

CULTURAL DIVERSITY

TAPICERIA COLOMBIANA an interview with Sandra Castillo

by Justin Wollenhaupt



vseriesfinal by Sandra Castillo

In the business of art, it can be a daunting task merely to have one's work shown. Thus it is a rare pleasure to meet an artist like Sandra Castillo, a 30 yr-old self-taught Colombian artist and champion of fellow Colombian artists in New England. In addition to her own work, she has organized and curated shows of local Colombian artists, and has made it her mission to bring Colombian art to the attention of the Boston cultural scene. Born in Colombia, Castillo came to the United States when she was five and grew up in East Boston, a neighborhood virtually devoid of Latinos at the time. Unlike many artists, she fell into painting almost by chance, attending a local art class on a whim after finishing college. I caught up with Castillo at Restaurante El Buen Gusto in East Boston to discuss her art, and the interactions between art, artist, and culture.

MM: You recently had some work shown at artSPACE@16 in Malden?

SC: For the last show, "Love Small," I submitted a small 12" by 12" piece. That piece was interesting because of both the technique that was used to do it and the message it conveys. The piece that I submitted there is called "Unfurnished Soul." It's digital art - that's what I call it, I still haven't really figured out what to call what I'm doing. I open Photoshop and throw some color in and I swirl it around the way you would use a brush and paint on a canvas until I get something I like. When I was creating that piece, it was a time earlier this year when I was coordinating East Boston Open Studios and was hard-pressed for time. I don't have a dedicated studio, I have a home studio, so making a mess doesn't go over too well, and I didn't have the time to set up and then clean up, so I turned to the computer to create...

MM: Do you do primarily digital work now?

SC: I'm still doing the digital stuff because I still don't have time. I'm going to be organizing a show coming up and I just helped out with an exhibit that was finished last week at the Colombian Consulate. After Open Studios I organized another Colombian exhibit at the Consulate. That was in September. I'm getting more into the organization of shows and curating things. I really like that aspect, so my work has kind of fallen by the wayside as I try to support other artists in their efforts to show their art.

MM: Is the show at the Colombian Consulate still running?

SC: Since the art is in the offices of the Consulate and they work during the day, the pieces aren't very accessible

to the public, but I know that they are open on some Saturdays so that would be a good time for people to stop by and see the work.

MM: So will your curatorial work at the Consulate be an ongoing project?

SC: Because the first show was so successful, I think it may. At first they were a bit hesitant because they weren't sure what level of work was involved and they thought it might be a little overwhelming, but then we did the first show and they saw it wasn't so bad. The agreement was that they would support it, and I would do most of the work and spearhead it. They've seen that it could be done and that it could be done well, and that it wasn't that painful. And the benefit to the Colombian Consulate was significant in that people for the first time showed up to the Consulate and it wasn't just to do the tedious transmission of papers and that sort of thing. So we're thinking about making it ongoing and perhaps have some solo shows. The first show was a group show to see the local talent and, because of it, various artists from the New England area have contacted me wondering if there could be an opportunity for them to have a show there. Right now I think there's about 25 Colombian artists that I've spoken with; some of them have been here 25 years, some just got here three years ago. My goal is to pull them together so that collectively we can get the word out about Colombian art and get the public to know them, because the art is so rich and different. I think of Boston as a very cosmopolitan city, so I think they would be very well accepted.

MM: What are some of the themes that you see often in the work you are curating and in your own art that might be common to the art of first-generation Colombians in America?

SC: The funny thing about the show at the Consulate was that the artists who had been in the United States longest brought in pieces that were sort of nostalgic and talked about the situation in Colombia. They talked about violence and the war, but they also talked about the family and being connected and the pleasure in life. Everyone talked about how despite the fact that Colombia has had strife going on for what seems like forever, people still move on and are happy and joyful. Conversely, artists who have been here for a shorter amount of time had other concerns. The war and that sort of thing wasn't central to their art. Their work was Colombian, but it was more abstract, more international. To me that was kind of surprising that the people that were here longer were very focused on Colombia and more traditional Colombian issues.

MM: And themes in your own work?

SC: All of my paintings tend to be split in two and I'm trying to bring the two sides together. It's a synthesis, a bonding... it's about how you bring two very dissimilar cultures or people and put them together in one space. It's basically about what I've been living, being of Colombian descent and being in a space with other types of people. When I got here, there were no Colombians, really even no Latinos in the Boston area. Growing up in East Boston, everybody was Italian or Irish, and nobody spoke Spanish. So my art focuses more on that sense of synthesis, bringing together those people who still have those concerns about Colombia and those people who live with those concerns and their art focuses on something totally different.

MM: It can be difficult to capture the essence of art in words, so what word or phrase do you think does not describe your art, or is antithetical to your work?

(pause)

SC: I'd say it's not static. At first glance it appears static with lots straight lines, but to me it's more dynamic. It's not about friction really, but it has to do with friction. I always envision the halves of my pieces being pulled apart, so there are braces that are necessary to combat that tension. It's about the tension of forcing two things to work together. It's a dialogue between myself and people to try to create a third space where people can think about what brings us together, what keeps us apart, and how we can exist on one plane despite the differences and the barriers.

MM: Going forward, do you see yourself pursuing curatorial work with art on the side, or are you going to try to keep both things going equally?

SC: I'm going to take it as it comes. I really have fun supporting other artists and giving them the opportunity which I feel is somewhat lacking, at least for Colombian artists. Some of my artist friends don't speak the language very well, so they miss out on some opportunities, while others are older, so while some opportunities are there online and that sort of thing, they don't have the technological knowledge to find those things for themselves.

Sandra Castillo's work can currently be seen at the Out Of The Blue Art Gallery at 106 Prospect St. in Cambridge, and she is currently curating the group exhibit at the Colombian Consulate at 535 Boylston St. in Boston (contact the Consulate for viewing times). For upcoming projects, she is currently working with a Harvard University student organization on a group show to be seen in February. Another show is planned for the week-long Colombian Independence Festival in East Boston in July. The Artists-At-Large Gallery at the First Congregational Church of Hyde Park will be hosting a Colombian show in September. For more information, visit Castillo's website at: <http://www.maldenmuse.com/>"<http://www.helloboston.com/art/SandraCastillo.Cfm>"

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