

*The Fragility and Visibility of The Authentic Mexican Identity- An Analysis of 'La Revolución' by
Fabián Cháirez*

How does '*La Revolución*' by Fabián Cháirez trace the trajectory of mobilized visibility for queer voices and recontextualize the dynamics of gender, race, and sexuality in Mexican history and culture?

Methodologies: Comparative and visual analysis, queer theory, semiotics, mythology of the hero, and Octavio Paz's 'Mexican Mask' theory.

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Introduction

La Revolución (2014) by Fabián Cháirez subverts traditional masculine portrayals that have been historically imposed to the image of Emiliano Zapata through homoerotic, drag, and queer dispositions. The work catalyzed social unrest within the Zapatistas when it was presented at the Palacio de Bellas Artes' 2019 exhibition, *Emiliano. Zapata Después de Zapata*. Protesters argued that *La Revolución* was unpatriotic and a transgression of Zapata's legacy by appropriating a queer narrative. However, it also garnered support from the LGBTQ+ community and nationally recognized fine arts institutions by advocating for greater visibility in the media and critically assessing exclusionary practices against queer people of color. The contextualization of Cháirez's contemporary painting and exhibition within this case study serves as a comparative analysis that investigates the mythicization of Emiliano Zapata as a hero and a symbol for nationalistic and heteronormative ideals of masculinity and femininity in Mexican society. This analysis also integrates discourse of gender performativity, "Queer Neutrality," semiotics, and Octavio Paz's cultural theorization of "The Mexican Mask" in his book *El Laberinto de La Soledad*.

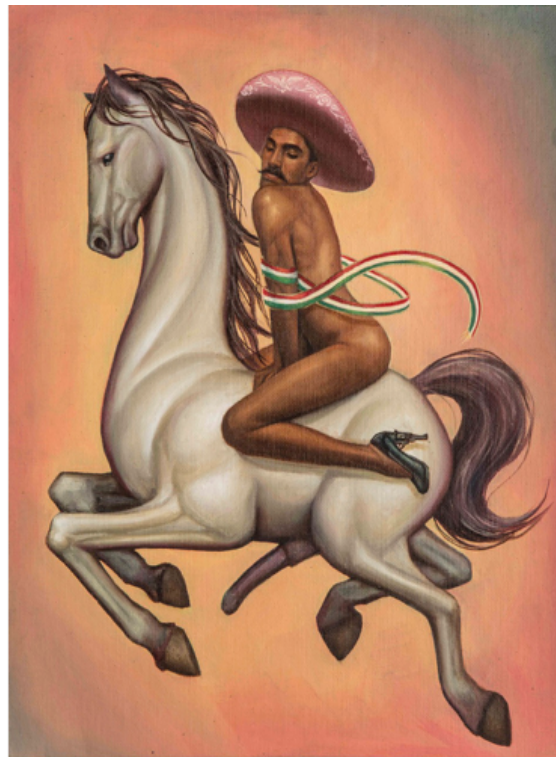
Biography and Visual Analysis

La Revolución (2014) by Fabián Cháirez exemplifies the artist's oeuvre, by showcasing his passion for dismantling hyper-masculine stereotypes in Mexican society through queer visualization. Fabián Cháirez has established himself as prominent contemporary painter in Mexico, especially within LGBTQ+ spaces, through his previous interventionist work as a Creative Director and mural paintings in nightclubs across Mexico City.¹ His work prioritizes the visibility of people of color and members of underrepresented communities, presenting them as "sexual and gender dissidents."² As a result, Cháirez's work provides a countercultural narrative

¹ Cháirez, Fabián: "About – Fabian Cháirez," n.d., <https://fabianchairez.com/about-us/>.

