

# RAZA ART & MEDIA COLLECTIVE JOURNAL

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## *The Images of Miguel Mendez M.*

*There exists in Chicano literature both an external and an internal preoccupation with the past. I might add that it is not mere nostalgia brought about through a disillusionment with what has happened, nor a disorientation within a value system, nor the exploding of the myth of a moral government; but, rather, it is a ritual from which to derive and maintain a sense of humanity—a ritual of cleansing and a prophecy.<sup>1</sup>*

—Tomas Rivera

Miguel Mendez M. is the author of the novel *Peregrinos de Aztlán*. He also wrote a long poem titled "Taller de Imágenes, Pase" ("Workshop for Images, Come in").<sup>2</sup> One critic calls this work "la obra barroca de Miguel M."<sup>3</sup> The complexity and richness of the images would seem to justify this judgment but its conceptual richness and its ideological content is contrary to the classic notion of baroque poetry. If we consider the long poem, "La fábula de Polifemo y Galatea," written by Luis de Góngora in the first decade of the seventeenth century as a paradigm of the baroque poem, we realize that denotative matter in it is really superfluous, because density of connotations substitutes for conceptual depth. Baroque poetry is "art for art's sake."

"Workshop" is a poem which deals with the problems of the world in a manner that approaches that of mythology because it is an explanation in images and not in abstractions. The consequences of this are a richer and more immediate meaning, and also a self-sufficiency that defies attempts to reduce the poem to unambiguous theories.

The complexity and density of the poem are due to the use of surrealist imagery, but not all the images in "Workshop" are surrealist. Such a non-surrealist image is essentially metaphoric and as a result redundant. It serves to elaborate by making an implicit comparison. For example: . . . "your doves winging to the nests of my hands" (p. 68). This image is used to compare the softness of the woman's breasts to the plumage of a dove and the form of a cupped hand to that of a nest. The surrealist image on the other hand has no simple one-to-one correspondence between the mentioned and the signified, because it is a juxtaposition of completely unrelated objects that creates a new object such as the image of the following type: "Among the barbs of a fence I saw a beheaded sheep; crape and black veils over blue eyes. Dust of the skies." (p. 67). This type of metaphor serves (to borrow a notion which Levi-Strauss uses to explain the function of mythology) to mediate contradictory and painful realities. It is in this way that we should understand Rivera's designation of the Chicano writer's preoccupation with the past as a ritual. It is a way to resolve contradictions not by synthesis which cancels both sides of the dialectic, but by providing a new image and at the same time retaining the individuality of each element.

In the case of the above image, and a significant number of images in "Workshop," the two elements which are set side by side are either organic or mechanical. The nature of the symbols is related to the central conflict or essential opposition between a primitive

vision of the cosmos and an industrial orientation to the world. Another example: "In the cornfield I saw a foal at the moment of gestation, within the matrix of the mare: Steam locomotives copulating before crowds at the station." (p. 67). This opposition of images presupposes a perspective other than the pragmatic one of the train engineer. This view is not an innovation of Mendez, it is his identification with the Indian-Mexican man who is in touch with the earth.

The conflict which Mendez develops is a recurring aspect of "Chicanismo." Armando Rendon writes, "My people have come in fulfillment of a cosmic cycle from ancient Aztlán, characterized by the progeny of our Indian, Mexican, and Spanish ancestors."<sup>4</sup> The identification with the past is for many Chicanos part and parcel of the claim to cultural integrity and heritage. The Indian view of the world is one which the past glorifies and the present denies. The respect for nature based upon an understanding of the unity of beings is contrary to the view that man is a superior being who must conquer nature.

As such, the richness of imagery in "Workshop" has its roots in the awareness of nature which Mendez shares with Indian people. It is reminiscent of the attitude of the "warrior" Don Juan who tries to teach Carlos Castaneda to talk to plants and to recognize that just as he feeds off a rabbit, the earth will feed off of him at the time of his death.

