



Chazen Museum of Art

Fall 2020 Faculty Curriculum: Activism through Art

Enrique Chagoya, *The Adventures of the Modernist Cannibals*
(*Les Aventures des Cannibales Modernistas*), 1999



Color lithograph, woodcut, and chine collé on handmade amate paper, 7 1/2 x 92 1/2 in.
Ruth C. Wallerstein Endowment Fund purchase, 2000.7

I don't have solutions for the problems of the world... it would be too pretentious to think that art changes people's consciousness, but you could arrive to a point where your art is a departure for thinking and the world changes through other actions. That's my only hope with my work.

—Enrique Chagoya ¹

¹ Quoted in Sarah Kirk Hanley, "Visual Culture of the Nacirema: Enrique Chagoya's Printed Codices," *Art in Print* vol. 1, no. 6 (March-April 2012), 11.



Artist Biography

Do you consider your work activist?

—Interviewer

No, the activism is a by-product.

—Enrique Chagoya ²

Enrique Chagoya (American, b. Mexico, 1953) creates paintings, drawings, prints, and books that confront the oppressive history of colonialism and explore its cultural ramifications, through the use of humor above all. Born and raised in Mexico City, Enrique Chagoya learned about art and how to draw from his father, an artist and bank employee. As a child, he was fascinated by his father's office, where—as an employee of the central bank in charge of catching forgers—his father displayed a collection of forged bills of all types. Growing up Catholic, he was also greatly impressed by the Baroque paintings and altarpieces that showed the evolution of Spanish Baroque painting in Latin American countries. A nurse who helped care for Chagoya as a child also introduced him to the history of indigenous people of the region.

Between 1973 and 1975, Chagoya studied political economy at *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México* and credits this background as motivating his desire to add social content to his work. While at university, he also contributed political cartoons to union newsletters. He left school to take a job in the countryside of Veracruz, for a rural development program run by the Instituto Nacional de Capacitación Agraria—a period that significantly influenced his awareness of world events and strengthened his interest in political and social activism.

In the late 1970s, Chagoya moved to Berkeley, California with his American-born wife. There he began working as a freelance illustrator and graphic designer. Further developing his artistic practice, he enrolled in the San Francisco Art Institute, where he earned a B.F.A. in printmaking in 1984. He went on to earn an M.A. and M.F.A. at the University of California, Berkeley in 1986 and 1987 respectively.

Over the course of his career thus far, he has created over fifteen artist's books and worked with more than a dozen printshops to make a variety of prints. Some of his work has raised controversy due to its social, religious, and political critique. In 2010, a religious zealot destroyed one of his books, which was on view in Colorado at the time. He cites the satirical artwork of Goya as inspiration.

Chagoya began teaching as a lecturer in UC Berkeley's art department in 1990, followed by a four-year stint as Assistant Professor at California State University in Hayward. A scholar and critically acclaimed artist, Chagoya has been honored with many fellowships, including two from the National Endowment for the Arts, one from the National Academy of Arts and Letters in New York, and residencies at Giverny and Cité Internationale des Arts in France. He began teaching at Stanford University in the department of Art and Art History, where he still remains a Professor, in 1995.

² Enrique Chagoya and Peter Nesbett, "Laughing at a Bad Dream," *Art on Paper*, 28.



Location

The Adventures of the Modernist Cannibals is currently installed on the Chazen Mezzanine. To view this work in person, see the Chazen's website for the latest information about open hours and entry. Admission is always free.

Visual Description

The Adventures of the Modernist Cannibals (Les Aventures des Cannibales Modernistas) is an accordion-folded codex made by Enrique Chagoya in 1999. When laid flat, the work measures seven and a half by ninety-two and a half inches and features a range of media of printmaking techniques from woodcut to lithography to chine-collé. Meant to be read from right to left, there are eight pages total, each numbered with the Mayan numerical system of dots and dashes. Though each page has a distinct scene, the scenes carry over and spill from one page to the next. The paper appears modeled with splotches of paint, as if to give it the appearance of age and occasional red fingerprints are spread across the surface.

Page One

The first, title page depicts a classical architectural façade flanked by sculptures. As a cartoon gladiator peers from the center of the façade, he looks right at an image of a person, ancient Mayan in style, who sits on a mat. Beneath the Mayan figure sit two pots containing human appendages. A menacing half human, half animal figure lurks in the right corner with claw-like fingernails and a large mouth like that of a crocodile. A pink speech bubble containing Mayan numbers and glyphs hovers about its head. Positioned at the top center of the page, the phrase "*Les Aventures des Cannibales Modernistas*" is written in thin, frilly red script appearing handwritten like calligraphy.