² Ibid.,

that challenges racial and social stereotypes and criticizes concurrent issues of machismo, racism and classism within Mexican society—issues often omitted from visual media. *La Revolución* exemplifies such values through the juxtaposition between traditional equestrian portraiture and the queer presentation of Mexican revolutionary fighter Emiliano Zapata. The portrait displays Zapata with his distinctive mustache, dark complexion, and large sombrero. A ribbon in the colors of the Mexican flag gently embraces and hugs his naked body. Zapata's emblematic masculinity is contested through visuals that are traditionally perceived as feminine such as the bright pink sombrero and the pin-up pose while riding a white stallion. Queer visualization is characterized by Zapata's flirtatious expression with an anticipatory downward gaze and bold black gun-shaped stilettos. This provides a persistent sexual tension that is accentuated by the direct gaze of the prancing stallion, which is depicted with an erect phallus beneath Zapata as he sits with an arched back.



Fabián Cháirez, *La Revolución*. Oil on Canvas. 30 cm x 40.5 cm. 2014.

Case Study: *Emiliano. Zapata Después de Zapata* Exhibition (2019)

The Minister of Culture and curator of the Palacio de Bellas Artes, Luis Adrián Vargas, collaborated on the exhibition *Emiliano. Zapata Después de Zapata* in 2019, that celebrated the one-hundredth anniversary of Zapata's passing and recognized his visual legacy. Zapata's image was investigated as a significant icon to several artistic, social and political movements through four thematic stages: The Peasant Leader, The Fabrication of the National Hero, Migrant Images, and Other Revolutions, in which *La Revolución* was included.³ The work elicited an ambivalent reaction from the public, as agrarian activists alongside the Zapata's relatives condemned the artwork through conservative sentiments. Jorge Zapata González threatened to sue both the Palacio de Bellas Artes and Cháirez for enabling the denigration of his grandfather's image by "depicting him as gay".⁴ Protests inside the museum, led by the Unión Nacional de Trabajadores Agrícolas (UNTA), soon followed, demanding the complete removal and destruction of the painting while physically targeting LGBTQ+ counter protestors.⁵ Criticisms directed at *La Revolución* stem from discourses suggesting that the inclusion of queer perspectives in Mexican history may lead to the erasure of revolutionary principles while selectively promoting "the masculinist hagiography."⁶ Societal pressure for a singular narrative of Zapata as the epitome of masculinity and heteronormative values speaks upon the mythological construction of his heroic image, driven by nationalism for the sake of cultural unity.

³ Campos, Citlali Aguilar: "The Semiosphere of the Hero in the Artwork 'The Revolution' by Fabián Cháirez," *Scientific Journal of Applied Social and Clinical Science* 2, no. 9 (June 10, 2022): 6–8.

⁴Jones, Ryan: "¡Viva the Queer Zapata! The Sexual Politics of Defining Mexican Identity and Icons in Fabián Cháirez's 'La Revolución,'" *Nursing Clio*, April 19, 2024, <https://nursingclio.org/2020/03/25/viva-the-queer-zapata-the-sexual-politics-of-defining-mexican-identity-and-icons-in-fabian-chairezs-la-revolucion/#footnoteref4>.

⁵ Ibid.,

⁶ Ibid.,

Mythology of the Hero, who is really Zapata?

To understand the constructed image of Emiliano Zapata, we must first understand the functions of myths under nationalism. A myth is a story is utilized amongst individuals as a link of shared identities within a community and enables a simplified narrative of a nation.⁷ The image of the hero lies within “the imagination of a nation,” which are cognitively accepted as critically vital to the country’s formation and survival by selectively depicting historical happenings promoting shared cultural values.⁸ Before Emiliano Zapata became the image of Mexican heroism and known by various alias such as El Caudillo del Sur, he was abhorred by the ‘Porfiriato’ and the general public for his political activism in favor of peasants’ rights.⁹ He was known for his extremist actions in pursuit of land reforms during the Revolution of 1910 as a commander for the Liberation Army of the South.¹⁰ His assassination in 1919 caused catastrophic fractures within Mexican society and campesinos from Morelos began memorializing his image as a representation of heroism and martyrdom.¹¹ The aftermath ensued the need for governmental reform, where the image of Zapata among various Mexican revolutionary leaders would be further mythicized for cultural hegemony.¹²

Zapata’s heroic image was attached to nationalistic and patriarchal values through fatalist doctrines that “pacify and otherwise manipulate the inhabitants of Mexico” by deterring drastic revolutionary actions.¹³ It is how political parties such as the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI) sought to use Zapata’s legacy as part of their compendium for political legitimacy.¹⁴

⁷ Brunk, Samuel: *The Posthumous Career of Emiliano Zapata: Myth, Memory, and Mexico’s Twentieth Century*, 2008, 5.