The ritualistic quality of Mendez's poem can be illustrated by the way the author merges the fertility of the earth with the fecundity of human beings through the use of erotic images, a type of poetic imagination also found in Garcia Lorca's plays *Yerma* and *Bodas de Sangre*. For example: "Yellow with cocoa, rotted melons, coconuts with

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Photo by G. Vargas

nipples, erect bananas, rice with tender almonds and nuptial violins; also the hate of the cactus with petulant snakes . . ." (p. 68). This image repeats the motif of the obscenity of sex—an essentially life affirming act—in the shadow of the machine. This type of imagery is also found in *Poeta en Nueva York*, published in 1927 by García Lorca. The existence of images of erotic mutilation expresses the culture shock of a mythopoetic tribal consciousness presented with the reality of urban America. For Mendez and for Lorca the elements of pain, eroticism, and the machine-dominated city are merged in a whirlwind of oneiric images.

The poetic awareness of the nature-city duality represents a problematic project of reorientation. Just as Don Juan must laugh at the attempts that Carlos Castaneda compulsively makes to rationalize the mystery of the world, Mendez must exorcize the intellectual mania of university trained people: "I shall rudely laugh at the ant-men who carry dead bodies on their backs, and fill their empty minds with fossils." (p. 70). The reorientation of the poet is a ritualistic process that transcends the bounds of cause and effect. The Indian view of the world is not lost in empti-

ness at the rejection of reason, because a merging with nature follows—as in the Zen state of awareness—the destruction of the self; Mendez affirms this with: "And when the mirrors are pools of water, or a moon, when the mirrors are silver and cloud the reflections of fortune; when the mirrors are rain, I will immerse my own image into them. And with a bar I will break them into fragments, even though I am inside." (p. 70).

The play of contrasts in images and of contradictions in the poet's response is evidenced by violent images and by ambiguous but intensely significant energy. There is an oscillation between the harmony which can be optimistically portrayed in terms of the Nahuatl or Yaqui cosmology, and the chaos which erupts within the world of the poem and within the consciousness of the persona of the poem.

Pain is often reflected in "Workshop"—pain resulting from the destruction of humanity in the battle against machines and against the dehumanization that occurs in our machine-like society. The first type of pain is symbolized by war: "Flesh destined for the mouths of cannons, soft wall against machine guns" (p. 72). This is the eter-

nal lament of the poet. It is heard in Yevtushenko's "Babi Yar," in Pablo Neruda's *Canto General*, and in Robert Bly's exorcism of the teeth mother in his poem against the war in Viet-Nam. The second type of pain is alienation from our brothers and from ourselves. It is the state of being of those stifled by repression whose words are wind against the bars of solitude: "My tongue is a bell clapper made of sponges, within a belfry made of gauze; echoes drowned in the trajectories on uninhabited planets, words that disperse and disappear on the sharp edges of frozen questions." (p. 73). Mendez ends the poem with a beautiful dance of fertility which affirms in a fusion of agriculture and sexuality the eternal truth of the peasant, and which recalls the sacredness of the planting of maíz as recorded in the Popol-Vuh of the ancient Maya-Quiché, a fitting tribute to the past.

Roberto R. Quiroz

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Tomas Rivera, "Chicano Literature: Fiesta of the Living." *Books Abroad*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (summer of 1975), p. 441

<sup>2</sup>Miguel Mendez M., "Taller de Imágenes, Pase." (The title of the English translation by the editor is: "Workshop for Images, Come in." All references to this work are to the following anthology: Octavio Ignacio Romano-V(ed.), *El Espejo-The Mirror: Selected Mexican-American Literature*. Berkeley, Quinto Sol Publications, second printing, 1970

<sup>3</sup>Miguel Gonzalez Gomez, Introduction to: Miguel Mendez M., *Peregrinos de Aztlán*, Editorial Peregrinos, Tucson, 1974

<sup>4</sup>Armando Rendón, *Chicano Manifesto*, Collier Macmillan, N.Y., 1971, p. 10

#### Un Nuevo Corrido

*Este es el nuevo corrido  
Que aunque tenga su respingo  
Que todos los mexicanos  
Nos vamos volviendo gringos*

*Ya las inditas del pueblo  
Se maquillan con caliche  
Y si les dicen bonitas  
Te dicen son-ova-viche*

*Y si te buscan pelea  
Meten de gallo a su broder  
Y tras mentando a tu foder  
Te rompen toda la moder*

