



Left: *Ohh Shit*. 2005. Oil on steel. 72 x 48 in.

Centre: *Plunder Me Baby Installation*.

Right: *Las Tentaciones de Santa Rosita*. 2007. Oil on aluminium. 72 x 48 in.

Patrimonio Kukuli Velarde

A Review by Colette Copeland

IN HER FIRST SOLO EXHIBITION AT BARRY FRIEDMAN Gallery, Peruvian artist Kukuli Velarde's work resists categorization. Although her work has been described as feminist, (Then Senior Editor for *Art in America*, Janet Koplos said that Velarde's work "scored feminist and cross cultural points".) it would be reductive to classify her work so narrowly. Inspired by Latin American history, folklore, religious iconography, colonization and gender roles, Velarde presents us with a layered revisionist history infused with dark humour.

Her series *Plunder Me Baby*, (2006–present) features ceramic figures inspired by Pre-Columbian terracotta. Velarde uses a variety of clay types: brown, mocha, white and black clay, earthenware and raku red clay. She also incorporates casein paint, wax, terra sigillata, underglazes, stucco and resin. Characterized by over-sized heads, expressive facial features and round child-like 'pot' bellies, the creatures confront the viewer with emotions of vexation, resignation, fear, outrage and indignation. Velarde employs traditional folkloric markings and materials but these creatures occupy an in-between space. They do not belong to ancient or modern culture. Placed on 'display' like specimens in an anthropology museum, these figures refuse to 'play nice'.

Accompanying each figure is an aged index card typed with the country, date and title. Each title is a pejorative name, slurs hurled on the streets or on TV against indigenous people. *Savage Aboriginal Bitch*. *Desperate House Help*. *AKA La Ofrecida*, *To whoever fits*. (Pero no haga papelones). *Take it easy, don't move*,

Ai Apaec is also known as the *Decapitator*. Whether in English or Spanish, the names/labels make me cringe.

At first I cannot pinpoint what is so disturbing about the figures. The realistic eyes? The sexualised figures displayed for our consumption? The derogatory titles? After a few minutes, I realize that all the faces embody the same person – the artist herself. While the series title *Plunder Me Baby* refers to the ravages of colonization, the title is also a taunt – an act of reclamation. Velarde writes the artist statement in the form of a letter to her teenaged Peruvian nanny, Lorenza. "Was the trade good for you, Lorenza? The name-calling, the put-downs, the lack of opportunities, the despair, the poverty, are they worthy of you?....They all have my face, for I had to become each one of them to reclaim ownership and to endure the name calling with defiance. In their attitudes and gestures, they illustrate a rebellious spirit that should never leave our hearts." The figures refuse to be objectified, refuse to be commodified. They fight back with resilience.

The *Cadavers* series marks a return to painting for the artist. Masterfully painted with acrylic directly on aluminium, the works are mounted directly to the wall with steel bolts. Referencing religious iconography and colonial Peruvian painting, Velarde's female protagonists exude a fierce sexuality. In *Las Tentaciones de Santa Rosita* (2007), a bound Madonna with a garter of thorns gazes directly at the viewer, as snakes with female heads encircle her body. A border of roses frames the subject. Christianity spiked



Left: *Idolo Marroncillo Con Cabeza de Chola Muerta*. 2009. (After Moche IV, AD 450-550 Perú.)
 Terracotta and Mixed Media. 19 x 10 x 10 inches. *Take it easy, don't move, Ai Apaec* is also known as the "Decapitator"
 Right: *Desperate House Help. Cupinisque*. 2009. (After Peru, 1,800-600 BC.) Brown clay and mixed media.
 24 x 14.5 x 17 in. *Cha que Drama Queen la serrana ésta*.

