country located up in the clouds, and as a place located at the crater of the volcanoes. The beauty expressed in each description resides in the term *küme* which denotes not only physical beauty, but emotional and physical well being. Therefore many of the heavens described by the narrators are adorned by desired material objects and images from the consumer society and at the same time the place offers to the dreamer the emotional solace and advice needed. Hence implicit in all the narratives there is a desire on the part of the dreamer to find in heaven not only what is missing materially in their daily lives but also in their emotional well being too. Three major themes emerged from these narratives of heavens: a portrayal of the type of existence in heaven, interaction in heaven with dead relatives who give gifts and advice to the dreamers, and the shamanic training and advice received from the gods in heaven.

The Making of the Paintings

As with all ethnographic accounts and artistic productions, the making of these paintings entailed a constant attempt to recall and to relive moments from the past. The recalling of the past was guided by a desire to evoke and recover the sense of wonder and marvel caused by hearing the dream narratives from the first time, and by the last images I had of heaven as a Catholic teenager in Chile; and also to recreate the aesthetic sense of the narrators of the dreams. Although most of these moments are lost, I tried to recreate these experiences through reading the transcripts of the narrations and the field notes, examining photographs and drawings of the area, and through my memories of my own past.

In an attempt to emulate the aesthetic sense of the narrators I made use of specific information- about preferences in colors, shapes, designs, and images- from the actual narratives, conversations with the narrators, and from observations about the visual world of the area. The use of figurative style as the predominant style in the paintings and the choices of colors, patterns, and designs were thus based on information from the narrators.

There were other choices and influences which did not make use of the ethnographic information. The sizes of the paintings and some of the design styles were selected to emulate the social and oral narrative aspect of the dreams. I chose sizes of 30x40 inches, which are large for the medium of watercolor, as a way to emulate the social character of dream narration. I attempted to replicate the public aspect of the narration through the analogue of public viewing by using large paintings which allow more distance between the viewer and the painting and hence several people can share the viewing experience at the same time. To convey the oral nature of the narratives I was guided and inspired by traditional Indian and Persian paintings with their long standing tradition in expressing oral narratives pictorially, in particular their style of perspective and the layering of narrative time.

I recreated in part the sense of wonder and marvel through the use of the figurative style of painting. Because my training and practice in painting has been primarily abstract, for this project I had to train myself in the figurative style of painting. It was through the daily process of observing and depicting the beauty of each object that I was seduced and marveled at the unique and extraordinary beauty of common objects. The figurative style became thus an unexpected vehicle for experiencing in part the sense of wonder and marvel which I was seeking. The constant recalling of past moments also guided the recreation of these feelings of experiencing the extraordinary which had the power of fusing different heavens: my heaven as a teenager which consisted of a space devoid of colors and shapes, and the multiplicity of images of heavens of the Mapuche narrators filled with colors and shapes.

