

***Where Lived Experiences Resides in Art Education:  
A Painting and Pedagogical Collaboration  
with Paula Nicho Cúmez***

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores my perspective as a U.S. educated painter who participated in a mentored studio experience with female Mayan Kaqchikel painter Paula Nicho Cúmez. I examine the philosophy and methods underlying artistic studio practice and pedagogy that takes place in an informal learning context in which artwork is made in the home and surrounding community. My goal is to provide art studio faculty with insights into female Mayan epistemologies and teaching philosophies that may be applicable to feminist art studio pedagogy at the college level in the United States. The *situated learning mentorship* that I experienced and share in this collaborative painting study involves female Mayan pedagogical practices of consensus, fusion, elicitations, and evaluation of the painting process based on each artist's ownership of personal and cultural narratives conveyed in her paintings. Through my experience of a nonhierarchical mentorship between two female artist-teachers from different cultures, I suggest ways to revise studio pedagogy in U.S. post secondary institutions so that it becomes inclusive of students who learn best with *connected knowing*.

As a student, teacher, and female narrative based painter, the system of higher art education in the United States did not meet my personal needs so I sought alternative ways to teach and study art. This led to my exploration of indigenous artistic living traditions as a means for understanding a more holistic process for teaching art. Such traditions incorporate art making in daily life connecting both personal and cultural narratives (Lassiter, 1998; Mundine, 1996; Myers, 1991; 1999; Pio, 1997).

I discovered two Guatemalan Mayan communities where painting was taught within artists' studios, and I wondered whether any of the practices informing these pedagogical models might serve as means to enrich art teaching traditions in U.S. higher education. After learning in collaboration with Mayan painters, I understood that living and painting are two halves of the same whole. Mayan teaching processes are rooted in the mentoring relationship, which is at the core of art making. In the contemporary Tz'utuhil and Kaqchikel Mayan art teaching and painting movements, art students are learning skills in the areas of drawing, color theory, perspective, and composition but the acts of teaching, painting, and living are not separated physically or psychologically. In other words, although the teaching of skills takes place, a holistic paradigm underlies the pedagogy.

Students spend many hours a week in Tz'utuhil and Kaqchikel artists' studios and homes studying painting for as many as eight hours a day in succession over the course of a year. Such education involves frequent and lengthy dialogues in the teachers' studios about artistic techniques, teaching, and life philosophies. The teaching is one-on-one; the teacher instructs at times, listens at other times, and conversations naturally occur as both teacher and student paint.

In a study of Mayan Tz'utuhil children learning to weave, Rogoff (1990) found that education is grounded in knowledge that is passed along from person to person in a situation that "involves both participants' life experiences" (p. 113). This *situated learning mentor* model is what I experienced and present in this paper with an emphasis on the model as a feminist pedagogical approach. The following characteristics of the *situated learning mentor* approach aligns with feminist pedagogies (Ballengee-Morris, 2003; Belenky, 1997; Gilligan, 1990; Greene & Griffiths, 2003; Lather, 1991; Martin, 1994; Witherell & Noddings, 1991). The dialogues were often life transforming, and the personal con-

nection that the mentoring paradigm fosters becomes a lifelong relationship between student and teacher. Learning is not structured formally; it occurs at different times throughout the week and on weekends. Additionally, the teacher and student often embark upon trips together to experience visual culture: local markets, regional traditional clothing, and surrounding landscapes. Tz'utuhil lake life and Kaqchikel highland life serve as resources for painting and as means for transmitting cultural information from teacher to student. Thus, informal situated learning relies on the local cultural context as the content for teaching.

As a female student taught by both male and female teachers in two Mayan contexts, I noticed differences in teaching styles that might be attributable to gender (Staikidis, 2004, 2006). In my own M.F.A. program, the teachers were predominantly male and I longed for feminist perspectives in the teaching of painting, so I sought to study outside of a Euro-American teaching framework with a female Mayan Kaqchikel painter. In this article, I focus on what I consider feminist perspectives in female Mayan epistemology that I discovered in my study of painting and teaching with Paula Nicho Cúmez from 2002 to 2005.

### Reflections on Feminist Pedagogy

Overall, women artists have been sorely absent as role models in art history courses and as faculty in studio art departments in U.S. higher education in the 20th century in the United States (Becker, 1996; Hubbard, 1963; Singerman, 1999). Even today, female art faculty members in higher education are still somewhat invisible (Garber, 2003). Singerman (1999) notes,

The issue is that despite their numerical predominance in art schools and college art departments from their inception at Syracuse and Yale in the 1870's, women were excluded both from and by the discourse. Their presence in the classroom and the studio is ... the "structuring absence" of the discourse of art education in the university. (p. 47)