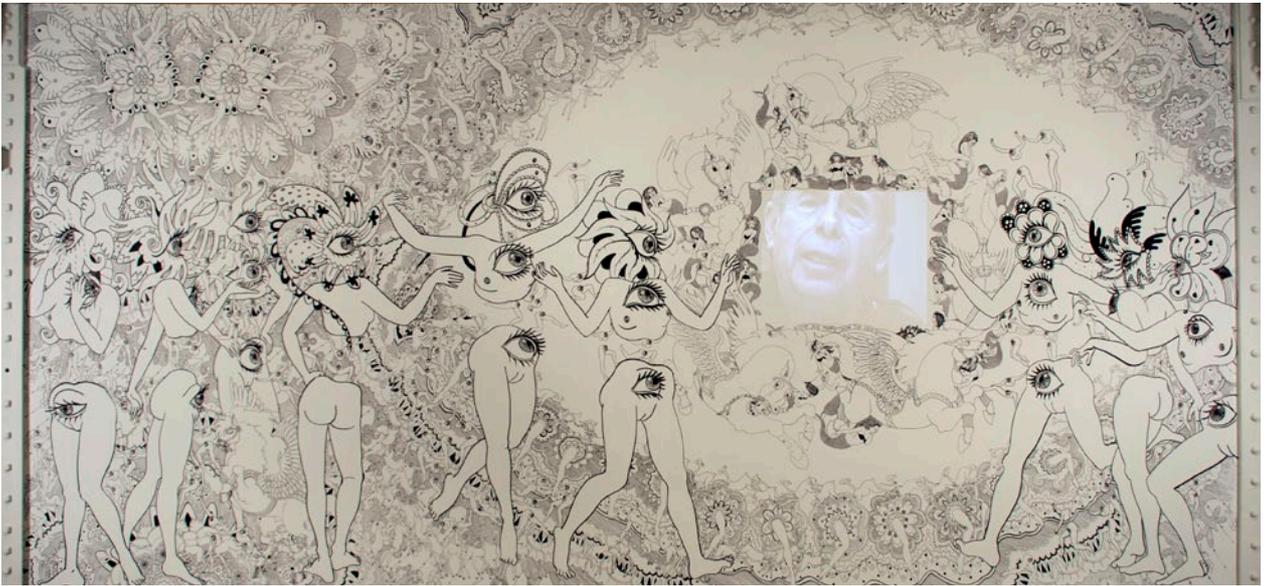
with a little S&M. In *Love Me Diosito, Love Me* (2009), Velarde depicts herself as a martyred saint pierced with arrows, while standing in gaping, fiery jaws. One angel screams in horror, while holding her severed tongue. Another angel holds her eyes on a platter. Another angel offers up her dismembered breasts. Again, flowers frame the composition. The ornate beauty and lush decoration of the flowers and fabrics in the paintings contradict the sexualised, violent overtones of the subject matter. Velarde's paintings critique religious colonization, while challenging the viewer to address archetypal gender roles. My favourite painting features a woman who is sitting on a toilet gazing towards heaven, surrounded by floating dogs with wings. The title, *Oh Shit* (2005). Velarde's humour has an edge.

The third component of Velarde's exhibition is a performative video/drawing installation entitled *Apple of his Eye* (2005). During the exhibition, gallery visitors could watch Velarde draw on the walls, creating an imaginary world. The marker doodle

drawings eventually filled, then obliterated, the wall in a gestural black mass. At the end of the exhibition, the drawings were painted over (white washed) signifying a return to memory.

In the centre of the wall, a small video monitor plays. The video opens and closes with the artist's father singing a traditional folk song. He narrates the story of his daughter's childhood. He speaks openly of his thwarted artistic desire and how he chose art as the career for Kukuli when she was still a young child. Through her efforts, she vindicated his failure as a painter. He shares his profound sadness when she left home and quit painting. Interspersed with her father's story are cut-away shots of text fragments. Velarde responds to her father but only the audience is privy to her thoughts. Punctuated with poignancy, tenderness and pain, the video examines the conflicted father/daughter relationship pregnant with mutual expectation and devotion.

Patrimonio. Historically patrimony referred to an estate inherited by one's father; it is also defined as



Above: *Apple of His Eye*. 2003/2010. Drawing and video.

Below left: *Chuchumecca Autoctona*. Moche with Viru Drawings. 2008. (After Peru, AD 1,800.) Terracotta with mixed media. 23 x 21.5 x 12 in. AKA *La Ofrecida*. To whoever fits! (Pero no haga papelones).

Below right: *A la Cholitranca se le salio el Indio!* 2009. (After Moche Peru, AD 200.) Terracotta with engobes and wax. 22 x 15 x 18 in. *Savage Aboriginal Bitch*.



medium, she responded, "I had a lot of responsibility with painting due to my father's overwhelming interest in my endeavours. That is why I stopped painting at 23 and did not come back to it until I turned 42. I did not come back to it until I felt I had something to say. My painting as a child was very naive, superficial, and it is one of the reasons I stopped doing them. I did not feel a connection with it. I do now."

Patrimonio. Do we inherit the sins of the Father? Oppression, colonization, extermination of indigenous cultural traditions, restrictive/prescriptive gender

inherited qualities and characteristics – one's legacy. In thinking about the exhibition title both literally and metaphorically, that one word conjures up a multiplicity of connotations. What is the legacy of the father? Can we choose which traits we embody? A skilled storyteller, Velarde collapses time, weaving intricately webbed narratives. Her biography as a child artist prodigy, as well as her indigenous, Peruvian heritage, inform and frame her formal and conceptual decisions. She claims Pre-Columbian and colonial art as her birthright. Velarde's father was her most ardent supporter and follower. Yet at age 23, she quit painting, leaving Peru and her father behind. When I asked her why she returned to the

roles, bloodshed in the name of religion? The rich, complex layers that comprise Velarde's work oscillate between the personal and collective, ancient and contemporary, mythic and factual. She proclaims, "We must embrace our history in order to understand its consequences and finally raise our heads with dignity." Kukuli Velarde's art re-imagines history through the act of creation, the ultimate form of reclamation.

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