

## **ArtNexus #111**

*Art en Colombia #157, December 2018 - January 2019*

Rachelle Mozman: Gauguin's Opaque Mirror By Monica E. Kupfer

A pure and primitive existence in a tropical place where he could live “like a savage.” This is what Paul Gauguin expected to find on the island of Taboga, just off the Pacific coast of Panama. In 1887, several years before his mythic sojourns in Polynesia, the French post-impressionist, who was escaping economic hardship in France, travelled to Panama, where he felt dramatically disappointed by the bureaucracy, the high expenses, and the impossibility to carry out the idealized life he had imagined. He stayed for only about two months, but his time in Panama gave rise to legends regarding his work on the failed French Canal project and his activities on the Isthmus. Little or nothing is known about the artworks he may have produced there.

This historic void provided fertile ground for the imagination of artist Rachelle Mozman, whose exhibition *Gauguin's Opaque Mirror* reflects her own fantasies regarding the artistic work that Gauguin might have created in Panama. The conceptual project was born of her experience during a visit to the “Metamorphoses” exhibition of Gauguin’s work at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2014, which highlighted some of his lesser known works, particularly sculptures, woodcuts and transfer drawings. Four years later, in the exhibition “Gauguin’s Opaque Mirror” held at the Arteconsult Gallery and curated by Maylin Pérez Parrado, Mozman showed works that simultaneously constitute an investigation and a meta-process, through the artist’s pursuit to frame, re-represent and question Gauguin’s creative practice and his works. Possibly in response to the MoMA exhibition, Mozman’s show included works in different media: color photographs of modern “muses” and collages from her series *A Cast of Women (An Artist's Selects)*; a group of small objects that resemble primitive fetishes; and a video entitled *Opaque Mirror*, in which a fictional narrative gives life to Gauguin and his search for “pure and primitive” muses in Panama.

In her collages, Mozman combines historic and contemporary images to create new meanings and a sense of mystery that evokes Gauguin’s art. Mozman overlaps pictures of women from ethnographic books or drawings by Gauguin himself, with images drawn from nature or supposedly exotic women she has photographed in Panama or New York, who might have seemed “savage” to the foreigner’s eye. In Mozman’s words, “Gauguin’s desire to create his own identity influenced by Darwinian ideology, his mythologizing and projection of his subjects, drives these pictures along with my fantasies of his model’s psychological transformation resulting from contact with the artist.” The racially different models are shown in sensuous but also somewhat absurd full-body poses, lying on a beach or surrounded by exuberant tropical gardens. In other photographs, they recline on colorful textiles with folkloric prints, projecting an artificial nudity through their neutral (“skin-colored”?) leotards. Their poses make an ironic statement regarding colonial attitudes and the category of the “Other” as defined from the European and North American point of view.

In the video *Opaque Mirror*, the cast includes an actor who represents Gauguin and several actresses as his potential muses. It is a satirical work of fiction, which shows the painter in search of subjects for his portraits through a deceitfully gentle approach. The sexual undertones

are impossible to ignore. The action in this video, which is almost fifteen minutes long, develops in an unhurried manner against an artificial backdrop that is intensely “rose-colored”, perhaps in reference to the Gauguin’s dreams of an idealized world. On the intentionally unnatural stage set, the tropics are represented by bamboo screens, large *monstera* leaves and palm fronds made of paper. The actors—a white man with a melancholic demeanor, and placid multiracial women—have painted faces, as if following some indigenous tradition, and wear the afore-mentioned cream-colored leotards, with dark areas to mark their nipples and pubic areas. A voice over narrates Gauguin’s thoughts, with quotes from letters to his wife, in which he describes his disenchantment with Panama.

*Opaque Mirror* reflects a sense of continuity in Mozman’s art, particularly regarding her exploration of the colonial past and themes of race and identity in Panama, her mother’s birthplace. In 2017, she produced *The Dying Cavendish*, a video that offers a sarcastic story about how banana companies exploited Panama, with reference to the director of the United Fruit Company, Minor Keith, and the cultivation of the “cavendish” banana species. Years ago, Mozman brought forth the extraordinary photographic series *Casa de mujeres*, where three identical actresses, who differ only in the color of their skin (and were all enacted by her mother), symbolically represents a family through a body of work that boldly scrutinized themes related to identity, racial differences and social classes.

Mozman’s original and provocative work leads us to think about how we see ourselves, as well as how others see us. To question the nature of our postcolonial identity. To ask who the “Others” really are. Or as Gauguin did in his famous painting from 1897-98, to ask: Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?

“Rachelle Mozman: Gauguin’s Opaque Mirror,” Arteconsult Gallery.