As well as being excluded from the discourse of art education, women's educational preferences have also been excluded from pedago-

gy. In *Women's Ways of Knowing*, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1996), interviewed 135 women in higher education. Women stated that they did not like a system in which knowledge flowed in only one direction. The "teacher as expert" system that has prevailed in art studios of higher education does not favor a two-way street in which students are themselves perceived as "containers of knowledge" rather than "empty vessels" (p. 217). Women felt that they possessed latent knowledge that they would prefer to articulate and expand upon with a teacher who could allow them to give voice to what they already knew. Belenky, et al., distinguished between two kinds of teachers,

Midwife teachers are the opposite of banker teachers. While the bankers deposit knowledge in the learner's head, the midwives draw it out. They assist the students in giving birth to their own ideas, in making their own tacit knowledge explicit and elaborating it. (p. 218)

The artist-teachers responsible for educating artists at the college-level have for the most part been the bankers. Their job was to convey, as the experts, that which was to be studied and mastered by virtue of acquiring skills. Little room for dialogue during the skills-acquiring process was reported in either the historical account of art learning in the last century by Hubbard (1963) or Singerman (1999), excepting Singerman's contention that art learning late in the century had become a theoretically-based discipline whose primary emphasis was on language and criticism. Still, the sense that students were encouraged to articulate latent knowledge does not seem to be present in his detailed accounts.

This practice has serious implications for the way women prefer to learn versus the way men have traditionally taught art. Simply stated, the latent knowledge that the artist-teacher helps to elicit might be a liberating force in the university art studio. Belenky comments, "We believe that connected knowing comes more easily to many women than does separate knowing" (p. 229). If so, then the male teaching tradition of artist-teachers, in colleges and universities, needs to be questioned. Belenky, et al., (1996) concluded that:

... educators can help women develop their own authentic voices if they emphasize connection over separation ... collaboration over debate; if they accord respect to and allow time for the knowledge that emerges from firsthand experience; if instead of imposing their own expectations and arbitrary requirements, they encourage students to evolve their own patterns of work based on the problems they are pursuing. These are the lessons we have learned in listening to women's voices. (p. 229)

Women's voices have not been heard, as a general rule, in the art departments of higher education. Nevertheless, there is a growing diversity movement on college campuses that examines hiring practices and curricular contents excluding women on the basis of gender. In the late 1980s, Andersen (1987) stated that curriculum change occurs as a process: first, is the recognition of women's invisibility; second, identifying sexism in traditional knowledge; third, looking for missing women; fourth, thinking of women as a subordinate group; and fifth, studying women on their own terms. Additionally, diversity curricula (Adams, Griffin & Bell, 1997; Allan & Estler, 2005; Burghardt & Colbeck, 2005; Elia, Lovaas, & Yep, 2003; Marshall, 2004) have been transformed by two important pedagogical perspectives: emphases on "connected" or "relational" forms of knowing and an emphasis on "experiential" learning. Pedagogies falling under these categories frequently include cultural encounters, reflective journals, service learning, collaborative projects, linked courses, and other courses that give students direct experiences in collective settings where negotiating differences is required (Humphreys & Schneider, 1998).

Clearly, there is a need to include the ways of knowing associated with women in the study of art. Andersen (1987) suggested that the study of the arts, via experiences of the traditionally excluded, would reveal new themes, such as powerful awareness of racial and sexual oppression, or bicultural identity or the importance of preserving cultural tradition in artistic forms of expression. Warren (1998) advocated a multidimensional, goal-oriented model of feminist curricular transformation that includes various domains—subject content areas, methodology, pedagogy, role models, and worldviews as they intersect with gender, race, class, age,

and affectional orientations. The collaborative painting study presented here contributes to the literature that concerns the ways women teach and learn. I conclude the paper with a discussion of how the insights of female Mayan epistemology as feminist art pedagogy might transform curricula and pedagogy in art studio programs in higher education.

As a female whose learning orientations and studio practices were marginalized when I was a college art student, particularly interesting to me were the discoveries I made as artist, student, and researcher about the relationships of gender to Mayan Kaqchikel teaching in which female experiences are not marginalized, but instead are considered rich sources for art content. Paula Nicho Cúmez's strengths as a teacher were her use of a curriculum based on consensus, collaboration, the integration of personal and cultural narratives into artworks, and a decentralized teaching structure based on the "midwife model" (Belenky, 1996).

### **Female Kaqchikel Mayan Painting and Teaching Processes**

Before addressing artistic processes as they pertain to the Kaqchikel female artists of San Juan de Comalapa, it is important to note that Kaqchikel female painters are the first organized group of Mayan women painters and, as such, have created an iconography and a unique teaching style. Paula Nicho Cúmez and her sister Estela Nicho Cúmez, the first women painters of San Juan de Comalapa, sought out Salvador Cúmez Curruchich as their mentor and asked him to teach them privately. As a group, and as individuals, these female painters differ distinctively from the traditional male painters of the Kaqchikel and Tz'utuhil Mayan painting communities in Guatemala in that the former use a kind of surrealistic imagery, incorporating fantasy into pictures, rather than focusing solely on daily life scenes and Mayan ceremonies and traditions.

