

Madre Tierra:
Peruvian Women's Art as Picturing Paradise¹

Rebecca Berrú Davis, PhD
St. Catherine University
St. Paul, Minnesota

March 14, 2021

As a third-generation Latina living in the United States, my research centers on art, faith, and justice as a way to understand the spiritual and religious expressions of those located on the margins of society. In this paper, I describe a project that embraces these interests in women and their creative activity while concurrently linking the global North and South. Over time, I have come to realize that this activist research focused on art is also a way to expand and deepen the dialogue about the environment. It extends what Pope Francis appealed for in his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'*, "If we are truly concerned to develop an ecology capable of remedying the damage we have done, no branch of the sciences and no form of wisdom can be left out, and that includes religion and the language particular to it." (*Laudato Si'*, 63). Certainly, those who experience the global inequities of environmental degradation and social decay firsthand have something significant to contribute to the conversation about healing the earth.² I further believe, as do others, that it is necessary to widen the scope and consider the varied ways that wisdom is communicated. One such source worth attending to is the arts.

Brazilian theologian Maria Clara Bingemer asserts that, "Rather than a theology of texts, a theology of testimonies can become a rich challenge for Latin American feminist theology in its attempt to rescue and empower women, who have been marginalized and muted by every social institution." She notes, "women's historical testimonies and research on their lives and experiences and thoughts" need to be retrieved.³ U. S. Latina theologian María Pilar Aquino proposes opening up places so that the socially marginalized and powerless "become active participants in articulating their interests, commitments and visions of justice."⁴ When considering these alternative "spaces" where women's insights are expressed, I propose that the notion of testimony and evidence of women's voice and vision regarding earth be extended

¹ This essay is dedicated to the memory of Isabel Principe Liñan, one of the women artists of Pamplona Alta, Peru mentioned in this essay, who recently passed away at the age of 39.

² Jon Sobrino maintains the conviction that if the Kingdom of God is Good News, its recipients, the poor, will fundamentally help in clarifying its content. In Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), 79.

³ Maria Clara Bingemer, *Latin American Theology: Roots and Branches*. (New York, Orbis Books, 2016), 83-84.

⁴ María Pilar Aquino makes reference to this in her chapter, "Feminist Intercultural Theology: Toward a Shared Vision of Justice," in María Pilar Aquino and Maria José Rosado-Nunes, eds, *Feminist Intercultural Theology: Latina Explorations for a Just World* (New York: Orbis Books, 2007), 25.

to art. Thus, I offer as an example, an enterprise by a group of Peruvian women to stitch into cloth visual testimonies of their reality and a just world they envision. Their convictions about environmental well-being and hope for achieving this goal are depicted in their fabric pictures, they call *cuadros*. My premise is that if we desire to expand our understanding of ways to attend to *Madre Tierra*, then attention to the wisdom of women, evident in their artistic endeavors, are important contributions not to be overlooked.

I begin this paper by introducing the reader to the women artists of Pamplona Alta, their context, their expressions of place and describe the project that unfolded and the exhibition that emerged. I then turn to this exhibition and explain how it provides spaces for encounter, connection and solidarity between two hemispheres with attention to our environment. To conclude, I return to the women's art underscoring the importance of the contribution art offers in illuminating our integral relationship with *Madre Tierra*.

The Women Artists

It is in the shantytowns that encircle most large cities in Latin America that one encounters the stark, visceral realities of life on the margins and its challenges. Increasing numbers of people migrate to the cities in search of better opportunities, residing in makeshift communities, struggling daily with the challenges of making do. Pamplona Alta is one such shantytown located on the southern edge of the capital city of Lima, Peru. These shantytowns are home to over 35% of the population of Lima.⁵ Many of these residents migrated to Lima after their lives were disrupted by the terrorism of the Shining Path in the 1980s and 1990s. However, these patterns continue as efforts to sustain a livelihood are diminished because of environmental devastation caused by deforestation, illegal mining that eclipses water tables or the disruption of seasonal patterns of agriculture or fishing, affected by climate change.⁶ Individuals and families are often left with no choice but to begin anew. In search of new prospects, these internal migrants move to the peripheries of major cities in order to build new lives. Most engage in the informal job market as construction workers, taxi drivers, and street vendors. However, for women who desire to nurse their babies, be accessible to their toddlers, accompany their school-age children to and from school, and provide a hot meal at midday for

⁵ Lima's 2021 population is now estimated at 10,882,757 (Peru's total population is 33,234,810). <http://worldpopulationreview.com/world-cities/lima-population/> (Accessed 3/14/21). For more on the shantytowns surrounding Lima, see Gustavo Riofrío's "The Case of Lima Peru", 2003. https://www.ucl.ac.uk/dpu-projects/Global_Report/pdfs/Lima.pdf (Accessed 3/14/2021).

