

Judithe Hernández, *Aztlán's* First Cover Artist

Fifty Years of Chicana Feminist Art

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The cover for the inaugural issue of *Aztlán*, published in spring 1970, proudly displayed an original artwork, *El concepto de Aztlán*, by Chicana artist Judithe Hernández (b. 1948) (fig. 1). At the time a student at the Otis Institute of Art, Hernández had been invited to be the new journal's artist by UCLA history professor Juan Gómez-Quiñones, one of the journal's founding editors. In a recent interview, Hernández recalled that Gómez-Quiñones described her as "a diamond in the rough" (Hernández 2016; Black 2017). He was right. Not only did Hernández create all the journal's covers and illustrations until 1975, as well as a logo in use from 1972 through 1983, she also was the only female member of the artist collective Los Four and an important early muralist. She quickly became one of the most visible Chicana artists associated with el Movimiento. Today she is receiving the recognition she deserves, with several acclaimed public commissions in Los Angeles, including a dramatic new mural in Downtown Los Angeles (discussed below), and important recent and forthcoming exhibitions: a joint exhibition with artist Patssi Valdez in 2017 at the Millard Sheets Art Center in Pomona, part of the Getty's third iteration of its Pacific Standard Time initiative; a solo exhibition at the Museum of Latin American Art (MOLAA) in Long Beach in 2018-19; and a solo exhibition in 2020 at Monica King Contemporary in New York City.¹ Hernández is credited with two important firsts: she was the first Chicana to have a solo show in New York, at the Cayman Gallery in SoHo in 1983, and the first US-born Latina to have an exhibition at MOLAA (Hernández, n.d.; and Hernández 2016). Recently, the Museum of Modern Art acquired two of her early pieces: *La*

