

Life is Art: Interview with Maria Alquilar, Artist

Q. Do you make a career out of or hope to make a career out of art, or is it a sideline for you?

I have always been a self-taught artist. I started at age five designing clothes for paper dolls. In grade school and middle school, I was the muralist. Instead of going to High School in Brooklyn, NY where I lived, I attended an outsider high school close to Union Square in NYC. This was close to the historic building that had announced in large letters, Sacco and Vanzetti Murdered. My two friends and I were socialists. We ran the school newspaper where we integrated social commentaries, stories and comics.

I attended Hunter, College in NYC. I majored in Humanities exploring Greek and Roman history, poetry, art, etc. One of the friends entered Hunter as well. I was a very shy activist. My uncle had introduced me to Communism when I was ten years old. I was a Marxist that turned Socialist in College.

After graduating, I married and moved to Sacramento, CA. I worked for the Welfare Department for several years. I taught school for many years. To advance my credentials, we had to take classes. My teacher, lecturer at Sacramento State College grew weary of lecturing. He asked us to paint pictures. He was very taken with the painted and collage Still Life paintings. I was inspired to keep on painting.

I left the teaching profession after achieving a lifetime teaching credential. The governor's daughter-in-law had a very well known Antique business in Old Town Sacramento. She encouraged me to show my paintings in her contemporary section of the gallery. She also talked me into renting a space in that building for a gallery.

Art was all consuming in Sacramento. That very year, Robert Arneson made history with his ceramic toilets. The city remodeled all of Old Sacramento and gave me a gallery space in one of the newly renovated historic buildings, all of my artists became nationally known. After my husband died, I started painting again. Since I did not exhibit my work at my gallery, I chose a gallery in San Francisco. My career in Public Art started shortly after my success in SF.

Q. What is it about your work that makes it speak to people or to the community at large?

I have used many of the rituals or combined rituals or invented rituals of the Indigenous people of Mexico, Africa, the Southwest United States and Asia to illustrate most people's basic need for Heroes, Saints, and other Divinities to absorb and share their suffering. Catholicism, Judaism, Voodoo, Hindu and Buddhism have provided me with proof of how all humans share the same collective unconsciousness. I enhance the myths of the major religions of the world including the pre Catholic Mexican and Southwest indigenous people's spiritual rituals and legends. To quote an unknown author, I perceive the diverse religious groups as symbols by which we express our perception of the eternal mysteries that may lead us to salvation and enlightenment. The rituals help us to heal and to adjust our psyches to the burden of life.

Q. How do you let people know about your work?

Before I moved to Miami, I exhibited at Virginia Miller Gallery in Coral, Gables. I still admire Virginia's taste for excellent Art. After buying a house in the Design District, I decided to exhibit the work there. Although I stay with one theme for a long time, my oeuvre is very diverse. It is difficult for one gallery to present enough of the work at one time. I did advertise in the Herald's art gallery section. I sent out e-mails and had exhibits. In Miami, the public can love you to death, but very few feel they can afford to collect art. I have never been able to find a consultant in Miami that could represent me to collectors and corporations. It is too difficult to make art and sell it in Miami.

Q. What do you feel inspires you to make art in the particular medium you have chosen?

I have always been drawn to Lost Worlds' sculpture; Ancient Egypt, Crete, Ancient Greece, Minoan Art, Etruscan, Pre Colombian etc. As a child, my mother took me to the Brooklyn Museum every Saturday. I particularly loved Ancient Egypt and the medieval sections of the Museum. Medieval art. When I first arrived in Sacramento, I won an award at the State Fair for a small ceramic in red clay of a calabash with a mother and child adorning the top. I was also entranced with the work of Robert Arneson who opened the doors to low fire ceramics and bright colors. I asked lots of questions about the glazes, under-glazes and little bottles of colors made by Mayco as well as china paints. Judy Chicago had a museum exhibit called the Dinner party. She brought notice to formally ignored artist craft people, many of whom are housewives that gloriously color molds with marvelous skill using china paints.

