

# Recent American History Painting; Alfred J. Quiroz's Sordid, Nasty, Peculiar, and Matter-of-Fact Tributes

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## *Abstract*

*Among other personas, Alfred J. Quiroz is a history painter. In the traditions of academic European painting, Quiroz pictorially excavates heroic narratives that idealize history with illusionary bliss, uncomfortable tragedy and, quite often, painfully irrepressible humor. Similar to 18th century French painters who scoured Classical history for poignant and theatrical accounts that reverberated among French citizenry, Quiroz scrutinizes American historical traditions for events that betray heroic sensibilities. Through select examples from his explorations of official United States military heroes, the Spanish conquest of the New World, and the exemplary lives of American Presidents, Quiroz's work is a contemporary manifestation of a long-held artistic academic hierarchy: history as the most demanding and exalted subject matter of the tragic and comedic. A native and resident of Tucson, Arizona, Quiroz's unflappable focus on historical fact tends to level the playing fields of cultural relativism and polarize people regardless of their ethnic affiliation, identity or skin color.*

## 1. Introduction

Contemporary American artist Alfred J. Quiroz is a history painter and the European roots of his work are important. The modern theoretical construction of history painting can be traced through the Italian artist and theoretician Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) and his mid-15th century observations on the artist's responsibility toward a unified *istoria*. From Alberti's point of view, no strong distinction between sacred and secular blurred the heroic past. Biblical narratives, for example, were legitimate historical subject matter. Some two hundred and thirty years after Alberti, in 1667, the French Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture codified the moral imperatives of history painting and its position at the apex of artistic subject matter. Below history painting, the subjects of art were, in order of importance, portraiture, animals, landscape and still life. (For a succinct review of European history painting see Grove Art Online.)

History paintings tell stories of a particular type and in a particular way. Their narratives have generally, but by no means always, sought some degree of historical believability while concurrently advancing heroic mythology and moral virtue in grand styles. An uncompromising objectivity has never been an overly significant feature of these narratives. From its early modern origins, European history painting elevated its subject and advanced it as moral, political, ideological and, at times, spiritual authority. While religious paintings of biblical narratives and saintly achievements have been considered historical, the more widely acknowledged early modern paradigms of history painting are found in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century academic classicism. For example, Nicholas Poussin's (1594-1665) *The Abduction of the Sabine Women*, 1637-38 (oil on canvas, 159x206 cm), depicts Roman men kidnapping neighboring Sabine women for wives, a strategy to secure future Roman muscle as they faced an absence of child-bearing women among their own ranks. Among many readings, this work elevates the fundamental institution of the family, a social unit required at any cost for adaptive success.

One hundred and fifty years later, Jacques Louis David (1748-1825), working in the tradition of Poussin, painted the *Death of Socrates*, 1787 (oil on canvas, 129.5x196.2 cm). With an appeal to similar ethical authority, David enlightened his revolutionary contemporaries on the sometimes conflicted contract between an individual and the

institutions of the State. And Benjamin West's (1738-1820) fashionable work, *The Death of General Wolfe*, 1770 (oil on canvas, 152.6x214.5 cm), celebrates the persistence and success of Wolfe and his men in the 1759 fall of Quebec as English soldiers overcame the entrenched French city. This work is important because it was publically recognized at the time as moving the attention of history painting from the classical past to a bloody present. The moral high ground of the painting moves between the reclining Christ-like figure of General Wolfe as death moves ever closer, and a singular noble savage, passively contemplating the events, engrossed in his own philosophical discourse (Fryd 1995).