### **Owning One's Narrative in Collaboratively Produced Paintings**

In the Kaqchikel women's movement, narrative plays the dominant role in art making. The narrative of a work dictates its formal contents and takes precedence over them, i.e., the story drives the art. Paintings are "talked into being" as they are painted. When working with Paula, I was asked what theme or title I would give to the collaborative painting that we made. She asked, "Looking at this work that you and I

have made together, what do you think, what theme, what name would you give to this painting?" (P. N. Cúmez, personal communication, June 28, 2003). She seemed to feel that my designation of a title was more important than asking me to describe how the painting was executed or even why I chose particular subject matter. Giving the work a title was a way to synthesize my understanding of what we created together.

Also, narratives, personal and cultural, are instrumental in attempting to maintain and perpetuate selected cultural traditions. Painters are asked to explain the meanings of their paintings after making them, and these explanations often determine authenticity. In other words, if the painter cannot explain the meaning of the painting, it is assumed that the narrative theme does not belong to her. Narrative themes are "owned" by painters. This is not unlike other indigenous cultures, such as the North American Kiowa and Papunya Tula Aboriginal cultures, where explanation denotes ownership of production (Lassiter, 1998; Myers, 2001).

Additionally, lived experiences are communicated through paintings and lived experience informs the teaching of painting. As Paula's student, in the realm of both painting and teaching, I was given the opportunity to glimpse into the life of my mentor, and to see what was closest to her heart. The images that come through her paintings are based on her lived experiences; thus, the paintings become visual metaphorical windows into Mayan Kaqchikel female cultural worlds. For example, Paula has created themes for paintings such as "Flying Woman" and "My Second Skin," both of which express individual and cultural concerns about her identity as an indigenous female Kaqchikel painter.

The transmission of lived experiences and cultural narratives inform teaching practices and involve collaboration, consensus, and the making of choices as ongoing parts of the teaching process. All didactic works were collaborations. We worked concurrently on paintings, leaning them on the table in front of us. Paula never left my side during our painting sessions. We made three paintings together during a four-week period. Then, during the fifth week of study, Paula asked me to make a painting for her in my style so she could see how I worked. It was interesting that Paula wanted me to paint for her last; in other words, the act of expressing my individual voice was the culmination of our sessions together. Below, I describe each lesson, my interpretations of Kaqchikel

artistic and teaching processes, and their impact upon me as a learner.

### **Weaving Women's Iconography in Paintings**

The first painting that Paula and I worked on involved creating a painted weaving. It purposely combined different techniques so that Paula could see what I needed to learn. She asked what I wanted to make. Her probing to see what my needs were felt radically different from my prior teaching and learning to paint in a formal setting. (See Figure 1.)



Figure 1. Collaborative painting with Paula Nicho Cúmez.

Weaving, another form of traditional Mayan women's art making serves to perpetuate cultural dress, symbols, and traditions. Weavings, like paintings, are also narratives telling cultural stories, and are emblematic of regional indigeneity. They are used as iconographic signifiers in paintings to represent "woman" as a powerful force, and boldly make the statement that the artist who authors the painting is female. Because weaving is associated with women, their work and their artistry, the



presence of a weaving that frames a doorway or represents the side of a mountain immediately suggests that its maker is female. Male artists use weavings as traditional clothing that describe areas by region, whereas Paula Nicho Cúmez and her sisters insert weavings into their paintings that become the subjects of paintings themselves. In this way, the weavings symbolize female identities and are used as metaphors for womanhood.

Weaving, as a source for pictorial ideas influences the paintings of the three women painters with whom I spoke. As painters, they rely on weaving as both an artistic and spiritual foundation. (See Figure 2.)



Figure 2. *Mother Nature* (18'' x 24'', oil on canvas, 1995) by Paula Nicho Cúmez.

Paula notes,

Weaving helped me to understand painting. When working the beginning of a guipil (traditional woven shirt), I already have the

form in my mind. And as such, when I finish making a guipil, I realize that it would also be very nice to fuse these woven images to canvas. If you look at each of my paintings, you can see that the volcanoes are made of guipiles, and many have criticized me for this asking, “Why do you make your volcanoes from designs of guipiles?” But if I look at mountains from far away, I see that the texture of the mountains is like a weaving, a guipil. A guipil is the stamp of a woman, of the feminine. I have always painted the forms of guipiles in the hills. It’s not as if I look at a hill and I make it as you see it, rather, I use creativity. Almost all of my paintings must be looked at in this way, from the perspective of the importance of creativity. (P. N. Cúmez, personal communication, June 27, 2003)

The use of weaving as iconography in painting reveals the feminist viewpoint and cultural heritage of the painters. As each speaks of images of weaving in her paintings, she talks concurrently about the importance of being a female painter and of contributing substantially in society outside of the household.