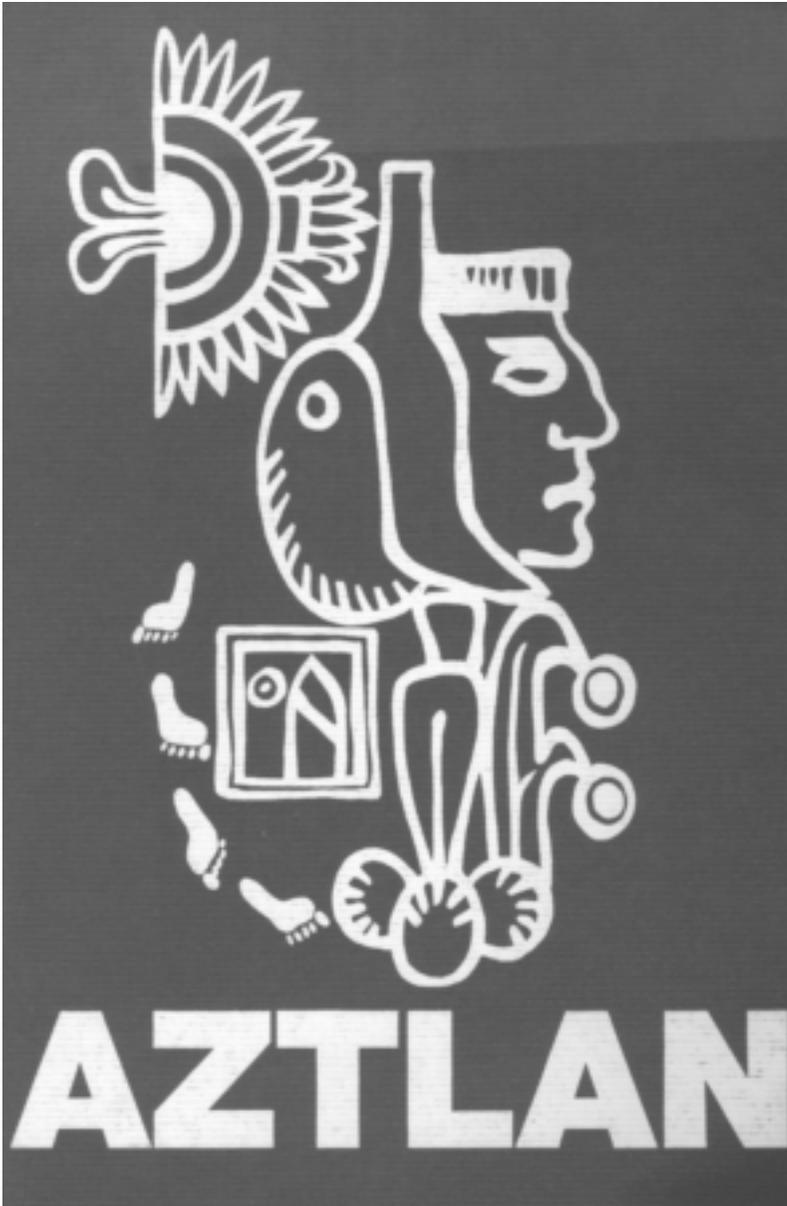


Figure 1. Judithe Hernández, *El concepto de Aztlán*, 1970. Cover of *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1. Image courtesy of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

reina del barrio, a mixed-media work (aerosol spray paint, gesso, marker, and pastel on paper) from 1976, and *La reina de la primavera*, a serigraph printed in 1976 (Hernández 2019a and 2019b).² *We at Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* are honored to feature *Su corazón*, a new print by Judithe Hernández, on the cover of this fiftieth-anniversary issue of the journal.

The drawing that Hernández created for the cover of the first issue, *El concepto de Aztlán*, employs a powerful white calligraphic line against a turquoise background. The image represents the foundation myth of Aztlán, central to Chicana/o politics at the time. It was the perfect cover for the new interdisciplinary journal, which would become the flagship publication for Chicana studies. Reminiscent of ancient Mesoamerican codices, the drawing proclaims the importance of indigeneity to Chicana identity. Elements inspired by or intended to evoke the ancient past include the footsteps, indicating movement; the toponym of cactus and maize, indicating place; the inclusion of a date glyph on the bottom left; and the male figure's headdress, seen in the top left. The figure's profile pose calls up Native visual strategies and suggests both timelessness and the orientation of the Chicano movement and Chicana peoples toward the future.

Other covers boldly proclaimed the Chicano movement's alignment with Native American cultures throughout the Americas. The second issue, published in the fall of 1970, featured an image of an owl, a common representation of wisdom in Native cultures (fig. 2). Hernández's elaborated style here recalls traditional woodcut technique, particularly of the type championed by the Mexican Taller de Gráfica Popular, whose prints were an important source of inspiration for Chicana printmakers. While Hernández did not name the piece herself, the title chosen by the journal's editors, *La lechuza de antaño en el presente* (The owl of yesteryear in the present), perfectly asserted the importance of the past for Chicana identity.

The *Aztlán* covers for the next two years continued to celebrate indigeneity. *Tribu Acoma*, reproduced on the cover of the spring 1971 issue (fig. 3), references the pottery style of Acoma Pueblo, in New Mexico. Hernández created an abstract design in black and red, the traditional colors of Acoma pottery, and placed it against a subtle, off-white background. Set off by brown framing, the balanced design juxtaposes straight and curving lines. For the spring issue of 1972, she designed *Thunderbird*, representing the mythical bird common to many Native American peoples throughout North America (fig. 4). The image recalls *El concepto de Aztlán* in its use of a white design against a solid background; here it is a bright green. By anthropomorphizing the powerful avian figure, Hernández seems to allude



Figure 2. Judihte Hernández, *La lechuga de antaño en el presente*, 1970. Cover of *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, vol. 1, no. 2. Image courtesy of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

