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## Eduardo de Jesús Douglas

# The Colonial Self: Homosexuality and Mestizaje in the Art of Nahum B. Zenil

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1. Interview with the artist, Mexico City, January 1995.

2. See Edward J. Sullivan, "Witness to the Self/ Testigo del Ser," in *Nahum B. Zenil: Witnesses to the Self/Testigos del Ser*, exh. cat. (San Francisco: The Mexican Museum/El Museo Mexicano, 1996), 9–17.

3. The issue of personal identity, especially with regard to gender and sexuality, is a common theme in contemporary Mexican painting. Among others, see Luis Carlos Emmerich, *Figuraciones y desfiguros de los 80s: Pintura mexicana joven* (Mexico City: Editorial Diana, 1989), and Edward J. Sullivan, *Aspects of Contemporary Mexican Painting*, exh. cat. (New York: Americas Society, 1990).

4. For puns as an integral part of homosocial interaction, see Joseph Carrier, *De los otros: Intimacy and Homosexuality among Mexican Men* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 18–21.

5. I do not suggest that folk art, a problematic concept and term, inevitably and transparently expresses a cultural, class, and ethnic essence, but that we often and uncritically assume that it does. With regard to Mexico, such an essence is characterized as *mexicanidad*, a term commonly employed to describe what is at the core of Mexican identity.

Nahum Bernabé Zenil's *Tiro de dardos* (Dart Game, 1994) (fig. 1) is a frontal, three-quarter-length, nude self-portrait. The artist's body fuses with the background—a dartboard painted in the red, green, and white of the Mexican flag—and his bright red heart, extruded from the body, marks the center, the target. The pose evokes both the crucified Christ and Leonardo da Vinci's representation of man as the natural expression of geometric perfection. The allusion to a target and a flag, as well as the play between two-dimensional object and three-dimensional image, recall Jasper Johns's fragmentation of identity in his paintings of the 1950s. In the case of Zenil, however, the picture articulates the self. Hitting the target—being a man, being Mexican—is neither predetermined nor natural, as it involves chance, skill, and

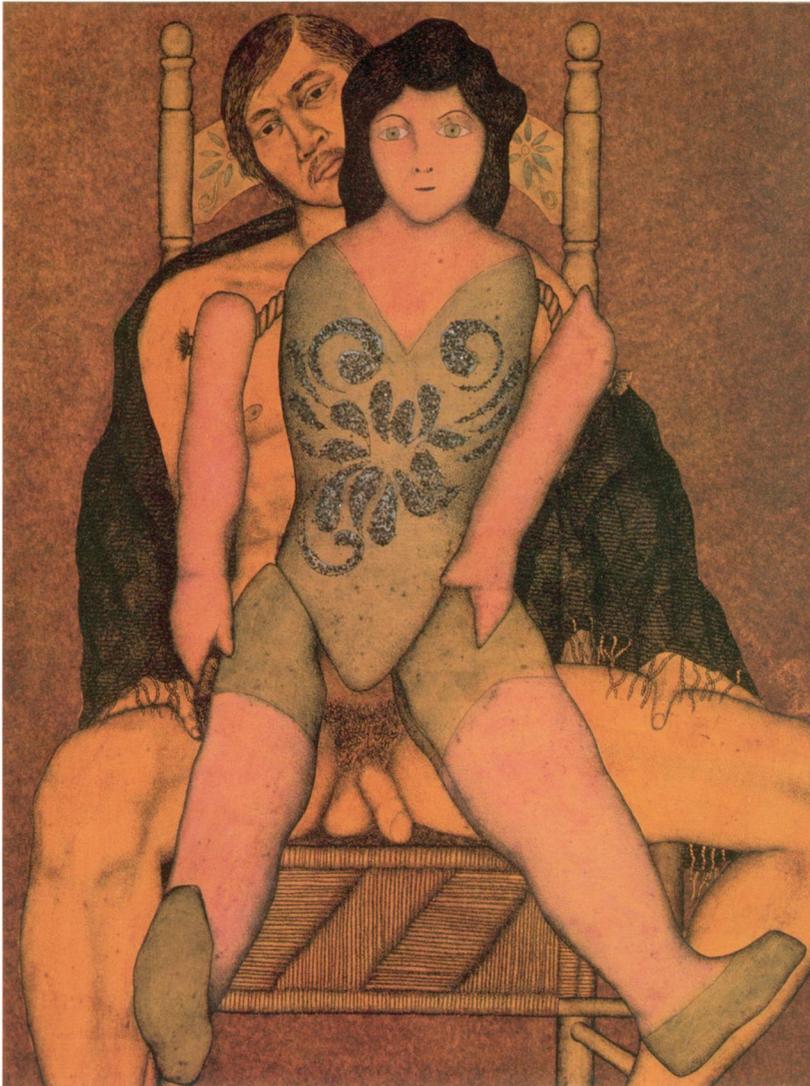
risk. To miss is to lose, but for Zenil, a *mestizo* gay male, to hit the target—to be himself in contemporary Mexico—is to suffer. In image after image he plays the game but according to different rules. In the process, he collapses Mexico's intertwined colonial legacy of race and modern ideologies of nation into male bodies experienced and desired, thus challenging notions of race, sex, and gender that consign him to society's edges.