At Paula’s suggestion, we began painting a weaving from our imagination. As I had never made a weaving, it proved to be a complicated process for me. Each region in Guatemala has its own symbols; Paula was teaching me the Comalapan symbols. There was a predetermined way to make each figure in the painted weaving as there was in actual weavings, but the color selection was up to me. Paula directed my drawing of the figures of the weavings, but she did not dictate my use of color. Instead, she watched to see what my color choices would be. It seemed as if she were evaluating me. She wanted to see who I was, as an artist, as a woman, as a person. This was never explicitly stated, but it was clear that through the color choices I made she was seeing who I was. I found this to be very interesting as it was a new experience that felt as if we were speaking through a color dialogue. As her student, I was asked to choose a color; then she chose a color and so on. She was looking at my color choices in terms of intelligence, harmony, personality:

Paula wanted me to choose colors on my own and she watched vigilantly to capture my color sense. The teaching was gentle guidance

with questions: “What do you think? What color do you want to use? What comes next? What comes to you? What shall we do? Shall we continue?” (P. N. Cúmez, personal communication, June 10, 2003).

Because I did not know what her preferences were, I could not choose based on what I thought she wanted; instead, I had to come out with it, whatever it was, whoever I was, and to live with the unknowable. This was a new kind of appraisal for me. There was no right or wrong. It was unnerving. We were actually talking through color and I could hear her responses, while she urged me to continue. Paula asked me to assert myself immediately from the onset of the lessons. This was a teaching approach that demanded student input and collaboration. Teaching and learning were a negotiated terrain. It was a different pedagogical model altogether:

A great deliberation process is going on. We constantly deliberate and discuss the next step, the color and narrative contents, size and shape of what we are going to paint. There is an asking process that precedes all work. Consensus and dialogue is at the core of this teaching-learning process. (Staikidis, field notes, June 12, 2003)

Consensus was a part of the every day life interactions of the Kaqchikel women I met. I watched the women’s painting collective in dialogue and discussion, time and again, coming to mutual agreements after many deliberations in preparation for their exhibition. I also observed the interchanges between Paula and her sisters in daily affairs, noticing that the decision making process among females seemed to be that of cooperation and collaboration. Therefore, as I progressed in my lessons, I considered gender as a possible reason for the collaborative, consensus-oriented teaching method that I experienced with Paula Nicho Cúmez.

After Paula and I completed the weaving which was done on one half of our first canvas, we switched to another technique that required the depiction of the colonial church of San Juan de Comalapa. Although there was a clear view of the church from the outer area of Paula’s studio, we went outside only for a moment to view it, talk about it, and then

immediately returned to the studio to replay what we had seen. Paula did not ask me to draw the church as I looked at it outside. We relied on visual memory, and over the course of my studies it became clear to me that rendering from observation holds no place in the female Kaqchikel conceptual framework for painting. I was asked instead to capture images in my mind, transmitting them to canvas later. We worked side-by-side on the canvas. Paula consulted me constantly on my thoughts of color, image, size, and theme. Through her asking me to lead, Paula was demonstrating her teaching method in which the student guides the learning along with the teacher. (See Figure 3.)



Figure 3. *Collaborative Painting #1*, (12” x 16”, oil on canvas, 2003)  
by Paula Nicho Cúmez and Kryssi Staikidis

### Fusion: One Imagines the Painting into Being

Primary importance is placed on the complicated thinking process in the conception stage of creating a painting. Paula states, “the truth is that an artist already has what she will paint on the canvas in her mind. I already have all of my ideas in mind before I begin the painting” (personal communication, June 15, 2003). The narrative theme for each painting comes first but the way the theme comes into being differs for each painter.

Paula is inspired by her dreams and by themes that just “come to her.” Her description below demonstrates the central role that narrative plays in the conceptual stage of the painting process as well as the way the themes come to her. (See Figure 4.)

This work is titled *Nana Luna*. How did this come to me? Our grandparents give thanks to God when they see the moon appearing at night and they have also said that she (the moon) is the goddess of weaving. All of these are Mayan stories and I wanted to paint them to give them life. (P. N. Cúmez, personal communication, June 25, 2003)



Figure 4. *Nana Luna* (12" x 18", oil on canvas, 2001) by Paula Nicho Cúmez.

After the theme is carefully thought through, the execution of the drawing begins directly on the canvas with pencil; later, the colors are applied. Each artist uses colors that become her signature and no generalizations can be made about color choice, other than the influence that weaving has had on individual color palettes in the execution of a painting. The larger background areas are painted first, and detailed subjects such as designs and figures on traditional clothing are painted last. The painting is conceived in the mind entirely before beginning. Paula explains:

I already have the ideas in my mind. Then I investigate, read, listen to advice and that's how the themes are developed. When I reach mid-way in making the painting, I add new things and use my creativity to give the painting life. (P. N. Cúmez, personal communication, June 30, 2003)

None of the Kaqchikel female painters that I spoke with rely on rendering from nature in the execution of paintings. Artists might go outside to absorb natural phenomena in order to engrave it in their minds, bring it back or carry it with them, as they say, to their studios. In the Spanish language, the verb *captar*, “to capture,” was used by Mayan Kaqchikel female artists to describe absorption of nature that incorporates more senses than sight alone. Paula notes,

The title of this painting is *Beauty of Nature* [see Figure 2]. We *live* the beauty around us, the trees, flowers, mountains, water. Nature is like a woman who dresses herself beautifully. (P. N. Cúmez, personal communication, June 25, 2005)

One imagines the painting into being. In Kaqchikel female iconography, imagery that comes from dreams or other narrative sources is imagined into being on the canvas via the acts of envisioning first, then drawing, then painting: (See Figure 5.)