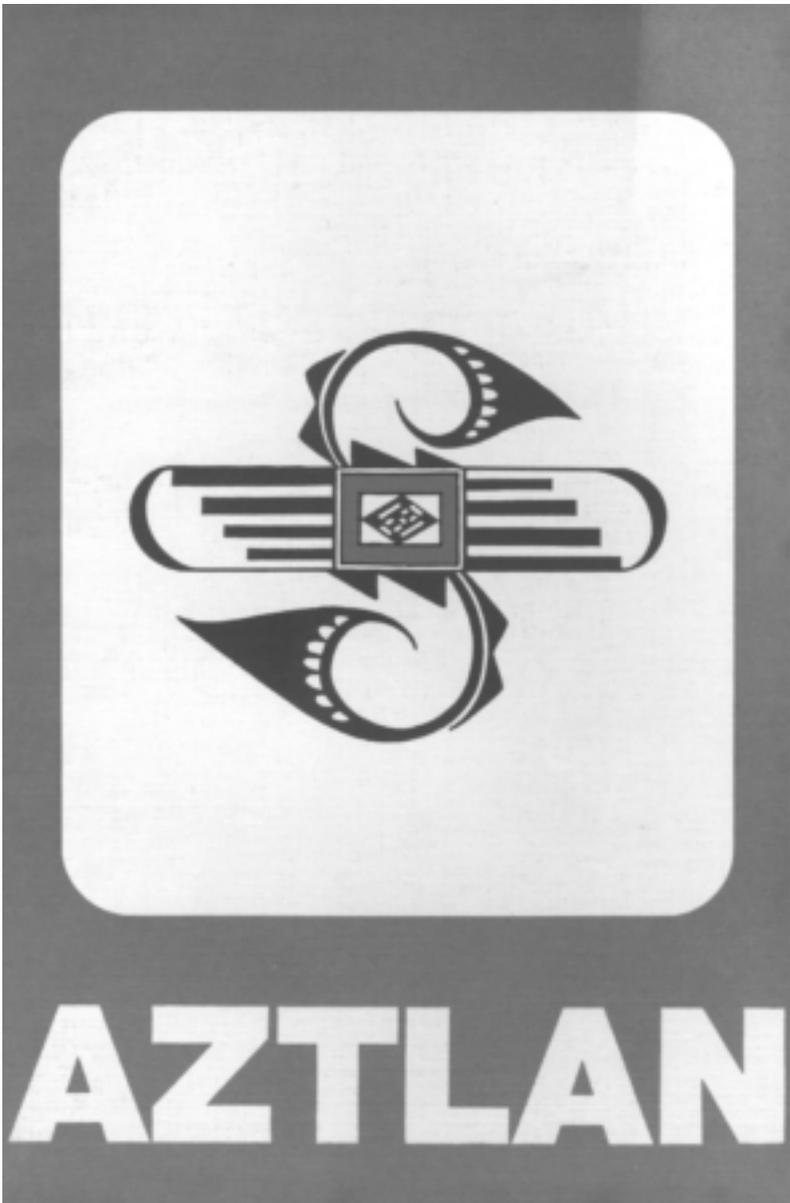


Figure 3. Judithe Hernández, Tribu Acoma, 1971. Cover of Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies, vol. 2, no. 1. Image courtesy of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

to the belief that thunderbirds could transform themselves into humans. For the fall 1972 issue she created *Rain Bird Zuni* (fig. 5), a drawing similar to the earlier *Tribu Acoma*. Both reference designs typical of New Mexican Pueblo pottery. By her own account, Hernández found inspiration in various handbooks of Native American design (Hernández 2019b).

While many of Hernández's drawings for *Aztlán* drew inspiration from the graphic quality of indigenous art, a handful are detailed works that highlight her exceptional draftsmanship. Her *Calavera de azúcar* (Sugar skull), created for the spring 1973 cover, demonstrates her facility at suggesting reality effects, including the suggestion of volume (fig. 6). An early tribute to Día de los Muertos, this image should be studied within the context of the reinvigoration of this cultural celebration in the Eastside neighborhoods of Los Angeles in the 1970s. It is one of Hernández's favorite artworks (Hernández 2019b).

The artist's aptitude for figure drawing is again evident in *La familia* (The family), a rendering that graced the spring 1975 cover (fig. 7). Depicted here as a heteronormative husband and wife accompanied by their child, wrapped in a rebozo, "la familia" was another concept important to the Chicano movement. Hernández clearly and purposefully characterizes the family as Mexican in origin, using *nopales* (prickly pear cacti) to set the stage and placing the sun and moon, common symbols in Mexican art, above. Hernandez used bold lines to create shape and hatching and cross-hatching to add volume, techniques that she learned during her training at Otis and with her mentor, artist Charles White (Hernández 1998, 2013, 2019b).

Hernández's covers for *Aztlán* drew on her insider knowledge of the Chicano movement, which was gained from her participation as an activist. They capture some of the most important concerns of el Movimiento: the importance of *Aztlán*, the reinvigoration of Mexican traditions, an alignment with indigenous peoples, the importance of Chicax history, and the value of family. Not surprisingly, Hernández's thesis at Otis, filed in 1974, was focused on Chicano iconography (Hernández 2016).

