Fantasies of Reconquest: Francisco Moreno
By: Adam Jasienski

In Francisco Moreno's massive *Family Vacation*, five near-life-size figures enjoy a tranquil afternoon on a verdant valley slope. They have just alighted from a massive avian shuttle, still open behind them, that glitters with gold and turquoise. The checkered picnic blanket spread beneath the family hints at the chain of events leading up to this halcyon day. For it is, in actuality, an Inca warrior's tunic, with its characteristic pattern of a red triangle framed by a pattern of white and black "como de juego de axedrez" ("like a chessboard"), as described by one terrified Spanish chronicler, who witnessed the Inca armies massing at Cajamarca in 1532.[i]

But the tunic has been here taken off, the warrior's task completed. All is peace, with the distant Tuscan cityscape—as if borrowed from a Trecento fresco by Lorenzetti—now shot through with the climbing steps of Aztec temples, a wishful inversion of acts like the construction of a Catholic church atop *Tlachihualtepetl*, the Great Pyramid of Cholula. The three toddlers (the artist himself and his two brothers?)—strangely muscular, almost miniaturized adults, and somewhat threatening in their boisterousness—would seem to be a handful, but their beautiful parents appear to be utterly unperturbed. After all, how could raising children be more difficult than subjugating a continent?

As a historian of Spanish and Latin American art of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, I have long been fascinated by how Francisco Moreno's practice interrogates that period, a "Golden Age" of European painting. He pointedly asks: "what enabled the supposed "goldenness" of that age?" and he confronts its cultural achievements with the realities of European conquest and colonialism, particularly in his native Mexico. His paintings are referentially dense in the number of nested borrowings and quotations from, and subversions of other artworks, of *masterworks*, that they contain. His bookshelves provide a roadmap for identifying some of his sources of inspiration. Certain names—Peter Paul Rubens, Titian, Albrecht Dürer, Paolo Uccello—appear so often that we begin to recognize them as the painter's favorites.

But Moreno does not simply quote from a canon of European painting. Rather, he updates a tradition of artistic innovation, of recombination, and of resistance that traces its roots to the earliest encounters between the Indigenous inhabitants of central Mexico and the invading Spanish. The sixteenth-century murals of Ixmiquilpan, where paintings of elite Aztec warriors wearing jaguar skins and uttering Nahuatl speech glyphs meld into Roman-style grotesque ornaments are a vivid example of this. In *Family Vacation* the richly dimensional tree beside the picnicking family, so clearly grounded in European traditions of illusionism, transforms in his hands into the "Tree of the South" from the Codex Yoalli Ehecatl (the name given by Gabina Aurora Pérez Jiménez and Maarten Jansen to an Indigenous central Mexican manuscript commonly known as the Borgia) through the imposition of the utterly flat, surface-hugging medallions of red and blue and marigold yellow.[ii] This, too, is undoubtedly a masterwork, its makers also "Old Masters," though they are never referred to as such in the fogyish languages of the art market and of connoisseurship. Moreno's pan-American conquest of Italy—the region that looms so large in histories of European art for giving us perspective and spatial recession—is expressed not only in the insertion of Inca tunics, of Chumash baskets, of Chimú birds, of Mexican temples, *bolillos*, and turquoise-studded goldwork into the Florentine-Sienese landscape, but in the introduction of American languages of form.

Moreno also confronts a commonplace often repeated about Latin American painting of the colonial period: its indebtedness to European prints.[iii] In Moreno's *Melencolia II* which is related to Dürer's famously indecipherable engraving, a simple yet crucial detail humorously flips the relationship between Dürer and Moreno, and between "original" and "copy." Engravings—as all prints—are made in reverse. The plate is incised by the artist, who often looks at a drawing or painting for inspiration, and if the engraver includes any text in the image they must remember to carve it backwards. The printed image that emerges once the inked

plate is lifted away is a mirror image of the original drawn or painted design: what was on the left is now on the right, and the previously reversed text is now legible. If Moreno's painted *Melencolia II* (which includes the floating text of the title written backwards) is in reverse to Dürer's printed *Melencolia I* it stands to reason that it is here Moreno who originated the design and placed it in the glowing landscape of the Valley of Mexico, and Dürer, the frigid northerner, who copied (and flipped) it, reducing it to black and white, for his engraving.