The classicized moral imperatives of history painting, that is the appeal to elevated virtues and reification of social contracts and obligations, were weakened by the development in the late 18th and early 19th centuries of a more romantic interest in human behavior. This included an increasing fascination with theaters of human conflict and emotion. History painting began to include among its subject matter sensational explorations of human frailties, abandoning the stoicism and ethical posture of the academic tradition. During the early nineteenth century, war, for example, became a stage for atrocity, fear and austerity, not a theater of moral superiority and personal integrity. Francisco de Goya y Lucientes' (1746-1828) *The 3<sup>rd</sup> of May, 1808, in Madrid*, 1814 (oil on canvas, 268x347 cm), perhaps his best known painting in this vein, complemented his biting etchings on the *Disasters of War*, 1810-14. Goya's images do not celebrate the sanitized bravery of idealized courage, but the slaughter and excision of the unidentified, those who exhibit no lofty historical attributes, those who anonymously succumb to human aggression. (see Sontag 2004).

Just a few years later, Theodore Gericault's (1791-1824) *Raft of the Medusa*, 1818-19 (oil on canvas, 491x716 cm) continued the erosion of academic historicism. The frigate Medusa, managed by an inept and politically appointed captain, ran aground in July 1816. Of nearly one hundred and fifty crew members, only a handful survived over the two weeks they spent adrift on hurriedly constructed rafts. Gericault's reckoning of the Medusa's crew members focuses on the gripping moment when the few survivors of the shipwreck made every effort to be noticed by their potential rescuers on a distant ship. Gericault's vision is not of the heroes, if there were any, but of ordinary, sullied humans facing seemingly insurmountable obstacles to ensure their survival.

Inconsistencies between elevated social and moral standards of heroes, nobles, intellectuals and other privileged members of society and realities of daily life have also long been a rich resource for historical comedy and caricature. As history painting sought human integrity, caricature and satire sought human shortcomings. It is no accident that as the mission of history painting became more entrenched in the academies, the popularity of caricature and satire increased. This critical historicism or satire, earned an increasing reception among history painters. In England, William Hogarth (1697-1764), for example his image, *The Tête à Tête*, circa 1743 (oil on canvas, 69.9x90.8 cm) from his series of paintings on *Marriage A-la-Mode*, indicts marriages made for conveniences of social class, money and property. Produced in more widely distributed print formats, the satires of Thomas Rowlandson (1756-1827), for example, *The Head of the Family in Good Humor*, 1809 (etching with watercolor, 34.5x24.2 cm) which features John Bull, a characterization of England, holding court among undersized European cohorts, were broadly distributed. And in France, the penetrating wit of Honoré Daumier's (1808-1879) lithographs, such as *The Legislative Belly*, 1834 (lithograph, 28.2x43.5 cm), depicting the conservative Chamber of Deputies of France in the 1830s, point the way toward increasing and popular interest in the less than noble dimensions of human history. These and other artistic assaults on style, political corruption, intellectual judgment, ideological disposition and collective standards focused reactionary fervor and roused zealous institutional rejoinders. Daumier, for example, was fined and thrown into jail for his less than flattering depictions.

However, the ideals of academic history painting persisted through the twentieth century. The work of American regionalists like Thomas Hart Benton (1889-1975) and of the Mexican muralists such as Diego Rivera (1886-1957), provided Quiroz with models on his own continent which sought to meld advances in modern art with the loftier ambitions of academic history painting. The Mexican muralists, most especially José Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros and Diego Rivera, offered not just models to mingle social criticism with historical fact but also served as ethnic archetypes for Quiroz. As will become evident, Quiroz is, however, certainly more Hogarth, more Rowlandson, and more Daumier than he is Poussin, David or Rivera (Quiroz personal email to author, 16 September 2005).

## 2. Looking for Alfred J. Quiroz

Quiroz lives in Tucson, Arizona, United States, where he was born in 1944 and raised. He comes from a Mexican American family. His grandparents moved from northern Mexico to Arizona in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. One of his great grandmothers on his father's side of the family was a Yaqui Indian and many of his relatives on his mother's side were cattle ranchers from Sonora. His grandfather fought with Pancho Villa (Quiroz personal email to author, 31 March 2009). Quiroz is a second generation Mexican American. His ethnicity, especially being *mestizo*, or of mixed native American and Spanish heritage, plays an important role in his art works.