The 1970s and the 1980s were productive years for Hernández. In 1975, after five years as *Aztlán*'s artist, she left this post and dedicated herself to other pursuits. From 1974 until 1984 she was very active in Los Four. The collective included, in addition to Hernández, Carlos Almaraz, Gilbert Luján, Robert de la Rocha, and Frank Romero. In 1974 the Los Angeles County Museum of Art hosted Los Four's first major exhibition, which was a landmark event in the history of museum practice (Tartan [1974] 2004).



Figure 4. *Judithe Hernández, Thunderbird, 1972. Cover of Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies, vol. 3, no. 1. Image courtesy of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.*

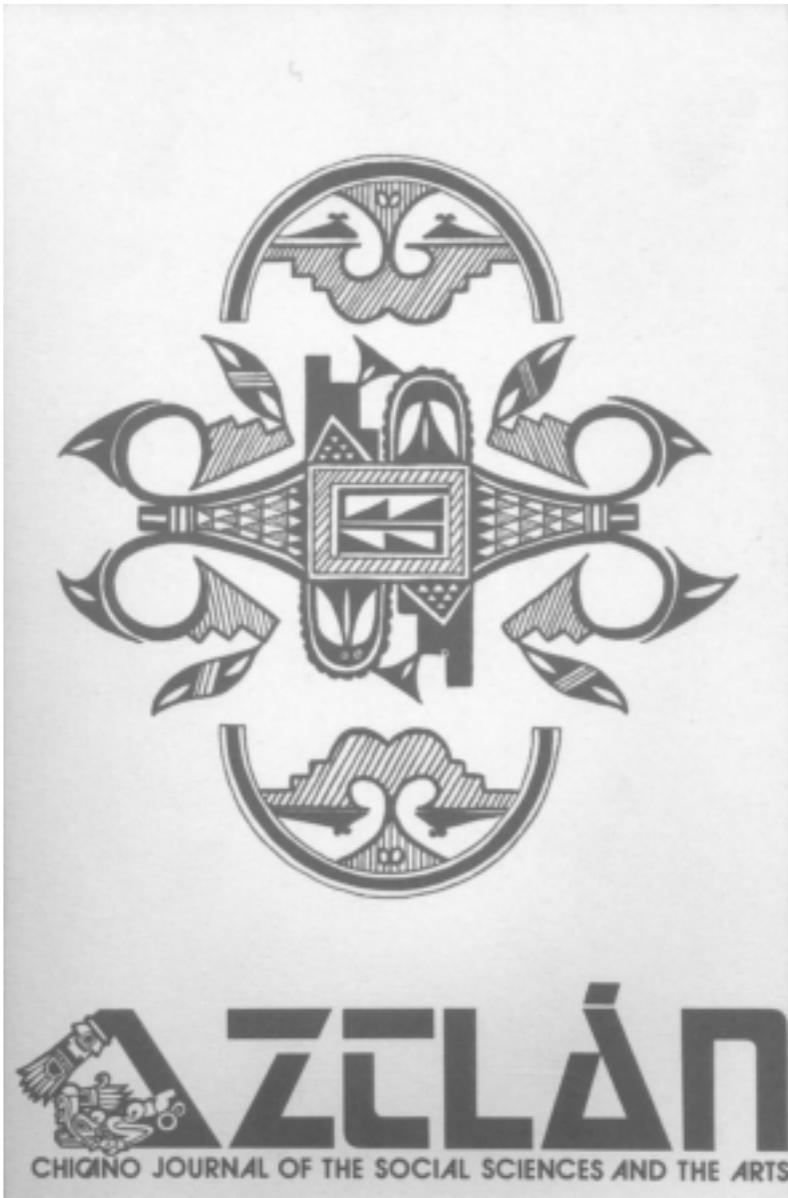


Figure 5. Judithe Hernández, Rain Bird Zuñi, 1972. Cover of *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2. Image courtesy of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.