⁶ For more information about deforestation (some, the result of illegal logging); overgrazing of the slopes of the coast and mountains leading to soil erosion; desertification; air pollution in Lima; pollution of rivers and coastal waters from municipal and mining wastes, see CIA World Fact Book <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/peru/#geography> (Accessed 3/14/21)

their family, options for employment are limited. Thus, an opportunity to procure work at a neighborhood art cooperative is one that offers flexibility and stability to earn a modest income in order to subsist. Two such cooperatives in Pamplona Alta, are *Manos Ancashinas* and *Compacto Humano*. Combined, they are home to a group of approximately fifteen women artists who daily stitch together *cuadros* to sell in the tourist market locally and abroad. This is one way they can earn a modest income in order to subsist. In their fabric pictures they create narratives of their past life on the coast, the countryside, the *altiplano*, or the jungle; places they previously lived and know well. (Fig. 1) These lush landscapes look nothing like the stark reality of their current homes in the *pueblos jóvenes*. The memories of their previous lives inform their art, and their imagination inspires their vision of a verdant world where all flourish.

My first visit to Pamplona Alta in 2006 was as an art historian. My intention then, was to survey, document, and contextualize the *cuadros*. However, in the process, I became increasingly interested in the sources and inspirations the women drew on for the subjects represented in their art. I learned that the *cuadros* not only served as a means to secure a livelihood, they were also an avenue for self-expression and a way to document the experiences that impacted their lives.⁷ As I sat around the tables, watching them piece together their fabric pictures I was particularly struck by the contrast of their brilliant palette, against the reality of the shantytown's very grey world. (Fig. 2) The questions emerged: How is it that beauty and hope persist even in the harshest conditions? And what better world for themselves and their families do these women envision? This is how the first project emerged. With special funds set aside to commission art from them and in an effort to better understand how the women perceived their current lives and imagined their future, I proposed a project that I knew could be completed within a short time without disrupting the pattern of their daily operation. I asked the women to each create a small *cuadro* (10"x10") illustrating their hopes and dreams. I purposely framed the task to be as open-ended as possible and left it to the women to visually express their ideas. The resulting *cuadros* revealed very personal wishes as well as universal aspirations. There were dreams of permanent homes with roofs, improved employment opportunities for themselves or their family members, and places where their children could play without fear of violence or environmental contamination. Their utopian visions were as uniquely defined as anticipating the birth of another child, meeting the "man of their dreams," and as all-encompassing as persons, regardless of race or social status, living peacefully together in a verdant, floral world. Their visual narratives reflected their imagination and hope-filled resilience to the dire reality. Each *cuadro* reflected a luxuriant setting. Isabel described her world,

⁷ Ivone Gebara notes, "Resistance is also expressed in collective ways of working at various crafts, sharing responsibility for production and selling and also sharing the profits. This becomes more than a work initiative because these small organizations become cells for personal communal change. Within these cells women dare to talk about themselves, about social and political organization or disorganization. They have the freedom to reflect, agree or disagree and then their consciousness, lulled by the clatter of plates and pans, begins to awaken. It finds words and feels the urge to reorganize this world differently." Ivone Gebara, "Option for the Poor as an Option for the Poor Women," in *Concilium 194 Women, Work, and Poverty*, Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza, ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1987), 110-117. (114)

My dream is to live in a place where my children can live without worries or fear of violence. In this cuadro you can see there is no smog and pollution like in the city. I would love to live in a forest where there are trees and a lagoon with a lot of ducks. Here my two children are playing soccer. My husband and I are harvesting fruit from the trees. We would be able to live together in a quieter place in tranquility. (Fig. 3)

Enma envisioned a fertile garden,

In this garden of many flowers, my husband and I are embracing as we await the arrival of our second baby. Here you can see my little daughter playing with a ball. My brother Javier, who I love like a son, because I have known him since he was a baby, is swimming in the river with an inner tube. Notice the butterflies fluttering about and my well-built two-story house. This is my dream. (Fig. 4)

And Lucy explained,

This cuadro depicts a dream that may only come true if there is a world without wars.” This would be a world like Paradise. My dream is to have people of different classes and different races live together. In this cuadro there are people of all colors and animals of all kinds. “If there weren’t wars, racism, and violence we could live together with people from different countries. We would be able to live together with our animals, because animals represent everything that is beautiful in the world. The tree that I have made here represents heaven on earth.” We are all together and sharing. (Fig. 5)

Throughout this initial project, I was (and continue to be), very conscious of my position as outsider and the prickly issues related to ethnography, power, subjectivity and voice. Despite the “complexities, confusions, and unexpected turns” embedded in this work, this methodology aspires to begin with the women’s experience, and in the process seeks to get at meaning, bringing to light their sensibilities, understandings and perceptions.⁸

