

FLUID PERCEPTIONS: BANYANS AS METAPHOR

My latest works feature large-scale on-site painting installations of dense, natural landscapes that overwhelm the viewer's perceptual senses. Each individual painting is created over the course of the day in an intense wet-on-wet cumulative manner that underscores the complex nature of trying to capture first-hand the multidimensional and ever-changing experience of being in that specific location. These "all-day" plein-air paintings have become documents of a real-time process: the accumulation of fleeting moments, the experience of the day. The works are as much about the materiality of the paint and the physicality of the painting process as they are about mixing and melding the illusionist possibilities of painting with its true abstract nature.

I have for a long while liked to show my individually-conceived paintings as large installations of closely hung, formally connected works that offer a sense of compelling "overwhelmingness" to the viewer. By creating the illusion of recognizable landscape, I draw the viewer into what is first perceived from a distance as a conventional space. Up close, however, the images break down and the lush, gestural paint marks, the squeezed-out paint patches and the occasional areas of raw canvas help, instead, to reinforce the two-dimensional abstract and material character of painting itself. I want to lure viewers in through the image and then push them out through the surface.

Banyan as Metaphor is my largest multi-panel work to date. The painting consists of 15 "touching" panels (ten 60 x 48 inches and five 48 x 48 inches) that create a 14 ft. H x 20 ft. W "single" work that was created specifically for The Ringling Museum exhibition *BACK AND FORTH: thinking in paint* which ran from August 14-Nov 8, 2015, in Sarasota, Florida. This exhibition showcased paintings created by five Florida State University faculty that referenced or were directly inspired by The Ringling Collections, and, in so doing, offered five diverse solutions in contemporary painting's dialogue with the past.

In making *Banyan as Metaphor*, I drew from both old (Peter Paul Rubens, Diego Velazquez) and modern (Robert Henri) painterly masters in The Ringling Collection who created images that were specific in an illusionistic way, but also left traces of their brush strokes as evidence of the process of painting and materiality of the paint. I was also influenced by contemporary artists in their collection interested in ideas of perception and the relative nature of color (Josef Albers, James Turrell, David Hockney). Given the enormity of the banyan trees on The Ringling grounds, I felt compelled to work in the monumental scale of Rubens' *The Triumph of the Eucharist* cycle of paintings and riff on his visually fluid but dense, High Baroque style to create a counterpoint to Albert Bierstadt's romantic vision of a tranquil sublime nature.

Banyan as Metaphor specifically related to Hockney's photographic collages that create an expanded overall view of a scene: they are composed of numerous individual images taken over a period of time and from different viewpoints and perspectives. Instead of using a camera, my documentation proceeds from working on-site and independently painting different parts of the banyan trees and then arranging them into a new whole. This formal expanded, multi-perspectival aesthetic beautifully parallels the often fractured, post-modern, cultural Caribbean experience.

Formally, the jigsaw-puzzle nature of the 3-row, 5-column, 15 panel *Banyan as Metaphor* allowed me to inadvertently create new "spaces" where the edges of the individually perceived/conceived paintings met. Symbolically, these new spaces/realities created from the connection of non-contiguous spaces/paintings seemed to visually represent what happens when cultures meet: they mix and meld and create new hybrid versions of themselves.

I was particularly drawn to banyan trees for several reasons. First, the fact that while it is a beloved staple in public parks across the Caribbean, it is not native to the region. It was brought over from the Indian/Asia minor. Secondly, I saw its longevity and cathedral-like grandeur (both created by its walking expansions of aerial roots) functioning as a metaphor for how we migrate and settle, or lay down family roots in an area over time: the roots turning into the supportive trunks, the first generation creating and nurturing the next until eventually the new offshoot support the growing canopy. As an immigrant, I know how "sense of place" and "belonging" and "community" (or lack of it) greatly influences the construction of personal identity, and I am drawn to the dynamic collective the banyans represent as a living object, painted image and metaphor.

I believe my comfort with and aesthetic attraction to a multifaceted existence comes from my background as a Cuban refugee and first-generation immigrant. I had to be open to seeing things from at least two culturally distinct, and often opposing, perspectives for all of my life. Unsurprisingly, these identity struggles are common themes in Latin American art of the last few decades, in which the postmodern Latin American subject is fragmented and fluid, with multiple unresolved and at times contradictory identities.

Lilian Garcia-Roig, 2018