Figure 6. Judithe Hernández, Calavera de azúcar, 1973. Cover of *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1. Image courtesy of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

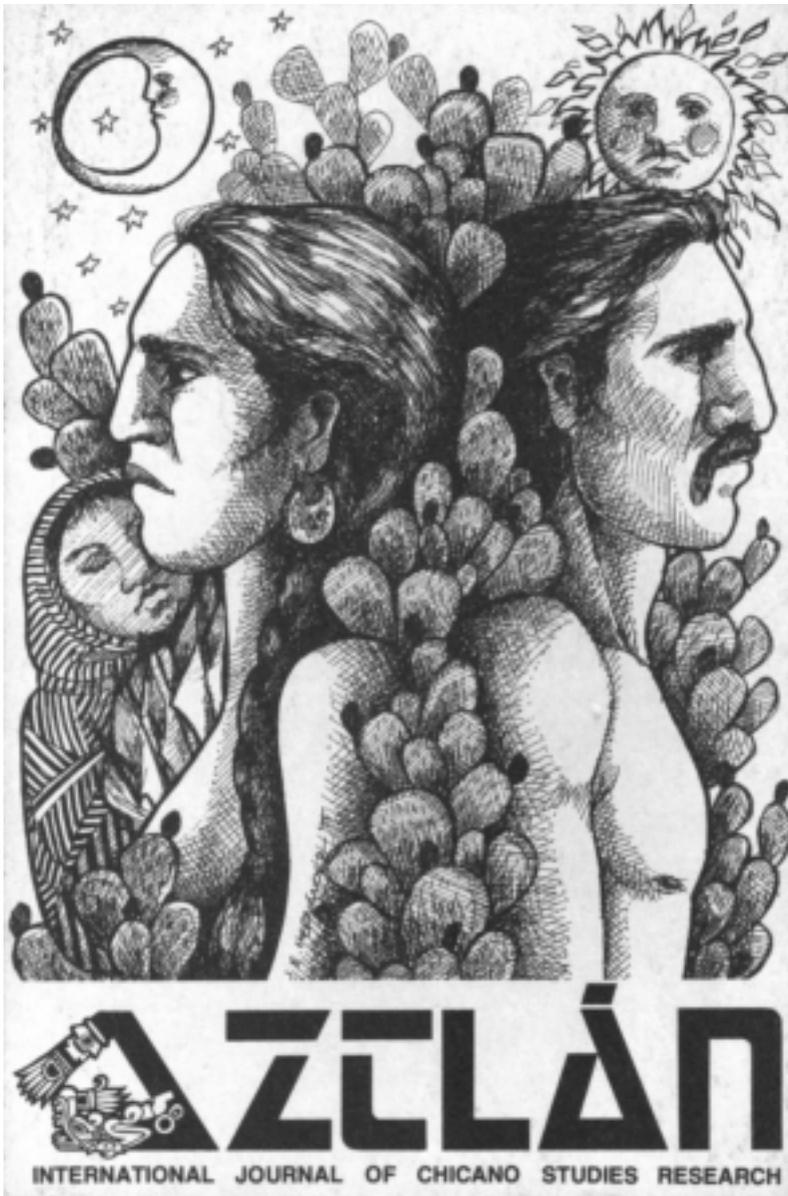


Figure 7. Judithe Hernández, *La familia*, 1975. Cover of *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, vol. 6 no. 1. Image courtesy of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

As a groundbreaking muralist, Hernández demonstrated her commitment to making Chicana and Mexicana women visible as an expression of her feminism. In collaboration with fellow Los Four painter Almaraz, she executed two important murals at Ramona Gardens, a housing project in the Eastside neighborhood of Boyle Heights. The murals were part of a series initiated by members of Hazard Grande, supported by the Mechicano Art Center, and funded by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA). The two artists conceptualized their collaboration as a feminist act. Ramona Gardens was a significant site for Chicana muralists, with two of the three entrances to the housing complex displaying murals by women artists. By representing feminist politics, these artists revised Chicano nationalism (Barnet-Sanchez and Drescher 2016, 165–73).

Hernández and Almaraz each designed one of their two murals, with the other acting as assistant. Hernández recalls that they each received \$150 for their efforts (Hernández 2019b). The mural designed by Hernández is *Homenaje a las mujeres de Aztlán* (Homage to the women of Aztlán), which was completed in 1977. In this early work, the artist articulated a subject that would recur throughout her career, that of the monumental female body. The position of the figure's arms is fundamental to interpreting the mural. With one arm the main figure embraces various female symbols—including the Virgin of Guadalupe, the goddess Coyolxauhqui, female farmworkers—that represent, in the artist's words, “the march of history” (Hernández 2019b). The other hand is upraised in an activist gesture. This hand was originally left unfinished because the artists were interrupted by a gunfight; a community member later completed the figure (Hernández 2019b). The woman is flanked by a statement in Spanish on the viewer's left and its English translation on the right: “Desde los días de la antigua historia de Mexico nuestras mujeres siempre han luchado para el bien de su familia, su pais, y su raza. Este mural esta dedicado a todas ellas . . . Las hijas, las madres, y las abuelitas de Aztlán. Since the days of ancient history of Mexico our women have always fought for the good of their family, their country, and their people—this mural is dedicated to all of them . . . The daughters, the mothers, and the grandmothers of Aztlán.” Together, image and text suggest the idea that the activism of Chicanas in el Movimiento is equally important as the activism of their male counterparts. A recent study suggests that this may be the very first mural to unite the concept of Aztlán with feminist *activistas* (Barnet-Sanchez and Drescher 2016, 170).

