

Jaime Guerrero

***Contemporary Relics:
A Tribute to the Makers***



February 3 – December 30, 2018

at the Riverside Art Museum

Contemporary Relics: A Tribute to the Makers by glass sculptor Jaime Guerrero brings forth one of Mesoamerica's most important Olmec cultural findings, *La Venta*. This exhibition demonstrates the skills and ability of glass sculptor Guerrero to create in the likeness art that at one point in time was endowed with cosmic and spiritual powers. His emphasis is on the experience of process. This body of work dates from the Olmec Pre-classic period to the Post-classic period that includes masks, idols, figurines, and figurative sculptures from West Mexico.

The centerpiece to Guerrero's exhibition is *La Venta (The Offering)*, an Olmec installation that replicates the discovery of 16 human-shaped jade, jadeite, and basalt figurines approximately 20cm tall and six celts approximately 26cm tall inside the ceremonial site of La Venta #4, located in present-day Tabasco, near the Gulf of Mexico. The discovery at La Venta #4 is called "La Ofrenda" (The Offering). In this installation, Guerrero sculpts out of glass the invisible mystery behind the myths and ritual practices of the Olmec (people of the rubber land) civilization. His re-creation pays tribute to the makers and the significance of process to record historical and religious events through artistic cultural practices. His archaeological method of investigation is tuned not just to details, but is receptive to meaning and history, politics and religion, ecology and aesthetics. It is interdisciplinary; the total sum of all.¹

La Venta #4 dates to the Pre-Classic period around 1800 BCE. Considered the Mother of All Mesoamerican Cultures, the Olmecs were known for their mastery in stone sculpting. For scholar David Carrasco, "the Olmecs built permanent ceremonial centers accompanied by an alluring art style appearing in jade miniatures, pottery, stelae (upright standing stones with carved imagery) and 'monumental' sculptures."² The Olmecs set the foundation for future Mesoamerican cultures in architecture, politics, art, esthetics, and religion. It is a culture whose origin is birthed from within its own experience. Sculpting for the Olmecs was an extension of recording its presence by carving out a place beyond itself. La Venta #4 made its relevance by how it united its people's history and its myths to the Mesoamerican Cosmo vision.³

Evidence points to the Olmec's ceremonial centers as being some of the oldest architectural constructions in Mesoamerican civilization. Anthropologist Susan Gillespie finds the importance of La Venta:

To assume a significant place in discussions of the evolutionary development of sociopolitical complexity and hierarchy in the Formative (or Pre-classic) period, the possible role of the Olmecs as a "mother culture" to the rest of Mesoamerica, and the suggested Olmec innovation of much of later Maya civilization to the east.⁴

¹ Hugo Zemelman. *Desefios de lectura de America Latina*. Mexico D.F: Cerezo Editores, 2010

² David Carrasco. *Religions of Mesoamerica*. Ney York: Harper-Collins Publisher, 1990

³ <http://arqueologiamexicana.mx/mexico-antiguo/la-ofrenda-4-de-la-venta-tabasco>

⁴ Susan Gillespie. *The Architectural History of La Venta Complex A: A Reconstruction Based on the 1955 Field Records*, 2008

Guerrero updates and acknowledges the holistic millennial culture of the Olmec's contributions to world history by putting forth an exhibition that draws our attention to pre-colonial ways of being. In doing so, the process of replicating in blown glass the setting of La Ofrenda is for Guerrero a process that facilitates meditation and discovery. The space utilized for the re-enactment of the ritual relics found at La Venta and other idols bends the westernized linear timeline into a circular a-temporal echo when he resurrects the otherness of Mesoamerica's originality and its achievements.

The location of the original semi-circle setting of the stone figurines in La Ofrenda at La Venta is considered a sacred site, expressing the relationship of the Olmecs with the infinite, their place, and cosmos. The figurines placed on several layers of colored sediment act as the conduit between the energy of myth and ritual. The importance of jade, jadeite, and basalt stones for ceremonial purposes is replicated by Guerrero in his glass figurine sculptures with hints of red that indicate a level of importance in some of the found sculptures in La Ofrenda. The human figurines in procession at La Ofrenda show no signs of status or hierarchy. Only two of the figurines, located at the center, show some type of status, which does not vary considerably.

The human sculptures' elongated heads are a particularly unique feature in Olmec stone carving, usually referred to as baby faces. The celt stones with engravings serve as testaments to an event. The alignment of the celts is the same as those found outside La Venta #4. Archaeologists suggest that the celts are in the likeness of the stelae type. All figurines are male, except three; these females are positioned at the center of the ceremony. They have slightly open mouths with bent knees and arms tucked to each side of the body angled outward. All human figurines are similar in style with unique features indicating that each figure must have been made by a different sculptor.

Guerrero's centerpiece installation is accompanied by masks, figurative sculptures, idols, and figurines that are inspired by the rich archaeological sites of Mexico's west coast states: Nayarit, Jalisco, and Colima. Artist, ethnologist, and writer Miguel Covarubbias is described by scholar Michael Kan as "using the same intuitive ability that had enabled him to date Olmec art to the Pre-classic period on stylistic grounds, Covarubbias recognized the stylistic kinship between the West Mexican figure complex and the Pre-classic period traditions of the Mesoamerican heartland."⁵ Much of the West Mexican figures are expressive, playful, and are highly skillfully crafted from clay. The ceremonial importance entrusted in these relics, masks, and idols by the makers reflect the deep connection to their cosmic beliefs. For poet Octavio Paz, Mesoamerican artisans created art that were transmitters of the psychic energy that unites animate beings – humanity, animals, plants – with the elements, the planets, and the stars.⁶

Guerrero grounds the polarity between myth and ritual as a conversation amongst a world in communion with earth and one that struggles to find itself as part of the cosmic connection in

⁵ LACMA Catalogue. *Sculptures of Ancient West Mexico: Nayarit, Jalisco, Colima*. University of New Mexico Press, 1989

⁶ Hammer Museum Catalogue. *Treasures of Mexico: From the Mexican National Museums*, 1978

today's modern society. He seeks meaning from Mesoamerican cultures, a new epistemology that puts humanity with nature as the central concern. Spiritual polarity stimulates energy beyond the visible to the tangible world, bringing forth a sense of trust and faith in nature. All the cosmic nutrient elements played an important role in defining Mesoamerican identity. Their approach to the ecosystem was more compatible with the regeneration of nature than the modern present day.

Guerrero's years of experience with glass makes him one of the country's most unique sculptors. He utilizes modern technique with hand-crafted skills to examine the past in this exhibiting body of work. Guerrero shares the creative and symbolic imagination of the Olmec to excavate space, time, and meaning. With this installation, is Guerrero critiquing modern capitalist society that for the most part has regulated pre-Columbian cultures as primitive and spiritually inferior to Western socio-cultural practices? The belief that nature was endowed with spiritual power lessened with the rise of the techno-industrial advancement of capitalism.⁷

By staging the handmade, Guerrero bids to unlock what was discarded through colonization: that we exist outside ourselves and are very much an extension of all that makes up the world. *Rituals* and *myths* have the potential healing manifestation that can ground us to our shared space on this earth. This composition of work thickens our space and the memory of our past adds to our space. This exhibition does not rely on volume as a prerequisite for sculptures, but instead it weathers our being through exposure. In *Contemporary Relics: A Tribute to the Makers*, Guerrero bridges multiple worlds through an a-temporal lens. His artistic endeavor is finding ways that permit, not to exclude, a world with many worlds.

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⁷ Victor Manuel Toledo. Nexos, Issue 69. Ecologismo y Ecología Política, September 1, 1983