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MALAQUIAS MONTROYA

TEREZITA ROMO

FOREWORD BY CHON A. NORIEGA



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FOREWORD

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My memory will retain what is worthwhile. My memory knows more about me than I do; it doesn't lose what deserves to be saved.

— Eduardo Galeano, *Days and Nights of Love and War*, 1983

One encounters a Malaquias Montoya artwork in stages, being first drawn in by the power of the image and then, upon closer observation, being engaged with the formal conundrums that move the piece toward its explicit message. In *Memories* (1992), a distinctively Mayan face looks to the left in determined profile, signaling an indigenous presence, a collective (and gender-neutral) subject at the center of the image. And yet, the figure also appears to be quite precarious. The charcoal portrait ends abruptly three-quarters of the way down the work, the jagged and torn edge of the paper colored in yellow. The portrait is positioned unevenly above a roughly torn strip of paper with rows of crosses set against a black background, suggesting a graveyard, with a blood red border along the bottom. The red and yellow borders, contrasted with a blue band defining the ornamental piece around the figure's neck, organize the collage and rupture of the lower half of the image through a sequence of primary colors. In the upper portion of the image, the figure's head fades into a black color field in which Montoya has handwritten a passage about memory by Eduardo Galeano.

Montoya produced *Memories* as part of a collective artistic counter-quincentenary that challenged official celebrations of the “discovery of America” in 1492. In juxtaposing an indigenous portrait with an evocation of the Catholic Church, Montoya mobilized contending formal properties through collage and color, using these to engage the viewers and lead them to the contrasting texts in the image. The first text, in the lower left-hand corner, is the word *text* itself, suggested by three crosses in which the middle one tilts to the right, forming an “x.” This text—with its missing “e”—is an absence that must be remembered: dead bodies, burned indigenous texts, suppressed education for the indigenous, and even the censored Florentine

Malaquias Montoya, *Memories*, 1992. Charcoal and pastel collage on paper, 30 × 22 inches. Collection of the artist.

Photograph by William Haught.

Codex. The second text is the passage by Galeano, the noted Uruguayan writer whose work mixes genres in the same way Montoya mixes media in order to conjure up the memory of the Conquest and its place in the history of the Americas. The irony here is that the passage recalls Galeano's divorce from his second wife, Graciela Berro, and his decision to leave all material possessions behind, taking with him only his memory. That personal memory is now documented as part of his journal-travelogue-history of life during two decades of political violence and repression.

If *Memories* is a political statement, it is one that resonates with Galeano's own writing, weaving together the personal and the political, the past and the present, and the aesthetic and the social. This approach is one that author Terezita Romo calls the "aesthetics of the message." She challenges the notion that political content renders art into nothing more than a simple illustration of a position or treatise unless the artwork maintains its autonomy by articulating its politics through the formal operations of the artwork. Such a notion posits a binary between form and content, signifier and signified, but it also presumes and even requires a viewing context defined by the seemingly abstracted and context-less "white cube" of the (commercial) gallery space. Romo provides a detailed and nuanced account of how Montoya developed an aesthetics of the message in the course of his "personal and artistic transformations" amid local, national, and international struggles for human rights, for a counter-memory to official history, and for a critical "voice" outside commercial networks.

Born in 1938 amid the Great Depression, Montoya grew up in a third-generation New Mexican family that had recently lost the ability to subsist on their small family ranch and now resided in Albuquerque. By 1941 the Montoya family had begun heading west, joining other "voiceless" migrant workers following seasonal crops in California before eventually settling in the San Joaquin Valley. Following military service in the U.S. Marine Corps in the late 1950s, during which he was stationed overseas, Montoya entered community college on the GI Bill. It was as a college student in the late 1960s that Montoya emerged as an activist artist working in support of the United Farm Workers and the Third World Liberation Front at UC Berkeley. He also cofounded the influential artist collective Mexican

Malaquias Montoya, *Abajo con la Migra*, 1977. Screen print, 30 × 24 inches.

Photograph by William Haught.

