

AN ARTISTIC EXPLORATION OF HUMAN EVOLUTION

In her unique totem exhibition “The Mind at Large,” Hillary Riggs traces our history and seeks the essentials to help us share a world vision.

By Gussie Fauntleroy

Tracing her fingers up the spine of the Andes mountains on her raised-surface globe, Hillary Riggs felt the column of rugged peaks continue through the North American Rockies and then arc across the Bering Strait, ending in the Himalayas of Tibet. The long crescent reminded her of the journeys of people and culture that have followed that same route over eons of time. The curving mountainous spine is like the backbone of the earth, she thought. It symbolizes the flow of people and ideas, just as the human and animal spine channels the energy of life.

Riggs imagined a colossal dragon, his body draped across the northern Pacific, the spiny ridge of his long, curving tail dangling down into the Americas. This blending of earth and animal became the artist’s vision of the heart and soul of the earth. It also became a central image on one of the six wooden totems comprising her newest body of work.

“The Mind at Large” employs carved and painted totems to explore the evolution of the human race through shared patterns of knowledge, thought, language, and cultural innovation as these have moved and changed over distance and time. The work is a celebration of the entire earth—all cultures, languages, and information, all peoples.

“My son asked me why I use dots so much. It’s because they’re an art form the Australian aborigines use in their paintings and these are not abstract—they’re maps of the Dreamtime, deliberately laden with information,” Riggs explains. “In a way that’s what these totems are all about; the idea that we think and express ourselves using chunks of culture, genetic imprints, and everything we’ve been taught. We’re only original in terms of the way we combine things. I rearrange them in a way that tells the story I want to tell.”

The story begins in primordial forms, in



the genetic, biochemical, and elemental information that builds and carries life. This core aspect of existence is symbolized in images featured on the first two totems: the double helix of DNA, the travels of sperm, sap, molecules, and roots. But the evolution of knowledge reaches beyond the material realm. In very early cultures, shamanic practices allowed the transmittal of medicinal information directly from plants to people, Riggs believes.

From there, innumerable forms of cultural expression evolved and spread across the earth. The two middle totems present many of the patterns, belief systems, and innovations that have had the greatest impact on the human race, through both feminine and masculine aspects of humanity. On 56 small panels are painted images of such things as scientific inventions, human sacrifice in various forms, goddess icons, and artistic accomplishments.

In Riggs’ view, the human spirit, or “mind at large” is this labyrinth of cultural change

which we navigate, just as a woman and boy maneuver a canoe through the universe in the central panel on one of the totems. As in much of her imagery, the artist draws on personal experience for inspiration—in this case, the memory of canoeing on northern waterways with her son.

For the fourth totem, “Generation,” the artist employs the universal symbol of the forked tree to represent the genealogy of the human race. Featureless faces in all shades of human pigment tell of the long succession of generations that have branched from the single seed of human life. In a parallel lineage, the names of dozens of deities from cultures around the world are listed on the totem’s sides. And connecting the universal with the individual are panels depicting a mother nursing her baby and a father holding his child.

The final totem brings the story full circle. Crowned with a giant butterfly, it celebrates the sacred and omnipresent process of metamorphosis and transformation—in nature and animals, the individual consciousness and the entire human race, on both material and spiritual planes.

A totem, as created and used by traditional peoples, is comprised of images and figures that represent sources of power for the individual or tribe. For the human race, Riggs believes, an essential source of power lies in “a deliberate embracing of all aspects of the self, and of all our culture.”

“I think it really is time,” she contends, “for all of us to share a world vision.”

The art of Hillary Riggs may be seen at Quimera Gallery at Collaboration, 544 South Guadalupe Street. Hours: 10:00-5:00 Monday-Saturday. (505) 984-3045. An exhibition of “The Mind at Large” opens June 9, with an artist’s reception from 5-8 p.m. Woodwork for these pieces is done by Steve Sovelove, with carving by Carlos Rascon.



“The Biological Missing Link—Illumination and Illusion”

PHOTOS BY MARK NOHL



"The Mind at Large—Earth and Water, Air and Fire"



"Generation" and "Metamorphosis and Transformation"