My works are based on my dreams, in particular this one, a woman flying. The image comes to me in a dream and stays in



my mind. I imagine it first before I draw, then paint. To dream of a woman flying symbolizes success. As an artist, I paint what is already there. (P. N. Cúmez, personal communication, June 25, 2003)



Figure 5. *Feminine Liberation* (24" x 36", oil on canvas, 2002)  
by Paula Nicho Cúmez.

Images are “fused” onto the canvas via reliance on mental imagery that either comes from careful observations of nature recorded in the mind or imaginings that stem from the inner eye of the artist. The artists refer to this observing-recording-imagining-painting process as fusion. In the Spanish language the word for the fusion of one’s life onto the canvas is “*plasmar*,” which includes within it the word *plasma*—the plasma that is found in blood. Therefore, the act of painting incorporates this notion of transmitting the entirety of one’s body, spirit, soul and life to the canvas. The fusing process is much more than a technical act involving painting. Paula talks about fusing an image onto the canvas, as well as fusing the same image into people’s hearts:

Rigoberta Menchu speaks a lot about the indigenous peoples and our human rights, and so this idea came to me to fuse the following images to the canvas. All of the faces in the sky are spirits, spirits of people that died in the era of violence in 1980 in all of the towns of Guatemala. There were people who were abandoned, who were left without families. One speaks of human rights, one speaks of who or what the Maya are; then, another class of people comes to tell us that we must do this or be this or they will kill us, or they will murder us, because that’s what happened here. We see that this part of the painting is dead, but it has flowered once again over here. Like Rigoberta has said, pull out all of our roots, pull out everything that we have been and are, go ahead, yet a day will arrive when every thing that we are will flower again. These images are fused to the canvas and fused into peoples’ hearts. That is the meaning of this work. (P. N. Cúmez, personal communication, June 25, 2003) (See Figure 6.)

It is interesting that when Paula speaks of “fusing” an image to the canvas, she also talks of fusing it into peoples’ hearts. It is not just the canvas, but the soul that is involved. Paula also believes that the act of teaching involves the sharing of the teacher’s soul with the student’s.

“How shall we begin?” she asks (P. N. Cúmez, personal communication, 2003). The second painting made with Paula involved a collaboration in which we progressed substantially from the first.





Figure 6. *Certeza* (18" x 24", oil on canvas, 2002) by Paula Nicho Cúmez.

Like painting, teaching involves the preliminary selection of a personal and cultural narrative or theme. We brainstormed and together decided on "The Life of Women." The teaching lesson revolved around spontaneously visualizing and depicting imagery based on a thematic narrative. This was very similar to the way I begin my paintings, so it felt

quite comfortable. (See Figure 7.)

Paula is looking at the canvas as if reading into it. She says she sees a face. She asks me to create a form from the line too, so I create a woman holding a bird. Paula loves that, "You see?" "You're learning!" (Staikidis, field notes, June 20, 2003)



Figure 7. *Second Collaborative Painting* (16" x 20", oil on canvas, 2003) by Paula Nicho Cúmez and Kryssi Staikidis.

### **Kaqchikel Women Painters' Iconography: Personal in Cultural**

Iconography for Kaqchikel women painters is related to personal and cultural narratives. All paintings stem from the desire to represent Kaqchikel culture, and in a broader sense, Mayan indigenous cultures through the medium of painting. Personal and cultural narratives are not separated in Mayan life as the following explanation of the theme of Adelina Nicho Cúmez's work indicates:

I remember when I was young they would bring us to the mountains and we would yell in the forest and you could hear the echo, and so I would ask, “Why does the echo return?” As an adult, I said to myself, “I want to make an artwork in which I visually demonstrate the echo of the mountains.” I relate this to the cosmivision of our Mayan ancestors whose philosophy is that everything contains life: water, trees, mountains, and nature. In my painting, the mountains had laughing faces as they played the marimbas. This was my way of showing that mountains are alive. (personal communication, June 24, 2003)

Each woman’s description of the iconography of one of her paintings illustrates the variety or range of thematic and iconographic inspiration within this small group of women painters. Paula is inspired by dreams; Estela is inspired by the symbology and narratives that inform Kaqchikel weavings; and Adelina calls upon childhood experiences, combined with the Mayan cosmivision elucidated in the *Quiche* creation myth, the *Popul Vuh*, to create her themes. The constant is their desire to describe and transmit aspects of Mayan cultures. Paula Nicho Cúmez describes:

The name of this painting is *My Second Skin*. When I was young, I remember we were told by our teacher that all children in uniform would go to the parade. But when we arrived, children who were dressed in *traje* (traditional indigenous woven clothes) had to stand to one side while those in uniforms began to play their instruments for the parade. It was then that I realized that there was much marginalization of indigenous peoples. When I became a painter, I realized I must leave this message: my *traje* is my second skin. If they forced me to change my *traje*, I would never do so. (personal communication, June 25, 2005)

(See Figure 8.)



