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HYPERALLERGIC

Sandra Vásquez de la Horra's Guide to the Americas

In Vásquez de la Horra's cosmology, we encounter fantastical creatures on whatever journey we take, whether it is to a real place or an imagined future.

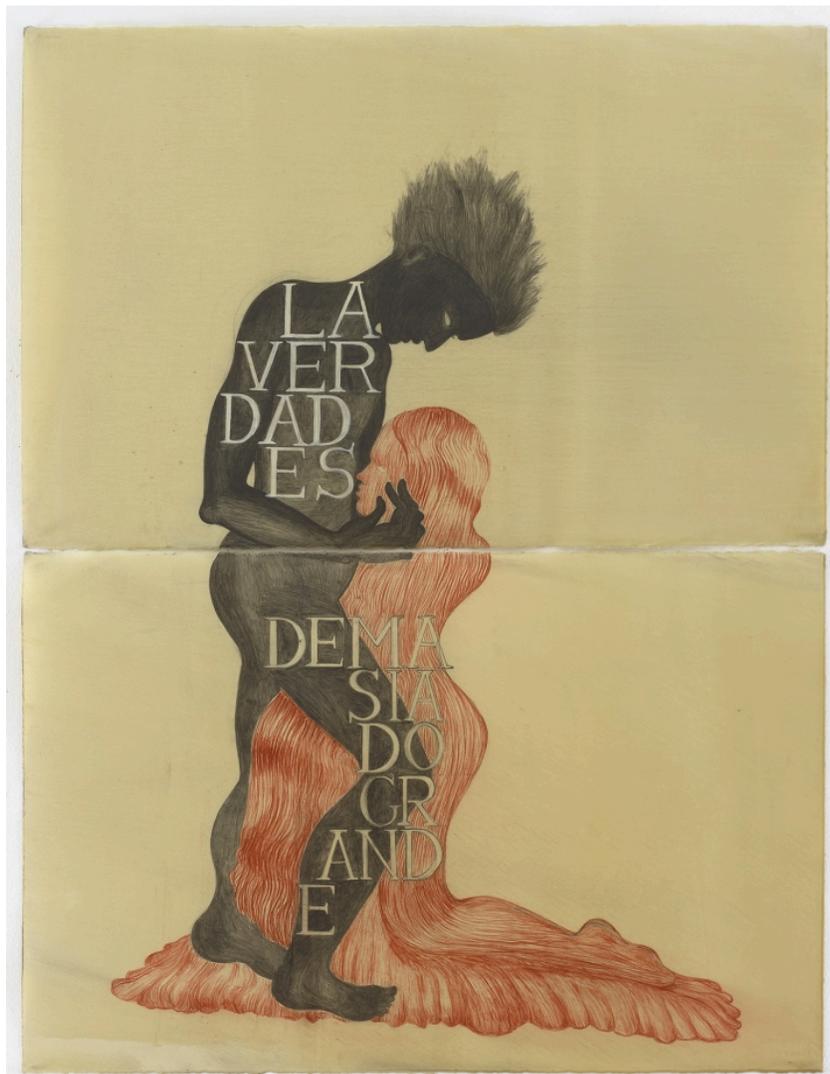
John Yau | April 14, 2018



Sandra Vásquez de la Horra, "Lazarus" (2017),
graphite, sanguine, wax crayon, and wax on four pieces of paper, 84 1/2 x 62 inches

I first wrote about Sandra Vásquez de la Horra's post-symbolist drawings on wax-soaked paper in the spring of 2016, when she had a show at David Nolan. As with all artists working in a highly recognizable style or vocabulary, repeating one's symbols or making slight variations on them are pitfalls that are extremely difficult to circumvent. You might say that falling into a routine can be an occupational hazard when working with symbols, which have a tendency to remain consistent from work to work. This is not the case with Vásquez de la Horra, who keeps expanding, both formally and visually, the territory she has been exploring.

For Vásquez de la Horra, this territory includes a conservative Catholic family in Chile, where she was born in 1967 and grew up during Augusto Pinochet's murderous, 17-year military rule (1973–1990). In order to carry this world with her into the present, she brings together research, memory, dreams, and imagination.



Sandra Vásquez de la Horra, "La Verdad es Demasiado Grande (The Truth is Too Big)" (2017), graphite, sanguine, watercolor, and wax on two pieces of paper, 52 3/4 x 40 3/8 inches

These pathways keep her terrain open, and there is much in it to be discovered. She keeps finding ways to be nuanced and elusive, as well as forceful and direct— a tight wire act that few artists have negotiated as nimbly as she has.