In 2016 Hernández restored the mural, and it remains in very good condition, unmarked by graffiti.

The other mural completed by Hernández and Almaraz is signed “Los Four” and dated 1976. This one was designed by Almaraz, with Hernández assisting with the painting (Hernández 2019b). The mural depicts an Adelita, a revolutionary female soldier (*soldadera*), “a symbol of action and inspiration” who represented “any woman who struggles and fights for her rights” (Arrizón 1998, 90–91). Another large, heroic figure, the Adelita crouches, rifle in hand, envisioning a more just future, with a mass of Mexican campesinos wearing white sombreros behind her. She looks to the viewers’ right, to a painted text directed to “Madre de la tierra y de la libertad” (Mother of the earth and liberty). The words here call for unity in the face of Mexican Americans’ communal suffering. Because the painted text specifically references discrimination in US barrios, the mural seems to suggest a role for Chicanas in encouraging harmony in the community. Unfortunately, this mural has not been restored and half of it has been painted over (Hernández 2019b).

Hernández also depicted heroic Chicana women in prints produced during this time period. In her poster for the National Association for Chicano Studies conference held at the Claremont Colleges in 1978, Hernández portrayed a Chicana *indígena* warrior, adorned with earspools, labret, and feather headdress and presented in a bold, frontal view (Saylor 2017, 90) (fig. 8). The title of the conference, “Changing Perspectives on Chicano Experience,” forms the warrior’s headdress. Hernández’s figure is the new face of the Chicano movement, representing its “changing perspectives.” The reduced palette of black, turquoise, and white complements the artist’s confident handling of the figure and works together with the frontal view to create an impression of strength and an attitude of confrontation. Like the Adelita mural, this print makes space for Chicana women in the Chicano movement and posits them as vital warriors within it. It was printed by Richard Duardo (1952–2014) in Highland Park, and it is the only work that Hernández and he produced together (Hernández 2019b).

An earlier serigraph, *La reina de la primavera* (1976), again demonstrates Hernández’s contributions to the establishment of a Chicana iconography that became essential to women’s incorporation into the Chicano movement (fig. 9). Printed by Joe Rodríguez, *La reina* was part of a calendar produced at Mechicano Art Center (Hernández 2019a). As the artist has noted, she was one of only two women artists who contributed to the calendar project (Hernández 2012). Representing the month of May (“Mayo”),



Figure 8. Judithe Hernández, National Association for Chicano Studies, 1978. Serigraph, 17½ × 22½ inches. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 9. Judithe Hernández, La reina de la primavera, 1976. Serigraph, 22 × 28 inches. Image courtesy of the artist.

Hernández's female figure is presented in a powerful frontal pose and is composed in brown, black, and white. Hernández overturned traditional European allegorical depictions of the seasons, in which Spring is usually shown as a delicate European woman crowned with flowers; a famous example is *Primavera*, Sandro Botticelli's late-fifteenth-century painting (Uffizi Museum, Florence). Instead, Hernández presents a brown Chicana figure framed by *nopales*, its ripe *tunas* (fruit) signaling the arrival of spring. Large hoop earrings with indigenous designs adorn her ears. This specifically Chicana rendering of Spring presents a strong, beautiful, brown woman as the embodiment of nature's fecundity. *La Reina* was recently acquired by MoMA, and it is also present in the collections of the Smithsonian and Chicago's National Museum of Mexican Art (Hernández 2019a).

