

**T**RY as he may, neither archeologist nor ethnologist has pinned to statistics of factual minutiae the spiritual complexities of the Mayan, as intricate as his own jungle flora and fauna. In this album, Alfredo Zalce, in true artist fashion, does what the scientist fails to do, reconstructs whole breath-taking vistas from the one legible modern glyph, the Indian body, naked or swathed in white, busy at rustic activities or relaxed in rustic leisure.

Dating of another millenium, Yucatecan bas-reliefs embody an ideal plastic concept as abstracted away from realism as the Greek. Eagle noses, caved-in foreheads, skulls shot backwards, bulging eyes —the ingredients of Mayan beauty— while they seem strange to the lover of classical art, do please the modernist, hell bent on aesthetic deformations.

The scenes sculptured and frescoed on ancient monuments are enacted daily in Indian huts and Indian fields. In Chichen-Itza, in the Court of the Thousand Columns, a stuccoed name glyph shows a hand kneading dough over a stone metate. In nearby huts of twig-woven walls and thatched with palms, living hands perform daily the same task, their cinnamon tinted arms issuing from the short sleeve of the *huipil*, immemorial raiment of the land, white square blouse loose over a loose white square skirt —that removes the female body away from the indiscretions of artistic anatomy, into the severe realm of geometrical forms. No frill, Indian beauty exists in terms of function, as when the mother, a few weeks after giving birth, offers her substancial hip, that the infant rides ceremonially as an initiation into childhood.

The traveler that brands as lazy the plateau Indian, squatting with his knees to his chin, bundled block-like in his *sarape*, may also wish to pep up the bush born Mayan, made of long and lean muscles, elegant to the point of ambiguousness, who moves in a slow motion synchronized to the lazy rythm of hammocks rocked by the motor of one big toe, alone watchful in a siesta relaxed body. Yet the stone platforms on which temples sit, as large as modern city blocks, the pyramids that raise to skyscraper heights the frescoed altar rooms, were put together by men like the Mayan stone mason whom I watched once, lifting a heavy block to a forehead shaped flat, with misleading langor.

In this album, Alfredo Zalce does also what the tourist fails to do, by substituting aesthetic intuition for bonded fact. He weaves anew in this superb set of lithographs on Mayan themes rustic present to imperial past, the intricacies of jungle shapes to those of spiritual meanings as local, and not a wit less complex.

To read these beautiful prints correctly, one must realize the cleavage between the pretext, physical sights, and the deep spiritual insights that are at the core of the work. A jungle is picturesque, but for the painter it is also a place of awe, where the deer hunter still propitiates with copal incense stelaes erected by kings long dead. The worker bent over the spiked maguery leaves, booted as a knight in rags, the fisherman pitting his eagle profile against a changeless ocean, may themselves be of the royal blood of Xu, whose coat-of-arms is the blue bird against azure skies. These rustic women that glide past jungle flora dipping finger-like roots in black swamps, think thoughts that dip in turn their roots into a past as splendid and as dismissed as that of the lost Atlantis.

The technique used is symbolical of the subtle process of osmosis by which the artist came to learn all by refraining from asking specific questions. These lithographs are in the black manner of which Zalce is a master, the light being scraped off from a black inked ground, so that even the more dazzling whites —crystal salt mounds drying under a zenithal sun, starched *huipils* in the white heat of noon— gather enough gray between scratched lights to make clear that the lithographer's goal is not at all that of equating the tropical sheen, nor to duplicate its gamut of leaf greens against strong magentas, even though he succeeds in doing this *en passant*.

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