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José María Velasco's Pastoral Landscapes and the Politics of Seeing: Technologies of Colonial Violence in Indigenous Geographies

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Prelude

The Mexican landscape painter José María Velasco (1840-1912) is considered to have made geography a symbol of national identity through his artwork. The premise in Velasco's pastoral painting is a narrative of magnificence and opulence, highlighting the splendors of the imperial court and ethnic harmony in the newly established colonial state, meanwhile concealing Indigenous genocide and colonial violence. His pastoral landscapes therefore acted as a mechanism for colonial subjugation, perpetuating Eurocentric artistic and historical values.

In my video installation *Portrait of a Nation*, I examine José María Velasco's pastoral landscapes as instruments of surveillance and colonial violence. By rephotographing Velasco's landscape paintings with a surveillance camera (CCTV) and then re-staging them with the collaboration of the Indigenous P'urhépecha in Mexico, the work situates video recording and landscape painting as technologies of violence. It produces depictions of a landscape inaccessible to ordinary gaze. In this essay I discuss the research and methodologies used in the making of the installation, addressing the complexities of the political geography of race in Mexico.

Nation

Legacies of Mexico's colonial past, such as racial segregation and oppression, coexist with ideologies of modernisation, neoliberalism, and economic progress. Ideologies of economic progress performing against a conflicted and racialised fractured state, can be traced back to the period of the second French intervention of 1861 and its creation of the Second Mexican Empire (1861–67) as a client state of France. The country began experiencing great political and social instability soon after the Mexican-French monarchy set up its administration in Mexico City in 1862. With the end of this period of monarchy in 1867 and the restoration of the Mexican republic, the new Mexican state faced the issue of how to rebuild the nation. National identity was widely seen as a vital goal. A newly created ruling class composed by business leaders, government officials, aristocrats, and royalty, began negotiating as to how cultural differences might be marketed within the new colonial relationship and what sorts of social markers would be needed to create a new national identity. The challenge of creating a modern nation by means of industrialisation and scientific modernisation, combined with a passion for French culture, performed against mulato disavowal and a rejection of Indigenous cultures. As such, Mexican nationalism was formulated by the ruling class as a cultural project, with the intention of providing a set of idioms for cultural identity, economic

dynamism, and social harmony. By examining the ways in which colonial violence was enacted through the cultural and artistic nationalistic projects that resulted, we may gain a better understanding of the function of Mexican colonialism.

After the 1821 war of independence from Spain and the subsequent establishment of the French monarchy in the country, Mexico's ruling class sought to establish a national identity by means of art. General and dictator López de Santa Anna favoured European art traditions when he reopened the Real Academia de San Carlos (Royal Academy of San Carlos) in 1843, in an effort to consolidate the art academy after decades of neglect following Mexico's formation as an independent nation. Modelled on the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando (San Fernando Academy of Fine Art) in Madrid, it began a new chapter in Mexican art history. The academic painting style of the nineteenth century — sometimes known as academic realism — was strongly realistic, with an emphasis on detail. Preferred subjects included historical depictions of military and political events that led to the formation of new nations. But another art school developed at the same time, known as the *Costumbristas*, or 'people who document local customs'. Although not strictly Romantic, this new school shared the Romantics' interest in the perceived exoticism of Latin American cultures and landscapes. The *Costumbristas* examined the unique qualities of their home countries with the intention to provide a sense of national identity following the post-independence period.

The history of Mexican art of the second half of the nineteenth century seems inconceivable without the pristine, classical figure of Painter José María Velasco (1840–1912). José María Velasco shaped the idea of Mexico as a nation more than any other artist of his time. The premise underpinning Velasco's pastoral painting is a narrative of magnificence and opulence, highlighting the splendours of the imperial court and conditions of ethnic harmony in the newly established colonial state. His paintings depict the Indigenous rural landscape as a marginal zone, quite apart from the scientific progress and knowledge that marked the imperialist aspirations of the newly established bourgeois ruling class. Increased national interest provided an unrestricted space for associating these faraway regions with the tradition of *en plein air* Romantic landscape painting, as well as exoticism. Even though colonisation was already in place, Velasco was among the very few artists to journey, on several occasions, to Indigenous territories that had been colonised by the Spanish Empire, places which, at that time, remained still largely unexplored by Europeans. José María Velasco's oeuvre anticipated certain aspects of the modern era: painting *en plein air*, exoticism, exploration of distant lands, and travel as a means of expanding an individual's

perspective and experience — an effort often linked to escapism and a critical attitude toward civilisation.

