



Luis González Palma's work was first shown in Houston in 1992 as part of the Latin American exhibits of FotoFest. If one were to ask retrospectively what exactly it was that was so impressive about his work, an important answer would be: his portraits of indigenous peoples of Guatemala like "La rosa" (1989) and "La esperanza" (1990). I reluctantly call them "portraits" because they are not intended as depictions of the individuals they denote; but rather, as impersonations of archetypal characters of myth, popular culture and/or the poetic imagination of the artist. [1](#) González Palma has continued, mutatis mutandis, producing these portraits throughout the nineties: "El soldado" (1993), "El casco" (1994); and more recently, "80 mm, 5.6" (1998), "La mirada crítica"(1998), and "Trama y urdidumbre" (1998).

Other portraits of Guatemalan Native-Americans had been featured at FotoFest '90 in the work of Hans Namuth Los Todos Santeros. [2](#) But Namuth's work, although impressive in its own right, is fairly straightforward whereas González Palma's work (not plain Palma, as some would have it) follows different paths —zigzagging along, crisscrossing others' paths, and branching off into untrodden territories. In order to understand a little better González Palma's work, I will attempt to walk along those paths.

The obvious and most conspicuous place to start is tone. González Palma's prints are generally glazed with a dark sepia medium that tones all but selected portions of his prints. Various interpretations have been given for this prominent feature of his work. Some have found in this earthy monochromaticism a connection with Goya's dark paintings. Others have connected it with the way paintings and frescoes in churches look after hundreds of years of exposure to the smoke of candles, incense, and the exhalations of devotees. Others have underscored the resemblance that his toned prints have with the bark on which ancient Mayans allegedly wrote. [3](#) This last suggestion is particularly germane because, according to the Popol Vuh, the first act of creation is dawn; and bringing the world out of darkness is part of González Palma's poetics. These interpretations are not mutually exclusive; more than likely, González Palma is plugging into all these outlets simultaneously —thus exemplifying a culturally diverse tradition of image-making and exposing his own aesthetic eclecticism.

In many of González Palma's portraits only the eyes of the subjects are spared the sepia tone so as to imbue their gaze with an engaging, confrontational, and almost hypnotic quality. Take the case of "America" (1990), a portrait of a young woman whose name happens to be 'America' —the title is both exact and metonymic. The white of the eyes irradiates a light that subliminally leads the viewer into St. Augustine's intuition that its source is the luminosity of the spirit. Through toning González Palma establishes a metaphor central to much of his work; namely, that the life of many indigenous Guatemalans transpires in darkness (the sepia tone) although their spirit (the glistening eyes) prevails and endures. It is clear that González Palma endorses their cause and makes the brunt of his oeuvre bear a political message for their liberation. Many would argue that the political impact of art beyond the narrow boundaries of the artworld is more often the unwitting design of censors. [4](#) But González Palma belongs to that breed of artists who believe that art itself has a spiritual luminosity and power whose social effects should not be underestimated.

The depiction of González Palma's indigenous subjects is a way of changing the historical perceptions about them for themselves and for others. Pedagogically, it is a forced act of self-knowledge whose main lesson is: "You are the protagonists of your own history." Unfortunately, what is scream for some is heard as song by others who see only the exoticism of the imagery. This kind of ambivalency is characteristic of great ideological paradigms like beauty or freedom. On one interpretation, for example, the luminous gazes are the light of reason: human rights, republicanism, and rationality (ideals of the Enlightenment). Therein lies a

connection with Goya's Capricho "El sueño de la razón produce monstruos" which has an ambiguity that reveals the bright and dark sides of reason. [5](#) From the Native-American perspective, "Enlightened" rationality has been a double-edged sword insofar as it has been the conceptual tool for liberation as well as for exploitation. González Palma has explicitly pointed to that ambivalence in one of his most conceptual and avant garde installations: "Historias Paralelas" (1995). The installation consists of a series of transparencies of white shirts ridden with bullet holes. González Palma identifies the shirts of "Parallel Histories" as those of Maximilian, Archduke of Austria who, in 1864, was imposed on Mexico as emperor by Napoleon III and Mexican conservatives. [6](#)

In an epoch when for the very first time a Zapotec Native-American, Benito Juárez, was elected president of México (a process for which Enlightenment ideals are partially responsible), a European monarch was forced militarily on a sovereign American republic. Ironically, Maximilian turned out to be more liberal (read, "Enlightened") than the Mexican reactionaries would have wished; Juárez shared more reformist views with him than with some of his own allies. Nevertheless, Juárez ordered his execution not only because Maximilian himself had ordered the execution of republican guerrilleros but also because he was the incarnation of imperialism. Thus, "Historias Paralelas" is also a reflection on the impersonality of violence; i.e., it was not Maximilian's person that was important in deciding his execution but his investiture symbolized by his shirt.