Sandra Vásquez de la Horra, "Aguas Profundas (Deep Waters)" (2016), graphite, watercolor, and wax on three pieces of paper, 93 x 42 3/4 inches

The results of her recent discoveries can be seen in her current exhibition at David Nolan, *Sandra Vásquez de la Horra: América sin Fronteras* (March 15 – April 28, 2018), in which the artist has pushed her work in a number of memorable, thought-provoking ways. First, the artist has enlarged her scale, making works that can require four large sheets of paper, which are pinned to the wall. The four-sheet "Lazarus" (2017) measures 84 ½ inches by 62 inches. Unframed and pinned to the wall, "Lazarus" is simultaneously large and portable. I think the work's mobility is part of its meaning.

Along with graphite and watercolor, the artist has started using acrylic. Her palette consists of black, sanguine, white, and the buttery yellows of the wax-dipped paper. The skin of her figures tends to be rendered with tightly packed, horizontal graphite lines, which conform to the body's changing surface and shape. At the same time, the lines evoke armor as well as steel engravings, an association that was further enhanced by two works in the exhibition, "Seres de Olokun (Olokun's Creatures)" (2017) and "Aguas Profundas (Deep Waters)" (2016).

In "Seres de Olokun (Olokun's Creatures)," the artist has drawn two mermaid-like creatures, their fish tails entwined. Their large bodies take up most of the two sheets paper comprising the image, as they rise from the bottom edge to about four-fifths of the way up, where they gaze up at a boat propeller just above their heads. Lines, indicating sunlight or churning water, spread across and down the top sheet of paper, but do not envelop the mermaids.

These creatures serve the androgynous Olokun, a minor Yoruban god, who rules over all bodies of water — a deity brought to the Americas by enslaved Nigerians. Vásquez de la Horra, who draws inspiration from a wide and deep pool of images and symbols, has developed a metaphorical vocabulary that evokes Latin America's complex history of cultural collision and subjugation.

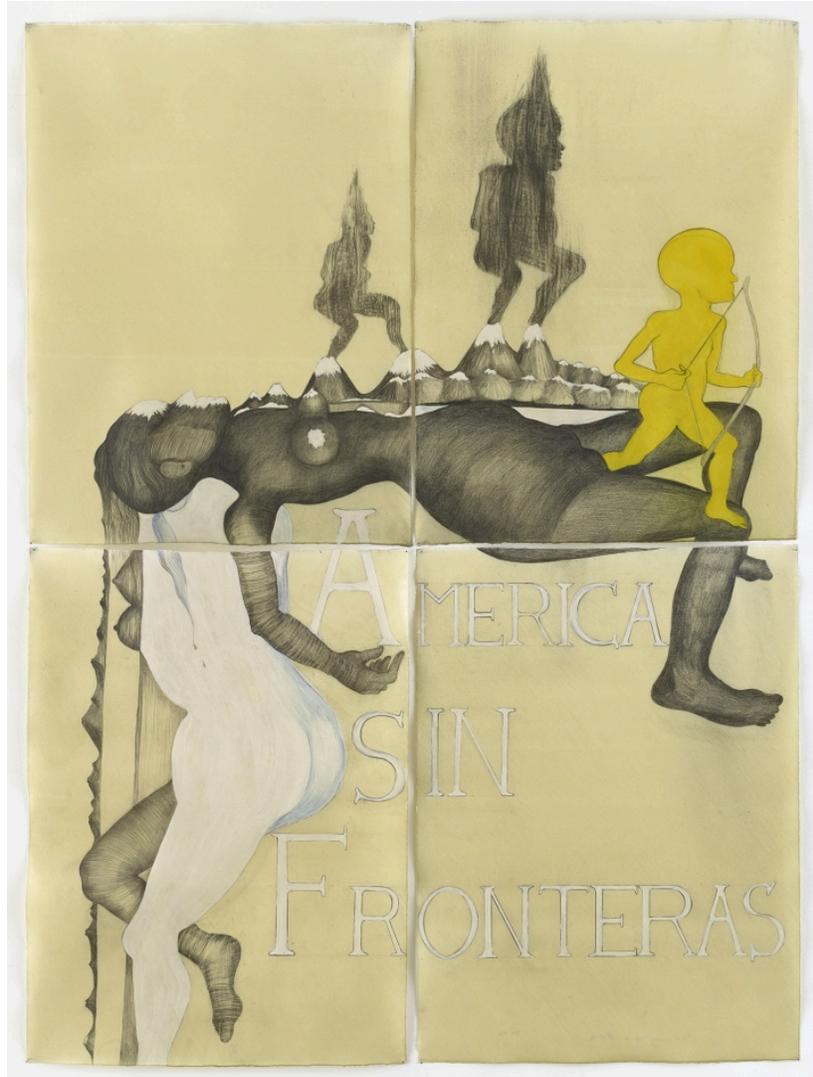
To understand her work, I think it is essential to keep in mind that she is not appropriating images, but rather recognizing certain lingering, if unstated presences in everyday life. Even if these presences are just superstitions, they still shape one's perceptions and choices. They are forces she is able to re-imagine without revealing the extent of their power.