Velasco was one of the outstanding painters of his time, exhibiting his works internationally with great success, and consequently became the leading interpreter of Mexican rural life. His paintings exhibited widely, both within Mexico and overseas, gaining international repute through his participation in the Exposition Universelle of 1889, in Paris (Worlds Fair Chicago 1893. 2018), and Chicago's 1893 World's Fair (Museo Nacional De Arte MUNAL. 2012). His sketches of Indigenous landscapes and depictions of everyday life, which later served as references for the monumental paintings he produced in his studio, illuminate not only Mexico's colonial history but also the intertwined intellectual relationships and mechanisms existing between society, politics, science, and art. In this regard, Velasco's compositions united pre-Hispanic symbols and contemporary national sentiments, in contrast to the severe neoclassicism of the early nineteenth century, which idealised and simplified its subjects. In Velasco's work, the combination of academic realism with Costumbrismo resulted in a new, unparalleled official style, which favoured national landscape painting as a romanticised depiction of colonial and racial domination. José María Velasco remains the most important Mexican painter of his day, who, through his landscapes, transformed Mexico's geography into a symbol of national identity.



Valle de México Desde el Cerro de Santa Isabel. José María Velasco. Oil on canvas, 137.5 x 226 cm., 1875. Museo Nacional de Arte, INBA, Mexico.

Landscape

Portrait of a Nation produced out of my field-based artistic research in the P'urhépecha forest, in the Mexican state of Michoacán, which I undertook as an artist-researcher in residence at El Colegio de Michoacán (College of Michoacán) between 2015 and 2018 (MITACS, n.d.). There I investigated manifestations of colonial violence as articulated in diverse facets of the extractive economy: state-sponsored violence, land appropriation, and enforced disappearance. Through a collaboration with Indigenous P'urhépecha scholars at the university, I was introduced to the P'urhépecha community of Cherán. On my first visit there in 2015, I presented my research proposal to the Concejo Mayor de Gobierno Comunal de Cherán K'eri — the main Indigenous authority in the community, composed of twelve Elders — and obtained their consent to participate in the everyday life of the community. I visited Cherán on four occasions: first in 2015 and returning each year thereafter. Each time, I stayed three months, completing a year's fieldwork. My artistic goal for this long-term project was to expand the possibilities of artistic interdisciplinary research by combining community-based research with site-specific practices and documentary filmmaking. As noted by Janneke Wesseling, "the exceptional thing about research in and through art is that practical action (the making) and theoretical reflection (the thinking) go hand in hand" (Wesseling 2011, 2). My aim was to investigate our relationship with the land through the lenses of extraction, exploitation, and colonisation.

The Indigenous P'urhépecha of Michoacán are ancestral victims of state power and colonial forms of governance woven through with violent disparities rooted in race, class, and geography. This context of dispossession, violence, and state divide did not occur in a vacuum; if anything, it emerged, rather, as the materialisation of slow processes and practices that perpetuate structural inequality and power imbalances in contemporary rural Mexico. These processes and practices tend to originate in catastrophic environments, but most of the time are prolonged and distributed in more gradual exchanges of knowledge and power between political institutions and privileged sites of power and wealth. Although they are often materialised violently in the landscape, such processes of land dispossession, social erasure, and colonial power have also long been exercised more subtly through visual culture. Racialised violence in the articulation of the nation's image becomes more visible as we interrogate visual representations of Indigeneity and the physical spaces they occupy or come from. By considering the colonial legacy of nineteenth-century landscape painting in Mexico through the paintings of José María Velasco, we can understand the circulation of such colonial visual power and the material infrastructure that supports it.