My initial concerns about interfering with their work and the value of the project were put to rest by Julia, one of the women who shared with me and with the group, “Thank you for this opportunity. I had never thought of sharing my dreams with anyone, because no one ever asked us about our dreams.” I carried Julia’s words with me when I left Pamplona Alta that year, struck by the way in which art helped to make tangible the hopes that lie buried inside of

⁸ Ethnographer and author, Karen McCarthy Brown makes explicit the challenges and ambiguities of ethnography. She says, “Ethnographic research is a social art form and therefore subject to all the complexities and confusions (and unexpected turns) of human relationships in general. In research sites, as well as every other life arena, narratives are contextual and so slippery, practices are easily misapprehended-sometimes with intention-and shared meaning is always approximate.” (p. 133) in “Writing about “The Other” Revisited” in *Personal Knowledge and Beyond: Reshaping the Ethnography of Religion: Reshaping the Ethnography of Religion*, eds. James V. Spickard, et al. (New York: New York University Press, 2002).

people. Moreover, the women's dreams of a transformed world and better future, when visually constructed with their hands, were notably consistent in their depiction of a generative *Madre Tierra*.

Picturing Paradise: The Exhibit

For over twelve years, I have remained committed to the women and to this project. When in Peru, I continue to accompany the women on the ground, in their homes, and at their tables.⁹ In the process I become not merely "researcher-observer," but "witness" to their challenges and joys.¹⁰ Shortly after the completion of the first project, their hopes and dreams and other works of art were assembled into an exhibit called *Picturing Paradise*. This became a collaborative endeavor as we determined that juxtaposing the brightly stitched visual narratives, with the women's photos, words and testimonies, and the photographic panoramas of the shantytowns was an effective way to draw viewers into the realities experienced by the women artists. Over the past twelve years this exhibition has circulated throughout the United States and abroad (twice in Lima) as a way to draw attention to the lives of these women and the beauty that persists despite the challenges of their lives.¹¹ Notably, the exhibition becomes a space for women who are ordinarily invisible, to voice the hopes they hold for their families and all creation. Moreover, the artistic "authority" and posture for thoughtful reflection ascribed by gallery and museum spaces prompt engagement from viewers. The women's dreams about a healthy and lush world resonate with the shared aspirations of their audience. Despite differences in culture or geographic distance, there is a felt connection. As part of this enterprise, additional works of art are sold, and the project serves to support the women and their families.

⁹ Theologian Ada Maria Isasi-Díaz, asserts, "The purpose in doing "translations" for *mujerista* theology is to discover the themes that are important to the women, the ones about which they feel the strongest, which move them, which motivate them. In *mujerista* theology we refer to these themes as generative words. They emerge for the world of Hispanic Women and express the situations they have to grapple with as well as their understanding of themselves in those situations. These generative words of themes are not only those "with existential meaning, and, therefore, with greatest emotional content, but they are also typical of the people." (p. 70) in Ada Maria Isasi-Díaz, *En La Lucha: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993). In Chapter 3 (62-80), Isasi-Díaz outlines "ethnomethodology," a strategy for understanding and the procedures she employs in shaping a *mujerista* theology. For this work, I draw on her methodology employing an approach that interlaces art, cultural and gender studies and theology focused on what Ada Maria Isasi-Díaz named, *lo cotidiano*, everyday life.

¹⁰ I thank Dr. Joanne Doi, M.M. for this insight. Doi develops this notion of "witness" in a theological sense as opposed to participant/observer in her dissertation, *Bridge to Compassion: Theological Pilgrimage to Tule Lake and Manzanar*, (Unpublished Dissertation: Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, CA, 2007), 23-27.

¹¹ Since 2006, *Picturing Paradise* has been exhibited in over thirty university galleries and museums throughout the United States, twice in Lima (2009 and 2016) and in Cochabamba, Bolivia (2012) and Barcelona, Spain (2012 and 2014).

As *Picturing Paradise* travels to various venues, I become aware that the exhibition serves another important purpose as it initiates an “encounter.” While the stories and images may resonate with its viewers, they are also affective prompts to move beyond what Pope Francis has termed a culture of indifference and toward a culture of encounter—to take that decisive step toward relationship, solidarity, and justice.¹² Thus, the representation and reception of the work is an important function and a crucial link between two distinct hemispheric communities—the global North and South in ways that “moves the human heart.”¹³

Madre Tierra

In 2018, I returned to Pamplona Alta to revisit each of the women about the hopes and dreams they identified in 2006. For some, their dreams had been realized. Vero had met the “man of her dreams.” Enma had a second child and now has a third. But for others, steady employment was still out of reach or constructing a home for a growing family was far from accomplished.

Among the *cuadros* created in 2006 was one by Mirtha Aliaga. Mirtha’s *cuadro* revealed her convictions and hopes for a safe and sustainable environment for her children, for Pamplona Alta, and for the world.