Figure 8. *My Second Skin* (24''x 36'', oil on canvas, 1995) by Paula Nicho Cúmez.

Estela Nicho Cúmez states, “I make paintings of *guipiles* to leave evidence of our values for the newer generation” (personal communication, July 1, 2003). (See Figure 9.)





Figure 9. *Guipil* (18" x 24", oil on canvas, 2000)  
by Estela Nicho Cúmez.

Female Kaqchikel artists expressed deep concern that Mayan cultures are being threatened; the act of painting becomes purposive in that it aims to salvage cultural losses of identities. Thus, traditions, stories,

dreams, myths and weavings are recorded in paint. Additionally, discourse based on Mayan paintings serves a political function, acting as a kind of spiritual emancipation from the battery of racism experienced by female Mayan contemporary artists in a Latino dominant culture. Adelina states,

At the cultural level, it is our responsibility to demonstrate what is embodied in our cosmovision, the cosmovision of our grandparents. As we can see now, since the era of the invasion, our indigenous culture has been excluded, and now we don't even understand the spirituality of our grandparents, and what they felt toward nature. The colonizers have ripped us apart, they have attempted to break us, as I say to you, since the era of colonialism.

In the schools we are at level zero in terms of culture. They have never included our cultural values in their curricula and now, on the cultural level, we must salvage these values and teach them to our children. We must also reveal our spirituality—how it is manifested, by whom, where it is lived—all of this should come together on the canvas.

I believe that art can activate thought. For example when viewers come to see paintings, they become curious and ask why this mountain has a face, why it cries, why it laughs, why it plays music. From this moment on, the artist is asked to explain what comprises his or her culture. The person listening is being influenced. In this way one realizes that part of one's culture is being preserved; we are becoming known through exposure to our artworks. (A. N. Cúmez, personal communication, June 24, 2003)

The teaching of painting is directly connected to cultural transmission. The third painting that Paula and I worked on together was inspired by a story that she told to her children and me one day as we sat on the studio floor. She wanted to teach them not to stay out after dark and she told a tale that combined personal and cultural narrative. She said that as a little girl she had been out with her brothers and sisters and



one evening they encountered *La Siguanaba*. *La Siguanaba* is a woman who has a hoof for a hand, big eyes like shining lights, long flowing hair, a glittery dress and scares children and drunken husbands into behaving “properly.” *La Siguanaba* lurks by the town garbage dump stalking victims whose behavior is unruly. After telling this story, our painting lesson began and Paula asked what the theme of our third painting should be. Together we decided to paint *La Siguanaba*. (See Figure 10.)



Figure 10. Third collaborative painting titled *La Siguanaba* (size 12" x 16", oil on canvas, 2003) by Paula Nicho Cúmez and Kryssi Staikidis.

I was given more responsibility with each painting that we created. This time, Paula asked me to do the entire preliminary drawing. When it came to painting, we worked together as we had before. Mayan cultures operate within a guided participation model (Lave, 1988; Rogoff, 1990). Likewise, skills in the painting studio are task-based and take into account the needs of the learner for building skills in relation to her/his evolving capability.

### Mayan Women Painters as Role Models

The artists also discuss the impact of being role models for a younger generation of women who will have the opportunity to follow in their footsteps as painters. Through their examples, older established women artists hope to blaze a trail for the younger generation. They hope that the younger women will become conscious of the many contributions that women can make to Mayan society, rather than seeing themselves solely as home makers. Adelina states,

First, we want everyone to realize that women have artistic talents. And at the societal level, our larger objective is to be recognized as women painters, women artists going against what has been said in the past, and still more with respect to the indigenous woman. It has been said that the indigenous woman is only good for raising children staying at home. This is the concept that we want to rupture and the structure that we want to dismantle. We want the younger generation to realize that as women we not only have moral value, but also artistic value. Young women must aspire to create a society that is based upon mutual respect.