Her fame as a muralist and printmaker notwithstanding, Hernández has worked since the beginning of her career in pastel on paper, a notoriously difficult and unforgiving medium, but one well-suited to her skills. Beginning around 2005 and continuing to the present, Hernández has reflected upon the victims of femicide (*feminicidio*) along the Mexico border in a series of works depicting lush, powerful female figures rendered in pastel. *La santa desconocida*, created in 2017, is one of her most moving works on the theme (fig. 10). The title, which translates as "Unknown Saint," indicates Hernández's reverence for the often unidentified victims along the border. In a powerful recasting of a staple of western art, the female nude reclining in a landscape, Hernández presents the lifeless saint reclining in the desert, her body framed by a mandorla of cacti. Here, though, the body is clothed, and the bluish-purple tint of her skin removes her from the realm of the living. The drawing is a *memento mori*, an artwork whose imagery forces the viewer to dwell upon the passage of time and mortality. The disintegrating edge of the woman's garment, blowing in the wind, and her lifeless body remind us of the inevitability of death. In contrast to the peaceful full moon and still sky, Hernández hints at violence. We see a disembodied red hand enter the scene from the left, a motive repeated in related images by Hernández, such as a set of drawings titled *Mano colorada*, *mano de sangre*, *mano de opresión* from 2007-8 as well as works about the Juárez murders in which a bloody handprint covers the victim's face (Hernández 2008).

In *La santa desconocida* the red hand leads to red ribbons that wrap around the saint's neck and body and trail along the desert floor. While we can read the figure's upraised arm and hand as evidence of the body's postmortem stiffening or perhaps as a defensive sign, one can also read the gesture as one of prayer. Her colorful embroidered huipil references



Figure 10. Judith Hernández, *La santa desconocida*, 2017. Pastel on paper, 30 × 88 inches. Private collection. Image courtesy of the artist.

Native cultures in southern Mexico, indicating that she, like many other victims of the feminicides around Juárez, traveled north from their homes to work in the maquiladoras along the border. Hernández memorializes the unnamed victim's brutal death while recognizing the beauty in her peaceful face and the delicate embroidery of her attire. The antirealist choice of bluish-purple for her skin color, though, disrupts any attempt or desire on the part of the viewer to aestheticize or objectify the female body on view (Hernández 2019b).

Also created in 2017, *Juárez quinceañera* is a further reflection on the feminicides, with the artist again making clear that many of the victims are indigenous women from southern Mexico (fig. 11). In this work Hernández suggests the historical context for the murders, with the bloody hand prints, similar to those in *Mano colorada*, *mano de sangre*, *mano de opresión*, clearly signifying violence.³ (Hernández makes several points with this work. The title, *Juárez quinceañera*, suggests that the figure is fifteen years old. Her mask, headdress, necklace, and earpools link her to the Maya peoples of southern Mexico and Guatemala.⁴ By referencing historic representations of the Maya, the artist acknowledges that ancient Maya culture lives on, but she also connects violence against women, as manifested in the Juárez feminicides, with the violence of the conquest of the Americas. Hernández considers misogynistic attitudes toward women to be a form of violence, as she noted in an interview with Ramón García (2017, 10–11). *Juárez quinceañera* is also similar to *La santa desconocida* in the artist's insistent articulation of the figures' femininity, represented in *Juárez quinceañera* by the beautiful feminine clothing, flowers, and shades of pink and red. The figure's mask merits further consideration. Clearly a reference to ancient Maya artifacts, Hernández's mask is a death mask, a strategy seen in other works in her Juárez series. In her 2011 installation *Juárez tzompantli*, created for the National Museum of Mexican Art in Chicago, she brought together



Figure 11. Judith Hernández, Juárez Quinceañera, 2017. Pastel mixed media on paper, 40 × 60 inches. Image courtesy of the artist.

her pastels of the women of Juárez with her own version of a *tzompantli*, an Aztec skull rack, from which she suspended white masks of women's faces created in papier-mâché. Black flags, on stakes that pierced the floor of the installation, commemorated the victims of femicide.

Women wearing masks appear throughout Hernández's other series: Adam and Eve Series, Luchadora Series, and Mexico Series. On one level, her visual strategy of masking references the many disguises that women wear as partners and mothers, an observation made by Margarita Nieto in relation to an early exhibition of her art (Nieto 1979). By obscuring the specific identity of the women depicted, Hernández also uses the mask to facilitate viewer identification with the figure: we can be the person represented. On a deeper level, I believe she deploys the mask at key moments in her work, moments designed to force us to reflect on the ways Mexicanas and Chicanas camouflage themselves as migrants, as luchadoras, and as partners—that is, as we live. Masks function as “icons and indexes of identity”; they represent “one of a variety of means for signaling identity” (Pollock 1995, 581, 582). I've written previously about Hernández's use of the mask as an aesthetic strategy, describing it as “a perfect metaphor for her art”: “In Hernández's work, there is always something hidden from view, a mystery that forces the viewer into an active dialogue, that forces us to question, to think, to unmask, in order to complete the reading of the

work—and it is this viewer engagement that is at the heart of her feminist practice” (Black 2018).