Zenil, born in 1947, is one of a handful of openly gay activists/artists in Mexico, and his unmistakably gay and autobiographical works are revolutionary in the context of Mexican art and society. Trained when abstraction reigned in Mexico, Zenil is best known for the autobiographical figurative work he has produced since the early 1970s. A need to address his sense of marginalization in contemporary Mexican society motivated his shift to figuration in the form of narrative self-portraiture.<sup>1</sup> In drawings, paintings, collages, sculptures, and, more recently, multimedia installations, he has crafted a pictorial alter-ego, appropriating from and alluding to the colonial- and Independence-era legacies that endowed Mexico with its hybrid art and culture. The appropriated images foreground the traditions they evoke: Mexican Catholicism, especially the Virgin of Guadalupe, the *mestizo*, the family.<sup>2</sup> In light of a critical engagement with Mexico's artistic past, artist and alter-ego dissect the experience of the *mestizo* and the gay male.<sup>3</sup>

Zenil depicts his longtime companion, Gerardo Vilchis, in the 1979 mixed-media drawing *Tengo una muñeca* (I Have a Doll) (fig. 2). Nude except for the woven *rebozo* (shawl commonly used by Indian and mestiza women) draped over his shoulders and seated on a decorated chair of cane and wood, Vilchis cradles a doll in his lap. The work's title refers to the doll, the sitter's penis, and the relationship between artist and sitter. The slippage between word and image recalls the suggestive *albur*s (puns) with which Mexican men of the popular classes negotiate sex and *la lotería*, a Mexican card game in which one describes what an image represents through oblique and witty puns.<sup>4</sup> Shawl, chair, and doll, all recognizable products of Mexican craft production, likewise function as indices of the class and ethnic essence perceived in folk art—in this case, *mexicanidad* (Mexicanness).<sup>5</sup> These indicators imply both that Vilchis is typically Mexican and, metaphorically, that the relationship between artist and sitter is as authentic, innate, natural, and national as are the folk objects.



**I. Nahum B. Zenil. *Tiro de dardos* (Dart Game), 1994. Oil on wood. 27¼ x 27¼ (69.3 x 69.3). Private collection. Photo courtesy Galería de Arte Mexicano, Mexico City.**



6. The *mestizo* and *mestizaje* (the process or result of miscegenation between Indian and Spaniard) are concepts that have changed radically over time in Mexico. I use the term *mestizo* to refer to a person who marks a biological and cultural fusion between Indian and European and in whom the Indian element is apparent, either physically or culturally. For an overview of *mestizaje* and Mexican national identity, see J. Jorge Klor de Alva, "Mestizaje from New Spain to Aztlán: On the Control and Classification of Collective Identities," in Ilona Katzew, ed., *New World Orders: Casta Painting and Colonial Latin America*, exh. cat. (New York: Americas Society, 1996), 58–71.

