

Enrique Chagoya: Reimagining the New World

Born and raised in Mexico City, Enrique Chagoya (born 1953) draws from his experiences living in Mexico, the United States, and France to create artworks that contrast secular and religious imagery with elements borrowed from pop culture and Pre-Columbian mythology. His works address border issues and immigration and are informed by his humorous art historical concepts including “reverse Modernism” and “reverse anthropology.”

In the 20th century, Modernist artists in the United States and Europe frequently sampled and appropriated Indigenous patterns and motifs for use in their own artwork. In doing this, the Indigenous designs became disconnected from their original contexts. Chagoya imagines a world of “reverse Modernism,” in which Indigenous artists borrow designs associated with western Modernism—such as primary-colored geometric color-blocks—for use in their own work. Similarly, in Chagoya’s “reverse anthropology,” the colonial conquest of the New World failed, and Indigenous ideology prevails throughout the Americas.

Chagoya’s prints take a variety of forms—from soup can labels to lithographs on *amate*, a traditional bark paper fabricated in Mexico since before European contact. One of the artist’s most distinctive

printmaking formats is the codex, an ancient manuscript form that existed among Indigenous populations in Mesoamerica. Chagoya created his first codex in 1992, five hundred years after Christopher Columbus initiated the conquest and occupation of present-day America. Sadly, most Pre-Columbian codices were destroyed by colonial invaders. By resuscitating this ancient Mesoamerican literary format, Chagoya establishes a connection with his Indigenous ancestors, while communicating present-day issues and ideas.