



Off the Map

LANDSCAPE IN THE NATIVE IMAGINATION

NATIONAL
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INDIAN

Carlos Jacanamijoy: Journeys of the Mind

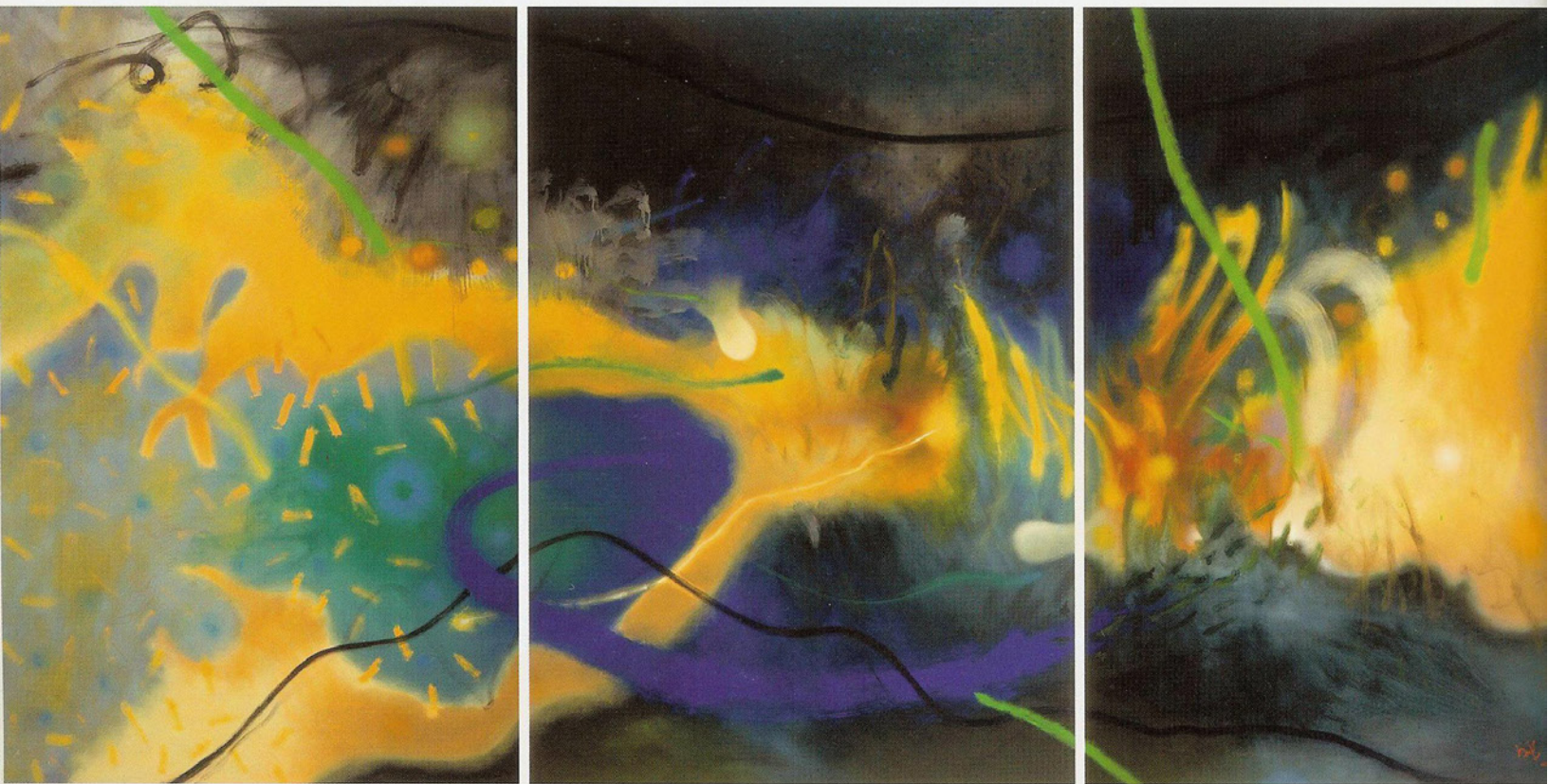
When traveling through this landscape, cultures are routes with which we begin to free, not only the memory, but the imagination and dreams.

—Carlos Jacanamijoy, 2003³¹

Like Lavadour and Whitehorse, Carlos Jacanamijoy has an intimate connection to his rural homeland, although he now lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. Jacanamijoy has been a traveler for many years: between the indigenous community of his birth on the edge of the Putumayo rainforest and the classrooms of the University of Colombia in Bogotá; between the urban jungle of his Brooklyn home and visits to his family in Colombia; and between the day-to-day realities of being a husband, father, and breadwinner and the surreal dreamscape of memory and imagination brought to light in his work. Jacanamijoy's expressive and colorful paintings reflect the freedom he has enjoyed moving among these worlds, while simultaneously revealing an unexpected interior perspective of his cultural worldview.

