SOL Y SOMBRA: 
BECOMMING AN ARTIST

A Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
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By

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* * * * *

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ABSTRACT

My thesis is essentially the story of how an American kid grew to become an artist, by searching for answers around the world, through volumes of words, and within his heart. It explains how this artist draws connections between bullfighting and the cycle of life, and how said artist fits into the scheme. Finally, it discusses this artist's artwork, and its evolution as a result of this growth process.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank my advisor, Mary Jo, for her support and encouragement throughout this writing process.

I also wish to express gratitude to the remainder of my committee, Bob and Ruth, for their enthusiasm and dedication.

Finally, I would like to thank my mother, who ground into my brain that cooking things get done, while people finish things, among other rules of grammar and usage.
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On July 3, 1994, I found myself seated in Las Ventas, the plaza de toros, or bullring, of Madrid. I knew nothing at all about what the corrida or toreo was, other than what I had picked up from Bugs Bunny and Ferdinand as a youth, and I had no idea what a profound impression the impending spectacle would have on my life.

The trumpets sounded and the parade of glittering participants marched proudly across the sand. The toreros took their places behind the safety of the red barrera, and soon the first toro burst from behind the toril gates. That experience defies description. The first torero came from the protection of the red fence, and with a brilliant magenta and yellow cape, enticed the bull to charge headlong, only to flick his wrist spinning the cape in a sculptural flash causing the toro to glance past without any harm done to the man. After several passes like this, the picador rode a horse clad in what resembled a futon matress out into the ring space. He was holding a long lance.
The corrida continued in what at times became a bloody, seemingly cruel, and above all dangerous spectacle. But, what I find most important to mention is that everything that seemed cruel was overruled in my mind by the whole of the corrida. Hemingway said, "The aficionado, or lover of the bullfight, may be said, broadly, then, to be one who has this sense of the tragedy and ritual of the fight so that the minor aspects are not important except as they relate to the whole. Either you have this or you do not, just as, without implying any comparison, you have or have not an ear for music" (p.9). I was becoming what I know now is an aficianado, and as such I was denying all of the traditional American ideals that I had been raised with. It struck me to such an extent that it was the only complete event that I recorded in my travel journal.

Four days later I was inside the fence. The festival of San Fermin is unlike anything I have ever experienced. The most notorious part is the encierro held every morning in order to run the afternoon's fighting bulls from the corral to the bullring. The streets are closed off with thick-beammed fences, and filled with white- and red-clad Sanfermines, bull runners. There I stood, full of fear and nerves, not from the idea of getting gored or trampled, but from not knowing what was going on--fear of the unknown. Not three minutes later, the screams, the plodding of hundreds of feet, the clatter of hooves on the
cobblestones, and several unrewarded glances backward only supported my feeling of unknowing. Then, in an instant, the crowd parted and there they were: huge bulls and horns. The fence narrowed to a tunnel that accessed the bullring. I was there and bulls were there. Instantly, my fear of the unknown became a fear of the known. It was a fear of huge bulls with horns. Rather than running into a narrow enclosed tunnel with these truly imposing creatures, two or three bulls passed me, I jumped the fence (with the aid of a Pamplona city police officer), and watched the rest of the bulls and steers run past at close range. Incredible.

My trip to Spain left a lasting impression on me that only in the past eighteen months have I come to fully appreciate. Something about the entire bull spectacle took root in my brain and when I came home I sought out not only information about what I had seen, but also feelings like those that I had had.

It was obvious that any education on bullfighting did not begin with a Bullfight 101 course, but was born from one available source: Ernest Hemingway. The Sun Also Rises, led to Death in the Afternoon, which turned out to be my textbook for the course. Then I found every book about bullfighting written in English and read it, trying to satisfy a yearning for knowledge which I can never remember having before. I taught myself as best as I could
through the words of Hemingway, James Michener, Norman Mailer, and others. I learned everything that an isolated American kid could learn about bullfighting, and one important thing kept me coming back for more. It is that everything I read shed a positive light on bullfighting, and I agreed with all of it.

That was my homemade education, and while I loved reading about what kind of feelings one has as one watches a bullfight, I still longed to feel those feelings once again. As it happened, a strange twist of fate occurred only weeks after my return from Spain—a friend who had been on the trip invited me to go dove hunting with him. I went. After many missed shots, I finally dropped a bird, and as I crouched over its dying body, I had a flurry of emotions wash through me. Relief from frustration, fulfillment of a goal, uncertainty as to what to do, and pride were all mixed, but a strange blend of sadness and excitement prevailed. I had the same feeling that I had only months earlier at the bullfight, but I didn't know it at the time.