The blending of social criticism and historical idealism frames the work of Quiroz. Each of his paintings conjures a handful of historical facts, but these facts and their contexts tend toward less than idealized interpretations. Quiroz's stubborn embrace of accuracy is one of the dynamic elements that allows him to satirize and pierce the armor of normalized history. These facts, as Quiroz organizes them, emerge within visual constructions that deliver stinging candor. (See, for example, Regan's insightful reviews, 1999 and 2003.) Quiroz transports history's elites from their longing for moral high ground to the factual muck of marshes and barnyards. The artist punches and jabs with his paint brushes, draws guffaws, evokes disgust, and seduces guarded laughter from the most erudite and sensitive among us. He explores the achievements of influential political leaders, the momentous consequences of European expansion during the last five hundred years, and the fearless suffering and dedication of individual soldiers and war heroes. This traditional and often superlative narrative inventory, however, is dissected under less than ideal circumstances. Disclosing debts to his contemporaries — the pop iconoclasm of Peter Saul (born 1934), the bizarre comics of *Mad* magazine and the ethnic and racial posturing of the painter Robert Colescott (born 1925) — Quiroz effaces moral superiority and replaces it with raunchy, unbecoming and commonly repressed realities.

The first work of Quiroz that I want to examine is a self-portrait. There was a famous 18th century debate on the issue whether portraiture is history painting or not. The English painter and theoretician, Joshua Reynolds, argued the issue and suggested that if a sitter's historical and mythological attributes advanced to the level of history, a portrait could reasonably be considered a history painting (Reynolds 1975). This pinpoints Quiroz's strategy. Like other portraits in the Grand Manner, Quiroz positions himself within a mythic context, elevating himself as a symbol of historical nuance. In a North American context, the blurring of a crystallized pedigree or unambiguous identity, that is being *mestizo* or mixed heritage, provides an avenue for Quiroz to observe and critique the pageant of ethnic identity with creative license.

The title of this 1998 work (Figure 1) is *No soy Chicano, soy Aztlano!* (I am not Chicano, I am Aztlano).

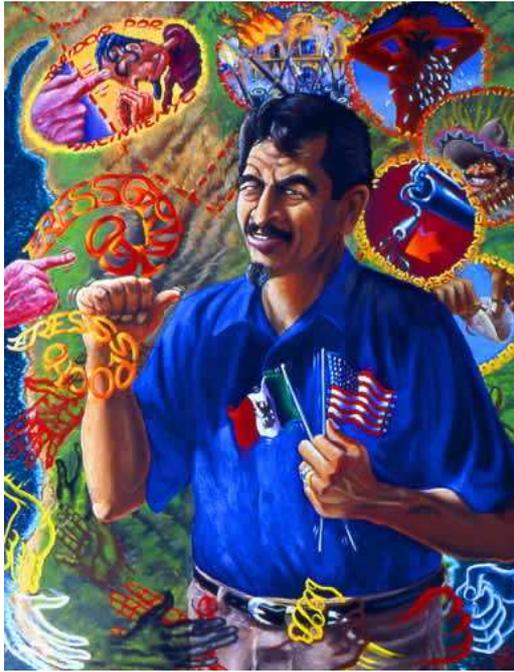


Figure 1 *No soy Chicano, soy Aztlano!*, 1998 (oil on canvas, 152x122 cm). Joe Diaz Collection. ©Alfred J. Quiroz

The self-portrait positions the artist in front of his native Southwestern state of Arizona, a state whose political geography is as an artifact of the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in which Mexico was forced to cede almost 1.4 million square kilometers to the United States, including all or parts of the modern American states of Arizona, New Mexico, California, Utah, Wyoming and Nevada. Mexican and United States flags nervously jitter in Quiroz's hands as an accusative pinkish *gringado* finger gestures toward the acknowledging artist. Balloons of text and symbols surrounding the artist remind us that he is a foreigner in his own land and a traitor to his motherland simply as a coincidence of his birthplace. He is *gringo* and he is *pocho*: the former an often pejorative term for European North Americans and the latter a derisive name for *mestizos*, people of mixed European and Native American blood, who live north of the Mexican border. Other familiar mocking ethnic chants balloon around him: wetback, remember the Alamo, taco bender, greaser, dirty Mexican (sic). Apparitions of hands dance through the steps of

secret handclasps, ephemeral affirmations of ethnic identity. And the title of the painting, *Soy Aztlano*, conjures up the much romanticized ancestral home of the Nahuatl, the Aztecs, in the north, *el norte* to immigrants south of the United States border.

