Art Across the Spectrum

SYLVIA MONTERO: The Life Of A Latina Artist
By Mary Motin-Meadows

How and when does one discover the focus of one’s life? Some discover their vocations early in life. For Sylvia Montero, it was many years before she realized her talents as a visual artist. She recalls that she was drawn toward the arts from a very early age. As a five-year-old child, she treasured a reproduction of a Henri Rousseau painting that her parents bought for her. She remembers the thrill of reading a book about the life of Mozart. She always enjoyed drawing and painting, and studied dancing for over 10 years, five years of which she studied under Jane Tannebaum, a student of the famous American dancer Martha Graham. It was not until 1986 that she began to think of focusing on the visual arts under the encouragement of her future husband, artist Tony Ortega. Her work first was exhibited at such local venues as the Chicanos in Acapulco. In 1988, her paintings were selected for regional exhibitions in New Mexico and Texas.

Two events were to prove significant to Montero’s further development as an artist: the birth of her son, Chacal, and her consciousness of her own Mexican/Checanian heritage. She was born in 1949, when she made a conscious decision that her art was as important as her role as a woman and mother. She traveled to Mexico in 1992 with a group of Denver artists. They traveled to Michoacan to view and participate in an important Mexican holiday, Dia de los Muertos, (also now celebrated by Chicanos in the United States) in its original setting. This experience became an affirmation for Montero of her Mexican/Chicanian cultural inheritance.

She said, “I saw the glory of all the art that the Mexicans have passed down through generations and generations...it fed every single part of my being.”

Upon their return, the artists produced art works based on their observations. “La Noche de Muertos: Chicano Journey into a Michoacan Night” opened at the CU Art Galleries in November of 1993. For this exhibition, Montero created one of her monotype paintings, as well as an altar installation with Alife Lucero, another member of the group. It then traveled to the Mexico City Art Symposium and the Denver Art Museum.

“La Noche de Muertos” has been described as a “mix-media/collage, in which the artist uses a variety of techniques and materials to create a sense of place and time.” The work was created by the addition of watercolor, ink, and collage to the original painting. The resulting piece is a complex and layered representation of the experience of the artists in Michoacan.

From this mix-media/collage, a poster was created. “La Mujer” has a monotype border, which includes Montero’s hallmark figures of Mexican life—mexicans and a jaguar with the addition of a rain goddess in the top, right-hand corner. The central image consists of xerox photographs (taken by Montero) of the center and the Denver skyline, which are painted in brilliant colors of yellow, green, blue, and lavender.

Other images collaged onto the canvas are the Virgin of Guadalupe, in front of the city, on the left, a pyramid from Tikal in Guatemala; and on the right, an attempt to represent Frida Kahlo in Western clothes. The young woman, standing in front of the door is an employee of the center, and the little girl who flies the balloon symbolizes the range of services offered at Mi Casa. Montero pays homage to the center to women, to Latino culture in a rich tapestry-like setting, combining the fantastic with the real, and the past with the present.

Montero’s art can be considered a journey of self-discovery and affirmation both as an artist and as a woman. Her art conveys the power of women, which she explains “can be understood by focusing on the dominant and hidden images in their lives. I unfold a story of cultural values which celebrate family, faith, and Indian roots.”

Montero’s Poster To Aid Mi Casa
The Mi Casa Resource Center for Women, 571 Galapago Street, was founded in the late 1970s by a group of Latina women from the surrounding neighborhood. The center’s various programs are available to any woman who has a need for job planning or job training. The philosophy of the center is to help women become economically viable.

A yearly fundraiser, Fiesta ‘94, held August 4 at the Norwest Bank in downtown Denver, awards women, volunteers, and organizations that fulfill the goals of Mi Casa.

Montero’s poster honors the contributions of Rose Bertha Chavez. She is in her mid 70s, a single parent, mother of 17 children, and has been an employee of the center for over three years. Montero said that Chavez has been a role-model and inspiration for the center’s younger women. The original “La Mujer,” as well as signed copies of the poster, are being sold to raise funds for the center.

Purchase of the poster supports a worthwhile cause and offers the buyer a striking example of poster art.

Call 373-1302 if you want to purchase Montero’s poster.