I went to graduate school with all the confidence in the world. In my first quarter I continued along the same lines art-wise that had gotten my into graduate school, and which felt comfortable for me. Unfortunately, I had no connection to my art at all other than the fact that I had made it. Two particular events occurred that first quarter
within twenty-four hours that changed my artwork drastically and forever. First, my grandfather died. He was the closest person to me who had ever died, and his death completely and utterly shocked me. Second, and the next day, I had my first graduate critique, which made it abundantly clear to me that my artwork was personally empty. I left an emotional wreck, going home and just sitting alone thinking for a long time. That night, after hours of thinking, I realized what exactly the bullfight meant. I realized exactly why hunting appealed to me. I realized that my hunting and bullfighting were inextricably connected. I realized what I needed to do.

I took all of my interest, education, and excitement about bullfighting, which were undoubtedly mine, and made my artwork. I was growing up and maturing as an artist. Philosopher Sam Keen describes people as being born with certain hardware, and are at birth inundated with software from outside people, predominantly family. As one grows, one either uses that family or starter myth as the outline for the autobiography that they are living, or they realize that the software is impermanent, and exchange newer, more personal software with old. I began exchanging my software. I erased some of my peace-and-love generation software for more updated, less naive, reality-based software. I erased the American ideal that nothing dies,
and replaced it with the reality that knows everything living will die. And on and on... After a couple of years of studying the bullfight, I would like to take the time to describe my bullfight software, only as it relates to my artwork. I concede that there are people with anti-bullfight software of their own, and I make no judgments for such people, other than to encourage people to discover for themselves an experience-based opinion.

THE BULLFIGHT

There are two basic ways in which the bullfight inspires me: the symbolism of the architecture and the meaning of the spectacle. First, the meaning of the bullfight is symbolized by the bullring itself. Based on a circular plan, bullrings for me become what Carl Jung called mandorlas, and Joseph Campbell described as follows:

The whole world is a circle. All of these circular images reflect the psyche, so there may be some relationship between... architectural designs and the actual structuring of our spiritual functions... The circle represents totality. Everything within the circle is one thing, which is encircled, enframed... The circle suggests immediately a completed totality, whether in time or space (p.268).

Being circular, the bullring is symbolic of life for me.

Second, the bullfight's meaning "celebrates the sacredness of life" (Highwater, video). In a cathartic twist, "bullfighting at its best forces everyone who sees it to become keenly aware of his [sic] own mortality, which...
arguably should ennoble his [sic] being and enhance his [sic] life" (Schoenfeld, p.91). The bullfight teaches one "to worry less about life also, by living it more spontaneously. [One's] knowledge of death gives [one] the tragic sense possessed by Hemingway and so many Spaniards; paradoxically, it will permit [one] to live more joyfully" (Stanton, p.73). I feel very much that a person so acquainted with death, not only lives their own life with more purpose, but also appreciates all living things to a higher extent. I know this is true for me, as I have felt it as a result of my hunting pursuits.

THE MEANING IN MY ART

My art has many meanings for me, as I suppose anyone's art must have for them, otherwise we wouldn't have the interest to do it. I would like to delve into the three ideas that drive the meaning in my work across all media.

First, I use the circular motif as defined by the bullring architecture. This comes directly from my symbolic interest in the circular bullring as a mandorla. "The image [of the circle] helps you to identify with the symbolized force. You can't very well expect a person to identify with an undifferentiated something or other. But, when you give it qualities that point toward certain realizations, the person can follow" (Campbell p.272).

Second, I want my art to acknowledge the bullfight juxtapositions such as life and death, sun and shade, and
excitement and sadness, all of which are contained within the mandorla. Life and death are the obvious outcomes, sun and shade not only symbolize life and death, but are also how seating divisions are made, and excitement and sadness are the feelings one has as a result of the outcome.

Finally, and most importantly, my art perpetuates my personal myth, and it does so in two ways: it is my personal iconography and it involves my interest in history. As in the bullfight, my art is a reverent celebration of life which makes "the sacred a visible part of life" (Highwater, video). My work reflects not only how I feel about the bullfight but also how I feel about life. My work is not about technical ability, or art for art's sake, although technique is contained within it. Throughout every culture's history of the arts, there comes a change, and "the change comes about when the meaning behind the word 'art' ceases to be the carrier of an ideology and becomes known as its own ideology" (Highwater, p.43). I am drawn to so-called primitive or primal art for its purpose, and I see my work now as a carrier of my personal ideology; my primal art if you will. I make art now that comes from deep within my being, with an individually private incept. Before I changed my work, my only goal was making things that looked like art and that people responded to as art. Gauguin said it best when he said, "[Primal] art stems from
the spirit . . . so-called fine art from sense impressions" (Highwater, p.45).