### 3. A Happy Quincentennial

*El Encomendero*, 1991 (Figure 2), is one of a series of 18 paintings, drawings, prints and constructions from Quiroz's "Happy Quincentennial" that celebrates in a less than flattering manner the 500th anniversary of the European discovery of the New World. The Quincentennial in the western hemisphere illuminated the conflicted significance of colonization in which genocide and ethnic cleansing were decisive weapons in the European arsenal used against native peoples. The brutal excesses, especially of the Spanish, rub raw the popular idealizations of Cristobal Colon setting sail to find passage to India. This heritage is formidable. Throughout the many public, academic and cultural celebrations and acknowledgements afforded by the 1992 Quincentennial, an air of apprehension permeated almost every event.

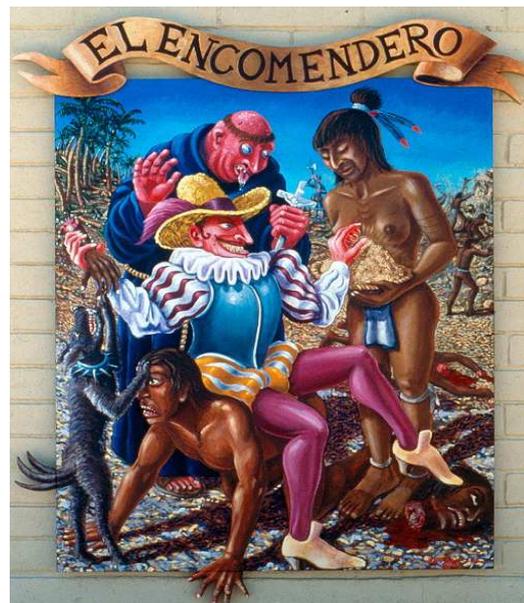


Figure 2 *El Encomendero*, 1991, *Happy Quincentennial Series* (oil and glitter on canvas and wood, 185x149 cm). Private Collection. ©Alfred J. Quiroz

*El Encomendero* investigates the relationship between the Spanish obsession with bolstering their dwindling fifteenth century gold reserves and its attendant impact on the organization of labor, land and living conditions in the Americas. With equal amounts of historical accuracy and wretched awe “*El Encomendero*” explores, as the artist noted, “the beginning of the Mestizo culture because the *encomienda* system was the root of the Mestizo. [and] Mestizos make up the population of Mexico today and that is inherent in every Chicano” (Quiroz 2009).

The Spanish *encomienda* effectively and forcibly transformed native Americans into a low-cost, expendable natural resource. This Spanish feudal system granted to colonizers the right to exploit the labor of native inhabitants within a prescribed geographic range. As part of this exploitation, the Spanish government requested that the colonizers provide reading and religious instruction to the native peoples. The colonizers extracted tribute from the Indians who, to add insult to injury, were required to render particular personal services to the conquerors. In partnership with disease and outright execution, the *encomienda* rapidly and in many places totally extinguished native populations, ironically exhausting from the Spanish point of view a critically important natural resource: enslaved human labor.