My paintings became a never ending compulsion after my children were a little older and my husband passed away. The entire spiritual art of the world, the books I had read, the tragedies and passions of my life all merged in my

head. The mix created an art that was my own.

I gave my gallery away and moved to Santa Cruz in 1985. Every hour of the day was passed making art. I met many artists and several museum people that included my work in exhibits at their museums. The gallery in San Francisco that carried my work exhibited my work in huge spaces. A new director for Public Art noticed my work I remodeled her bathroom alcove with two narrative murals plus wall tile that told the story of her pregnancy and the birth of her child. That led to my being accepted for Public Art projects in Sacramento, San Jose and many cities including the US General Services Administration.

Somewhere in between all this work I was invited to John Michael Kohler's foundry, it was organized by Ruth De Young Kohler. I was invited to work in their foundry but asked for the cast iron foundry. Molten iron became a living substance, the same as clay, both coming from the earth. Ruth Kohler loved my work. I introduced some of the color that had been missing in metal sculpture. Somewhere in my studies I knew that Ancient bronze was colored with stains etc. The pieces we see in Museums today is how mother earth altered those colors and replaced them with the various colors of rust that we observe.

Q. Why Miami?

I came to Miami to study Yoruba Mysticism, myths, rituals etc. Several years before visiting Miami, I went on a trip that included the Smithsonian Institutions Renwick Gallery, Soho (NYC) galleries and Key West. Went to the Renwick's exhibit of Birthday Cakes that celebrated 100 years of their existence as a Craft Museum. Several artists, myself included had been commissioned to create a Birthday Cake. Mine was ceramic. In NYC, I visited the Phyllis Kind Gallery. She asked to see my work which I had in a small pocket sized photo album. She told me it looked like Haitian art and proceeded to show me a catalog of Haitian Art. I had never seen Haitian Art before. In Key West I visited the most distinguished Haitian Art Gallery where I purchased two paintings. The director asked to see my work. She exclaimed also how Haitian it appeared. I did not think about this for several years until I returned to Miami. My Lonely Planet guide said Little Haiti had been renovated so to speak. I took a little jitney bus and found the Haitian Market was not restored and poverty was all around. I went into the only place open, the Mapou library. Mapou showed me a book about the Haitian Exhibit that had been at the Museum and had just closed. He took me into the closed, run down market. He told me that a Haitian politician had run off with the Restoration of Little Haiti money. This was my first introduction to the corruption that exists in Miami. I visited the Botanicas in Little Horizon, The Cigar store as well as the Botanicas in Little Haiti. I was hooked.

After returning to California, I painted four paintings about the Island people that were staying in The Miami Sun Hotel where I stayed. I also created several paintings of the Domino players in the park on Calle Ocho, The Cigar Factory etc. I had to return to learn and paint and sculpt more.

Q. Do you have a favorite artist from the past or present?

I have too many favorite artists alive, dead and unknown to list. My favorite gallery in Miami was Justin's Objex, I was sorry when it closed. My favorite artist that I cannot find any more are the underground artist that used to appear for a short time at various spaces.

Q. How would you compare the art scene in Miami to other cities you have lived or worked in?

It does not happen very often when artists make Art History. In Sacramento and Davis this did happen. In Miami, the art that comes from suffering Hispanic countries is seriously brilliant. The galleries in Miami seem to be a mish mash of stuff. As I mentioned above Objex was the exception.

Q. If someone wanted to get into being an artist, what would be your first suggestion to them?

Live life. Sweat and suffer. That being said, keep your curricula vitae updated. The computer makes things much easier to keep photos of all your work. Don't keep your nose in what you think is a happening art. Go back in time. Go inside yourself. Be an Ancestor worshipper. Be a nature lover. Don't ignore your fellow members of the human race. Don't take rejection seriously.

<http://lifeisartfest.org/interview-maria-alquilar-artist/>