

Tortured silk, nudes in nature on exhibit

Gallery Nord shows works by Veliz, Samandari.

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Published 01:00 a.m., Sunday, September 11, 2011

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Carla Veliz, an artist who grew up drawing pictures while lying on the cool tile floor of her mother's kitchen in Piedras Negras, a city of 150,000 across the border from Eagle Pass, was waiting in traffic at the checkpoint for the zillionth time a couple of years ago when she had an epiphany.

"I go back and forth all the time," she says in Spanish-inflected English, "but this one time it just hit me — that I was crossing into a Third World country from a First World country. I thought here we are in the 21st century, but we remain so barbaric, so wicked to one another, so harmful to the earth."

What happened next "consumed" the 40-year-old mother of 8-year-old twins, a successful painter of haunting figurative works and emotional abstracts living a good life in the San Antonio she adopted in 1992.

"It was so intense I gained 15 pounds," she says. "I fought with my husband all the time."

Her plan was to take a large sheet of virginal white silk from India — it turned out to be roughly 17 feet long by 6 feet wide — and put it through the proverbial ringer for 21 days, then mend its wounds for the next 21, each day representing a century of our tumultuous history.

Veliz documented the entire process on video and captured digital stills from the footage for "XXI: Who We Are and Who We Could Become," her most ambitious — and exhausting — art exhibition yet. Part of FotoSeptiembre, it's on view at Gallery Nord through Sept. 30. Titles of images include "Inocencia," "Pureza," "Cicatrices (Scars)," "Mutilado" and "Suicidio."

Curated by [Arturo Almeida](#), who is director of the [University of Texas at San Antonio's](#) art collection, "XXI" is truly a multimedia project.

The artist also published a limited-edition illustrated book of photographs and bilingual poetry: "Aunque mi cuerpo muere,/mi espíritu vivirá para siempre," which translates, "Although my body dies/my spirit will live forever."

That seems to be the underlying theme of "XXI." Veliz is a formidable, ambitious woman, concerned, perhaps alarmed, yet ultimately hopeful and optimistic. In fact, Almeida calls "XXI" "a poetic homage to infinite possibilities and the tenacity of hope."

Employing every part of the creative process in the exhibition, Veliz also created three

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assemblages from tools and implements she used to torture the cloth, from a pair of her own cowboy boots to rusty chain, deer antlers and a tin tub she used to soak the cloth in a variety of fluids.

And tortured it was: Veliz stained, ripped, dragged, trampled, splashed, slashed and stomped the poor, pristine cloth to ragdom. Her kids rode their bicycles over it, and the yardman left his tire tracks, with her blessing. He was confused but happy to partake.

“My kids would ask, ‘Mom, why is this art?’” says Veliz, a U.S. citizen since 1989 whose background is in graphic design and advertising — she was creative director for the San Antonio firm [Montemayor and Associates](#) before devoting herself to art full time in 1998, soon after marrying her husband, [Richard Veliz](#).

Tormenting the cloth, Veliz says, was symbolic of what we do to one another and the planet, various processes representing cartel murders and drug abuse, domestic violence and pollution. (She was working on the project during the BP oil spill.)

And then ... she took pity, rescuing the cloth, resurrecting it, really — one can't help but think of the Shroud of Turin, imprinted with a snapshot of our times rather than an image of Jesus — stitching it back together, rinsing it in the Gulf of Mexico, immersing it in mineral spirits, slathering it with white paint, embellishing it with lace and pearls. Damaged goods, its scars are immediately evident, but it survived. Beautifully.

“Silk looks very fragile, but it's tough,” Veliz says.

The shroud hangs in an arc in the soaring, light-filled Nord gallery space designed by modern architect [Allison Perry](#), and Veliz looks on with obvious pride — and relief.

Through the piece, she says, “I explore who we are, documenting the often casual disregard and outright abuses we inflict on each other and ourselves.”

Pausing, she wonders: “Is it going to take us 21 centuries to change our ways?”

Outdoor beauty

Iranian-born San Antonio photographer [Ramin Samandari](#) continues his exploration of the human body and nature — and the human body in nature — in “Earthly Bodies,” a series of sensual black-and-white — actually more sepia-toned — nudes and landscapes capturing outdoor beauty around San Antonio, including Guadalupe State Park, Enchanted Rock and the Pedernales River.

“In Iran, I loved to go out and explore, and when I moved here in 1988 I started discovering these beautiful areas — Enchanted Rock ... I couldn't get enough of it,” says the 50-year-old photographer, who gave up his day job of 17 years at Half-Price Books and now devotes himself full time to art and to teaching photography at the [Southwest School of Art](#).

“So I was fascinated by the landscape first of all — and these are places I've been going to for many years — but then I thought why not do a series of nudes in these locations?”

Nude models, male and female, exist easily with nature in tasteful photographs, floating in rivers and lakes (minnows kiss a woman's legs in one image), wedging themselves into the gnarly contours of cypress trees.

“It's a sensual landscape, and then you put a model in it and just ask them to make themselves comfortable, and the body and nature begin to blend together,” Samandari says.

“XXI” and “Earthly Bodies” remain on view through Sept. 30 at Gallery Nord, 2009 NW Military Highway. Carla Veliz will have an artist talk and poetry reading at 7 p.m. Sept. 23 that is open to the public. Call 210-348-0088 or visit [www.gallernord.com](#) for more information.

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