One of my interests in life is history, because I believe that how people are now is a result of how people have been in the past. Being a product of Western culture, I feel I have made sacrifices in certain areas, namely lacking meaningful life experiences upon which to draw. I see that "the victors of the Western World have won everything--and in the process have lost themselves. Those people who work in art rather than industry feel this loss very deeply. They are attempting to create rites of their own to compensate for the lack of rituals integral to their societies" (Highwater, p.43). We have made the meaning of life artificial and shallow in Western cultures in order that we may experience progress and growth. Now, as I re-write my personal mythic software to suit my needs, I feel the need to draw upon my culture's spiritual and ritualistic elements, of which I find few. Researching, I was relieved to find other Western artists who struggled through this same dilemma. Dancer Martha Graham, bound by her medium, sought primal dances in the American Southwest for inspiration, and revolutionized dance in the twentieth-century. Henry Moore went to Central America, and borrowed Mayan and Aztec forms to create his sculpture. It wasn't until Picasso discovered African masks that his abstraction took its familiar twist, and Jackson Pollock's action
painting would not have flourished without his enlightenment from active Navajo sand painting. "These artists were interested in primal art because the sacredness of art had been largely lost in their own culture," and that too is the root of my interest (Highwater, video). I chose the ancestry of my culture's art for inspiration, a time when Western art carried an ideology other than its own--Medieval art.

MY ARTWORK

My thesis exhibition, Sol Y Sombra, was the culmination of my departure into my new life as an artist and person. For me it was both the point where my work had come out of the transition period inherent with any change, and proof to me that I had made the right move. I'll begin with individual pieces and media, then discuss the show as a whole.

INDIVIDUAL MEDIA/PIECES

La Plaza de los Cuernos (fig. 1), is a ring of thirty-six porcelain bull horns, individually housed in their own wooden stand, and placed on the floor in a ring spanning approximately six feet in diameter. I began with a few predetermined objectives for this piece. First, I wanted to make a large piece, and saw that I could stay in a scale comfortable to me and combine smaller pieces to make one large piece. Second, I wanted to present a history of, and brief introduction to, bullfighting to people in my
specific culture who might be unfamiliar with bullfighting in general. As the piece developed, I realized that I was creating not only a monument to bullfighting, but also a memorial to the brave men who make up its history. Formally, from the outset I wanted to put the pieces in a circle, emulating the form of a bullring, and thus a mandorla. I used red tones on the inside of the ring to suggest the red barrera inside a bullring, and aged the wood and paint to express history. I chose media which felt the most convenient for my skills and which intuition dictated made the most sense.

My paintings (example fig. 2) were the first pieces that I did in the show, and I had very simple goals in mind. First, I wanted to establish a visual language through color and form, which would familiarize the viewer with basic bullring architecture without becoming the kitsch velvet bullfight paintings found in Mexican restaurants. Using fragments of the barrera (now synonymous with mandorla in my mind), both painted on the surface and suggested in the board fragments, I present the viewer with fragmented scenes of life, just as one lives life. There are no people in the stands since the viewer standing alone is the only participant, just as the matador stands alone in the bullfight, and as I see people standing alone going through life.
My embroideries (example fig. 3) continued where La Plaza de los Cuernos left off as far as carrying stories of bullfighting history. While that was one objective I had in making them, two other goals held more weight. First and foremost, I was making personal icons, that expressed through their stories the ideals that make bullfighting intriguing for me, and through the obvious time and devotion that it took to hand stitch the images into the canvas. As the pieces came together for the show, I juxtaposed their jewel-like quality against rustic and aged wood frames and pedestals that carry a sense of history and ritual. In doing so they added another opposing force to the show (along with sun and shade, life and death, excitement and sadness, etc . . . ). I borrowed forms from Medieval (Primal Western) embroideries to connect with my search for personal myths and to carry the spiritual feel that I desired. I struggled with color in these pieces, since I was borrowing outlines and distortions from Byzantine art coupled with the color inherent in the fiesta de toros, some of my pieces had a cartoon-like feel. My final embroidery, Courage, was an attempt at using monochrome threads to relieve any cartoon feel.

Finally, my matador's jacket (fig. 4) began simply as a logical and elaborate means of framing my smaller embroidery work, which in turn carry the ideas in my paintings. As I worked on presentation ideas for the
smaller embroideries, the jacket began to take the same route of being a jewel in contrast with fragmented wood with a history. This both continued my interest in expressing history and the bullfight oppositions, but also made sense in the real life of a matador's jacket. I discovered that when not being worn by a matador or hanging on a hanger en route to the next bullring, the normal home for a matador jacket is on a chair back, with the rest of the suit on the chair seat. After that discovery, it made perfect sense that the jacket must be seen on a chair. As an afterthought, the jacket made more sense on the chair when seen in a figurative frame-of-mind. Formally, I wanted to stay true to reality in the jacket's overall design, with only small patches of imagery added to carry my architecture/mandorla idea. I chose a black ground to convey the loneliness that the embroidery carried from the paintings. The remaining gold encrustation was added to support the jewel-like quality, and followed floral and foliage motifs staying true to actual jackets.

