



1. *Black Sun*, 2006, Acrylic on canvas, 10 ft diam. 2. *Green Flamingo*, 2006, Acrylic on canvas, 10 ft diam. 3. Detail *Green Flamingo*

Cristián Silva

Black Sun / Green Flamingo

October 13 through December 31, 2006

WorkSpace at the Blanton

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A gallery space dedicated to exploring new developments in contemporary art. WorkSpace features commissioned projects by emerging and mid-career artists from around the world.



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Black Sun/Green Flamingo

I am suspended in the air
like the birds' song
like the scent of flowers
that fill all spaces. - Leonel Lienlaf

Most of the myths and legends of the Pre-Hispanic people of the Americas are based on the mysteries of nature. Animals, water, the sky and the sun often appear as messengers, mediums, manifestations of power, symbols of wisdom and transcendence. Key mythological events, such as the foundation of Tenochtitlan, involve most of these characters. In this story, the Aztec people were guided by the god Huitzilopochtli—one of the main Aztec deities—to the final chosen place where the great city of their future empire was to be founded. Their divinity indicated an islet in the middle of a marsh as the site, where there would be a nopal cactus on a crag, with an eagle and a snake in its claws perched on top of it.

After indigenous Americans and the Spanish conquerors first encountered each other, new beliefs among the latter demanded new symbols to correspond with new rituals. One of the most notorious is the Andean ceremony known as the Festival of Blood (or Yawar Fiesta), in which a wild Condor is firmly attached to the back of a bull. This breathtaking ceremony represents the most eloquent symbolic re-enactment of the fierce, centuries-long struggle between the Inca and the Spanish.

Birds also appear frequently in the spiritual heritage of the Mapuche people from Chile. Knowledge and interpretation of bird song—its incantation, an alternation of sound and silence—has always been part of their daily act of communication, but also a form of integration with their natural surroundings.

A native of Santiago de Chile, Cristián Silva has cultivated an artistic language of his own, drawing inspiration from history, mythology, social critique, and psychology. His peculiar vision of culture, past and present, is often dusted with subtle and occasionally candid humour, resulting in a dense network of information. Through objects, drawings, videos and large mixed media installations, Silva's work inhabits a sphere where the political meets the existential, a zone where, for example, Socialist, Fascist and Masonic imagery coexist in tense harmony. By displaying this singular collection of slightly allegorical elements—that he refers to as “subjects in suspension”—the artist delivers a complex yet simple chronicle of his own life in the so-called periphery.

For this Workspace project at the Blanton Museum, Silva has created a site-specific piece titled Black Sun/Green Flamingo. Two ten-foot circular paintings on canvas in a darkened room present us with instantly recognizable imagery. The first panel, Black Sun, depicts a bright day with a black sun hidden behind the clouds projecting an awkward shadow onto the water. The other panel, Green Flamingo, depicts dusk and a green flamingo standing in the water on one leg. These images, located somewhere between new-age illustrations, ethnic surrealism and North American native imagery, suggest the revealing of a secret, a vision, or a sign.

The source for both these pictures are the front and back cover of the debut album by Texan soft-rock songwriter Christopher Cross (the original bright pink flamingo and the dark full moon have been altered by Silva by inverting their tones to negative). This

album, recorded in Austin, Texas, in 1979, quickly climbed the world charts with the hit songs *Sailing* and *Ride like the Wind* (where Silva noticed a captivating clue in the lyrics “...and I got such a long way to go, to make it to the border of Mexico...”).

In a region that has been wrestling with identity and migration issues for decades, *Black Sun/Green Flamingo* hints at these conflicts from the devious perspective of the sentimental. According to Silva, the nature of these images could also have other connotations: “...all of a sudden, I was fantasizing about the water in the pictures as if it were an idyllic version of the Rio Grande. I imagined an eclipse and a mythological bird made of jade standing halfway between both banks (a migrating bird caught in the middle of the night), a mystical warning, a sinister invitation, a veiled alchemic message. At the same time, from a circumstantial point of view, these pictures seemed to be whispering the crossed hopes, fears, and dreams of those on either side of the border; how each perceives the other...”

The journey these images have made is quite remarkable. Mr. Cross has pointed out that the flamingo painting on the album's cover was originally on the studio wall of the former bass player—and painter—of his band (the same studio where they use to rehearse in their early days). Due to the success of the album, these images reached an unexpectedly large audience in a short amount of time and would eventually become a symbol for a whole generation

of young, white American middle-class adults (as well as an icon to the eighties upper-class South American youth).

At that same time, 1980, another American pop-culture creation hit the world: the film *Xanadu*. It portrays the story of a young frustrated artist and his enchantment by a post-modern muse who emerges from a street mural: she encourages him to leave his reviled job—as a painter of oversized promotional reproductions of album covers—and to pursue his own genuine dreams. It is from this tradition that Cristián Silva returns these images to Austin: a life-cycle that began in a modest musician/painter's studio in Texas, from where they were launched into the world's consciousness, to now be returned to Austin, only this time as fine art on the walls of the Blanton Museum.

Cristián Silva's appropriative approach to “the white man's” culture through the transformation of one of its popular-culture symbols, is consistent with colonial dynamics in marginal locations and is pertinent to any of those eras or latitudes. A specific reference at the forefront of Silva's thought process is the seminal and ceaseless Antropofagia movement from early 20th century Brazil. Silva's simultaneously cannibalistic, vindictive and situationist procedure could lead us to the primary importance of *Black Sun/Green Flamingo*: the mutation of the Blanton's Workspace into a sacred room for multilayered spiritual exploration.