*Cuando vayas a los estados  
Y te encuentres en muy malas  
Haz lo que quieras hermano  
Nomás no vayas a dallas*

*Y los inditos del pueblo  
Te dicen "forty-one"  
Y pa decirte carajo  
Te dicen san-ava-gan*

—anónimo

Contributed from the Song Collection of Ramon Salinas Johnston

# Tenocelome: The Jaguar Mouth People

Approximately 1200 B.C. on the southern Gulf Coast of Mexico in an area encompassing between 6,200-7,000 square miles which today comprises southeastern Veracruz and Western Tobasco,<sup>1</sup> the cornerstone of Meso-American civilization was set by a people called the Olmec. The Olmec civilization, the most ancient and most recently discovered civilization of Meso-America, has the distinct honor of being the antecedent, the very mother culture from which every other great culture of Meso-America sprang.

The Zapotec of Monte Alban, the people who built and lived at Teotihuacán, the Maya of Yucatan, Chiapas and Central America, the Mixtec of Oaxaca, the Toltec of Tula, and the Aztec of the Valley of Mexico, all were influenced by the Olmec and inherited and embellished many of their traits,<sup>2</sup> which ranged from a numbering system (mistakenly credited to the Maya) to the art of sculpture.

It is in the latter, sculpture, where the Olmec reign supreme. The Olmec were the finest sculptors Meso-America produced. The quality and style of their work remains unsurpassed to this day and ranks with some of the best sculpture produced in the world.

From Pánuco in northern Mexico to the Juxtlahauca Caverns of Guerrero on the Pacific and as far south as El Salvador, the Tenocelome, the "Jaguar Mouth People," the Olmec, journeyed leaving their mark in the form of sculpture that ranged in size and style from the colossal heads of La Venta and Tres Zapotes in their heartland to monoliths, altars, stelae, and tiny clay and jade figurines found at such sites as Tlatilco in the Valley of Mexico.

Hegemonic to the Olmec style is its outré aesthetic ideal. Olmec art does not depict reality but rather an interpretation of it. The body is that of a sexless, obese human being. Humans, some representing pathological human figures, stylized jaguars, plus an infinitely varied combination of human and jaguar, embrace the mass of Olmec subject material. The concept of the were-jaguar is central to Olmec art and was part of Olmec myth: the origin of part human, part feline infants resulting from the union of a woman and a jaguar. A monument from Pretero Nuevo points to such a belief. This monument shows a woman copulating with a jaguar. The were-jaguar is typically shown with narrow oval eyes,

inconsequentially crossed with full size or eccentrically placed pupils; above the eyes are extensive flame-like brows, a bald notched head from which maize or other flora may sprout. The nose is flat, the corners of the were-jaguar's mouth are turned down in the form of a gnarl or cry, the upper lip is prominent and shaped like the top half of a heart with the mouth toothless.<sup>3</sup> On occasion, long feline canine fangs may curve down and out from the upper gums, some of which have notched ends. Variations of the jaguar motif form a whole galaxy of were-jaguars shifting in style and delineation from the straight forward were-jaguar to personages with just slight traces of jaguar features.<sup>4</sup>

The notion of the were-jaguar may have been affiliated with rain or perhaps fertility. The former notion may

be somewhat doubtful because of the location of the Olmec heartland in dense tropical jungles circumscribed by rivers to the east and west which were constantly flooding. Also, the majority of the heartland was in savannahs and swamps, an area with a very high density of rainfall. Nonetheless, the jaguar is found in this type of environment and does most of its hunting along water areas. Also, the jaguar is an adept swimmer. The were-jaguar as rain god cannot be ruled out. It may have acquired this distinction as time progressed. Evidence of the were-jaguar as rain god has been put forward by the late Mexican artist/archeologist Miguel Covarrubias. He constructed a family tree in which all the well-known rain gods of Meso-America may be traced back to the Olmec were-jaguar: Chac of



### The Marketplace

*The stalls filling with those who sell:  
the seller of dogs, chili venders, salt piled like small  
pyramids, the herbs of medicine, the tortillas  
round and flat, cocoa filled gourds. Some women on mats  
of straw, others struggling with canopies, wrestling  
with the sun.*