OVERALL EXHIBITION

It was time to put all of these individual, yet inextricably connected pieces together in a show. Since there was such a mix of media, I felt it best to divide my space in order to separate pieces which might fight with each other visually. It occurred to me that I could use the sun and shade opposition found in the bullfight to divide
the space in my show, which would separate my pieces, but carry the idea in all of them.

SOL

Sol means sun in Spanish, and the first space you entered in my exhibition carried this idea. I placed the ring of porcelain horns (fig. 1) in the entry to invite people in, and supported it visually with paintings hung high on the wall. This space was awash in bright flood and spotlights carrying the sun idea, and I chose some of my earlier paintings which were lighter in tone for the same reason. I wanted to keep the layout simple and austere, hoping to make the entire show follow a symmetry that recalled a Medieval church or chapel. To support this idea, I hung my paintings a bit higher than is common to suggest stained glass windows, and stretched the first space to recall a nave.

SOMBRA

Sombra is Spanish for shadow or shade, and this space is where I chose to show my stitched work. One single embroidery piece hung on each of the three walls, and the jacket on the chair stood in the center of the space. The lights were limited to either pin-pointed beams from the ceiling, or small individual lamps over an individual piece. I wanted this space to be calming and personal, a relief from the lights in the sol area, and continue the chapel-like symmetry. I found myself bound by gallery

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restrainsts in this space, and had I been able to have more control I would have painted the walls in a darker, neutral color, which would have made the room all the more shade-like.

**BURLADERO**

The burladero is a section of the barrera in a bullring that affords the toreros entrance onto the sand, but keeps the bulls out of the populated areas. The walls that separated the sol and sombra sections of my show were arranged in such a way as to emulate a burladero, affording viewers entrance into my personal space (into my mandorla, if you will). I believe that this wall was key to my success, as it served many purposes. It physically blocked the light from the sol section, it controlled the spectators by making them have to participate in their entrance, and it served to invite the viewers in by building their curiosity. Formally, as one entered the separating space, the walls framed the two side wall embroideries, further inviting people in.

**COMBINATIONS**

I created the pieces for my show individually, and I feel that each piece was probably strong enough to stand on its own without any other pieces to support it. Likewise, I feel that each of the two spaces in my show was strong enough to stand on its own, without relying on the other to play off of it. However, I truly believe that the
combination of pieces and spaces brought everything together in such a layering of comparison, contrast, and meaning, that the whole package made everything better. Just as in the bullfight, it is the whole spectacle that is enjoyed, not just parts here and there, and I feel the same way about my show. I think there was just the right amount of separation through lighting, media, and walls to convey two different ideas. I also think there was enough connection through theme, visual language, and support media to make the two spaces come together in one cohesive exhibition.

As one walked through Sol Y Sombra, without realizing it, one was not only becoming aware of bullfighting and its history, but also John Shaw and his personal history. Beginning with paintings, and porcelain horns, then moving through space (and time) through the burladero to see embroideries on the walls of my most personal space. Only after deciding to continue all the way into my mandorla, does the viewer see the jacket, hidden from the view of those outside, saved for those who dared enter.

CONCLUSION

This is where I am now. I grew up with the idea that I could make art, and getting to know how seemed easy for me. However, it wasn't until I had lived twenty-six years, and gone through countless hours of learning and un-learning about art that I was finally able to make artwork
that was completely mine, from incept until completion. I only had to travel across an ocean and forget all that seemed comfortable to me in order to discover what was closest and most personal to me: my artwork.
Figure 2. Toril I, oil paint on wood.
Figure 3. Manolete and Islero, embroidery on canvas.
Figure 4. *Untitled*, embroidery, gold cord, sequins, ribbon roses, beads, wood.
GLOSSARY

aficionado - someone who loves bullfights, understanding both the individual parts and the combined whole.

barrera - the red wooden fence surrounding the sand circle in which the bull is fought, containing the action and protecting the spectators.

burladero - the opening in the barrera which affords bullfighters both entrance onto the sand and shelter from the bull within.

corríada - the Spanish bullfight, translating literally as "running."

encierro - moving fighting bulls from a corral to the bullring, usually on foot through the streets. Pamplona's is the most well known.

picador - the torero on horseback who pics the bulls neck muscle in order to weaken it for the matador.

torero - the word describing any professional bullfighter, including the picador, banderillero, and matador.

toril - the entrance from which fighting bulls come into the bullring.

toro - a fighting bull. Scientifically known as Bos taurus, it is bred and pedigreed to remain undomesticated.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