In this cuadro I depict a dream that I have always hoped for. In order to make the world better, we must preserve sea life so that the whales, dolphins, sea wolves, and fish do not become extinct. We must protect and care for all the animals and plants that are running the danger of extinction.

Mirtha’s first hope and dream for her daughters, was for a better environment. More than a decade later, she noted the environment was worse. They now have to buy water. Mirtha explained, “What good is it to accumulate things? It does not make sense if you do not have an earth.”¹⁴ She described her new *cuadro* with these words:

“This cuadro is a continuation of a dream that I hope will become reality. People are conscious when they hurt the seals that live on our planet. Many times, we encounter an animal badly wounded and we leave it to die on the beach without even realizing that

¹² Pope Francis, on a regular basis has spoken of a “Culture of Encounter” as a goal for human society. A society that espouses a Culture of Encounter instead of exclusion, facilitates right relationship among humans and involves a spirituality that emphasizes a relationship with God, who first encounters us in love, and this moves us toward solidarity with one another. See, *Joy of the Gospel* (2013). For more on “Encounter” see Pope Francis’ “First Pentecost Homily,” Vatican City, May 19, 2013.

¹³ Alejandro García-Rivera, *A Wounded Innocence: Sketches for a Theology of Art* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2003), ix.

¹⁴ Interview, Mirtha Aliaga, May 17, 2017.

*we have hurt its habitat. It is for this reason that we must help these seals rather than doing nothing. We are the ones who have altered the sea and their way of life—fishing in places that are prohibited. It is for this reason that you see persons who are helping these seals that need healing by cleaning the environment since we are the ones who have altered the environment. God is in every person that expresses this love and care for the animals that we all need.”*¹⁵

For Mirtha, her dream of a world where all creation flourished had not been realized. Instead, Mirtha’s new *cuadro* depicted her conviction of how we should treat our environment, including its most vulnerable creatures. Mirtha illuminates her concerns and advocates for ecological virtues, prompting response and solidarity from all who view her art. (Fig. 6)

Ivonne Gebarra notes that her ecofeminism “is pregnant with health: not health as we understood it in the past, but the health of a future that promises deeper communion between human beings and all other living things.” She explains further, “My ecofeminism is shot through with the staunch conviction that beauty is important in healing people.”¹⁶ Gebarra suggests that “[we] must return the poetic dimension of human life to theology, since the deepest meaning in the human being is expressed only through analogy; mystery is voiced only in poetry, and what is gratuitous is expressed only through symbols.”¹⁷ Mirtha’s depiction of the world she sees, is one of poetry.

Picturing Paradise continues to be a work in progress. It claims art and beauty as a significant means of expressing the vital concerns of human existence and of communicating in ways deeply felt. It is a project that seeks to bring to light the lives and creativity of women as social poets living on the margins of society counting their art and their perspectives as important contributions to our understanding of environmental well-being.

In this essay I have presented a way in which art, its making, and its reception holds potential for creative transformation. The project I have described highlights the creativity, beauty and insights of these Peruvian women artists. It draws attention to their theological acumen while asserting that visual art created by ordinary people is a worthy source to be examined. Conveyed in their art, are the women’s hopes and dreams that honor *Madre Tierra*. They describe what they know and recognize and suggest how one participates. The resulting exhibition attempts to engage individuals and communities with the women and their lives, thus initiating an experience of encounter and solidarity. Indeed, the way in which the women picture “Paradise” and point to *Madre Tierra* make evident God’s abiding presence.

¹⁵ Descriptive words that accompanied Mirtha’s 2015 *cuadro*.

¹⁶ Ivonne Gebarra, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), vii.

¹⁷ Ivonne Gebarra, ‘Women Doing Theology in Latin America’ in *Through Her Eyes: Women’s Theology from Latin America*, Elsa Tamez, ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1989), 45.



Figure 1
Cosecha (Harvest)
Betty Rojas, *n.d.*
17" x 19"



Figure 2
Botanica (Flower Garden) contrasted with Pamplona Alta

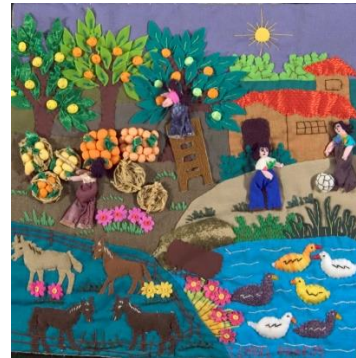


Figure 3
Isabel Principe Liñan (1982-2021†)
Hope and Dreams, 2006



Figure 4
Enma Principe Liñan
Hopes and Dreams, 2006



Figure 5
Lucy García Corahua
Hopes and Dreams, 2006



Figure 6
Mirtha Aliaga's Hope and Dream for an Improved Environment
2006 and 2015



Detail- Cosecha (Harvest)



Sewing Botanica