

Maddu Huacuja



Open the Way

The Mary L. Fifield Art Gallery at Bunker Hill Community College

Maddu Huacuja Open the Way



"Jakelin se fue al Norte pero llegó al cielo/Jakelin headed North, but arrived in heaven," Acrylic on linen, 85" x 154".

"Open the way" is Maddu Huacuja's meditation on movement, life, migration and the journey of life to death, expressed in the paintings and drawings featured in this exhibition. The four paintings, three drawings and three oil pastels featured in this exhibition comprise the presented trajectory of Huacuja's engagement with the present and the transcendent and with the material and evanescent aspects of history and existence.

The works of art gathered here provide a snapshot of two series on which Huacuja has been working for the past decade: *The Green Blood Bank*, her reflection on the endangered Amazon jungle, and the contemporaneous *Love Letters* series. There are also independent works that extend her exploration of nature, identity, emotion and social issues – themes she has pursued throughout her career.

As time passes and historical events change the way Huacuja perceives the nature of her relationship with her chosen subjects, she adjusts her portrayals of the beings, people, animals and places that define her imagined and created theater of life to reflect her ongoing exploration of her chosen themes. Consistently, in each work and across her series of related paintings, drawings and oil pastels, Huacuja explores an expressive vocabulary of line, form and space that best presents the emotions, movements, colors, gestures and settings of the people who surface in her work. Taken together, her works compose a theater of time and existence that record the world she has witnessed and her works become a record of stories enacted and given form in art.

Huacuja's path to this exhibition began with her lifelong exploration of her identity, as a Mexican-American, and her existence as a global citizen. As her life has unfolded, Huacuja has explored her mixed selves combined with her interest in diverse environments and in the animals and peoples who share our living space. One of her early interests was the Amazon jungle, with its rich and diverse life and its peoples, myths and iconic animal life. From her regard for their lives and her research about their environments, she began, in the past ten years, to create a series of drawings and paintings within which she explores subjects and themes focused on her desire to capture that which is fleeting and vanishing in the Amazon. Yet, even as the jungle diminishes, its continuing life still retains its continuity and connections with Nature. The outcome of Huacuja's concern with the Amazon is *The Green Blood Bank* series, wherein she represents, with unflinching determination, the state of the endangered rainforest.

As Huacuja expressed, "The title came from a dream in which I was wandering around a dense jungle, when suddenly I came upon a steel and glass building. I went inside and asked, 'What is this place?' Someone explained that it was the green blood bank, that they kept green blood Rh+ and Rh- to provide infusions and transfusions to all the plants and animals in the jungle."

From this dream came the denizens of *The Green Blood Bank* – tigers, hyenas, monkeys, jaguars – presented as anthropomorphic beings who combine aspects of the natural and supernatural. Huacuja's Amazon is a place of mysterious forces, shown in a



"Tigre Acorralado/ Cornered Tigre," Acrylic on linen, 48" x 42".



"Tigre Madonna" from *The Green Blood Bank Oeuvre*, Conte and charcoal on Arches paper, 28" x 43".



"Pietà" from *The Green Blood Bank Oeuvre*, Conte and charcoal on Arches paper, 28" x 43".



"Madonna and Child" from *The Green Blood Bank Oeuvre*, Conte and charcoal on Arches paper, 28" x 43".

delicate, ephemeral way as they morph across the divides between human and animal, human and the divine. In her drawings, the outlines of figures are juxtaposed against white backgrounds as though they were already the ghosts of their past selves. The idea of vanishing presence that will become absence is central to Huacuja's meditation on the inhabitants of the Amazon: she makes her figures come to life fully aware that their time might be short. As she states, "We are facing the very real end of a world inhabited by wild creatures as we stand by helplessly and watch Greed devour Beauty; as we stand by and see the Jungle disappear on Earth and in our own selves." In Huacuja's drawings from this series, mother animals clutch their young and tigers emerge as the guardians and enablers of possible communication between animals and humans.

For Huacuja, "Tigers are warriors. Aztecs went to war dressed in Tiger and Jaguar skins and wearing Jaguar heads as helmets, facing their enemies through the jaws and teeth of lions and jaguars. The Aztecs ate rattlesnakes. They were wild. They were also poets and fine artists." In "Tigre Acorralado/Cornered Tiger" and "Pietà," Huacuja shows two aspects of the tiger, the hunted and the guide; the latter can carry humans into the next realm of existence across the border between life, death, trance and sustenance.