7. For a discussion of gender and homosexuality in Mexico, see Carrier, esp. 3–21, and Ian Lumsden, *Homosexuality, Society, and the State in Mexico* (Toronto: Canadian Gay Archives and Mexico City: Solediciones, 1991), 13–48.

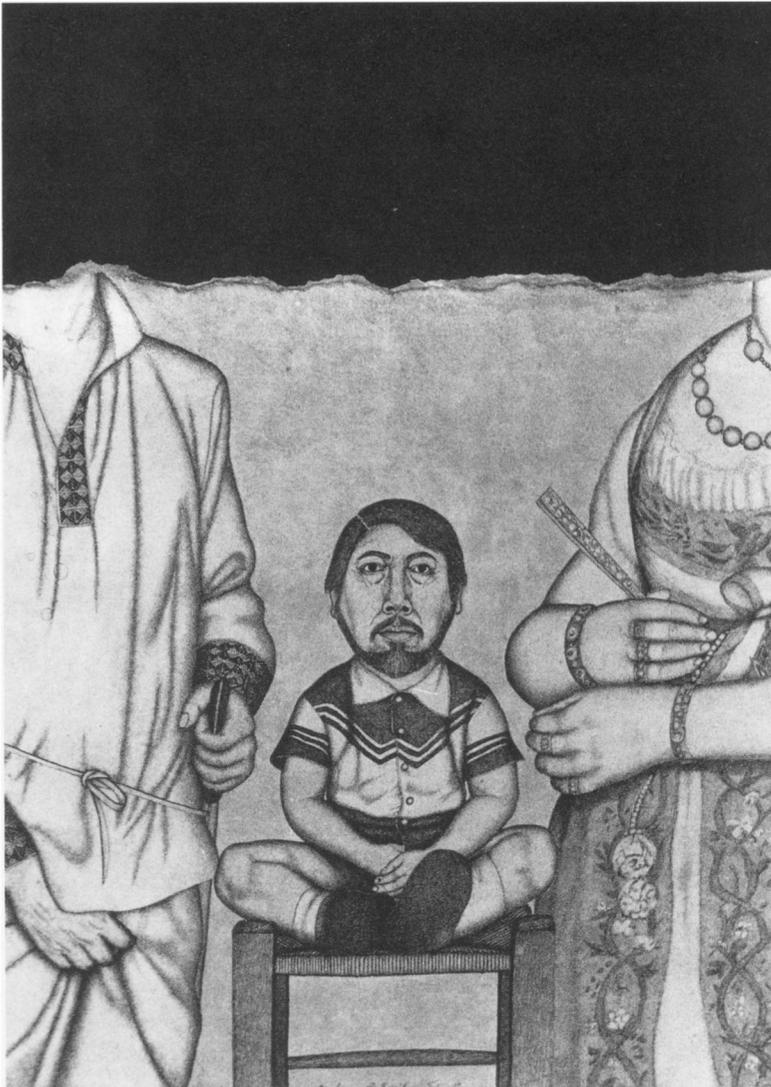
8. See Lumsden, 47–74.

privileged more closely approximate what is connoted by the Anglo-American term *gay*. In spite of the *mestizo*'s preeminence in constructions of national identity, these elites tend to be more European than Indian, both racially and culturally. For a *mestizo* male to eroticize the penis, as Zenil does in *Tengo una muñeca*, is blatantly to flout class, national, and "natural" gender norms.<sup>7</sup> Notwithstanding advances in recent years, and the theoretical legality of all forms of sexual relations between consenting adults, homosexuality remains almost invisible and barely tolerated in Mexico.<sup>8</sup>

In *De indio y española, mestizo* (Of an Indian Man and a Spanish Woman, a *Mestizo*) (fig. 3), a mixed-media work of 1992, Zenil marks the indigenous as a source or token of authenticity and ethnicity and himself as both *mestizo* and *gay*. In the format of *casta* painting, a genre typical of colonial New Spain that catalogues miscegenation, the artist represents himself as a *mestizo* man-child.<sup>9</sup> Even more so than in the *casta* paintings of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, father and mother are represented purely as racial types.