More recently, Hernández has completed two public commissions in Los Angeles. In 2016 she installed *L.A. Sonata*, a set of twenty-four mosaic panels commissioned by the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority for its Metro station in Downtown Santa Monica. As its title suggests, the work is an ode to the diverse city of Los Angeles, with its different parts resolving into a harmonic whole. The panels feature representations of women from around the world, shown in different seasons. Some commemorate the historical cultures of Mexico, Greece, Egypt, Asia, and the Assyrian world, all origin points of LA’s diverse populations. One of the panels focuses on the confrontation between two cultures—the ancient worlds of Mexico, represented by Toltec figures, and the classical world of the west, represented by Apollo and Pegasus. The artist rewrites US history by uniting them, suggesting that the encounter marks the new dawn of the twenty-first century. In other scenes, Hernández brings together Latin American and Asian imagery, as, for example, in her use of butterflies and origami birds, which commemorate Santa Monica as the edge of the Pacific Rim.

After decades of important work as an artist and activist, Hernández’s most recent public artwork, *La Nueva Reina de Los Ángeles*, signals her arrival as one of the city’s most influential creative minds and as a major figure in the history of US art. The seven-story mural was installed in the fall of 2019 at LA Plaza Village, a mixed-use complex located near El Pueblo de los Angeles Historical Monument in Downtown Los Angeles. It and three other murals, by José Lozano, Miguel Ángel Reyes, and Barbara Carrasco, create a new Los Angeles “mural corridor” (Esparza 2019). Hernández’s “New Queen of Los Angeles” replaces the colonizing Catholic emblem of the Virgin Mary, which is associated with the city’s founding, with a towering indígena Mexicana figure who is crowned with white flowers and enveloped in a blue rebozo. A dove of peace alights on her open right hand, and rays of light frame and sanctify her figure. Hernández’s towering queen can be read as a retaking and resanctification of Los Angeles as native land—land that was taken from the original indigenous inhabitants. The doves articulate the artist’s hope for a peaceful, more inclusive future. *La Nueva Reina de Los Ángeles* rearticulates the themes of an older mural, now destroyed, that Hernández created in 1981-82. *Recuerdos de ayer, sueños de mañana* was a three-story mural on the Brunswig Building at Spring and Arcadia Streets, near Placita Olvera (Hernández 2019b).

In that mural, Nuestra Señora la Reina de Los Ángeles rose over the site of the historic founding of the city. Hernández again rewrites that history in her latest creation, supplanting the familiar reference to the Catholic Church with an indigenous Mexican woman.

I conclude with Hernández's own words on *La Nueva Reina de los Ángeles*, a testament to her practice as artist and activist over these past decades: "I believe that public artists are entrusted with the unique responsibility to frame their artistic vision to reflect a community's collective perception of a moment in time. It is my hope, that La Nueva Reina will come to embody this moment and become a visual memory of Los Angeles for all who see her" (Hernández 2018).

Notes

1. These exhibitions are: *Judithe Hernández and Patssi Valdez: One Path Two Journeys*, September 1, 2017–January 28, 2018, Millard Sheets Art Center, Pomona, CA; *Judithe Hernández: A Dream Is the Shadow of Something Real*, August 11, 2018–February 17, 2019, Museum of Latin American Art, Long Beach, CA; and an as yet untitled solo exhibition, September 2020, Monica King Contemporary, New York, NY.

2. According to the artist, *La reina del barrio* was previously titled *Super Macha*.

3. Red handprints have been seen recently on the faces of demonstrators across the world who are protesting violence against women; the handprints may possibly be the direct influence of Hernández's works, which she lent to feminist activists in Mexico and are viewable on her website.

4. Her regalia is similar to that of a seventh-century statue of Maya royalty found in 2006 in a burial chamber in Guatemala. See Rich (2017).

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