In *Love Letters* a coterminous series to *The Green Blood Bank* Huacuja expresses the emotions of gratitude and place that define life as living creatures extend across time in chains of being and becoming. In the semi-abstract forms found in "I Ask Permission to Be Born" and "Mi Vida: I Love You Like a Rock," she uses line and color to express the movement of existence in patterns that evoke dreams and thoughts. These works are portraits of the subconscious parts of our minds, which rely on instinct and inspiration to perceive meaning in the events that attend the journey from birth to death. As Huacuja has explained, "The large format allows for dancing movement, and the oil sticks illuminate the paper with spirals and lines that allude to forests and wings and the vastness of the Southern Hemisphere. Terracotta and gold entwine with black and red; a touch of cerulean explains the sea and Love nods its magnificent head and says, 'I am here.'"

Within the world Huacuja has created, she follows a train of thought that links animals and people, who merge into one another in a continuing cycle of shared existence. From *The Green Blood Bank series*, "Madonna and Child" presents us with a monkey and offspring who look out at the spectator with a puzzled look that seems to question the spectator about their fate. Tender sorrow defines their expressions, mingled with a small bit of hope for a future life untrammelled by the existential

threats they perceive from their endangered perspective. In Huacuja's drawing, the monkey and child seem to pause on a journey that implies a migration from home to an unknown future. Migration and movement have been a part of human existence since the first *homo sapiens* walked out of our ancestral home in Africa and began to wander and populate the world. Migrations caused by natural disasters, such as fire, flood and drought, and the failure of land to produce abundant food define Latin America's history in significant ways. From the abandoned cities of the Maya, Aztec and Moche, which became lost when they could no longer sustain their peoples, to the more recent waves of migrants coming north to seek new places to live, the movement of people and animals in search of a sustainable life is part of Latin American identity.

"Mi Vida" from *Love Letters Suite*, Oil pastels on fiber, 48" x 60".



"I Ask Permission to Be Born" from *Love Letters Suite*, Oil pastels on fiber, 48" x 60".





"Refugees," Oil pastels on fabric, (each) 37"x 82".

The universal aspects of migration are the subject of Huacuja's drawing "Refugees," in which she draws the bodies and heads of two migrants, whose gestures speak of sorrow, despair, exhaustion and agony and of the loss of identity that is a part of mass migrations. These two figures once had an identity firmly established by place and people. Now, even their faces have lost form as they seek an unknown new identity that has not yet formed in the liminal space they inhabit as they move from home to the unknown. Huacuja's sharp lines, with their abrupt and jagged movements, enact the emotions that accompany those of her figures—standing and sitting with their hands up to their faces in gestures that express their plight.

"Jakelin se fué al Norte pero llegó a cielo"/Jakelin headed North, but arrived in heaven" focuses on the metamorphosis of the migrant and the transcendence of life experience in an environment defined by a specific and allusive geography that transposes life into hybrid mythologies, both shamanistic and Christian. The background of the painting is composed of the iconic volcanoes of Mexico City (Popocatepetl and Iztaccihuatl), and place the spectator in Huacuja's childhood home. But this painting is not a work based on Huacuja's personal history. It is, instead, an amalgamation of specific and general aspects and events associated with past and present migrations, resonant with the vanishing species of the endangered Amazon.



"Tierra, cielo, agua y fuego/ The Earth, the Air, the Fire and the Water," Acrylic on canvas, 120" x 75".

Migration does not always end in a successful resettlement. In "Jakelin," Huacuja pictorially recounts an interpretation of the fate of six-year old, Jakelin Caal Maquin, the Guatemalan girl, who died as her family attempted to migrate to a new life in the United States. In Huacuja's tribute to the bravery of those who migrate under the most adverse circumstances, Jakelin stands in the middle of a caravan reminiscent of iconic images of The Magi coming to worship the child in Bethlehem. But Huacuja's three Magi, on their camels, are the tigers of the Amazon, the jaguars taking human form, as they ride their camels and donkey. They too need to migrate as their homes are disappearing and their way of life is being disrupted. These "Magi" are bringing other endangered species with them in the hope of reaching a safe haven. Evoking the Magi coming to worship the birth of Christ, Huacuja's images blend Amazonian traditions of shamanic transformation of jaguar into men, and vice versa.

