

Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation
Individual Support Grant Application 2007
Narrative Statement
Humberto Batista

From a very early age I was attracted to old objects. As a child I would spend hours rearranging and putting them back together. When I was ten, my family moved to a farm near the pre-Columbian ruin of Teotihuacán. Every afternoon after school, I would go out into the surrounding fields, digging in the dirt, turning over rocks to find fragments of old clay figurines and arrowheads. I would examine them, admire them and add them to my growing collection.

At ten it was difficult to completely comprehend the strong energy that I could feel from these highly artistic ancient objects. What I did understand is that I had found treasures (and I still have them today). And I do know that this early experience laid the foundation for what would eventually be my lifelong work.

My next definitive experience was the work that I did for the Mexican government during the two years I attended art classes at La Esmeralda Art School in Mexico City. I was hired to work on the restoration of one of the murals by David Alfaro Siqueiros. Not only was it an honor to participate in a small way in preserving part of the history of Mexican art, but it taught me, the power of the visual image, the grandeur of mural making and the materials and techniques used in this medium of painting on walls.

A third defining experience that defined my artistic work and life was moving to San Francisco where I started painting and building assemblages. It was after two years of art school and the first time I was away from my own country. Although, it made me acutely aware of the vast cultural differences, it also forced me to acknowledge that there were many ways to perceive life. I also realized that my own Mexican culture was a very strong one and that I became even more appreciative of the richness of its history and art. And at this time I made the commitment to continue to make art despite all the challenges that it involved.

In my late twenties, I moved back to Mexico. In order to support myself while creating art, I started working in the antique business. I loved the smell of the wood from the old religious icons, the texture of mottled surfaces of rusted iron, the feel of old paper and fabrics and the way these

objects seem to transmit the energy that things accumulate in countless years of interacting with people. Soon I started to use the broken and discarded pieces from those objects in building my assemblages. And this conjoining of those objects from so many different provenances with so many different surfaces, textures, colors, ages and meanings has been the continuous thread in my work today.

I am of course influenced by pre-Hispanic (Aztec and Olmec) and Mexican colonial art, but I make visual allusions to other artistic traditions of African, western and eastern cultures.

I build personal connections with every old object used in my work. The past knowledge gained from the antique business and the fact that these objects have been admired, accumulated and collected while lovingly displayed in my crowded studio has contributed to this relationship.

My method of work varies. The objects speak to me. Very often I literally and figuratively de-construct the object. In reconstructing the object to its new form, it's my intuition which dictates its meaning and new form. I am aware, however, that my Mexican cultural meanings are always present in my mind.

The theme I am working with now is "*el nagual y la muerte*" (the joyful animal side of human beings and death). The concept behind this theme is one that has concerned indigenous artists and thinkers from the Olmec to the present: How are we to reconcile the joy of life with the inevitability of death?

The current body of work created over the past year, consists of forty pieces. (15 slides of this work are enclosed) This work was to be a solo exhibition in one of the principal galleries in my city of Oaxaca and was scheduled for this past October. Unfortunately because of the political situation in Oaxaca, the exhibition had to be postponed. Receiving this prestigious grant would not only be an honor and an affirmation of my work, but would be an enormous financial help for me and my family, especially at this time.

Humberto Batista November 2006