Page Two

The second page depicts two characters. On the left, a man stands in chest high water. A speech bubble hangs above his head and contains an anatomical drawing of a heart and the words "Corazon de melon de melon" with musical notes, suggesting he is singing these words. Behind him, are two people in a canoe paddling under an arched bridge within a dense, green landscape. On the right, a man wears a large sombrero with the phrase "reverse science" written backwards on it. He stands with his chest splayed open to reveal internal organs, his hands deep inside an anatomical drawing of a severed male torso. Two similar drawings of hearts flank the man on each side.

Page Three

The third page looks like a scene from an artist's studio. A topless man wearing a feathered headdress and skirt sits at a large easel. He holds a painter's palette in one hand and a long paintbrush in the other which he presses against a large abstract black and white canvas. On the far right, a male model stands wearing a loin cloth and holds a bird in his outstretched right hand. His body is splotchy and is covered in black and white speckled markings. Hanging above the men, a sienna-tinted object resembling a photograph is placed. On it, the male model appears in a similar pose, but stands in an elaborate interior setting.

Page Four

The fourth page depicts popular superhero Captain America charging into an architectural scene that looks like a drawing from the right. He hoists a shield up with his right arm and is faced with two large sculptural heads which appear collaged on the page. The heads are identical and appear to be stone or wooden, with matching pinwheel swirls for eyes and sharp pointed tongues. In the bottom center of the page, part of a black and white comic strip appears. The strip features a group of one-eyed bald figures who hold shields and arrows. Spanish text in the cells reads:

(Left) LA DANZA MACABRA QUEDO INTERRUMPIDA CUANDO EMPEZARON A CAER
MONSTRUOS...Y SE DESATO UNA CRITERIA HORRIBLE QUE SE MEZCLABA CON EL RUIDO DE LAS
DETONACIONES...

(Right) LOS HOMBRES- GORLAS TAMBIEN GRITABAN DE ESPANTO Y LOS PIGMEDS SEGUIAN
CAYENDO....BAHUMA Y YO NO FALLA – BAMOS UN SOLO DISPARO

Page Five

The fifth page depicts a female heroine in mid-conflict with Superman against a backdrop of Mayan numbers and symbols. She jumps or flies in from the right edge of the page and is seen post-punch as evidenced by her twisted upper torso, a set of downward lines from her right hand, and an orange starburst shape with the word “órale” – all which suggest movement or impact. In the upper left corner, Superman appears to be falling from the top of the page and hangs suspended face down in an orange beam of light. In the background is a sheet of Mayan glyphs. Walking off the left edge of the page, a man depicted only in red ink dressed in a matador-like outfit, head entombed in a tall globe-like helmet, moves to the next page.

Page Six

The sixth page depicts a grotesque combat scene. In the lower left corner, a pair of men wearing red berets and holding large guns shoot. A speech bubble with a Parisian stamp hovers above one of the men and reads “Collection E. Eng. GOUPIL à Paris, Ancienne Collection J.M.A. AUBIN” in red text. In the background, a Mayan temple stands, a dismembered Mayan body scattered on its steps. At the top, a structure resembling a small building stands, an orange logo and the word “orina” marking it. Three Mayans surround the temple as if protecting it and carry shields. A series of three serpent-like mounds rest atop the page’s lower edge beginning center and moving right.

Page Seven

The seventh page depicts a lifeless man, lying in bed with organs spilling from his insides. A small heap of objects including a roller skate, a cell phone, a hazardous waste can, and a cross with the number six sit atop his open abdomen. A rocket appears to fall from the sky into this heap, leaving billowly mushroom-cloud like smoke behind. At the foot of the bed, a bloodstained nurse stands and holds a large knife. At the head of the bed, a figure dressed in all black holding an object floats in a halo of fluffy clouds. Written across the bottom of the page, on the bedsheets, handwritten black text reads:

EL SR. DANIEL ROJAS DA INFINITAS GRACIAS AL STO. NINO DE PLATEROS AL SALVARLO DE GRAVE INDIGESTION Y FIEBRE A MAS DE 100 GRADOS Y SIN EXPERANZA DE SALVARSE.

En agradecimiento ofrece este retablo. Lyons, CO 1999.

Page Eight

The eighth and final page depicts two pairs of people in separate fist fights. On the right, the female heroine reappears and punches a man wearing a khaki military uniform causing him to fall backwards upon impact. Behind her, a man wearing a similar uniform stands and points a gun at the pair. To his left, running off the page, is a speech bubble hangs with the words “c’est...ADELITA y los Guerrillas” contained within. In the bottom left corner, a man and woman also fight, the impact of the woman’s punch sending the man to the ground, red stars dancing around his head. Above them, a circular shape is placed featuring a calligraphic line drawing of a woman in profile, the word “*fin*” written near her mouth. The artist’s signature, date, and codex’s edition number, 15/30, rests below the fighting couple.