In the P'urhépecha territory, racialisation, racial genocide, and enforced disappearance are closely linked. Although they are materialised in space, these practices have also been constituted through time. My research necessitated moving between present and past, and across different locations. As such, multi-sited ethnography seemed an ideal approach, as its essence is to follow people, connections, and relationships across space. George Marcus describes it as a mode of ethnographic research that "moves out from single sites and local situations of conventional ethnographic research designs to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects and identities in diffuse time space.... This mobile ethnography takes unexpected trajectories in tracing a cultural formation across and within multiple sites of activity" (Marcus 1995, 96). As multi-sited ethnography moves across locations, consequently place becomes an essential element of the research. As such, I placed the idea of the single site under a critical lens — central to ethnographical methodology — what Marcus identifies as the discipline's "research imaginary" (Marcus 1999, 10). Engaging against an established methodology demands a new approach and a new system of aesthetics that takes ecologies and politics into account, alongside critical theory. My aim was to work through epistemological frameworks that deconstruct claims of truth and objectivity in established and largely unquestioned modes of academic writing and knowledge production. I used multi-sited ethnography in order to engage with alternative forms of knowledge production and circulation, while emphasising scholar activism, lived experience, and intersectionality.

Methodological questions are always concerned with political and ethical choices and strategies. Accordingly, I aimed to frame my research in such a way as to circumvent dominant neoliberal approaches such as capture and instrumentality. By decentring my perspective, I learned how to be attuned to my various social, cultural, geopolitical, and ecological realities. My research responds to the relationship between creative practices and resistance, opening up possible new alliances between Indigenous knowledge, critical theory, and art through a reconsideration of the politics of place. I decided to investigate Mexican settler colonialism by considering the relationship between the construction of national narratives and cultural trauma through the use of visual instruments. My hope is that doing so may help to establish a discursive groundwork that sets the design of coloniality into relief and which seeks to make visible the invisible and to visualise social hierarchies enacted geographically in contemporary colonial relationships. By considering the legacy of landscape painting in Mexico, I was able to reflect on the intersection between postcolonial thinking, historical imagination, and critical aesthetics, and create a research-based video

installation to intervene directly upon the Mexican Indigenous landscape. In so doing, I delved into Mexico's colonial archive and colonial imaginaries, imbued as they are with an epistemic and aesthetic power that helped articulate the nation's image.

I conducted research in the Velasco archive, which is hosted at the Museo Nacional de Arte (the National Museum of Art, or MUNAL) and contains information on most of his work (as well as almost three hundred paintings). Even though this archive is quite exhaustive, there are certain major gaps. For example, it is known that not only did Velasco conduct a thorough visual documentation of the Valley of Mexico, but he also ventured through central Mexico and into the south of the country, including Oaxaca. Extensive documentation exists regarding his work in the Valley of Mexico, yet far less is known about his paintings depicting south and central Mexico. I focused on some twenty paintings from his work in central Mexico, that fairly resemble the P'urhépecha landscape in Michoacán. The goal of this archival research, however, was not only to identify potential pictorial depictions of the P'urhépecha landscape but also to scrutinise thematic drifts, latencies, and tendencies that might be further explored and highlighted. This research aimed at assessing the implications, aesthetic and political, of the ways by which practices of colonial and racial domination have been visually maintained. By excavating the colonial archive and the colonial imaginaries manifested by Velasco's paintings, and placing them in dialogue, I was able to examine and assess the epistemic and aesthetic power that contributed to articulating Mexico's image as a nation.

After spending several months in Cherán, and through close collaboration with the community, I identified certain landscapes which, although we could not be fully certain they were those portrayed by Velasco, nonetheless had some distinctive topographic elements in common with his paintings. By understanding the P'urhépecha landscape as existing in a close relationship with Velasco's paintings, and then juxtaposing them side by side, I was able to trace a trajectory of the movement of Mexican imperialism through colonial visual power and its domination of the geography. Indigeneity, then, in this context, is not a new political imagining but rather becomes a cartography upon which may be mapped the transit of empire. Various members of the P'urhépecha community of Cherán collaborated alongside me, not only in the research process but also by participating directly in filming the video piece. Following careful analysis of a selection of Velasco's paintings, we resolved to carry out a visual, performative experiment wherein we would re-enact four of his landscapes directly in the P'urhépecha landscape of Cherán. By doing this, we aimed not only to expose the colonial visual power exercised in Velasco's paintings but also, hopefully, to lay a

discursive groundwork that would place into relief the very design of coloniality. Addressing the physical landscape on the basis of the relationships and activities undertaken by the social groups that form and transform it may permit us also to understand social landscapes as environments characterised by inequality, social violence, and exclusion. In carrying out these collaborations, my emphasis was on making visible the inextricable linkages between violence and the social production of space, in turn affecting social imaginaries, memories, and practices.