*The conch shell sounds; I blow on it.*

*A man with ollas hanging heavy on his back, supported by  
a headband, releases them to sift down like cornmeal.  
Through the canals canoes come loaded with hummingbirds.  
The cotton blankets wave from hands, banners to show  
the weave and color.*

*The maguery thorns; my tongue is pierced by them.*

*Clothes embroidered by a hand, a warrior would not be  
ashamed to take the finger of to war.*

*Rabbits, bees and deer in rock crystal.*

*A feather worker talks in a low voice to the craftsman  
showing jade.*

*The copal incense is lit; the thorns, red with me, are offered.*

S. Zaneta Kosiba Vargas

the Maya, Tajin of the Totonac, Dzahui of the Mixtec, Cocijo of the Zapotec, and Tlaloc of the Aztec.<sup>5</sup> In addition, all of these rain gods were lightning dieties.

Ignacio Bernal, famous Mexican archeologist, takes the Olmec concept of the were-jaguar one step further into a realm that we would consider fantastic. He associates the were-jaguar with Chanaques. Chanaques, which people in Mexico still believe in today, are old dwarfs with faces resembling those of children, who inhabit waterfalls. They are a source of bother for women, are the cause of innumerable illnesses, devour the human brain, predict rain, and rule over the world of the wild animal and fish. Chanaques are also sorcerers and in order to allay them a person must throw them buckets of water, the magic food.<sup>6</sup> Small figures surrounding the central personages on Stela 2 and 3 at La Venta have been identified as Chanaques carrying canes in their hands to break the clouds. Chanaques may be related to Tlaloques and Chacs, assistants to the rain gods Tlaloc and Chac who also break with canes the "jars", or clouds, that contain water for rain.<sup>7</sup> Thus, one may assess that the were-jaguar was not only central to Olmec art but it also played an important role in their belief system as well. With the other cultural traits of the Olmec, the cultures which proceeded it were either directly or indirectly influenced by an Olmec theme or

elaborated on it according to their artistic or religious needs.

The dubitation of the antiquity and grandeur of the Olmec culture has been cast aside through the consequential research of Stirling, Drucker, Heizer, Pina Chan, Covarrubias, until his death in 1957, Bernal, and Michael D. Coe who have brought to the surface, for all the world to see, the ubiety of an Olmec style which has definite characteristics of its own.

The Olmec, the "Jaguar Mouth People," the oldest civilization of Meso-America, have left for us today a sculpture style which has no equal here in the New World. Through the medium of basalt, andesite, magnetite, serpentine, jade, and jadeite, these ancient sculptors created works of art that rival the imagination and artistic creativity of the artist today.

One can appreciate the art style of the Olmec by understanding what these people created without the use of modern art tools: hollow figurines modeled without the use of a mould, figurines of precious polished stones that stand free in space and time, giant colossal heads weighing several tons made from basalt and andesite which were located in areas where stone was absent and brought from as far away as sixty-five miles without the use of wheeled vehicles, stelae that were void of the omnium-gatherum typical of Maya art, pyramids constructed out of clay with each layer a different color

from the one that preceded it, and a huge mosaic of a jaguar face (an offering to some god) with each block weighing several hundred pounds and adding up to tons of precious serpentine.

One could go on and on praising the art work of these people, yet I doubt that this is what motivated them to create what they did. We can only wonder with awe at the Olmec art style expressed through the form of sculpture. The Tenocelome unquestionably were true artists in their own right.

Zaragosa Vargas

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Coe, Michael D. "Archeological Synthesis of Southern Veracruz and Tobasco," *Handbook of Middle American Indians*. 1965, Volume 3, p. 679.

<sup>2</sup>Coe, Michael D. *America's First Civilization*. American Heritage Publishing Co. Inc.: 1968, p. 42.