In Huacuja's depiction of this great migration, Jakelin stands by the side of the donkey, as though she were leading the caravan of the Magi. Jakelin's portrait is based on a photograph that was published in newspapers at the time of her death, on December 8, 2018. In Huacuja's painting, the child stands as she did in the photograph, dressed in her simple clothes, representative of her earthly poverty, as all around her the painting's action unfolds. In life, Jakelin was powerless, but in death, she is surrounded by a cosmos of metaphysically transformed beings who have transcended their earthly forms. Next to Jakelin, appears a Buddha-like figure with golden halo.



In the painting's upper left, Huacuja delineates the figures of Alberto Martínez Ramírez and his twenty-three month old daughter, Valeria. Both drowned in the Río Grande, as they attempted to reach the United States from El Salvador. Ramírez and Valeria are represented with haloes around their heads, in a manner that evokes the Virgin and Child. In front of them, a figure dressed in green, riding a donkey, protectively holding out an arm that shields Valeria and Ramírez from harm. The grouping of these figures recalls the Flight into Egypt of The Virgin, Child and Joseph, as they flee persecution and certain death at the hands of King Herod, (the puppet king of Israel installed by the Romans). The Virgin, Child and Joseph fled certain death as they went into Egypt, and their migration is emblematic and metonymic of the great migrations of global refugees, both human and animal, that we see in our contemporary world. Huacuja's use of the colors red and green indicate areas of great threat, while yellow and green point to the colors of the Brazilian flag – the country where the greatest destruction of the Amazon continues to take place.

On the painting's right, Huacuja places two figures, which represent aspects of today's reality for Latin America – a yellow jaguar and a reddish-brown Mexican coyote. The jaguar is a guardian figure, one of the traditional roles of the shamanic jaguar-human transformation.

The Mexican coyote is an allusion to the shamanic human-animal transformation. It is also an allusion to the "coyotes," the smugglers, who bring migrants across countries. As such, they are humans transformed into animals, who although illegal, bring humans out of immediate danger. As guardians of the jungle, jaguars become transformed into the role of the shaman and both are traditional guardian of the forest. These symbolic and allegorical reversals of form and identity represents the realities of destruction and migration, of flight and transformation.

Huacuja's painting places the spectator into clear and sharp confrontation of pertinent issues of our time, in an historical moment, add comma here where the choices made by governments either destroy the natural world or bring it back into balance, even as individuals and animal species appear powerless against governments which decide the fate of the world. Huacuja's painting, with its brilliant colors, evocative forms and clear message, confronts the spectator and forces them to reflect on where they stand on the "cause and effect", and asks them to make a choice to save the planet or participate in its destruction.

An equally powerful message is found in the painting "Tierra, cielo, agua y fuego/ The Earth, the Air, the Fire and the Water," where the forces of nature are represented as abstract colors and forms, which flow together and blend, and then emerge as streams of energy and life pulsating with the rhythmic lines. "Tierra" presents an image of both creation and destruction. In its ambiguity, it enables contemplation on the formation of the universe and the world, and then its dissolution. Its ambiguity holds both possibilities. It is up to the spectator to decide

whether they are witnessing an act of creation or of destruction.

Less ambiguous is Huacuja's "Ehecatl, dios del viento, creador del mundo/Ehecatl, God of the Wind, Creator of the World," where the creative force of Ehecatl dances and generates the world of Nature that is now so endangered. Ehecatl was the Aztec god responsible for creation and culture, a fitting symbolic figure for Huacuja's themes, which bind together her reflections on life, the world, contemporary events, universal human experiences and the transcending reality of the connections between life and death that form the basis for the metaphysics of spirituality in its many forms.

Huacuja's exhibition is an opportunity for spectators to stop and consider the subjects and themes she presents to the spectator in the works that spring from her desire to enable others to understand why what is happening to the helpless and unfortunate matters. Through the artist's representation of the environments, animal species and humans being impacted by the forces that destroy their homes and lives, she enables her audience to commune with their plight and with her emotional response to their reality. In so doing, Huacuja leads her audience to its reception of her message, one which delineates this crucial moment in human history in which we currently find ourselves.

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"Ehecatl, dios del viento, creador del mundo/ Ehecatl, God of the Wind, Creator of the World," Acrylic on canvas, 60"x 60".





October 10, 2019 – February 21, 2020

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