The Spanish *encomendero* in Quiroz’s painting sits on the back of a native American. The dog to the left leaps for a bite of fresh meat from a severed hand. The Spanish conquistador rests his foot on the head of the butchered Indian. An obese cleric of the collaborating Catholic church serves as a buttress for the *encomendero*. His bulging eyes and salivating chops anticipate a gluttonous feast of the near-naked native American woman who



Figure 3 *Christopher Columbus Discovers America and Introduces the Spanish Language*, 1990, *Happy Quincentenary Series* (oil pastel, graphite and acrylic on paper, 152x228 cm). Collection Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art. ©Alfred J. Quiroz

bears a pyramid of gold nuggets mined from a now decimated landscape. Quiroz’s tightly classical composition of this human catastrophe points emphatically to the factual consequences of the historical realities and to the uneasy human origins which he seeks to focus on, that is the discordant origins of the *mestizo*, the mixed blood of European and Native American.

In another work, entitled *Christopher Columbus Discovers America and Introduces the Spanish Language* (Figure 3), from the *Happy Quincentenary Series*, Quiroz’s largely black and white painting catches a moment during one of the landings of the Spanish explorers on a tropical beach in the

Caribbean. Driven by the dreamy language of gold, the deadly consequences of the conquest for the native populations uncomfortably linger.

Columbus bears an inevitability of colonial destiny as he rests his foot on a native American and a severed head from another native person peers from the ground, looking into a map of future Spanish gold reserves.

#### 4. Medals of Honor

Quiroz likes to work in series. One of his most powerful bodies of work includes fifteen large paintings developed in response to citations for United States military heroes who won the prestigious Medal of Honor. The first in this series, *Gotta Save Dose Collahs*, painted in 1982,



Figure 4 *Gotta Save Dose Collahs*, 1982, *Medal of Honor Series #1* (oil on canvas, 152x122 cm). Collection of the artist. ©Alfred J. Quiroz

brings attention in general to the military contributions and valor of African American soldiers during the American Civil War. The painting monumentalizes the sacrifices and commitments of the “colored troops” who fought for the Union and the Confederacy. Interestingly, the South or Confederacy, who were, among other things, ostensibly fighting to maintain slavery, had substantial numbers of “colored”, or African American, troops fighting for its cause. The African American troops fighting for the northern Union were officially referred to as the U.S. Colored Troops and they repeatedly demonstrated their courage and military abilities despite frequent humiliation from their white Union counterparts.

Quiroz’s painting is titled, *Gotta Save Dose Collahs* (Figure 4), and the intentional vernacular in the title is an obvious reference to saving colored peoples of the North and the South as well as saving the Union flag, affectionately referred to as “the colors”. This particular battle poses a handful of caricatures of African Americans dying in rapid succession while trying to hold high the flag or colors of the Union Army.

Instead of focusing on a specific soldier who won the Medal of Honor, Quiroz recreated the consummate ideal of the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts’ unit of “colored troops” as they led the 1863 attack on the Confederate Fort Wagner in South Carolina (Quiroz, personal email to the author 6 April 2009).

Quiroz unleashed more aggressive postures toward individual histories of Medal of Honor recipients. The fourteenth painting in this series, titled *A Slip-Up Slows Da Search Fo’ Sandino-1932* (Figure 5), was created in 1989. Military history, especially when it is an official variety, tends to recount stories of gallantry and



Figure 5 *A Slip-Up Slows Da Search Fo’ Sandino-1932*, 1989, *Medal of Honor Series #14* (oil and glitter with mixed media on masonite, 244x503x122 cm). Collection of the artist. ©Alfred J. Quiroz

heroism under duress. Medal of Honor winners epitomize the lofty achievements of American wartime valor (only two medals, for example, have been given during peacetime). The medal was awarded, and I quote from some of the earliest government documents, to those who “shall most distinguish themselves by their gallantry in action, and other soldierlike qualities” (*Congressional Medal of Honor Society: History*). In 1863 the United States Congress granted the medal of honor status as a permanent military decoration. Medal of Honors have been awarded to over 3,459 men and one woman. (The narratives of the winners of this medal were first published in 1973 and a revised edition appeared in 1979 in the U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs Report, *Medal of Honor Recipients: 1863-1978*. For awards after 1978, citations are either in the CRS Report for Congress: *Medal of Honor Recipients: 1979-2008* or among the citations officially released and published at the time of award by the White House. The citations are available on line at *Congressional Medal of Honor Society* and *Medal of Honor*.)