Sandra Vásquez de la Horra, "La Mosca (The Fly)" (2016),
graphite and wax on paper, 15 x 11 1/4 inches

Vásquez de la Horra's figures accompany us on a journey that we have already started: Lazarus has risen from the dead. He is striding forward, accompanied by two dogs. His features are East Asian, a reminder of all the Chinese who immigrated to Latin America, often as indentured servants or coolies. If, as the work's title suggests, Lazarus has been reborn, what future is he striding towards? Is it the one that will greet us as well?

In "América sin Fronteras (America Without Borders)" (2017), a large work on four separate sheets of paper, a prone woman floats in the air, with different parts of her body appearing on each sheet. A series of volcanoes and snow-peaked mountains seem to simultaneously emerge from her body and drift away from her. A yellow silhouette of a child emerges from between her legs, one foot still in her womb; he is holding a bow. Two other childlike silhouettes rise like smoke from the volcanoes, one foot in each snowcapped peak. A mostly white female body rises up from the bottom left sheet and merges with the prone woman by entering through the back of her head. The work's title "America Sin Fronteras" is visible in white letters.



Sandra Vásquez de la Horra, "América sin Fronteras (America Without Borders)" (2017),
graphite, watercolor, and wax on four, pieces of paper 84 1/4 x 61 1/2 inches

By depicting the earth's upper crust — its mountains and uneven terrain — as a living being that other beings enter and exit, Vásquez de la Horra asserts that borders are false, and that we are bound together whether we admit this or not. At a time when a lot of artists are understandably involved with making didactic political art, Vásquez de la Horra acknowledges that situation without commenting on it directly. "América sin Fronteras (America Without Borders)" is concerned with green politics and ecology, though it never states it overtly.

In the drawing "Señorita Amordazada (The Gagged Lady)" (2017), the artist turns the viewer into a witness to a disquieting scene of a nude young woman gagged and tied to a chair. There is no one else but you and her — no lover, interrogator, or witness — no one to interfere with the direct relationship you have with her. The chair seems on the verge of pitching forward. The woman's feet are not touching the ground. You too are suspended, unable to do anything about her condition. The deeper, lingering question remains: what can you do about her on your own?



“Sandra Vásquez de la Horra América sin Fronteras” at David Nolan Gallery, installation view

Vásquez de la Horra’s real strength is her ability to draw images that seem to have stepped out of a dream: they are powerful and mysterious and certainly not immediately explicable. The drawings can be erotic, peculiar, and fantastic. A librarian climbs a ladder, wearing a transparent skirt and red shoes, while a man stands below her. Is this a scene from an erotic story by Anaïs Nin, Elfriede Jelinek, or Georges Bataille?

On a variety of short shelves mounted against a wall in the gallery’s small, rear room, Vásquez de la Horra has placed drawings that open into accordion folds. The drawings are both sculptural objects and books. On a number of them we see a squatting figure from behind as if peering into the future, perhaps divining what we are unable to see. The arrangement evokes a kind of altar.

Among the other works arrayed on shelves is “La Mosca (The Fly)” (2016), one of the smallest drawings in the show. Looking at it, you get an inkling of just how in touch Vásquez de la Horra is with the incomprehensible. We see a pair of a woman’s legs emerging from a fly’s wings. The legs are encased in fishnet stockings, and the feet are wearing high heels. The fly seems to have no head and therefore no eyes. I don’t think of Vásquez de la Horra’s pairing of the fly’s wings with the woman’s legs as juxtapositions. I think of it as a unified vision of something truly strange — at once beautiful and deformed.