As artists, we also want to demonstrate that our imaginations go further. We don't want to shut our imaginations down. Rather, we want to light them up and make them bigger. We want to break with the male traditions and arrive still farther with new models for working and teaching. (A. N. Cúmez, personal communication, June 26, 2003)

### Asserting Female Ways of Connected Knowing and Teacher/Student Role Reversals

Male artists predominantly paint Mayan ceremonies, traditions, and scenes such as *A Coffee Harvest*, *The Night Market*, or *Worshipping Pascual Abaj*, a Mayan deity. In both men's and women's paintings, the colors and symbols of *trajes* reflect regional communities and are true to life. However, Mayan Kaqchikel women artists of San Juan de Comalapa combine dream images, weaving, purposeful distortions of subjects, and fantastical imagery that conveys autobiography, cultural narrative, fable,

ritual, tradition, and customs. Thus, Kaqchikel women have taken Mayan male iconography to another level, playing with imagination and creativity in ways that are unique within the Mayan painting movements as a whole. The styles unique to the Mayan Kaqchikel women artists of San Juan de Comalapa constitute what I would call a female iconography. Female artists are aware and proud of this phenomenon and attach great significance to the relationship between its evolution and their gender. They state and believe that women have a great capacity to feel, perceive, and imagine, and that this is directly connected to their womanhood. As women, they believe it is only natural that they come up with a more original way of painting than men. Paula observes,

We believe that the woman is more open and in touch with her knowledge than the man. Her knowing is more profound. Our knowledge of weaving also helps us since men know nothing of weaving. (P. N. Cúmez, personal communication, June 29, 2003)

Part of Paula's teaching process was to relay, both through content and form, such female ways of knowing. And because I was a female painter and colleague, at our conclusion, Paula asked me to make a painting for her. She honored the multiple aspects of my identity as both woman and painter in a male dominated world, and perceived of me as a role model as well. I was, in this sense, very much her contemporary. Part of her teaching strategy, then, was to set the stage for role reversal of teacher and student.

Since Paula clearly wanted a view into my world, I worked the way I customarily do. I chose a narrative theme, painted images that emerged from the stains at first created by preliminary touches of mineral spirits and washed color, and then continued the image by extending it onto four canvases instead of one. The immediacy with which I applied paint and read into marks, coupled with my lack of prior sketching, and the use of more than one canvas to extend images, were all new techniques for Paula. (See Figure 11.)

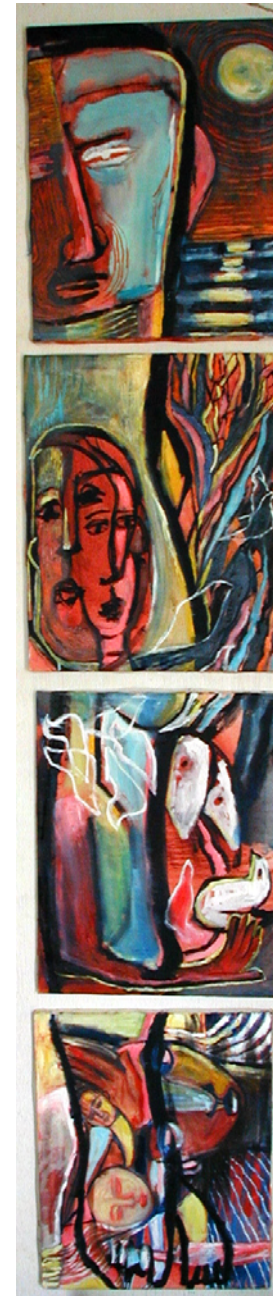


Figure 11. *Paula* (12''x 48'', oil on canvas, 2003) by Kryssi Staikidis.

When I finished the painting and explained the symbolism of the images to her, she listened quietly, absorbing every word and asking questions. The oral narrative that followed my painting process seemed very natural to her, and her understanding of it felt exactly right to me. It was a refreshing experience to talk about making a work of art in the way that I had always liked to, simply describing its story and characters, without being asked questions that dealt only with form.

The opportunity to insert myself completely into the learning experience by being asked to create an original piece for my teacher at the conclusion of our study period was another indication of Paula's belief in the collaborative aspect of her pedagogy. She gave me a place in all of this, not only as a student, but as an artist from whom she too could learn. I, as student, was given free reign to communicate with the teacher as a peer. She notes,

When I look at your work, I like your style, and it would be very hard for me to make a painting as you make it. But seeing my style and your style together, an exchange has taken place that has benefited both of us. (P. N. Cúmez, personal communication, July 4, 2003)

### **A Feminist Teacher's Strategy: To Elicit**

Paula's teaching strategy might be best described using the verb "to elicit." Distinctions need to be made between learn *from* versus learn *with*. Her teaching took place alongside the student so that the sense of dispensing knowledge was transformed into a "call and response," where each step was based on the student's reply to the teacher's question. The questioning was dialogical in nature and was rooted in conversation as the bridge for learning. There could be no curriculum planned without the learner and the teaching strategy evolved according to the learner's needs:

I came and asked if Paula would teach me and she did without having a preplanned agenda for doing so, and very naturally it became a collaboration instead of a dictation or set of instructions. The only instruction she gave was to *be* creative. (Staikidis, field

notes, June 15, 2003)