Quiroz's careful choices of military history advanced an agenda that seeks to heighten the contrasts among brutal realism, stark contradiction and problematic idealization of historical events. This knack for selectively groomed historical episodes suggests that the wartime realities stemming from several years that he spent in the United States Navy during the Vietnam war may have been effective preparation for his artistic orientation. Whatever the origins of his interests, Quiroz's visual survey of Medal of Honor winners tends to pay homage to the frequent discordance among ideological, political and military goals and their blunt realities.

This particular three-dimensional historical panorama or theatrical set converges on the United States' occupation of Nicaragua in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Following the decision of the United States to build a canal across the isthmus of Panama, Nicaragua, much to American chagrin, began soliciting Germany and Japan to finance and manage a canal across its territory, a business and engineering venture which Nicaragua had hoped the United States would undertake. As relations between Nicaragua and the United States deteriorated, struggles among vying Nicaraguan political interests increased. In 1909 the United States sent troops to a weakening liberal Nicaraguan government and strengthened the power of Nicaraguan conservatives. In ongoing pursuit of its interests, the United States sent military forces to Nicaragua again in 1911. This time the forces remained in that country for twenty-two years, until 1933. The latter part of the American occupation witnessed the rise of Augusto Cesar Sandino, the namesake of the Sandinistas. As Sandino increased guerilla activities against the United States and a conservative Nicaraguan government, the United States responded by developing the Nicaraguan National Guard which, when the United States left Nicaragua in 1933, was controlled by the infamous Anastasio “Tacho” Somoza Garcia. Depicted in Quiroz's work, the American-educated and Marine-trained Somoza arranged to have the populist Sandino assassinated. By January 1, 1937 Somoza had maneuvered his way into the presidency of Nicaragua.

Quiroz explored this historical sequence through the recreation of U.S. Marine Donald Leroy Truesdell's (officially changed to Truesdale) heroic effort. In 1932, while near the Coco River in northern Nicaragua, Corporal Truesdell accompanied a patrol carrying arms and ammunitions in pursuit of Sandinistas. A grenade tumbled from a mule's load and hit a rock, activating the detonator. Truesdell scrambled, slipping perhaps on a banana peel, toward the live grenade and attempted to toss it into the bush, protecting the other soldiers and the mules from the explosion. Unfortunately, the grenade blast blew away Truesdell's hand (United States Army Medal of Honor).

Quiroz ceremoniously invited Somoza and friends, an American puppet, and a representative of American capital to witness Truesdell's fearless action (Quiroz personal email to author, 2 February 2006). This work also summons attention to President Ronald Reagan's reawakened storm in Nicaragua surrounding long-term, by then some fifty years, American backing of the Somoza regime. During the 1980s, as Quiroz painted, the Reagan administration reaction to the end of Somoza-based conservative government, ironically forced out by elected Sandinistas, culminated in another decade of covert war in Nicaragua supported by the United States government.



Figure 6 *Allá en el Rancho Grande*, 1990, *Medal of Honor Series #15* (oil on canvas and masonite with mixed media, 361x324x91 cm). Collection of the artist. ©Alfred J. Quiroz

The ultimate work in the Medal of Honor series revisits Quiroz's ethnic roots. The painting, *Allá en el Rancho Grande* (Figure 6), completed in 1990, is not only the last in the group but is a monumental work. It recounts in three parts the story of a young Mexican American man aspiring to make a career as a singer of *corridos*, or Mexican ballads, of which *Allá en el Rancho Grande* is widely known and popular. The future crooner joins the Marines, fights and dies in Korea. His *rancho grande*, his heavenly dream, goes unrealized. And a gorgeous white woman, part blonde angel, part Virgin of Guadalupe, replaces the ballad's fantasy of a young cowgirl. Like Quiroz's first work in the Medal of Honor series, his last does not refer to any one specific soldier (Quiroz personal email to author, 7 April 2009). Instead, it creates a mythological history that memorializes all of the Mexican American Medal of Honor winners during the Korean war, of which there were many. Indeed, Quiroz himself

lost two uncles to this war. More akin to academic history painting, like that of Benjamin West, the outlines of specific events provide Quiroz with an impetus toward an exploration in general of bravery, fighting valiantly for one's country, and its consequences.