I enacted several experimental collaborations and creative interventions with the P'urhépecha people in Cherán attempting to rewrite the script of Mexico's national colonial history. I combined re-enactment and performance with ethnography, bringing them together in a visual exploration of story and power. Presented, more often than not, in a disjointed fashion, these interventions and collaborations made visible the unifying thread, otherwise obscured, running through all these practices. Documentary re-enactment defamiliarises our world, revealing the cracks and fissures in history and memory. Such practices rupture time and history and open up a space in which we may rethink the ideological power of history and memory. Re-enactment encourages us to question the common documentary ambition of creating a seamless illusion of the present. Erin Manning reminds us that "what the conjunction between research and creation does is make apparent how modes of knowledge are always at crosscurrents with one another, actively reorienting themselves in transversal operations of difference" (Manning 2015, 65). By bringing the past into the present, we may discern the ideological tools and effects that create forgetting, erasure, and suppression. Documentary re-enactment with the P'urhépecha people in Cherán was primarily an exploration of story and power. What does it mean for the P'urhépecha people to re-enact their own, personal experiences, or those of their community? I invited them to perform and to scrutinise themselves — from within their own circumstances and institutions — in order to write a new vocabulary of national colonial history, and to tear apart the coloniality of history and memory making.

In preparing for this research, I wanted to think carefully through the material conditions for my intervention. Ethnography understands site as the container of a particular set of social relations, and these relations may be untangled by observation in the field for long periods of time. In the field of ethnography, it is acknowledged that reality is a co-construction of researcher and subject, and that we — the ethnographers — are tasked with analysing structural relationships and producing a thick description of the events that unfold around us. In the classical ethnographic tradition, interviews and participant observation often occur in a carefully negotiated space, in order to create the

conditions for an ideal response from the subject. Whether this is achieved by positioning oneself in a familiar, comfortable context or by creating conditions of comfort in an artificial space, ethnographers have recognised that material conditions affect the responses of subjects. In classic ethnography, a successful intervention is one in which the interlocutor is at ease and expressive, because the framework of the intervention no longer calls attention to itself and is experienced, instead, as an ordinary exchange. However, as my research concerns extraction, exploitation, and colonial visual regimes, I wanted to move in the opposite direction, by drawing attention, dramatically, to the act of being documented as well as to the technological apparatus by which this is accomplished.

Since the very act of recording creates a sense of heightened importance, I sought to further enhance it with the use of a large and bulky surveillance camera, thereby challenging both the classical conception of ethnography and two key attributes of surveillance: invisibility and the absence of subject consent. While recording, I challenged this invisibility, this absence of subject consent, by continually drawing attention both to the unwieldy camera and the fact of being documented. Of course, members of the P'urhépecha community were always acutely aware of the surveillance apparatus at work in their landscapes. The landscapes that we document are never neutral, but are inherently bound up in the social and political specificities of the environment, as well as the political nature of the documentation itself. The term landscape is ambiguous, as it not only designates the environment around us but also relates intrinsically to pictorial tradition and the act of contemplation. Landscape is subject to and the result of multiple filtrations — the traces, readings, versions, and constructions of coexisting realities and selves. It is time to rethink landscape, in view of the heuristic experience of site acting against the hegemony of vision. During my fieldwork in the P'urhépecha landscape, the traditional tropes of the fieldwork encounter — immersion and distance — gave way to a narrative of intervention wherein the aesthetics of collaboration took the place of conventional documentary approaches. In this sense, ethnography occurred through processes of material and social interventions, turning the field into a site for epistemic collaboration.



Portrait of a Nation. Victor Arroyo. Video Installation, 2019. Still.