Content and Context

My artwork was irremediably changed from the moment I began to learn some of what little is known about the history and meaning of indigenous writing in Mesoamerica. This investigation inspired me to create a series of books that mimic the pre-Hispanic screen-fold book format. My codices are an outgrowth of my acceptance of the fact that history is written by the victors of war. Previous versions of history are erased or buried. New official histories are invented to justify new retellings of events. Cultures are transformed and often completely destroyed by those who came to conquer and occupy. The map of the world is eternally reconfigured...

– Enrique Chagoya ³

The Adventures of the Modernist Cannibals (Les Aventures des Cannibales Modernistas) is one of Enrique Chagoya's early codices. A codex is a manuscript text with multiple pages joined together. This form existed both in Medieval Europe as well as pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, though Chagoya emulates the latter. Chagoya has made at least eleven codices in his career to date. Each are accordion-folded and incorporate a variety of processes in their creation. He began working with the indigenous form in 1992, during the quincentenary of Columbus's journey to the "New World."

Intended to be read from right to left like an indigenous Mayan book, the visual narrative unfolding across the pages presents a playful yet biting assessment of European colonialism in Mexico and Central America. Chagoya conceived the work as the result of his experience researching pre-colonial Mesoamerican codices for an essay he was writing (quoted above) about the history of their deliberate destruction by Spanish conquistadors during the conquest of Tenochtitlán. According to Chagoya's essay, only twenty-two pre-colonial books are known to exist today. They are Mixtec-Zapotec, Mayan, and Nahuatl in origin (the Aztecs are one of many Nahuatl groups in Mexico). These represent a tiny fraction of the materials that were lost. The library of the Texcoco Kingdom—the most important religious and cultural center of the Aztec empire—contained thousands of books that Spanish priests and soldiers piled in front of the building and burned.

In 1999, at the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris, Chagoya asked to study one of only three surviving Mayan codices, all of which are in European collections in Paris, Dresden, and Madrid. Despite letters from Stanford and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art attesting his scholarly pursuit, Chagoya's request was denied on the grounds that a Mexican had stolen a pre-colonial document from the library a few years prior. As Chagoya recounts, the library prescribed a list of requirements, including interviews with the institution's leaders in order to convince them, with no certainty that Chagoya would be allowed to see the codex. Rather than waste his time, Chagoya declined and said to the bureaucrats, as he has recounted it, "in the first place such pre-Columbian books and documents were illegally smuggled out of Mexico, and they should be returned to the country of origin so people like myself could see them."⁴

³ Enrique Chagoya, "A Lost Continent: Writings Without an Alphabet," in *The Road to Aztlan: Art from a Mythic Homeland* (Los Angeles, CA: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2001)

⁴ Enrique Chagoya, email from the artist to James Wehn (August 25, 2018)



Chagoya decided to make a colonialist critique of this experience, and the result is *The Adventures of the Modernist Cannibals*. Adopting the Mayan codex format, he created what he and writer and performer Guillermo Gómez-Peña have termed a ‘reverse anthropology.’ In this alternate reality, Mayans and Aztecs have conquered European nations instead of the other way around. To create this imagined world, Chagoya appropriated, altered, and juxtaposed imagery from: the collection of the Bibliothèque nationale, European prints, Mayan and Aztec symbols, comic book characters, and pop culture references. He likens this appropriation to the way other, European artists looked to other cultures as a source for their work, particularly Picasso. Picasso incorporated the aesthetic of African masks into his Cubist works, while other modernist artists, like sculptor Henry Moore, looked to Central America.

The result is a visual narrative in which Latin American stereotypes subjugate the politics and art of Europe and the United States. On one of the pages, for example, Mexican comic book heroine Adelita thrashes Superman against the backdrop of an astronomical almanac from the Mayan codex now located in Dresden. While the superheroes fight, a cartoon astronaut modeled on Mexican singer and movie star Jorge Negrete strides into the next scene to shoot killer bees at French Resistance Soldiers. On that page, Chagoya changed the popular French drink Orangina to “Orina,” Spanish for “urine.” In the second scene, a caricature of an indigenous man in a huge sombrero dissects a human body, alluding to a history of discourse ordering knowledge about the human body and its systems. It also invokes the trope of the savage cannibal propagated by Europeans to justify their missions to bring civilization to indigenous peoples in the lands they invaded. Here, in Chagoya’s reverse anthropology, it may also imply that it is the conquerors who cannibalize the history and the culture of the conquered. To the left, a Mexican singer, up to his chest in the pond of Monet’s garden, croons “Corazón de Melón” (melon heart), a term of endearment in a popular ballad.

Like the images, the book itself—the materials and methods used to make it—is a cultural hybrid. The lithographic and woodcut printing techniques originated in Europe, as did the practice of printing with chine collé. Literally translating “China pasted,” the French words chine collé refer to a technique in which the image is printed onto a fine paper (traditionally imported from Asia) and simultaneously bonded onto a stronger support. In Chagoya’s codex, that sturdier material is handmade bark paper called *amate* (Spanish) or *amatl* (Nahuatl), the traditional paper used in pre-colonial codices. In addition, his codices are paginated using the Maya numerical system, that utilized dots and dashes.