<sup>3</sup>Coe, Michael D. *Pre-Classic Central Mexico: The Jaguar's Children*. American Heritage Publishing Co. Inc.: 1967, pp. 13-14.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

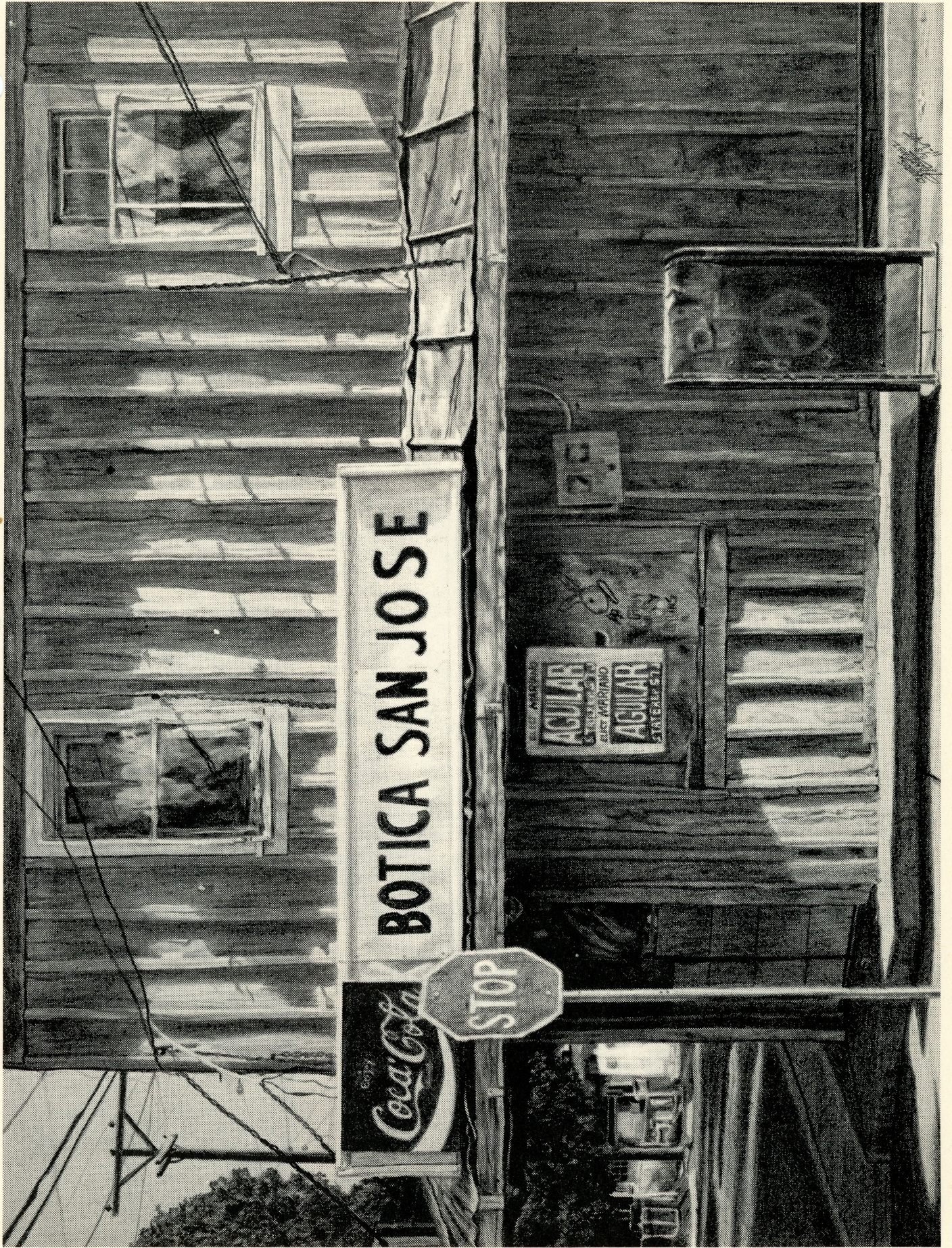
<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Bernal, Ignacio. *The Olmec World*. University of California Press, Berkeley: 1968, pp. 100-102.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.



