

# Urban Virgins

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by Ramón Mujica Pinilla

The symbolic vocabulary of Ana De Orbegoso is derived directly from the aesthetic resources of colonial Peruvian painting. The manipulation of the sacred image in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was neither unorthodox, nor illegal or marginal. On the contrary, the policy of visual catechism, recommended by the Council of Trent (1545-1563), developed during the Spanish Golden Age in the American colonies into a baroque technology of the symbolic image as a “language of power” and a massive system of religious persuasion and political propaganda. The holy image was a tool used to evangelize illiterate Andean villages, as art of the memory, and above all, as a visual language complementary to the spoken word. The religious paintings were sermons for the eyes.

In the first fifty years of the conquest of Peru, not all the religious orders that reached the New World recognized that the native cultural traditions were compatible with the Gospel. What’s more, during the whole of the seventeenth and a large part of the eighteenth century, violent campaigns were carried out to eradicate indigenous idolatries for the purpose of destroying the symbolic native imagery associated with their pre-Hispanic customs. This was equivalent, to some extent, to the repression by the Holy Office of the Inquisition of Lima of the Spaniards, Creoles and those of mixed blood (Mestizos) for heresies or subversive interpretations of official Spanish Catholicism as practiced in the Peninsula. In spite of all this, the Augustinians and Jesuits missionaries of colonial Peru -- following the well-established model of cultural assimilation employed by Saint Paul and Saint Augustin and later by the Neo-platonic philosophers of the Italian Renaissance -- also tried to find points of convergence and symbolic juxtapositions, including even alternative practices, between the truths of the gospel and the native traditions associated with mythology, fables and Inca ritual. However, religious syncretism was a double-edged sword: it facilitated the conversion of the natives to Christianity, but also enabled the survival of some deep-seated beliefs of the pre-Hispanic past. Nonetheless, in general, the Spanish ecclesiastic authorities fostered the creation of a culturally hybrid, multi-ethnic and multilingual social order since this concept formed the main thrust of the universalism and global discourse of the Spanish monarchy. One of the official political strategies employed in Peru to highlight the political unity of the empire was precisely to exhibit the rich cultural diversity of the native peoples converted to Christianity. Therefore, they not only exalted Spanish military victories but also the triumphs of the faith. In this context, it is not surprising that Creoles, Mestizos and Natives alike used art along with their religious devotions in their ceremonial festivities, thereby rhetorically expressing their total submission to the Christian God and even to the Spanish crown yet at the same time emphasizing and legitimizing their own trans-cultured otherness.

Ana De Orbegoso offers us here new contemporary versions of the Virgin of Cocharcas -- who was in turn the identical copy of the Virgin of Copacabana, the first miraculous effigy of Maria carved by an indigenous craftsman; the Virgin of the Rosary, much venerated by the Dominicans and the Franciscans; the Virgin of Bethlehem; the Virgin Maria as the Temple of the Trinity; and Saint Rosa of Lima, the first female saint of the Americas, among many others. Some of these colonial paintings are in fact images of images, in other words, paintings of sculptures: portraits of dressed effigies that worked incredible miracles from the altars, chapels or churches of the Andean South. The photographs of Ana De Orbegoso are no longer idealized colonial virgins with stereotyped faces despite their majestic triangular cloaks with gild decorations that evoke the Byzantine notion of the icon. By means of photomontage, de Orbegoso appropriates and re-semanticizes the iconography of the Virgin with Child to create a hermeneutic or ethnohistoric critique of Andean art. She intentionally secularizes the sacred image to grant the Virgin, the Child

and the Angels the recognizable physiognomy of the women and children, Natives or Mestizos of Peru. These secular portraits hide an allegorical message that provokes a vertiginous theology: holiness does not exist exclusively in heaven. It can be found also amongst the common people nurtured by faith, who, from the heights of the Andes or the lowland villages, celebrate by feasts and processions the saints of their church. It is not a question of merely demystifying the colonial past. The devotional canvas converted into photomontage is no longer an object of prayer, but one of meditation and visual reflection. Nor do de Orbegoso's Urban Virgins claim to propose new hagiographies. Her anonymous Madonnas do not exalt the unattainable divinity of the Mother of God or of the saints. They incarnate the tremendous mystery of a suffering people purified by sorrow and poverty and intentionally longing to be made in the image of the celestial archetype, which, as both an apparition and an abyss, fills their lives.

In order to transmit this message, de Orbegoso uses the same rhetorical weapon that was employed in the Middle Ages and the Spanish Counterreformation to defend the realism of figurative art and the cult of the icons: de Orbegoso's images of vowed offerings are endowed with movement. That is to say, with life both human and supernatural. They are iconofones, absent presences that in their plastic representation concentrate simultaneously on their everydayness as well as their idealized reality. De Orbegoso's photographic canvases look, speak, weep and smile since they are flesh and soul. They are figures that escape from the altars and the frames of the paintings that hold them. These Urban Virgins, far from being static illustrations of the past, contain as a unique attribute the portrait of their own existence but also the timeless representations of the maternal emptiness of the divine power that transcends the present and the future.