Portrait

In Velasco's paintings, Indigenous Peoples are represented as mere staffage or accessories, their only purpose being to serve as visual components supporting the artist's poetical composition of pure landscape. There is no dialogue between the artist and the portrayed. The staging is not negotiated but imposed. In his landscapes, Velasco often imposes a spatial ordering of the elements, variously depicted as characters and via situations, poses, and costumes. However, the Indigenous subjects remain anonymous. No information is evident regarding their lives, hopes, or desires. They are depicted as inhabitants of a pastoral idyll, absent of colonial violence, land dispossession, and racial annihilation. The grandiosity of these idylls in Velasco's works lends a sense of poetic harmony to images in which national pride, Romantic poetry, and daily life blend together within a Romantic landscape. To depict central Mexico as a Romantic landscape is to erase many years of systemic oppression and colonial violence, exercised outside the boundaries of artistic depiction. Even the Indigenous subjects' garments are little more than markers of national iconography, aimed at evoking exoticism while enhancing the effect of the art. The visual ordering of Velasco's painted compositions adheres to colonial hierarchies of gender, race, and class, that ought not to be read separately but as a set of interconnected hierarchies of visual

power. In these paintings, each and every visual element refers to structures of power, to violent orderings of race, gender, and class. Here, visual representation is a tool of power linked to knowledge and imagination but also to violence and exclusion, all impossibly entangled, yet with the power to define who or what may exist and remain — where, when, and how.

Audra Simpson has written that, "to speak of Indigeneity is to speak of colonialism and anthropology, as these are the means through which indigenous people have been known" (Simpson 2007, 67). Her reflection acknowledges the role of systems of knowledge — anthropology and ethnography — in perpetuating ongoing violence against Indigenous peoples living under settler-colonial occupation. This ongoing violence is not only physical and social but also epistemological. Colonial landscape painting — fundamental instrument for visual domination — promoted and buttressed asymmetrical power relations between race and class. Such assertions of power may be found at the roots of inequality, capitalism, colonial power, struggle, and erasure. The power to represent, to define, and to extract. As Stuart Hall remarks, "every regime of representation is a regime of power" (Hall 1990, 225). Such withdrawals are achieved through planned trauma and dispossession — manifestations of political power. However, an epistemological shift is currently taking place, due in large part to recent advocacy on the part of Indigenous artists and scholars, comprising an understanding that no documentary should be made without acknowledging the visual practice's intrinsic relationship to colonialism, capitalism, and exploitation. As such, I was led by the P'urhépecha themselves. The camera, it was understood, is an instrument that mediates aesthetic thought, and thus an object with powerful social implications. My study of fieldwork was primarily, but not exclusively, an epistemological inquiry into lens-based practices, outlining their historical, geopolitical, and artistic contexts.

One of the goals of my research in the P'urhépecha landscape was to expand the possibilities of artistic research. My aim was not only to offer an original contribution to socially engaged art practices and methodologies, but also to revisit their genealogies, critique their limitations, and reclaim them. To this end, I critically examined the history, specificity, and geopolitics of place by weaving together community-based research with multisited ethnography, sound recording, and visual anthropology. By re-photographing Velasco's landscape paintings with a surveillance camera and juxtaposing them against ethnographic documentation, I situated video technology and landscape painting as technologies of violence, producing depictions of landscape ordinarily inaccessible to the gaze. I used this interdisciplinary methodological approach to understand various geographically dispersed phenomena, such as inequality, capitalism, colonial power,

and extractive practices. As such, my video installation addresses the complexities of the political geography of race in Mexico, situating landscape painting and video technologies as surveillance assemblages that normalise and thus provide a basis for colonial violence. My incursion in the territory of cultural representation is informed by Russell's *Experimental Ethnography* as she says "that experimental ethnography is intended not as a new category of film practice but as a methodological incursion of aesthetics on cultural representation, a collision of social theory and formal experimentation" (Russell 1999, 11).