Paula demonstrated a consistent emphasis on the importance of emerging creativity as the catalyst for art making. The use of the word "creative" differs from its use in English—as in an adjective to describe someone, or as in the verb "to create." Instead, Paula used the word "creativity" as a combination of noun and verb existing deep inside the person. Much like a spring, or source for water, she saw creativity as an infinite place within the artist's life from which she/he could bring forth ideas, images, and spirit. As my teacher, she expressed the constant desire for me to draw upon such a source when contemplating color use, image, composition, and story. She never answered my questions by stating I should do this or that, use this or that, rather, she responded with a question insisting I rely on desire and vision to come up with the answers. She states,

I like to teach in the way that I make my paintings ... I ask questions of myself when I paint. I also ask you what you want to do because I believe that each person must call on their own creativity to guide them. (P. N. Cúmez, personal communication, July 2, 2005)

As my teacher, Paula believed that what made an artist true to herself was her reliance on cultural knowledge. The lived experiences of both teacher and student, with their cultures at the center, were the foundations for the purpose of, and process involved, in teaching, as well as the motivating factor for subject matter of the paintings. For these reasons, before the mentorship was over, she insisted that I create a painting in my style that I would leave for her as a symbol of our friendship.

Paula's emphases in the teaching of painting were collaboration, consensus decision-making, and eliciting information from the learner. The curriculum was negotiated and there was no hierarchical structure involved in the passing along of knowledge; it was a transmission of information that seemed horizontal rather than vertical. She created opportunities for the learner to set parameters for both learning skills and defining curriculum content. Knowledge within such a paradigm becomes a



two-way communication that is shared with the teacher playing the role of facilitator instead of expert (Sullivan & Hawke, 1996; Welker, 1992). This study confirms the work of Belenky, et al. (1996), who cite women's preferences for eliciting latent information or the "midwife" model for teaching (p. 218). Additionally, they emphasize collaboration and cooperation as aspects of female ways of knowing that are incorporated into the teaching process.

### **Conclusion**

When artistic skills are taught within a situated learning context, they are one with lived experiences where daily life and art making are integrated. Paula Nicho Cúmez taught from her individual painting processes in her studio. She derived ideas for paintings from her dreams, her cultural knowledge, and the visual culture in her surrounding community with its regional dress, customs, and social practices.

Relationships and a sense of collectivity are the cornerstones for transmitting knowledge in Kaqchikel female cultures. This accords with the ideas of Gomez-Peña (1996) who notes that indigenous philosophies embody an interconnectedness where "all struggles for the respect of all life in all its variants lead in the same direction" (p. 221). Mentoring in the artist's studio was the vehicle for communicating Mayan Kaqchikel female epistemologies to me where work undertaken by artists was a form of research, and where visual arts may be considered "a powerful cultural and educational agency of human insight" (Sullivan, 2005, p. 11).

I now believe that the influence of the trans-cultural artistic mentoring relationship may partially erode traditional paradigms of cultural insider/outsider. Mentoring within a situated learning context provides an opportunity for a close relationship to develop between teacher and student. When transference of knowledge is highly personalized, cultural bridges are crossed and likewise formed through a unique vehicle—artistic language. Personal and cultural narrative directs the teaching process. Because of my transformative learning experience as student, teacher, artist, and researcher, and as one result of studying with Paula Nicho Cúmez, the question I asked myself was: How might Mayan Kaqchikel female perspectives help to transform curricula in the art studios and art

education courses of U.S. higher education?

This study makes it possible for me to expose students in higher education to Mayan Kaqchikel female conceptual frameworks for both making and teaching art. Such practices include negotiating curriculum, collaboration, infusion of personal and cultural narratives, decentralized teaching, the consideration of learner needs within curriculum design and the exploration of students' creativity as a form for teaching. Expanded perspectives based on Mayan Kaqchikel female painting and teaching methods can transform practices of traditional art pedagogy in higher education formulated on a predominantly "banking" model (Freire, 1970). Introductory classes often compartmentalize skills and present drawing from observation as the only way to learn, the one tried and true way to grasp the basics. Students are told that this initial drawing process is essential for later art making. Rather, it is important that students have options for the initial stages of creation so that they do not feel estranged from curricula. Mayan Kaqchikel female perspectives have the potential to enrich and expand the teaching terrain for they present new possibilities.

Obviously, artistic mentoring in a situated learning context cannot be applied in all of its facets to a formal higher art educational setting. However, the infusion of personal and cultural narratives into lessons, the decentralization of the teacher-as-expert model into small novice teaching groups, and collaborations among teacher and students can be incorporated into art classes in most situations. Teaching strategies in the studio that reflect female ways of knowing such as collaboration, the inclusion of story as content, and negotiating curriculum are particularly conducive to possibilities in the art studios of higher education where collective enterprise directs the teaching of artistic processes. Such processes can also easily be applied to teaching art in K-12 settings.

In the world of Paula Nicho Cúmez, women partake in consensus building, cooperation and collaboration, natural parts of daily living, and thus, the approach to teaching painting is part of a holistic philosophy. Perhaps, the practices of narrative, collaboration, decentralization and negotiating curriculum would produce a long awaited transformation for female art and art education students long excluded from the discourse in college and university studios in the United States.

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