



Zenil, Nahum B. (b. 1947)

by Edward J. Sullivan

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Nahum B. Zenil emerged on the international art scene in the 1980s as part of a generation of Mexican artists who were re-examining the artistic traditions of their country as well as their personal positions within Mexican contemporary culture. Zenil's art, mostly autobiographical, has consistently acknowledged and utilized his identity as a gay man to define his artistic personality.

In a number of ways, Zenil has looked to the art of Frida Kahlo, with its strong dose of self-examination and criticism, as a beacon of inspiration. The portrait of Kahlo is sometimes incorporated into Zenil's works and he creates a lively dialogue between his own portrait and that of Kahlo, whose art has often been seen as representing the triumph of will over adversity.

Employing an often small, intimate format, he re-works a number of traditional Mexican forms of artistic expression, such as the *retablo* or *ex-voto* form of art. This genre is comprised of images that give thanks to God, the Virgin Mary, or a saint for a favor received. Zenil appropriates this picture type and utilizes it to express a unique blending of religious and secular concepts, most of them related to his status as a gay man in the "macho" society of Mexico.

Zenil was born on a ranch in Chicontepec (Veracruz) in 1947. He studied to be a primary school teacher and received a degree in 1959 from the Escuela Nacional de Maestros in Mexico City. He soon discovered his interest in art and enrolled in the Escuela Nacional de Pintura y Escultura (called "La Esmeralda"), taking classes there from 1968 until 1972.

His first one-artist exhibition, at which he showed purely abstract work, took place in Mexico City in 1974. He continued to work as a school teacher in the Mexican capital until 1982, at which time he decided to devote himself full-time to painting and drawing.

Virtually all of the work that Zenil has exhibited since the early 1980s has incorporated images of himself, his long-time partner Gerardo Vilchis, his mother, and, at times, his students.

Zenil's preferred medium is mixed media (drawing, water color, and applied found objects) on paper. In the first half of the 1990s he executed a significant body of paintings on canvas, but the toxicity of the materials he used severely compromised his health and he was obliged to return to the paper format.

The use of paper with collage and drawing lends an intimate feel to his art and he consciously strives to draw the viewer into the realm of the innermost details of his private life, offering a glimpse into the ways in which he utilizes his sexual openness to combat stereotypes and prejudice.

In a number of his paintings and drawings text and image often play symbiotic roles. The texts often describe Zenil's frustration with sexual clichés and his hope that one day gay men and lesbians will receive equal treatment in Mexican society.

In many of his images Zenil also engages with traditional religious iconography. The Virgin of Guadalupe, the most revered religious symbol in Mexican society, is central to much of his work. At times the Virgin is given the face of Zenil's mother. At other times, the Virgin of Guadalupe watches over and protects the union of the artist and Gerardo Vilchis.

Irony, acute social commentary, and humor also play key roles in the work of Zenil. His satires of certain Mexican art critics who have condemned his life style are poignant and sharp critiques of the individuals concerned, as well as of the Mexican art world at large.

Zenil has also served as a strong supporter of gay and lesbian social and artistic causes in Mexico. He was one of the founders of the *Semana Cultural Gay* (Gay Cultural Week) held every year at the Museo Universitario del Chopo, an important museum in the Mexican capital; and he continues to provide encouragement to many artists whose work deals openly with their sexuality or with issues of sexual identity.

Zenil's work has been seen in numerous group exhibitions throughout Latin America, North America, Asia, and Australia. He has had significant one-artist shows throughout Mexico, most recently at the Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City, in 1999.

A major traveling exhibition of his work was seen in San Francisco, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and New York City in 1996-1997. Zenil's art is part of the permanent collections of such institutions as Mexico City's Museo de Arte Moderno and New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.

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Edward J. Sullivan is Professor of Art History and Chair of the Department of Fine Arts at New York University. He is the author of over 25 books and exhibition catalogues on the subject of modern and contemporary Latin American art.