Chagoya is aware that the melee of cultural references he has embedded into the book and spread across its pages presents a history that is non-linear, even chaotic; he wanted the fantastical codex to be open to interpretations other than his own.

Discussion Questions

1. Describe some of the ethnic stereotypes and/or misconceptions Chagoya addresses in the piece.
2. How does Chagoya's use of cultural appropriation relate to his larger ideas about "reverse anthropology?" What do you see that makes you say that?
3. In what ways does this piece alter and/or contribute to a discussion about the mentalities of colonization, specifically the relationship between savage and civilized?
4. There are multiple structures of power at play in this work. Define and discuss at least one. How does Chagoya's depiction of said power structure flip it on its head?

Collection Connections for Further Engagement: *Unless otherwise indicated, the following works are not currently on view. Click the titles to learn more about them.*

Dirk Volkertsz. Coornhert (Dutch, 1522-1590), after Maarten van Heemskerck (Dutch, 1498-1574). [*The Imperial Troops Bringing Civilization to the Indians*](#), from the series *The Victories of Emperor Charles*, 1555. Engraving, 6 1/8 x 9 in. Gift of the Louis and Annette Kaufman Trust, 2001.116.18.

This is one of the first images of the so-called "New World" printed in Europe. It is part of a set that were made to celebrate Charles V's victories around the world. Even at this early date, an agenda to "civilize" the "natives" was being put forth, and a trope of showing the residents of the "New World" engaging in widespread cannibalism and nudity was established.

Tom Jones (American, Ho-Chunk, b. 1964). [*Disney*](#), from the series *I am an Indian First and an Artist Second*, 2011. Digital archival print, 49 3/8 x 39 1/4 in. Cecil and Jessie Jennings Burleigh Endowment Fund purchase, 2014.4.

This photograph is from a series of abstract images that UW—Madison professor Tom Jones made by photographing the bottom of plastic Indian figurines and accessories, which often feature harmful stereotypes. He sees this as a metaphor for the appropriation of Native American culture in such figurines, a form of "identity genocide."

Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes (Spanish, 1746 - 1828). [*Neither More Nor Less \(Ni mas ni menos\)*](#), Plate 41 from the series *The Caprices (Los Caprichos)*, ca. 1800. Etching, burnished aquatint, drypoint and burin, 7 3/4 x 5 15/16 in. Brittingham Endowment Fund purchase, 70.7.41.

Chagoya cites Goya as an influence for his own printmaking and imagery. In his bizarre satirical series (*The Caprices*) *Los Caprichos*, Goya lampooned the Catholic clergy and Spanish royalty, among others.

Additional Resources

Enrique Chagoya, "A Lost Continent: Writings Without an Alphabet," in *The Road to Aztlan: Art from a Mythic Homeland*, Victor Zamudio-Taylor and Virginia M. Fields, eds. (Los Angeles, CA: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2001) [Memorial Library F1219.3 C6 F54 2001; pdf available to faculty on the Chazen's Canvas site]

Enrique Chagoya, *Enrique Chagoya: Locked in Paradise*, exh. cat. (Reno, NV: Nevada Museum of Art, 2000) [Kohler Art Library N6537 C43 A4 2000]

Enrique Chagoya and Peter Nesbett, "Laughing at a Bad Dream," *Art on Paper*, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/24556910> [pdf available to faculty on the Chazen's Canvas site]

Ruben Cordova, "Enrique Chagoya's Superheroes and Super Villains," *Glasstire* (August 2019), <https://glasstire.com/2019/08/19/enrique-chagoyas-superheroes-and-super-villains/> [pdf available to faculty on the Chazen's Canvas site]

Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Enrique Chagoya, and Felicia Rice, *Codex Espangliensis: From Columbus to the Border Patrol* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2000) [Kohler Art Library N7433.4 G644 A73 2000 and N7433.4 G644 A73 2000]

Sarah Kirk Hanley, "Visual Culture of the Nacirema: Enrique Chagoya's Printed Codices," *Art in Print* vol. 1, no. 6 (March-April 2012), <http://www.jstor.com/stable/43047059> [pdf available to faculty on the Chazen's Canvas site]

Eve A. Ma, *Enrique Chagoya Interview* (December 2019), 6 minutes, <https://vimeo.com/381791328>

Metropolitan Museum of Art, "Enrique Chagoya on Goya's *Los Caprichos*," *The Artist Project* (2015), 3 minutes, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NC-R4NYI52A>

Sprint Nextel Art Collection, *Enrique Chagoya* (2007), 7 minutes, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IDMe9o3gBlw>