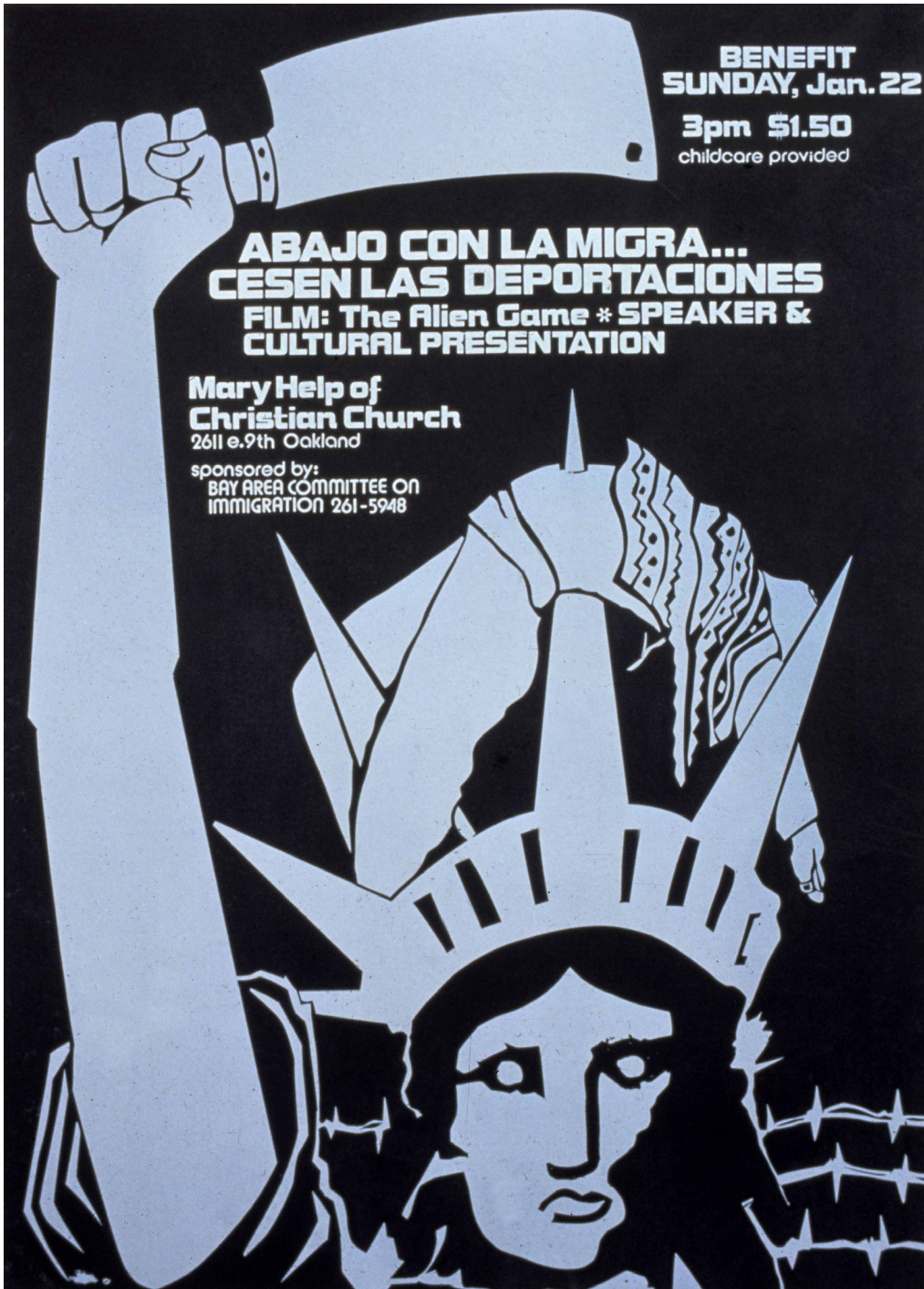
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American Liberation Art Front (MALAF). Since the 1970s, Montoya has combined his role as a college professor with an ongoing commitment to community-based art making through *talleres*, or print workshops. For Montoya, activist art was not just about an aesthetic engagement with a political content; rather, it evinced a worldview in which the aesthetic and the social are in a productive engagement with each other—in the artwork but also in the social role of the artist as an educator, as a community member, and as a world citizen.