An equally important feature of González Palma's work is the way he consistently endows the image of Native-Americans with an almost irresistible beauty. [7](#) To do so, González Palma slides the canons of European beauty along indigenous traits—a concept spelled out in "Reflejo" (1998). The trinity—beauty, truth and goodness—is a Platonic amalgam whose persuasive power has not dwindled since antiquity, but whose currency was challenged—among others—by the art of the historical European avant-garde. German artists of the so-called New Objectivity movement, like Max Beckmann and Otto Dix, brutally, even grotesquely, depicted the bourgeois society of their time. For these artists beauty was clearly a distraction and contrary to their aims of critical objectivity. Beauty, however, is a value with which the Latin American avant-gardes have found it harder to dispense. In González Palma's work beauty conspires to ennoble his indigenous subjects. Through the rhetorical power of beauty the viewer is rendered more susceptible to fully accept their humanity just as 500 years ago Bartolomé de las Casas gained over a handful of Spaniards by arguing that the physical slightness of Native-Americans was a sign of nobility.

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More recently, González Palma has introduced contemporary genetic theory in the work "The image of the world" (1998). For González Palma, the move to dignify and beautify the Native-American subjects of his portraits has the effect of persuading the viewer to move from the factitiousness of their staged personas to the documents that attest to their existence and exploitation. Works such as "Los Recuerdos Intimos" (1991) and more recently, "Letanías con ángel" (1995), depart from an aesthetic heavily dependent on beauty and enter a more current one based on text and evidence. With these latter images González Palma pays homage to Christian Boltanski, whose work has had a tremendous impact on his own. [9](#) In fact, in "Letanías" (1993) as well as in "Letanías con ángel" many id-photos (as in many of Boltanski's works) become blurred to the point of becoming useless as tools of identification. One reading of this feature comes from the tragic futility of looking for "disappeared" ones with id-photos not only in Guatemala but throughout the continent—in a sense, a debunking of the idea that photography's main function is to document and/or identify. Indeed, something as unmimetic and unsensorial as DNA is a better tool for identifying the dead as well as clarifying the kinship of all humans.

That González Palma has not always relied exclusively on an aesthetic of beauty is clearer in his early work where there is even a hint of the grotesque. In "Imágenes de Parto y Dolor" [Images of Child-Bearing and Pain] (1989), or "La Muerte Reyna" [Death Rules] (1989), González Palma exposes his connection Joel-Peter Witkin's work. If only a few of González Palma's images can be regarded as grotesque it is perhaps because since then the rhetoric of beauty was so steadfastly established throughout his opus that it entices the viewer to regard works like "Deer"(1991) and "The Moon"(1989) as something more akin to the sublime than to the grotesque. Beauty, therefore, is also a strategy for persuading the viewer into accepting different paradigms, if not of beauty (whose parameters are historically and ideologically fairly well-defined in spite of the enthusiasm of many who relativize it), then, of artistic representation. González Palma recycles a whole gamut of religious, popular, ancient, mythical, and media icons. In "Lotería I" and "Lotería II," for example, he alludes to the game of lottery whose images—according to María Cristina Orive (one of his first commentators) were used to convert Native-Americans to Catholicism. In order to address issues like emigration, more recent works like "Tensiones herméticas" (1997), leave behind not only beauty but also the representation of Native-Americans as a potentially exotic specimens.