In Zenil's work, homosexuality qualifies and is qualified by Mexican-ness. In light of post-Independence (1821) and especially post-Revolution (1910) nationalist rhetoric, Mexican-ness means *mestizo*. A biological and cultural hybrid born of Spanish and Indian, Old and New World, and made unique by its indigenous American component, the *mestizo* comprises *la raza de bronce* (the race of bronze), often shortened to *la raza*. In the founding myth of the modern Mexican nation, the *mestizo* race, as a social phenomenon and ideal, subsumes ethnic and national identity.<sup>6</sup> For Zenil, to be *gay* is to be Mexican—that is, a mixture, something in between two radically different worlds—and to belong to neither.

To be *mestizo* and male is, ideally, to be a *macho*—a "real" man who dominates all, by force if necessary. Homosexuality inheres, not in sex between two men, but rather in the assumption of feminine-gendered characteristics—namely, playing the passive role in anal intercourse. A male who plays the active role is not perceived as homosexual because he manifests the masculine-gendered trait of dominance/penetration. In Mexico, moreover, class informs homosexual desire and experience. The economically and socially



**2. Nahum B. Zenil. *Tengo una muñeca (I Have a Doll)*, 1979. Mixed-media on paper. 25 x 19½ (63.5 x 48.5). Private collection. Photo courtesy Galería de Arte Mexicano, Mexico City.**

**3. Nahum B. Zenil. *De indio y española, mestizo (Of an Indian Man and a Spanish Woman, a Mestizo)*, 1992. Mixed-media on paper. 27¼ x 19½ (69.3 x 49.5). Private collection. Photo courtesy Galería de Arte Mexicano, Mexico City.**

Zenil has torn the drawing along the top, decapitating and rendering them anonymous. In contrast to colonial precedents, he offers no appropriate correlation between race and sex: in general, in casta paintings the male is racially and socially privileged, and his role is to “civilize,” to whiten, his wife and child.<sup>10</sup>

In *De indio y española, mestizo*, Zenil neither individuates the figures nor, more to the point, differentiates skin tone. Standing frontally and flanking their child, mother and father are contrasted and specified solely by clothing. The father wears the colonial-era trousers and shirt of an Indian agricultural laborer. Borrowed from one of Francisco de Goya’s royal portraits, the woman, on the other hand, wears the elaborate European dress and jewelry of an urban, well-to-do Spanish lady. Who and what the two figures are is a function of what they wear; and because they are featureless and colorless, what they wear has no innate, natural, or determined connection to who they are. The signs through which we read identity have become ephemeral commodities, easily purchased or exchanged. This superficial articulation of cultural, economic, racial, and social differences overturns the essentialist and hierarchical categories that European colonialism imposed on the New World.

The lack of fit between race and sex likewise challenges essentialist and normative correlations among sex, gender, and sexuality. With arms crossed and protecting her belly, the woman holds in her right hand a fan—a marker of civility and leisure. The male’s left hand clutches the hilt of a machete, both a tool and a weapon, while in his right hand he holds his erect penis, just discernible under the fabric of the trousers, and points it in the direction of his wife and child. The crude, possibly autoerotic, gesture and the visual equation between tool and penis mark the racial, social, and economic “inferior” as sexually active and potentially dangerous. Here, Zenil insinuates the indigenous penis and male sexuality into the genealogical fabric of mestizo identity. In substituting the Indian for the European male and the penis for the violated indigenous vagina, Zenil subverts the gendered ideological underpinnings of colonial relations and reshapes history, allowing alternative possibilities to invade the present.

Zenil depicts himself as a mestizo man-child, with an adult’s head and a child’s body. Seated between his parents, he situates himself physically

between Indian and Spaniard; he has made himself a folk artifact, crafted like the cane and wooden chair on which he sits, or the colonial system of castes, according to which he is a mestizo. But, because the child is dressed in what is clearly a twentieth-century outfit, he exists at a remove from the colonial tradition that categorizes him. Furthermore, he is a biological hybrid who has the face of a fully formed adult but the body of a child. While such a composite

suggests infantilization, and thus marginalization and subordination, it also reverses the Spaniards' characterizations of the indigenous as children in the bodies of adults. Moreover, the mestizo man-child plays on Surrealist precedents of hybrid creatures emanating from and embodying the unconscious, especially the *femme-enfant*—the lascivious but passive object of heterosexual male desire. By imaging the child as the physical and pictorial opposite of its parents, Zenil breaks the link between the individual and his genetic script, decolonizing identity from its biological and historical matrix.



