



Roberto Chavez

Paintings and Drawings

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Edited by Robert Ross



hit & run press

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Acknowledgments

This volume is published on the occasion of a major traveling exhibit of drawings and paintings by Roberto Chavez.

The originating venue of the exhibit is the Robert F. Agrella Art Gallery of Santa Rosa Junior College, Santa Rosa, California, running 14 November through 15 December, 2012.

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The final venue for this exhibit is the Wiegand Gallery of Notre Dame de Namur University, in Belmont, California, running 23 January through 23 February, 2013.

Robert Poplack, Director of the Gallery, generated and curated this second exhibition. Appreciation to the Wiegand Gallery Advisory Board, members of the Directors Circle, and Notre Dame de Namur University, for their major assistance with the exhibit and the book.

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Why Paint?

Roberto Chavez

Sometimes it seems to me that our society has no use for art or even for knowing what purpose art can serve.

One could make an analogy with food. We need food, not just for something to chew on and enjoy, but to maintain our bodies, that is, as nutriment.

There is a lot of food available to us. Vending machines are everywhere. Every gas station has a food mart where you can pick up snacks for the road as you pay for your gas. In the supermarkets there are aisles and aisles of canned, processed, frozen, bagged, and bottled "food." There are displays of goodies in great varieties of flavors and colors to catch your eye. Lots of stuff to consume. What is missing is nutriment.

And what is that nutriment in art? The potential to journey into the unknown. To quote Joseph Campbell, "a potential for realization and consciousness that are not included in your concept of yourself." The ability to see that life is much deeper and broader than you conceive it.

That can seem like too much work to bother with for people in a hurry. In general, people want to be entertained, not challenged. People do not want to question their sense of who they are, of what it may mean to be fully alive. That is a perplexing thing, something that cannot be grasped clearly, quickly, or logically.

The language of painting is not literary but plastic, not ideas but feeling. By manipulating the paint in terms of shape, texture, value, color, and light, the successful painter can offer viewers a different way of viewing their world.

In our time, the camera provides the main way of observing the world. Even so, cameras come as close to recording experience as Xs on a page feel like real kisses. Part of the problem is that our machines have become replacements for our own experience of life. Cameras copy nature, badly. Art seeks not to copy nature but rather to emulate it, to be in unison with nature.

That requires an attentive awareness that our machines seem to make unnecessary. We need artists to show us, in a deeper way, how things are and how they could be. This all makes for an interesting time (in the Chinese sense) for artists.

We have exhibits and competitions. Many artifacts are sold by the big auction houses as investments, while others are peddled as home décor at the local arts and crafts fair. Such transactions belong to the world of trade, simply another arena of competitive or commercial dealings.

Art, as I understand it and have tried to practice it, lies in another realm altogether: the spiritual, that is, relating to the human spirit (or soul), as opposed to the material or physical. Art is not concerned with material values or pursuits.

My first “artistic” experience came at a very early age, possibly before I had mastered language. I was sitting on a rug, looking at the pattern in front of me. I saw that it consisted of shapes of different colors. I found that by shifting and modifying my focus I could change the relationships of the colors and patterns. It was rather like staring first at the red, then at the black squares on a checkerboard, but this rug pattern had more colors, a greater variety of shapes and textures.

My consciousness included the feel of the rug on my bare legs, the sounds from another room, a terrific sense of well-being, and the fact that my whole visual field was a part of these sensations. The distinction between me, as the perceiver, and that which I was perceiving disappeared. I became one with that which I was looking at. I felt expanded and totally content. I believe that we all have the capacity for such insights. Possibly everybody has had at least one such episode. There are undoubtedly differences in the intensity and length of them, but I believe they are part of the human potential.

But of course the difference between this type of experience and the accepted or conventional way of seeing things can make it hard, even dangerous to share such an experience with others. Ridicule, ostracism, or worse can result. The fear of this reaction may cause one to suppress and forget the event and to avoid the chance of a reoccurrence.

It is my opinion that humans need to cultivate this facet of existence for their own inner harmony and for the good of the species and of the earth as our home.

The arts often explore this realm and can be helpful in bringing us into harmony with nature and with each other, fully integrated with life. What is involved is a confrontation with the mystery of life. We are not comfortable with mystery, something that we have not the words to understand. But logic is not our only resource for this journey.

We have other ways of understanding: our organs of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch, which operate independently of thought. Art helps us feel comfortable with experiences that give us a sense of what an incredible thing it is to be alive as humans in this awesome and beautiful place.

I paint to achieve this. In working with my materials I challenge myself to let go of expectations, to trust that the medium, and my body, will guide me in learning to trust the unknown.

You could say that I paint to discover what painting is.

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