⁸ Ibid., 6.

⁹ Ibid., 18.

¹⁰ Campos: “The Semiosphere of the Hero in the Artwork ‘The Revolution’ by Fabián Cháirez,” 2.

¹¹ Brunk: *The Posthumous Career of Emiliano Zapata*, 18.

¹² Ibid., 13.

¹³ Ibid., 13.

¹⁴ Schell, William: “Emiliano Zapata and the Old Regime: Myth, Memory, and Method,” *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 25, no. 2 (January 1, 2009), 330.

Furthermore, Zapata's indigenous heritage was used to promote a generalized ethnic coexistence amongst socialites and commoners through the *Mestizo* identity, later coined as *The Cosmic Race* in 1925 by José Vasconcelos.¹⁵ To suggest the collective remembrance of "the modest Indian," stories that contained Zapata's dishonorable actions such as womanizing, intemperance, excessive violence, and gambling were omitted by politicians.¹⁶ His recognizable charro outfit combined with a passive demeanor narrates as a chivalrous character that would set fixed cultural and gender norms. Ideals of masculinity proposed by the nation have used indigenous and mestizo bodies as part of the essentialist and idealized Mexican identity. The manipulation of Zapata's image provides contemporary nuance on "the seduction of the spirit," where Mexican politicians exploit personal insecurities stemming from vulnerable identities, such as those of agrarian workers and people of color, by aligning themselves with fabricated revolutionary ideals "to keep them in line."¹⁷ This alignment elevates Zapata to a god-like status, transcending the physical reality of events. The relationship that UNTA and Zapata González have with the hero's legacy becomes co-dependent, where any transgression against the norm is perceived as a threat.

Cháirez Contesting the Myth and Infiltrating the Social Consciousness

Fabián Cháirez's semiotic approach enhances the cultural significance to the image of the national hero by infiltrating the collective consciousness. Signs, investigated through a semiotic lens, do not work independently; they require various interpretations to solidify cultural meaning throughout an extended period.¹⁸ It is how Zapata's emblematic charro outfit, dark skin, stoic stare are associated with portrayals of masculinity and heroism, despite having no direct relation with the guerrilla fighter's work before his passing.¹⁹ The Palacio de Bellas Artes' integration of *La*

¹⁵ Brunk: *The Posthumous Career of Emiliano Zapata*, 82.

¹⁶ Ibid., 84.

¹⁷ Cox, *The Seduction of the Spirit: The Use and Misuse of People's Religion*, 118.

¹⁸ Campos: "The Semiosphere of the Hero in the Artwork 'The Revolution' by Fabián Cháirez," 7.

¹⁹ Ibid., 4.

Revolución in the ‘Other Revolutions’ allowed for the inclusion of a queer narrative into the collective consciousness surrounding Zapata’s memory and history. Throughout the 80s to the present, artists have worked with the image of Zapata to destabilize nationalistic and patriotic ideologies affiliated with machismo culture.²⁰ Furthermore, his image has functioned “as a symbol of feminist fights and modern activism.”²¹ However, the proposition of *La Revolución* as part of Zapata’s semiotic repertoire is deemed transgressive by conservative protestors as their hero wearing stilettos symbolize homosexuality.²²

Octavio Paz and *The Mexican Mask*, Sociocultural Perceptions of Masculinity and Modesty