**4. Nahum B. Zenil.**  
*Untitled, 1979. Mixed-media on paper. 13¼ x 19¼ (33.7 x 50.2).* Jack S. Blanton Museum of Art, University of Texas at Austin, Archer M. Huntington Museum Fund, 1986. Photo George Holmes.

In imitation of the Indian father, the mestizo touches his own penis. The act of touching and arousing the penis parallels and becomes part of the “genetic” formation of the individual. Zenil thus anchors sexuality to ethnicity—that is, to biology, the natural, the innate, the indigenous, the Mexican, all categories he questions. If, as the image proposes, racial difference is embodied in culture and society and is conventional rather than natural, then sexual difference, when manifested in gender-specific normative standards, must equally be crafted or fashioned. For a man to touch, to desire, or to accept the penis is to sever the “natural” link between maleness and the macho ethos of penetration. He thereby marks himself as different, as Other, which in this case means to experience both subjective authentication—that is, to become himself as a fully autonomous sexual subject—and emasculation. But this emasculation is predicated on convention rather than determined by a natural disjunction between biology and sexuality. Likewise, for a mestizo to be authentic or genuine, he must manifest what is Other—namely, the Indian—and in so doing places himself at the economic and social periphery of contemporary Mexico.

An untitled drawing from 1979 features Zenil at a protest rally, with a Mexican flag in his right hand (fig. 4). Behind the artist, fellow protesters form a horizontal band across the bottom of the sheet. These figures, multiples of Zenil’s lover, Vilchis, either carry Mexican flags or hold up a large banner decorated with a domestic interior. Color is kept to a minimum of green and pink but is nonetheless powerfully expressive, as these evoke the colors of the Mexican flag. After a moment’s glance, one realizes that in the flag he himself

holds, Zenil has replaced the central emblem—the eagle-snake-cactus-rock pictograph of the Aztec capital Mexico-Tenochtitlan—with a frontal bust of Vilchis. This substitution equates the figure with the symbol of the indigenous, pre-Conquest imperial city, which today authenticates the modern nation-state and asserts its essential indigenous identity. The equivalence is underscored along the bottom of the sheet, where the marchers carry Mexican flags without central emblems; each figure physically manifests Mexico's indigenous inheritance and thus constitutes a living, corporeal emblem, or relic, of the Indian.

In the rhetoric of twentieth-century nationalism Mexico is a mestizo nation, whose character and individuality derive largely from the indigenous element. It was for and by the mestizo that the revolution was fought, and subsequent state-supported cultural propaganda privileged this touchstone of Mexicanness and its Indian past. The rhetoric, however, is just that. Color and culture shift perceptibly as one moves up or down the social and economic ladder in Mexico, and contemporary media and advertising separate out what is neither white nor Western. What makes Mexico mestizo is also what condemns one as poor, rural, unacculturated, and uneducated. Like the figures in the drawing, the mestizo is either invisible or indistinguishable—a reductive racial type, an Everyman and thus no one, because of his very hybridity. Indeed, the term *la raza*, employed frequently and pejoratively for the overwhelmingly mestizo masses, signifies both the conflated racial, ethnic, and national category and, in view of the correlation between race and class, its socioeconomic anonymity.<sup>11</sup> Zenil's figures and flag may be read both as a claim to national identity—Mexican and thus mestizo—and as an allusion to the marginalization of the individual on the basis of this very claim, a marginalization the artist and image contest through the depiction of political activism. By analogy, the male lover Vilchis is as fundamental, as innate, to the artist's sense of self as the indigenous, pre-Hispanic element is to national identity. Like the physical or cultural vestige of the Indian, what Vilchis represents—a radical mixture of gender identity and sexual desire—classifies Zenil as a marginal social type, in light of a system of gender as cultural and colonial as the racial categories of New Spain.