Jacanamijoy is an enigma in his home community. One of fifteen children in his family, he was raised in Santiago, one of the several Inga and Kamsá communities in the Sibundoy Valley of southwestern Colombia. The arts of the region are dominated by vibrant textile traditions and featherwork, reflecting the diverse bird species in the Putumayo jungle and the material culture of the Andean highlands. The region is known for its annual Carnival, as well as for the indigenous mastery of local plants, especially the hallucinogenic variant of *Banisteriopsis caapi*, or *yagé*, used to induce visions among the shamans of the Amazon. When Jacanamijoy was young, his father left the family to pursue opportunities in Bogotá—then 24 hours away by car. Jacanamijoy eventually joined his father in the city. The transition to an urban lifestyle was jarring, but Jacanamijoy came to embrace his new home. At the university, he was expected to study law or medicine, but instead he became enamored with art, spending hours by candlelight copying the work of Leonardo da Vinci. When he graduated, he had developed his own style of painting drawing heavily on his memories of the landscape of his youth.

Jacanamijoy's early work, especially his painting during the 1990s, is full of frenetic energy and urgency evidenced by the proliferation of visible, nervous brushstrokes, the colors never muddled, overlapping each other cleanly with bright blues, greens, and yellows predominating. In the last ten years, his style has matured, and his paintings have attained a luminous quality. The brushstrokes have softened, and the compositions have become more complex. *Bordear* (2005, p. 38), for example, is a powerful and dramatic recent work. Within this triptych an expanse of mottled gold and yellow hues moves across a deep, dark background. Strings of bright yellow, lime green, and indigo serve as accents to the subtle shifts of color that cross the canvas. The title refers to the idea of bordering something undefined. According to the artist, it represents a childhood memory when his universe was contained in his small indigenous community. Jacanamijoy recalls



Carlos Jacanamijoy
Bordear, 2005
Oil on canvas
Each panel: 230 x 160 cm.
Private collection

that his grandmother's entire life was spent in the village; she traveled only as far as the neighboring communities nestled in the Sibundoy Valley. While his grandmother expressed no desire to breach the boundaries of her existence, even as a child Jacanamijoy harbored an urge to explore the mysteries of the valley's borders and learn about the outside world.

Although Jacanamijoy has stated, "My vision is not specifically Inga, it is essentially human," his choice of colors and imagery, though highly abstract, is clearly derived from the landscape of the worlds he has traveled in. The intense colors evoke the rich flora and fauna of the rainforest, the brightly hued traditional Inga textiles, and, some have surmised, the hallucinogenic visions induced by yagé. Art historian Natalia Vega has discussed at length the cultural significance of color and vision reflected in Inga cosmology, and its translation into the "language of Western painting" by Jacanamijoy: "His concept of landscape, deeply rooted in the Native cosmology and articulated in its mythical narrations, reflects a world of many levels where the natural and the supernatural live together. . . . His nature is fluid, full of mutations and metamorphosis." Color, in particular, has deep symbolism among the Inga, embodying transformation and knowledge. Their creation story focuses on the birth of the world through sound (music) and color, which a shaman re-experiences through the psychoactive properties of yagé. Colombian art critic Eduardo Serrano has also cited these influences as defining Jacanamijoy's work: "It is blessed with an esthetic and history that are different from those of

other artists, qualities that come from the indigenous world and are linked to its magic, enchantment, mystery, and irrationality.”³²

✦ While these somewhat romantic interpretations provide insight for audiences unfamiliar with South American indigenous cultures, they fail to take into account the integration of new experiences and sources of stimulation in the artist’s very cosmopolitan life. For example, *66 Water St.* (2005), the first painting Jacanamijoy completed after moving to New York, takes its title from the address of his new residence and studio in Brooklyn, in the neighborhood known as DUMBO (District Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass). The green tendrils arching horizontally across the canvas evoke the vines of the jungle, but could they also reference the sweeping cables and girders of the Brooklyn Bridge? In the energetic landscape Jacanamijoy has created, yellow flecks sweep through the lower right quadrant, like a school of fish in a tropical river or the headlights of an evening traffic jam snaking over an entrance ramp. Beams of light shoot upward, like skyscrapers or the *Tribute in Light* intermittently installed as a memorial at the site of the World Trade Center. •

The strength of Jacanamijoy’s work lies in his lack of inhibition and his willingness to abandon expectation regarding either form or content. As Jacanamijoy explains, he has internalized the jungle: “It is inside me.” But so are the streets of Manhattan, the hours studying Western art, and his many experiences traveling the globe as an international artist. While it is tempting to succumb to a mystical interpretation of his painting—an interpretation that has perhaps, predictably, been emphasized because of his indigeneity—Jacanamijoy’s work embodies the culturally and aesthetically syncretic landscape of an indigenous artist’s imagination.

Carlos Jacanamijoy
66 Water St., 2005
Oil on canvas
91 x 152 cm.
Private collection