In a way, Gonzáles Palma's eclectic work allows us to discern two epicenters in his artistic persona. One, spelled out by the rhetoric of the titles of his books, exhibits and some of his works (i.e., *Poems of Sorrow*, *Wedding of Solitude*, etc.): a modernista à la Rubén Darío [10](#) , with a clear penchant for beauty; and a second one, an avant-garde installation artist à la Boltanski. It is this second aspect of his work that most impressed me about his work in 1992. González Palma irreverently tears photographic prints, nails them to rough supports, collages legal documents and pins ribbons to the prints, invents rituals, uses popular culture, etc. A horde of issues of authenticity, veracity, even morality which photography in the documentary mode had defined within its own paradigm, were thereby forced into revision. González Palma—like Gerardo Suter or Mario Cravo Neto— makes no effort to hide his staging and his choreography and it remains unclear what degree of complicity he has with his subjects who usually include his wife, friends, workers, etc. In a sense, González Palma preempted issues of validation and authenticity. His work in 1992 was in the avant-garde of Latin American photography; and the notion of the avant-garde—is worth remembering—is always contextual.

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1.- The case of "America" (1990) is interesting insofar as the name of the model, who happens to be González Palma's godchild, is really "America." Nevertheless, the intention seems to be to depict this girl as a substitute for the 1875 Bartholdi's statue "Liberty" (as-in-the-Statue-of-Liberty) -a mestizo female who is most representative of the American continent; i.e., one, with Native-American features. A later work, titled "America II" (1998) has a more ironic vein insofar as "America" is inscribed on a heart pin bearing the U.S. flag and adhered to the forehead of a young mestizo. [\(back\)](#)

2.- Hans Namuth. Los Todos Santeros. (Berlin: Verlag Dirk Nishen, 1989). [\(back\)](#)

3. Maria Cristina Orive, essay "Luis Gonzáles Palma" in book Luis Gonzáles Palma (Buenos Aires: La Azotea, 1993), p. 5. [\(back\)](#)

4.- That the most unproductive course of action a regime may take against dissident artists is to repress it is a lesson well-learned by those countries in Latin America that best handle their cultural programs; namely, Cuba and Mexico. In most other countries cultural programs are generally handled by the "unintelligentsia." It is not clear to me whether or not Gonzáles Palma's works are considered subversive by the Guatemalan government or power cliques. [\(back\)](#)

5.- The ambiguous meaning of Goya's famous Capricho "El sueño de la razón produce monstruos" (The dream [slumber] of reason produces monsters) oscillates between two interpretations. The ambiguity arises from the fact that "sueño" means "sleep" as well as "dream." So on the kinder view of reason, if reason sleeps (is not vigilant), monsters arise. On the negative view of reason, its dreams result in terrible excesses -take the cases of the excesses of Robespierre, of Marxist totalitarianism or of free-market predation. [\(back\)](#)

6.- The story of Maximiliano, is one of the strangest in the history of the continent. The idea of

Napoleon III was to create an empire made up of European and American countries of Latin culture. It is from this notion that the enigmatic term "Latin America" arose. ([back](#))

7.- "Equally radical is González Palma's approach to beauty. His work is unashamedly beautiful." See JohnWood' essay "The death of romanticism and the birth of New Science, and the poet of sorrows" in Luis Gonzáles Palma's book Poems of Sorrow (Santa Fe: Arena Editions: 1999), p. 18. ([back](#))

8.- It is also a move not unlike that of the Mexican and Peruvian indigenista avant gardes of the 1920's. The Mexican muralistas aimed to create a public art for and about the oppressed masses, including the indigenous populations. In their works beauty joined forces with epic heroism. Perhaps more akin to González Palma's work is that of Martin Chambi, whose probing work dissected the structure of the 1920's landowning Peruvian society which marginalized Native-Americans -a system of exploitation not very different from present day Guatemala. ([back](#))

9.- Boltanski's installation "Leçons de Ténèbres" [Lessons of darkness] (1986) presented in the cloister space of the Chapelle de l'Hôpital de la Salpêtrière in Paris an array of identification portraits amidst religious statuary and other ecclesiastical paraphernalia. In fact, See, Lynn Gumpert's book Christian Boltanski (Paris: Flammarion: 1994). ([back](#))

10.- Take the following verse of Rubén Daró, with clear resonances in González Palma choice of

Light and darkness, song and scream, the photographic work of Luis Gonzáles Palma

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titles: "voy, ciego y loco, por este mundo amargo" (I wander, crazy and blind, across the bitter world). [\(back\)](#)

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