“The Mexican Mask” proposed by Octavio Paz in *El Laberinto de La Soledad*, provides an explanation to the repression of emotional and physical vulnerability within Mexican gender binary culture. According to Paz, the Mexican man measures his “hombria” (manliness) by concealing his feelings; “*no se raja*” (does not crack), as vulnerability is viewed as a sign of weakness.²³ Women are to remain stoic and passive, as being the “reflection of the male will and desire” holds no room for femininity.²⁴ This ideology permeates matters of modesty, as awareness of our own and each other’s nudity suggests vulnerability and thus brings shame.²⁵ Cháirez’s presentation of a nude Zapata challenges puritanical mindsets prevalent in Mexican society that regard homosexual men as submissive character. Under the “Mexican Mask” criterion, homosexuality among men is considered indulgent and vulnerable in character, making it impermissible in the imaginative heteronormative utopia, where men must always fulfill the

²⁰ Vargas Santiago, Luis et al., *Emiliano: Zapata después de Zapata* (Ciudad De México, Mexico: Instituto Nacional De Bellas Artes Y Literatura, 2019), 36.

²¹ Campos: “The Semiosphere of the Hero in the Artwork ‘The Revolution’ by Fabián Cháirez,” 6.

²² Ibid., 7.

²³ Paz, Octavio: *El Laberinto De La Soledad Y Otras Obras* (Penguin, 1997), 51.

²⁴ Ibid., 57.

²⁵ Ibid., 56.

dominant role within relationship dynamics.²⁶ Zapata's bold and flirtatious nature in *La Revolución* also demonstrates Cháirez's practice of depicting masculine bodies in feminine poses, which decontextualizes previous representations of gender stereotypes.²⁷

Queer Neutrality and Gender Performance

Cháirez integrates Zapata's revolutionary image in Mexican queer culture through constructed identities and performativity. Author Jaques Khalip introduces the term "Queer Neutrality" to assess artistic expression through the deconstruction and re-construction one's identity, aligning with concepts of memory and loss.²⁸ This *loss* is evident on the "groundless ground" on which Cháirez's visual aesthetics stand on, compelling him to pave a unique path for the memory of Zapata representative of queer revolutionary sentiments. Gender performativity is investigated "as a process of recovering LGBTI iconographies and historical moments."²⁹ The *queerification* of Zapata radically deconstructs masculinity through drag representation and exploration of homosexual imaginary scenarios within history. It resurfaced the theoretical possibility of a potential romantic relationship between Zapata and Porfirio Díaz's son-in-law, Ignacio de la Torre y Mier, who was suspected to be closeted and was associated with the *Dance of the 41*.³⁰ This event was considered a taboo chapter of Mexican history that involved 42 men dancing together in secrecy where half dressed in women's clothing.³¹ This scenario is one of several where Cháirez resurrects the image of Zapata through a queer lens by recreating gender norms and transgressing forbidden dialogues in Mexican society.³² It also critiques the idealized

²⁶ Ibid., 61.

²⁷ Olvera and Tresgallo: "Los Imaginarios Disruptivos Del Cuerpo Queer: Un Análisis De La Masculinidad Disidente En La Ilustración Mexicana Del Siglo XXI," 14.

²⁸ Khalip, Jacques: "Of Queer Neutrality," *New Formations* 84, no. 84 (October 20, 2015): 258–59.

²⁹ D'Alleva, Anne: *Methods & Theories of Art History*, 2005, 74.

³⁰ Santiago et al., *Emiliano: Zapata Después de Zapata*, 36.

³¹ Morgan, Thaddeus: "41 Has a Secret Meaning in Mexico, Thanks to a Queer Underground Ball," *HISTORY*, August 9, 2023.

³² Rodolfo Hachén, "ARTE, GÉNERO E HISTORIA: DIALOGISMO TRANS-GENÉRICO EN LA OBRA DE FABIÁN CHAIREZ," *Open Minds International Journal* 1, no. 1 (July 1, 2020): 18.

histories and identities constructed around Zapata as a beacon of masculinity and nationalism, which fails to acknowledge homophobic and racist precedents that continue to affect marginalized communities today.