The collapsing of the national and the ethnic into the sexual is realized in another subtle visual pun. Zenil has painted the bedroom on the banner in pink (the bedspread) and green (the wallpaper) washes, associating it with the colors of the flag. What the bedroom represents for the artist—domesticity, the family, the private self, homosexuality—is as potent an agent of identity as ethnicity or nationality. On this “flag” Zenil himself is the emblem or genealogical sign, and thus it marks his subjectivity as the indigenous source and token of legitimacy. Just as the Aztec pictograph correlates the nation's past to its present, the portraits of Zenil, his mother, and Vilchis on the bedroom walls quote religious types and affectively limn history as biology in both reproductive and sexual terms. By equating autobiography with symbols of race, nation, and state, Zenil counters the expectations of the normative institutions engaged in the reproduction of identity, for which he substitutes personal affinity and experience.

Like many of his generation, Zenil looks to Frida Kahlo as a model for the

9. See essays in Katzew, ed., especially Katzew, “Casta Painting: Identity and Social Stratification in Colonial Mexico,” 8–29.

10. Indeed, the Mexican nation and social relations came into being in the womb of the Indian woman Marina, La Malinche, when the European conqueror and master Hernán Cortés impregnated her. For Malinche as the archetypal *chingada* (fucked/violated one) and model for Mexican identity and social relations, see Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude and Other Writings* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1985), 7–212.

11. Zenil is a mestizo of humble rural origins and for many years worked as a primary school-teacher, which in Mexico is a low-paying, low-status occupation.

pictorial objectification of personal affect and narrative.<sup>12</sup> *Con todo respeto* (With All Respect) (fig. 5), a 1983 serigraph, presents Zenil in an amalgam of two Kahlo paintings (*The Bus*, 1929, and *The Two Fridas*, 1939). Zenil situates himself and his family in Kahlo's scene of passengers sitting on a bus, with a view through the windows onto factories at the point where city meets country. A reworking of Honoré Daumier's *Third Class Railway Carriage* (ca. 1862), *The Bus* shows the racial and economic range of Mexican society, from the white and well-to-do figures at the right to the working-class mestizos at the left.<sup>13</sup> At the center of *The Bus* sits a barefoot Indian mother cradling an infant in her arms, her head covered and body wrapped in a rebozo. Woman and child suggest an Indian Virgin—the dark-skinned Guadalupe, mother and patroness of Mexico—and Christ Child. The Indian mother anchors the image, serving as a pictorial and biological link between its two halves. European and Indian become Mexico, the mestizo nation, in her womb.

In *Con todo respeto* a simple thatch-roofed house is visible through the window at the left. It represents the isolated rancho (small farm) El Tecomate in rural Chicontepec, Veracruz, where Zenil was raised by his maternal grandparents. Three figures—Zenil, Kahlo, and Vilchis—occupy the center. Vilchis and Zenil, dark-skinned, Indian-featured mestizos in contemporary Western dress, frame the lighter-skinned, European-featured Kahlo, who wears an Indian folk costume. This Kahlo is the Tehuana<sup>14</sup> from *The Two Fridas*, the self-portrait in which Kahlo the mestiza replicates herself as European and Indian. As in *The Two Fridas*, the Tehuana's heart is extruded from her body, evoking private emotion and pain, in addition to the sufferings of the Virgin in her guise as *La Dolorosa* (The Sorrowful One), with whom Kahlo equates herself.<sup>15</sup> Except for the heart, Zenil has bleached the Tehuana Frida and her costume of their original color, approximating the look of a sepia-toned photograph and thereby presenting her as if she were the portrait of a revered nineteenth-century forebear. One artery wraps around her left arm, as in the original, and ends at the childhood photograph of Diego Rivera in her left hand, which she holds in front of her groin. The Indian Kahlo metaphorically gives birth to Diego, her husband, and she thus paints indigenous female sexuality as self-willed erotic pleasure and the Virgin's grief and mourning as erotic pain. In Zenil's miscegenated pictorial genealogy, Kahlo, the sorrowful, sensual Tehuana who creates herself and her son-lover, fuses with Kahlo's "indigenous" Virgin whose womb bears mestizo Mexico.