The opportunistic dramas of other American wars have not escaped Quiroz's brush. He has more recently painted works about the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as earlier, historic confrontations, including the Vietnam war, the Boxer Rebellion, the United States military campaign into Korea in 1871, the sinking of the U.S.S. Arizona at Pearl Harbor, the 1915 invasion of Haiti, and the 1983 invasion of Grenada. This latter United States military exploit, officially known as Operation Urgent Fury, sought to oust a left wing government and Cuban soldiers or advisors as well as rescue a small group of American medical students.

## 5.U.S. Presidents

Quiroz's artistic investigations that meander among official and idealized history and their often embarrassing and outrageous realities also have explored areas of revered, almost sacred, United States history, specifically the lives of American Presidents. In *The Firht and Wirtht* (Figure 7), for example, Quiroz jumped into the fray concerning the possible

homosexuality of President James Buchanan who served one term as President from 1857-1861. Many historians and a variety of polls, some conducted by illustrious historians others conducted by American public media, consistently rank Buchanan among the least effective and uninspired leaders of the United States (for example, see Federalist Society. The Wall Street Journal Survey of Presidents). Some conclude that he was the worse President, or as in Quiroz's gaily aspirated superlative, the "wirtht".

There is little controversy regarding Buchanan's Presidential performance. His personal life, however, has spearheaded more speculative suggestions. Sociologist James W. Loewen in his 1999 *Lies Across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong* argued that Buchanan was the first gay or homosexual American President. Before he was elected President and for fifteen years Buchanan lived together with his close friend, Alabama Senator William Rufus King. The close and long-lasting relationship between King and Buchanan prompted Andrew Jackson, the seventh United States president, to refer to King as "Miss Nancy" and in Washington circles, he was referred to as "Aunt Fancy" and the two of them as "Buchanan and his wife" as well as other suggestive terms that, at least to our modern ear, might imply that the relationship between King and Buchanan was more than a nineteenth century unconsummated "romantic friendship".

The portrait on Buchanan's right, labeled "Miss Nancy" is that of his close friend, King. The chained African American slave holding some cotton, the confederate flag, and the Ku Klux Klan member pointing a shotgun all refer to Buchanan as a "doughface" politician, that is a northern politician, he was from Pennsylvania, who supported southern political positions, especially the right to own slaves. Perhaps this is no coincidence since his closest companion, King, was from Alabama. Buchanan holds a turkey leg in the shape of Mexico and, behind, a picturesque sunset by the San Francisco Bay bridge serves as a reminder of Buchanan's role as then Secretary of State in the United States war against Mexico and his rejection of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in favor of taking over a far greater range of Mexican territory. An ironic medallion, a portrait of Benito Juarez reaching for the leg of meat, contrasts poignantly with Buchanan's appetite.



Figure 7 *The Firht and Wirtht*, 2000, *Presidential Series* (oil on canvas, 208x170 cm). Collection of the artist. ©Alfred J. Quiroz

Quiroz honed in on shortcomings, eccentricities and inconsistencies in his American Presidents series, embracing sensational possibilities painting by painting. One more example will suffice. A portrait (Figure 8) of the almost deified Thomas Jefferson stands in stark juxtaposition with those aspects of Jefferson's life Quiroz sought to highlight. Jefferson was the primary author of the Declaration of Independence and the third President of the United States. His inventiveness, business acumen, and philosophical insight earned him an extremely high position in the hierarchy of presidential rankings.