La Revolución and The Mobilization for Queer Visibility in Mexican Culture and History

The controversy between Zapata activists and Fabián Cháirez at the Palacio de Bellas Artes highlights the importance of queer visibility within Mexican contemporary culture and history. Cháirez faced challenges in finding inclusive spaces within the “established referents of masculinity,” and thus positioned Zapata within “elements opposite the dominant masculinity of our country, which became widespread through the cultural industry.”³³ This suggests that the portrayal of the hero through a queer lens transcends objective values and transgressive acts. It conveys a message that pushes for visibility within a heteronormative narrative, which has historically excluded prominent queer figures. Furthermore, suggestions of ‘softening’ queer images has been imposed onto Cháirez to make his work accessible to the public.³⁴ Galleries and museums have requested the artist to eliminate vital visual information in *La Revolución*, such as the stallion’s erection to publicize it in catalogue covers.³⁵ This enforces a controlled narrative on marginalized communities through censorship regarding how they should portray their identity within a conservative majority. However, the refusal to remove *La Revolución* by the Palacio de Bellas Artes serves to defend the artwork as canonically relevant by celebrating its transgressive discourse and formal qualities that defines it as fine art.³⁶ It was initially believed that *La Revolución* was acquired by the Museum of Modern Art for 6 million dollars in 2019.³⁷ However,

³³ Campos: “The Semiosphere of the Hero in the Artwork ‘The Revolution’ by Fabián Cháirez,” 9.

³⁴ Santiago et al., *Emiliano: Zapata Después de Zapata*, 398.

³⁵ Ibid., 398.

³⁶ Soto Rodríguez, Mario Andrés: “En Defensa De La Revolución De Fabián Cháirez,” *Anales Del Instituto De Investigaciones Estéticas*, March 27, 2024, 213–15.

³⁷ Donohue, “The Pin-Up Revolutionary - Open Space.”

it was subsequently announced by El Universal in 2020 that it was sold to Spanish businessman, Josep ‘Taxto’ Benet Ferran, who sought to expand his censored art collection that pursues freedom of expression.³⁸ Since its sale, *La Revolución* has been on tour with the Servais Family Collection as part of their international exhibition AMEXICA at The Loft in Brussels in 2020 to 2022, and at the Institut Culturel du Mexique in Paris in 2023.³⁹ Interactions with the media, along with the painting’s official acquisition, heighten its contemporary resonance and validate the diversification of historical narratives in favor of the LGBTQ+ community. Finally, the efforts toward inclusion by nationally influential institutions acknowledge Zapata as a revolutionary symbol for the LGBTQ+ community, emphasizing that “visibility is also a way of justice.”⁴⁰

Conclusion

La Revolución by Fabián Cháirez enhances the inclusion of Emiliano Zapata’s revolutionary spirit within the LGBTQ+ community. The transgressive language of queer visuals suggested by the image critiques previous mythological narratives that portrayed Zapata as imposing heteronormative and nationalistic values following the Mexican Revolution. Protests by Zapata’s modern supporters at the Palacio de Bellas Artes highlight the fragility of traditional masculinity through “The Mexican Mask,” which restricts emotional connections between men, masking vulnerability with aggression. Nationally acclaimed institutions have challenged the lack of visibility towards marginalized identities by providing space for inclusive historical narratives that recognizes racial, gender, and sexual dissidents. This promotes the gradual integration of counterculture within the collective consciousness that upholds transparency regarding current prejudicial discourse by fostering receptiveness to queer activism.

³⁸ Universal, “Tatxo Benet Cree Que Censura Al Zapata Gay Muestra Retroceso Mundial.”

³⁹ “AMEXICA,” AMEXICA, n.d., <https://www.amexica.me/>.

⁴⁰ Olvera and Tresgallo: “Los Imaginarios Disruptivos Del Cuerpo Queer: Un Análisis De La Masculinidad Disidente En La Ilustración Mexicana Del Siglo XXI,” 13.

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