



04.09.2013

PEOPLE: ARTIST SANDRA VÁSQUEZ DE LA HORRA

Drawing Light From The Dark Arts



We visit Sandra Vásquez de la Horra at her studio apartment in Berlin—along with her macabre creatures. Little did we know we were entering a world of great sensibility, adorned with dark artwork that would leave our minds a bit brighter.

Minutes after the necessary small-talk and informal conversation, Sandra Vásquez de la Horra gets down to business as she begins to unpack her drawings and laying them across her huge living room table. Let me be honest: I did not like them. They were disturbing to a point that I felt like a five year-old boy having nightmares again. I somehow recognized myself in one of the drawings that showed two boys in the water; I felt suffocated. I imagined it was my twin brother and I in the water, very close to drowning. Things got worse after the conversation carried on. After mentioning that I was from Brazil, she began talking about her trip to Salvador de Bahia, a big city in the seacoast of the Brazilian northeast. "I felt in love with Pomba Gira," she said with a very proud tone in her voice. I laughed—not because it was funny, but because it made me nervous.

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Into The Dark Side

Let me explain: Pomba Gira is an entity of Umbanda, a Brazilian religion that blends African religions with Catholicism and Spiritism. During her adventure in Brazil, Sandra discovered Pomba Gira while visiting a "macumba" slot – a place where religious practitioners perform rituals. The reason I was shocked is because of macumbas' status as "black magic" in Brazil. You see, I grew up in a protestant family and was raised to believe that this was the work of the devil. So there I was, facing things that I've tried to avoid my whole life, surrounded by death figures, demons and creepy anthropomorphic beings. Don't get me wrong, it did not take long for me to turn off my judgmental mode and start to understand her drawings better. Believing that every artwork carries the artist's biography, I had to go back to her as a person and comprehend the meaning of her work within the context of her life.



Facing my fears in the drawings of Vázquez de la Horra. Photo: Chris Phillips

Vásquez de la Horra was born in Chile during the hard times of an oppressive dictatorship. She was raised in a typical patriarchal society with a very strict family. If every family has a black sheep, the artist was the one in hers. At least, this is how she describes herself in comparison to her siblings. "I used to argue a lot with my father and he would send me to eat in the kitchen with the cooks or to spend time with the maids." In the kitchen, she would interact and learn from the family's employees.

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Consequently, she also found refuge in literature. These two forms of escapism would help define the artist as she is now: someone with intellectual rigor that loves books as much as connecting with people of humble means. She travels the world in search of shamans and people with spiritual knowledge—there is no doubt that this has had a huge impact in her art. Her drawings may not be about a specific religion, but it would not be wrong to say they possess spiritual qualities. They appear as a collection of childhood nightmares mixed with a teenager's sexual desires and the wisdom of an old shaman.

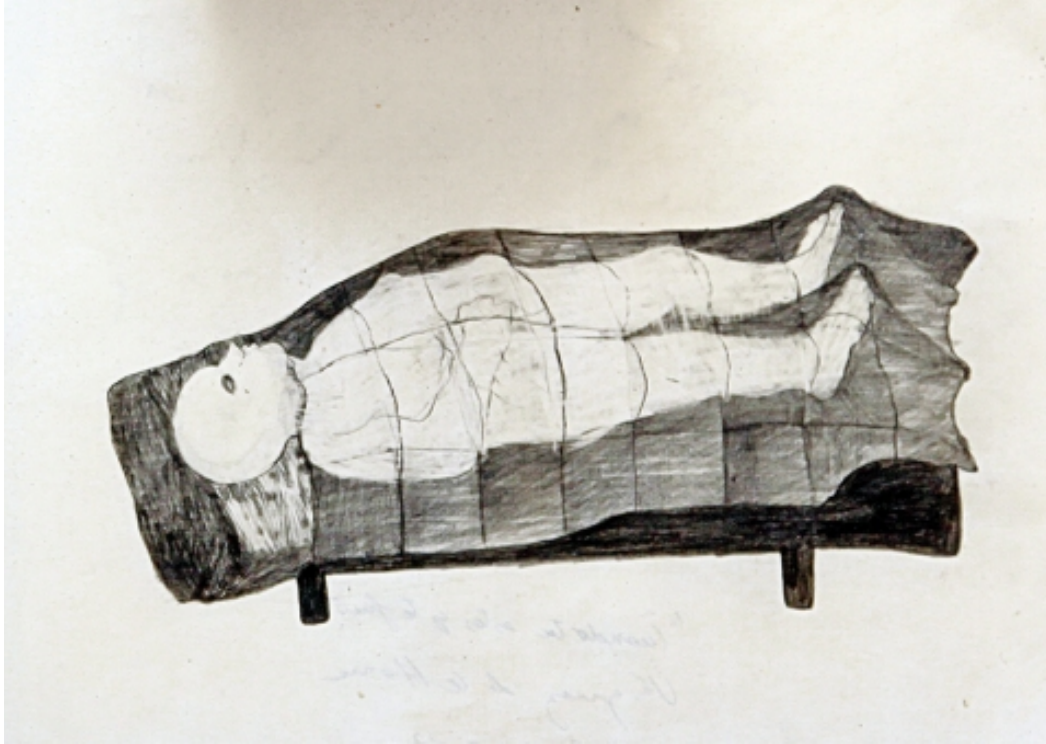


A fine mix of cute and macabre: the drawings of Sandra Vásquez de la Horra. Photo: Chris Phillips

Yet Vásquez de la Horra avoids all stereotypes: She deals with death, but not portraying it as a negative thing; she deals with female sexuality, but not as a preachy feminist. What she presents in her personal beliefs – and her art – is a skeptical cultural relativism. These are the drawings of someone who does not believe in Western society's norms. And maybe this explains the themes from her artwork: surreal mystical creatures that offer not a complete escape from the real world but a way of trying to connect to something more; something that goes beyond our usual understanding. This 'something more' in the drawings of Vásquez de la Horra is what I had initially missed—and that's where the beauty of her art is. She also took long to recognize the value of it; before having her art bought by big collectors or renowned art institutions such as the Centre Pompidou, the artist would never sign any of her work.

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I asked if this was how she saw God. "I do not see God, I feel God," she replied. Photo: Chris Phillips

Ultimately, I left her studio apartment feeling wiser. The power of art is to open one's mind; her artwork reminded me that going out of my comfort zone could often teach me valuable lessons. My initial fear was transformed into admiration. Before leaving, I had to look at the drawings on the table once more. Maybe I will never find the reptilians that she draws or join an orgy of mermaids (perhaps only in my dreams), but I did meet an artist that showed me that even in the darkest of darks there is a great deal of brightness.

Sandra Vásquez de la Horra [Price range of works: 3,000 – 15,000 Euros]

Article by Chris Phillips