Melencolia II aptly illustrates why Moreno terms his practice a New Old-Master Sci-fi Surrealism. He can simultaneously celebrate his fascination with Dürer while presenting an alternative to a Eurocentric canon of making and talking about art. It is a sort of steampunk Renaissance fantasy, in which Tenochtitlán is never razed to become Mexico City, and a futuristic dreamscape in which a Porsche 718 RSK can coexist with a writhing, pointilistic *tezontle*-stone serpent; where Michelangelo's *Torment of Saint Anthony* at the Kimbell Art Museum—a frequent point of reference for Moreno—can hang next to a distinctly 90's watch-clock, both unscathed by the plumes of blue fire shooting forth from the Düreresque putto's chrome-clad rocket pack.

Moreno's practice of citing so-called Old Master paintings from Europe also embraces a fundamental but little-acknowledged aspect of Western European easel painting: it was built much less on modern concepts of originality and innovation than we might expect. Rather, artists strove to situate themselves within a context and a lineage, to ennoble themselves through proximity to others already recognized as great, and to thereby demonstrate their own mastery—of mediums, of publics, of symbolic languages. For instance, Anthony van Dyck's *Amaryllis and Mirtillo* of circa 1631 explicitly quoted—but did not precisely replicate—Titian's *Bacchanal of the Andrians* of over a century prior. Why would a painter with Van Dyck's gifts for form and flesh rely on a ready-made figure, borrowed from one of the most famous paintings made up until that moment? The whole point, I'd suggest, was challenging his learned publics to spot the citations in his paintings. Similarly, Moreno invites his viewers to enter the art historical spotting game and in doing so claims his own position as a (new) Old Master.

But to entirely unpack his paintings, to string them up so that they can be dissected and broken down into composite elements is beside the point. After all, when Moreno looks at a sixteenth-century European engraving, or a colonial Mexican codex, when he sketches an element from it that he likes, or when he saves it in his mental databank, this is only the first step of many, of appropriating an aspect of it: from its form, to its symbolism, to even something as abstract as the way in which it was created, and then building on them. In this his paintings not only invite prolonged looking, but they demand repeated looking.

What's more, the paintings reference one another. They form subtle groupings, they speak to one another across the room. A lush grass-scape is shared across four canvases; in another, an inspirational heron dances across turbulent waters that also appear in the background of *Melencolia II*; curled serpents, one wrapped in flames (those, too, are a common motif) are carved from *tezontle* stone, which is also the material of the scarified bust of the Grecian muse, seen from behind; a grinning reaper's pantone-swatch wings are borrowed from Pietro Cavallini's Roman angels, and appear again as those of the melancholic spirit. In another pairing, the mother from *Family Vacation* occupies an entire canvas by herself, enjoying a well-deserved slumber. She is visited, like Henri Rousseau's *Sleeping Gypsy*, by a giant feline. Has the visionary jaguar, itself a symbol of militancy as in Ixmiquilpan, brought the woman a warning? Just as the lush grass is filled with detritus in one of the other paintings, does trouble brew in her peaceable kingdom?

Importantly, like with Van Dyck, Moreno's spotting game is *additive* to one's experience of his paintings, not subtractive. Those who didn't spot the citation of Titian in *Amaryllis and Mirtillo* didn't necessarily lose anything in their experience of Van Dyck's luscious canvas, and I wager that Moreno's paintings enthrall entirely independently of his invitation to us to read them for their historic, artistic, and symbolic references. Perhaps this is because they are equally filled with references to the painter's own life, his own spaces, his own time: the viscous leakage from the tip of the hot glue gun—one that might be on the table in his studio right now; the

whirling color wheel (another favorite motif) set aside like a weary warrior's shield, both in *Melencolia II*; or the cell phone (Moreno: "how do you explain a cell phone to a person in the Renaissance? It is the world in a box") next to the kneeling mother in *Family Vacation*. However, those who do take Moreno up on his invitation to explore the art history of his art undoubtedly gain an additional layer of appreciation of his works' pictorial intelligence, of his criticality of artistic canons and historiographies, as well as an internal satisfaction. It feels good to be in on the joke.

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[i] Adam Herring, *Art and Vision in the Inca Empire: Andeans and Europeans at Cajamarca* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 103.
[ii] Maarten Jansen and Gabina Aurora Pérez Jiménez, "Renaming the Mexican Codices," *Ancient Mesoamerica* 15, 2 (2004): 267-271.
[iii] Aaron Hyman, *Rubens in Repeat: The Logic of the Copy in Colonial Latin America* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2021).