

I was born in Maiquetia, Venezuela a little over half a century ago. My family lived in Caracas but ladies at that time drove down that perpendicular dangerous road, nervously twirling their rosaries, to bathe in the sea, for it was believed that the ocean had curative powers. Huge bathhouses stood on the coastline, waves pounding and resounding in their cavernous interiors, the dusky air pierced with streaks of sunlight while crabs walked the high ledges and the women and children squealed with delight. It was on one of these sojourns to the beach that I was born.

Memories of my childhood in Venezuela still invade today's reality. Padre Peñalber, our parish priest, is at least partly responsible for my life long aversion to a certain shade of pink. Each year at Easter there was a long mass late in the evening for which a scaffolding was built directly behind the altar, and little girls with paper mache wings strapped to their backs were placed around the altar kneeling on a space hardly larger than a small cushion. Padre Penalber was a short stocky man with very bushy eyebrows and a thunderous voice. Hassock swinging, he walked staring at the line of children waiting to hear what the color of their dress would be that year. At that time in Venezuela, dark complexioned children were thought to look best in pink and so I would try holding my breath, hoping that perhaps my complexion would change. I was invariably unseccessful in these attempts for when he looked at me, he would always say, "Pink. You are a pink angel!" I never knew whether it was that I had suddenly grown too tall to be an angel or whether it was that, rebelling against

the pink I wore, I disrupted the mass by falling asleep kneeling on one of the higher platforms of the scaffolding, whatever the reason, I was never again chosen to be an angel at Easter. Being a painter, color has always been a very important part of my life, of myself. I go through color periods when anything purple, or red, or green, or blue seems magically endowed, but never ever a certain shade of pink.

Venezuelan girls were taught to sew at an early age. They didn't knit, the tropical climate cancelled out any warm clothing, but they did sew, crochet, embroider and make beautiful lace. I don't believe I ever saw a group of women working together on a common project, rather, they worked alone, even if in a group, spending long hours embroidering a pillow case or making a lace doily.

My grandmother, Rosario, taught me how to sew. If she caught sight of me sitting under a tree enjoying the afternoon breeze, she would ask me to bring her my favorite dress. "Idle hands tempt the devil," she would say, then together we would undo the hem. Once done, she would say, "Now, sew it up again and let me see how well you can do it." It never occurred to me to ask her why it was that when I day-dreamed I was tempting the devil, whereas when boys day-dreamed they were lost in thought, planning some great project.

I didn't like to sew then, and it took me years to discover that it could be a pleasurable experience. When I became pregnant with my first son in New York, then it was I learned to enjoy sewing. In the fortys, when he was born, the only maternity

clothes available in stores were called 'butcher boy' dresses, with an ugly hole cut out in the skirt. I had a vision of a long silk black and white striped dress with a velvet ribbon and red geraniums and promptly began to make it. It took me weeks and, I remember, I did set the sleeves in backward so that I had to stand with my shoulders at an odd angle. However what I remember most is how good I felt when I finished it and wore it. My vision had not been altogether wrong. When my son, Daniel, was born, the dress had been so constantly worn that, like the placenta, it was discarded in the process. I went on sewing then whenever I coveted some imagined piece of clothing or visualized my infant son in a red vest with blue satin ribbons. Sewing has afforded me great satisfaction through the years: the color and texture of cloth, the combinations of colors and the lines of a garment are for me very joyous, personal and creative expressions.

From the beginning, painting has been a most integral part of my life. I make clothes, I cook meals, I've raised children. I write poetry and I keep a journal of my dreams as well as my days, but most important, I paint and consider myself a painter. An artist's recesses became a condition, a preparation to transmit, a commitment to one's self.

It took me a long time, however, to think of myself as unique. Looking back, I was always searching for myself. I wanted and needed to grow, to be an individual. No one encouraged me. I seemed to threaten the order of things.

I left the Church when I was fourteen. I had been reading Tourquenada's INQUISITION, which I kept hidden under my bed. One

day I confronted my mother. I presented her with the book, telling her that I was not going to church any more and recommending that she read the book for herself. She wept, made the sign of the cross and said "What priest have a wounded?"