Photo by G. Vargas



*My drawings are Chicano landscapes—architectural portraits of the Barrios in San Antonio, Texas. They depict life in the Barrios as it exists.  
¡Que Viva la Raza, Que Viva el Chicano!*  
Santos Martinez

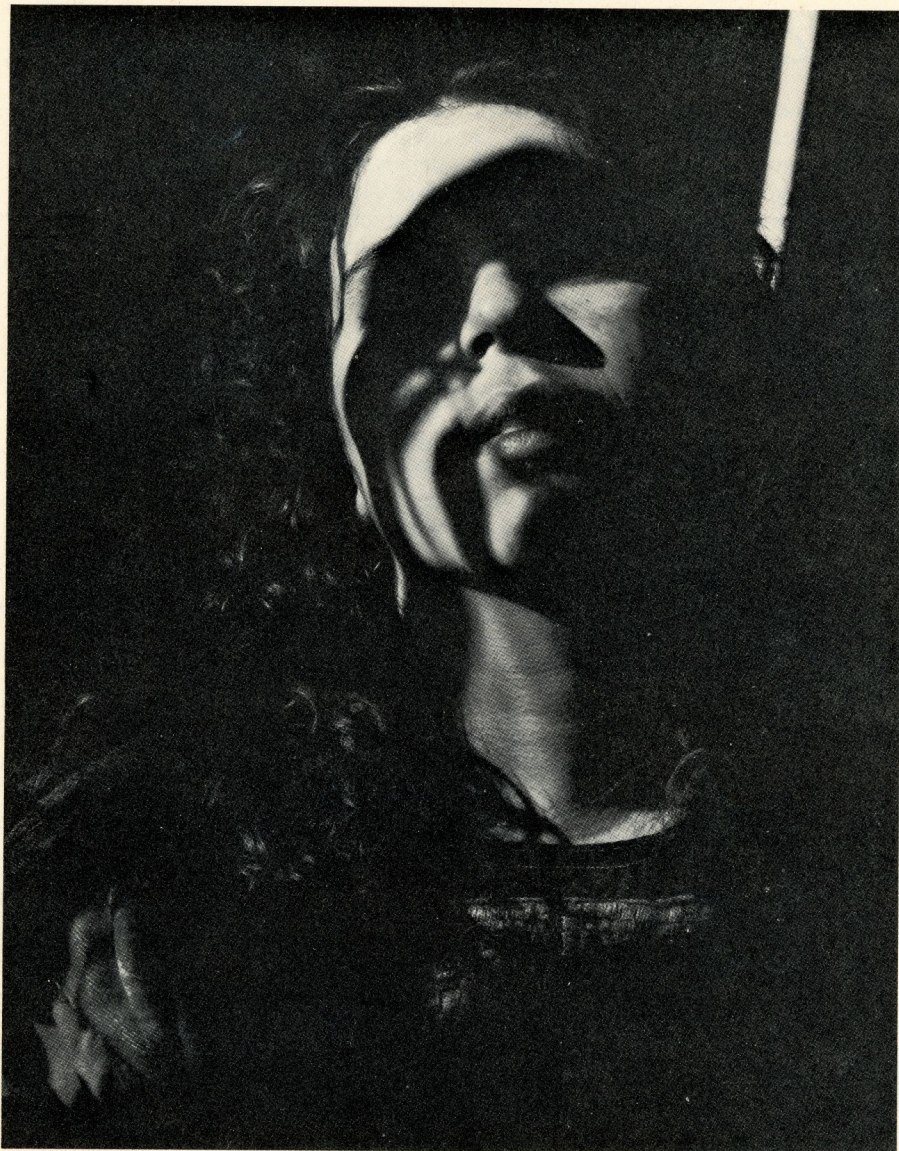


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*Attention  
Interested Contributors:*

The RAMC Journal is planning a Bicentennial Issue to be dated July 4, 1976, in honor of the Bicentennial Celebration. The editors earnestly solicit your material for this forthcoming issue, especially any material with a suitable Bicentennial theme and applicable to Raza. Mail any material in a form suitable for publishing to The Editorial Committee c/o the Raza Art and Media Collective, Inc. at our address shown on this issue.

Alone Moments

*alone  
moments  
prisms created  
from visions  
unseen  
smoke strewn thoughts  
siftings through time  
visits  
with one whose presence now is song  
and smells that wrap  
my mind in flight  
from captured times  
within me  
now*

Ana L. Cardona

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