Quiroz searched for the evidence for Jefferson's success in steamy topical incidents. Painted in 1999, the public media in the United States had seized on Jefferson's fathering several children with a "mixed blood" slave, Sally Hemings on the occasion of African American descendents attending a Jefferson family reunion in that same year. What has been

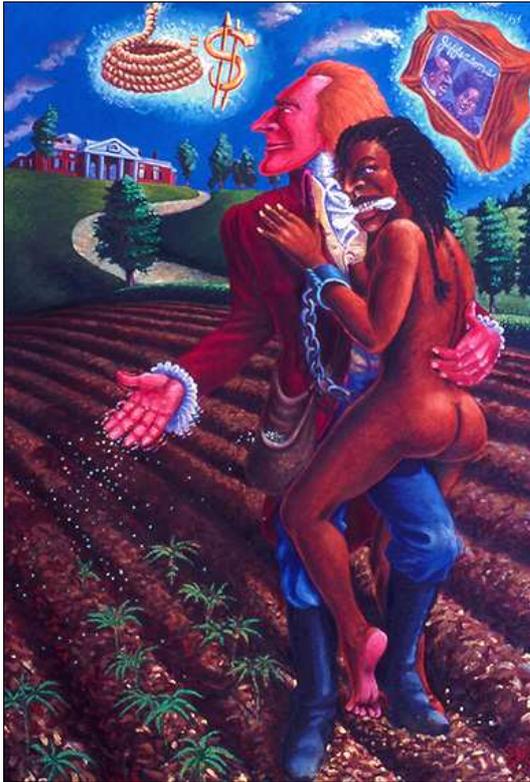


Figure 8 *TJ Sows the Seeds*, 1999, *Presidential Series* (oil on canvas, 152x122). Collection of the artist. ©Alfred J. Quiroz

of significance in recent debates of Jefferson's intimacies with Hemings, is not how many children he fathered or the fact of his "illicit" relationship, but the intensity of the defense for Jefferson's actions. And much has been made in the literature about how "white" or European Sally Hemings looked.

Quiroz took a different angle. He depicted Hemings with a dark complexion and caricature-like physical attributes. Jefferson, as the painting suggests, sowed more than one type of seed. He intensively cultivated *cannibas* or marijuana for commercial products, especially as a fabric for textiles. The late 20<sup>th</sup> century heritage of Jefferson's influence comes full circle in one of the first broadly successful African American situation comedies on American television. Simply titled, *The Jeffersons*, the program focused on an mobile urban family and, somewhat ironically, was a spin-off form the white working class television comedy, *All in the Family*. Jefferson's personal homage to rational democracy, his palatial home Monticello, dominates the estate from above.

## 6. Conclusion

As suggested at the beginning of this paper, Quiroz's paintings mix idealized history and biting satire, as much in the tradition of William Hogarth and Thomas Rowlandson as Jacques Louis David or Benjamin West. The seriousness and aspirations of noble and mythic history painting feeds political agendas that seek to evoke commitments through affirming specific values and ideologies. Satire, on the other hand, is a contrarian strategy aimed at undermining lofty claims and unblemished realities. Neither one of them have much to do with historical truth, whatever that may be. In painting the limits of the canvas demand that the artist carefully select among a fairly finite range of information or facts to communicate a particular point of view. The luxury of nuances afforded by an historical tome are not available to the artist. It is not surprising, therefore, that history painting is not primarily about accuracy. It is about ideology, about promoting a specific interpretive framework for an event or series of events. While satire may not appeal immediately to more exclusive and enlightened arguments, it no less penetrates historical interpretation and seeks a point of view whose excavation of normative history is equally poignant. As is true with any artist, Quiroz achieves these ends with varying success. But there is little ambiguity about what it is he is trying to achieve. If Quiroz's slapstick and caricatures spawn laughter, the jokes hurt. The pain, the embarrassment and the harsh realizations provided by his demystifications offer few comfortable escapes. The rapier of historical fact penetrates more deeply with each detail, each caricature, each flamboyant manifestation of zealous artistic candor.

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