Substituting himself for the working-class mestizo in *The Bus*, Zenil sits to Kahlo's right, with his left arm around her. With his left hand he touches the physical and conceptual heart of the image—Kahlo as autochthonous eroticized folk object. Vilchis sits to her left, a bag of tools at his feet, and grasps his penis with his right hand. Although he occupies the place of the well-dressed, upper-class white male in Kahlo's picture, his figure quotes and repositions that of the working-class mestizo in *The Bus*. Whereas Kahlo's upper-class white male holds a bag of coins in his right hand (capital), her mestizo holds a long, thick metal wrench between his legs (labor). In the picture's complicated skein of allusions, Zenil, the mestizo to the right of the mother, must in some way be a function of her sexuality and of the white male penis whose place is here taken by Vilchis. Zenil portrays himself as son and lover of the mestizo penis.

12. The importance of Kahlo for the current generation is well documented in Blanca Garduño and José Antonio Rodríguez, *Pasión por Frida*, exh. cat. (Mexico City: Museo Estudio Diego Rivera-INBA, 1992).

13. Hayden Herrera, *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983), 97–98.

14. A woman, either Indian or mestiza, from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in southern Mexico, who was an icon of mexicanidad and erotic promise in early twentieth-century art and thought.

15. The iconography of the heart in Mexico is complex, nowhere more so than in modern and contemporary art that conflates the erotic and the religious, both Precolumbian and post-Conquest Catholic. See Olivier Debrose, "Haciéndola cardíaca: para una cultura de los desencuentros y malentendido/Heart Attacks: On a Culture of Missed Encounters and Missed Understandings," in Debrose, Elizabeth Sussman, and Matthew Teitelbaum, eds., *El Corazón Sangrante/The Bleeding Heart*, exh. cat. (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1991), 12–61.

At the same time, Kahlo as mother assumes the role of the Guadalupe, spiritual mother to all Mexico, thus transforming the central group into a homoerotic mestizo adoration of an incestuous Indian Virgin and Child. By substituting for and thus eroticizing Kahlo's Indian mother, Zenil indexes Vilchis's penis as an incarnation of desire (figs. 2, 3), which, by analogy, is to Zenil what Rivera

was to Kahlo. Embedding this relationship in the biological and spiritual genealogy of Mexicanness as accessed through Kahlo's art, Zenil at once naturalizes and nationalizes it.

The artist frames the central group with his blood family, leveling *The Bus's* racially and economically constructed social hierarchy and locating Mexico in his family, himself, and their world. To the right, the artist as a child sits reading a book, in anticipation of his future career as a primary schoolteacher. Next to the boy the half-truncated but still recognizable figure of his younger sister holds a Mexican flag in her right



**5. Nahum B. Zenil. *Con todo respeto (With All Respect)*, 1983. Serigraph. 17¼ x 23½ (43.9 x 59.7). Collection of the artist. Photo courtesy Galería de Arte Mexicano, Mexico City.**

hand. To the left sits Zenil's mother, wrapped in a rebozo. Next to her is a male figure, presumably Zenil's father, whose left arm and leg are visible. In place of Kahlo's representative Mexican social types, Zenil describes from right to left a shift in time, an atemporal three ages of man in his own flesh and blood that moves both toward and away from the artistic and sexual epiphany at the center. He recasts Kahlo's visual catalogue of race, class, and nation in Mexico as autobiography, specified as mestizo, rural, and Mexican, but rooted in and expressed as subjective erotic experience and artistic materialization.

Eliding the nation as race into the gay male and the gay male into the image, Zenil, like Kahlo, creates a sophisticated pictorial fiction in which the artist himself functions as an authentic and transparent folk artifact. Artistic process and product become autobiography and mimic the lived disjunctures between individual and society, sex and gender, and race and nation. They do so in a form or a space where these disjunctures no longer exist. Because of its authenticity and transparency, indeed, its ethnicity, the folk artifact—as the image itself and as the artist objectified in the image—is politics by other means, as it critically manipulates the visual signs of race and nation, embodying, and thus advocating, radical social alternatives.

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