Tuck and Wayne Yang remind us that "Decolonization is not a metaphor" (Tuck, Wayne Yang 2012, 1). It rather seeks to challenge and subvert the very foundations of modernity, together with its epistemological, ontological, and economical assumptions. For the decolonial approach, resistance is not enough to bring about the radical changes necessary to achieve social justice and equality. The suppression or dismissal of the views and perspectives of the Global South, as well as Indigenous ways of thinking and being, is a colonizing, universalizing force aimed at subordinating and dominating other cultures and ways of living. Postcolonial theory and research represent a critical engagement with the legacies of Western modernity, disentangling the ways in which it is implicated in colonialism and imperialism. This involves not only the unearthing of what the colonial experience has buried but, rather, the use of decolonial thought to untangle its various strands: material domination, exploitation, racial classification, and dispossession. To achieve decolonisation, it is not enough to value other cultures and knowledges, or to promote multiculturalism, diversity, equity, and inclusion. Decolonisation is about the praxis of dismantling material and symbolic structures. The historical entanglements of racism, capitalism, and colonialism correspond to the enduring asymmetries of power, both geopolitical and economic, between the Global North and the Global South. The geopolitics of knowledge and the coloniality of power are intimately intertwined. It is the means by which the Global North manufactures poverty.

Material is never neutral, nor are race or visual culture. Art practices, such as that of José María Velasco, may serve as forms, overt or covert, of violence and exclusion. They control what forms of knowledge matter, who is heard and seen, and in which locations and under what conditions. Through documentation, recollection, and performance, my video installation *Portrait of a Nation* presents images as forms of historical knowledge, deploying them as acts of resistance and remembrance. I sought to use video surveillance to challenge institutional power asymmetries in visual culture, at the intersection of site, history, and memory. Instead of scrutiny, control, and

supervision, here a surveillance camera becomes a tool for retaliation and self-representation. My artistic research in the P'urhépecha landscape in the state of Michoacán, emphasised the importance of collective action and political mobilisation in the struggle against colonial violence and its legacies. Coloniality is neither a discrete event nor a historic arrangement fixed in time and space. It is a totalizing architecture that demands a close examination of our geopolitical intimacies and complicities. In carrying out my artistic research into P'urhépecha social structures, communities, and events, I was mainly interested in reflecting on notions of state violence and colonial visual regimes. In so doing, the machinations of colonialism and resource extraction were revealed as a set of social relationships, spaces of production, and governmental structures intimately intertwined within a complex system of property relations, capital, politics, and identity. As Coulthard postulates, "any strategy geared toward authentic decolonisation must directly confront more than mere economic relations; it has to account for the multifarious ways in which capitalism, patriarchy, white supremacy, and the totalizing character of state power interact with one another to form the constellation of power relations that sustain colonial patterns of behavior, structures, and relationships" (Sean Coulthard 2014, 14).

Resistance, in this context, is the will to navigate the complexities of settler colonialism as an ongoing practice. Visual art does little to question the historical inequalities between settlers and Indigenous peoples. It is necessary to unveil and illuminate how systems of visual distribution, such as museums and art galleries, continue to perpetuate settler perspectives of history. By displaying artwork — even radical artwork — in colonial institutions such as museums and galleries, we adopt the colonial gaze that we seek to work against. By displaying artwork functioning in harmony with — rather than in contradiction to — a colonial institution, we continue to pander to whiteness instead of challenging coloniality. As such, I found myself wondering whom my work is being shared with: who is the intended spectator of my work? Who is the audience for these works? And whose stories are they telling? I realised that, in fact, my practice is not concerned with creating spectators, having audiences, and communicating a message. My work is meant to be an act of resistance by removing spectatorship and focusing instead on relationships and communality. My video installation is meant to reverse art history's colonial gaze precisely by not offering a gaze. The artwork is merely a stage in the process, not a byproduct of it nor an ultimate endpoint. My video installation addresses this complexity precisely, using portraiture as a tool, as an instrument of postcolonial retaliation. By entangling landscape painting with political history, *Portrait of a Nation* enacts a nuanced study of memory and explores the

political dimensions of space, making visible the invisible and visualizing social hierarchies that are enacted geographically within contemporary colonial relationships.



Portrait of a Nation. Victor Arroyo. Video Installation, 2019. Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery. Montreal, Canada. Photo by Guy L.Heureux.

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