When one is young, one has to fight for one's own space, one's own little island, but as one grows older boundaries expand and there is no limit to one's heart. I gave my mother much unnecessary pain, rebelling as I did against tradition, against the all-encompassing authority of the Church. There were two values, theirs and mine, and there was no question as to whom I owed allegiance, no matter the pain inflicted on others and upon myself.

But life is tentacled and what I did with it sometimes suggested a loss of self. Whole years at times when I stopped painting altogether. Times of breathing in and breathing out, a few drawings, very few paintings, and all eventually destroyed. During these times of emotional upheaval and no work, I discovered I became particularly aware visually. A very ordinary soapdish could suddenly, for no reason I could fathom, become a magic object, reflecting light behind understanding. It became a world of dark and glowing light, or, cutting into a squash, I would discover a language in the changing patterns of the seeds. I wonder now if, like a person blinded, whose other senses become very acute to compensate for the loss of sight, I did not open and use hidden levels of consciousness. The times of not working were not happy times, they were confused and perplexing during which I wrote a great deal. Afterward, painting again, I would re-find my own personal center, my own personal world, and isolated, working alone, I could manage

to think of myself as a ridge of moderate elevation made of reeds that caught the light, naturally communicating thoughts and images.

I had already started work on my "looking down in perspective" paintings when I first met Joyce Kozloff. She phoned me, introduced herself and said, "Women artists are isolated. We are getting together. Do you want to come to a meeting?"

"Yes," I replied. "Nothing could keep me away."

The meeting was set for March 1, 1971, and the address 1000 Ashland Avenue, Apartment #1. Somehow it seemed an overwhelming number of ones, an omen of some kind. Everyone I had ever met was there, the successful, the struggling, the young and the old. There were at least fifty women and we began the meeting by stating our name and occupation. When it was my turn, I said, "Luchita Mullican, painter." Across the room, I heard June Wayne ask in what seemed a very penetrating voice, "Luchita what?"

"I stand corrected," I replied. "Luchita Hurtado, painter."

We met several times, that large group, but eventually we broke up into smaller groups, into consciousness raising groups. I became part of a very compatible group of women artists. We were like sisters and we met for the record breaking time of three years. Still, today, we will all have dinner together, to share or despair, or to just enjoy each others company.

Up to the time I joined the group, I had always faced my paintings to the wall whenever a visitor arrived unexpectedly at my studio. This secretiveness was perhaps the result of working alone or perhaps related back to the time in art school when I could show my mother still lifes and landscapes but never work

done in the life-class. The change came about almost imperceptibly, but after being in the group for awhile I discovered that I was less inhibited. I have never again faced my paintings to the wall. Quite the contrary, I am quick to show them.

In a way, I have been doing self portraits in one form or another since 1970. The early canvasses were corporeal, female nudes looking down at themselves, feet planted solidly on the ground and breasts like mountains. They seem to be saying, "This is what I am."

The next series of paintings were made of letters, words. The first one I did read "Yo", "I" in Spanish, and I was very pleased with it. To achieve the quickness, the evenness and length of stroke I needed on large canvasses, I rigged up bottles with nozzles that became the brushes I needed. I was having a show at Grandview in six months and I began to paint word paintings toward it. I painted large paintings, all messages, some right side up, some on their side, some cut, set apart, as life does, and sewed together again. Some were in layers, one atop the other.

I had a good response to the show but no one saw the letters, the messages. Just the color and energy. It didn't seem important that they were not fully seen and I thought it superfluous to explain.

I started to do T'ai Chi Ch'uan four years ago. After I had learned the form, I began to experience an unfamiliar element, somewhere between air and water, which seemed to communicate directly to my blood stream and my nervous system. I began a

new series of paintings which I'm still very involved with. They deal with light and gravity yet I see them as direct descendants of the 1971 figures, as another facet of a self-portrait.

I still have a built-in resistance to success in the large arena of the commercial world. The thought of dealing with more than a few dozen people seems unreasonable to me, but who knows, someday soon I may learn to accept the thorn along with the blossom.

After all, settled and colonized, women have always seemed to hold their own, instinctively recognizing their true source, sensing their affinity to both mountain and leopard.

Luchita Hurtado
370 Mesa Road
Santa Monica,
California 90402