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Voices of the Puuc angels: Rural life among the archaeological ruins in the Yucatan Peninsula

Interviewed: Patricia Martín Morales
Interviewer: Tomás Gallareta Cervera
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Tomás Gallareta Cervera [00:00:02] Can you please tell us your name and profession please?

Patricia Martín Morales [00:00:08] My name is Patricia Martín Morales. Well, I reproduce Mayan pottery. We're trying to rescue some of the pre-Hispanic techniques. From the beginning of the preparation of the material, which is the clay, to the preparation of minerals, pigments and clay. Part of it is brought from Chiapas, Tabasco and here from the region around of the village. We try to make a more stronger and consistent clay that reaches the temperature, because there are other types of clay that exist here near the region, which are very, very rough and that do not reach the (needed) temperature, if it is cooked at 300 degrees (Celsius) the surface deteriorates. Then the clay that we use its stronger and thinner.

Tomás Gallareta Cervera [00:01:25] How did you began to do his work. And how did you become interested in doing art?

Patricia Martín Morales [00:01:35] I started in 1985. About 32 years ago here in this very place. I started with my brother. He learned from someone else, with a teacher from Palenque. Yes, but was dedicated and learned. He was 13. He dedicated himself to making Jaina figures. Yes, he specialized more in sculpture, because at that time I was studying a career that I never exercised and I liked painting, polychromia. And he asked me “do you want to paint or something?” And I started. I will never forget. With a vase found on a 1975 National Geographic books. And so, I started with him in this place.

Tomás Gallareta Cervera [00:02:36] What was so special about that vase that caught your eye?

Patricia Martín Morales [00:02:39] Because it was the first vase, he, how could I say this, because I was just starting, I still didn't have the knowledge to choose a vase for myself to paint. So, he choosed one for me. “Let's start with this vase, it's a vase that's not so complicated but nice”. The first vase I painted; I don't know where it went. I don't know where it is.

Tomás Gallareta Cervera [00:03:17] That first vase, when you started making it, did the complexity of the artistic style intimidated you?

Patricia Martín Morales [00:03:29] No. It was like it wasn't that hard because it felt like me, my talent as they say. There are other words to say. It's not a profession, I don't remember what the appropriate word is.

Tomás Gallareta Cervera: Like natural?

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Patricia Martín Morales [00:03:52] I started with that vase and I never forget it. “What if you get it wrong for being the first vase?” No, no, I thought. It looked good, it was very good, but as they say, fortunately someone came, liked it, and its gone (bought it), I think its in the outside (foreign country). It’s been 30 or 31 years now.

Tomás Gallareta Cervera [00:04:29] And was it here in Muna?

Patricia Martín Morales [00:04:31] Here, in this very place.

Tomás Gallareta Cervera [00:04:32] Do you remember who it was? more or less who was the person who bought the first vase?

Patricia Martín Morales [00:04:39] I do not remember, at that time a lot of people came because of Mérida’s tourism and Uxmal. The detour was not constructed yet and this place was already like a mandatory stop, because there were people of the neighborhood, the ladies who made their seams, their parades, and to sell to the tourists that passed here. There was a lot of tourism during that time. There were about ten buses a day. Yes, because there were already people here, the place was always full of people. We sold (vases).

Tomás Gallareta Cervera [00:05:24] You think, there are not so much Tourism anymore? Has it gone down or has it changed?

Patricia Martín Morales [00:05:30] Well, it has changed, it has changed because there are already other businesses, more competition, not of ceramics, for example restaurants and they (people) go there. On the other side (of town), by the detour, most of the tourism goes to the detour. However, in this place, here where we are, people who known us for over 32 years, people who know about our work quality, there are people who keep coming back. We also are recommended by other people.

Tomás Gallareta Cervera [00:06:14] Are there different kinds of tourists? International tourists, for example, buy certain things that locals don’t buy?

Patricia Martín Morales [00:06:21] Well there are lots of people, you could say that all the people, for example Mexicans, foreigners, there are those who like our work, because there are people who come and have the knowledge, they know what they are going to see here, they come prepared, because most of the vases that I have sold were bought by foreigners, the Germans, the French. There are also people from the State of Mexico who are people who know about Mayan culture and yet they don't care about the quality of the work.

Tomás Gallareta Cervera [00:07:18] Then in general the locals almost don’t buy anything.

Patricia Martín Morales [00:07:24] No, no!

Tomás Gallareta Cervera [00:07:29] Were you born here in Muna?

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Patricia Martín Morales [00:07:40] Yes, I was born here.

Tomás Gallareta Cervera [00:07:43] And your parents?

Patricia Martín Morales [00:07:44] Them too. Also, my grandparents are from here, too. My great-grandfather and grandmother are from here in town.

Tomás Gallareta Cervera [00:07:59] Do you remember more or less when you began to notice the archaeological sites and archaeological materials?

Patricia Martín Morales [00:08:16] Excuse me?

Tomás Gallareta Cervera [00:08:20] In other words, when you were little, what role did the ruins and the archaeological play in your life?

Patricia Martín Morales [00:08:35] Well, the truth, I was about seven years or so. Well, no, because even though we had the archaeological zone nearby, how to say it, we didn't go, that's what you want to ask me? No, no, no, we always ran in that place or I don't quite understand that. That said, aha. Well, for example, yes. I did know, so I was going, I was going to do and then.

Thomas Gallareta Cervera [00:09:26] Did the fact that he lives near the ruins influence you?

Patricia Martín Morales [00:09:37] Well I feel that yes, because my grandparents lived inside the archaeological zone. A long time ago. My grandfather died at the age of a hundred and ten. He lived in the Uxmal Hacienda, yes, and my dad, because at that time he was about 11 years old and played inside the archaeological zone. Yes, because at that time the area was very sheltered, this (tourism and urbanization) was still starting. I remember him telling us that in that place, at that time he wasn't too looted ruins could be seen at plain site. They even played in it. Otherwise, no, no, we didn't think of them. What was going to happen. This is it. And his dad, his grandfather. My husband's dad also had his milpa in the archaeological zone, near the archaeological site.

Tomás Gallareta Cervera [00:10:58] Is you husband also from here? from Muna?

Patricia Martín Morales [00:10:59] He is from Muna, yes, but he had a milpa. And his grandfather, who was inside an archaeological site, and I remember him telling us. He would tell my husband that there was a figure named The Donkey, *k'at*. Is a figure, but of clay, who arrived for a while and who had a double personality transformed, his *way*.

Tomás Gallareta Cervera [00:11:48] Do not frequent that area anymore, that milpa?

Patricia Martín Morales [00:11:50] No, because when he was a kid my husband went with his grandfather to the milpa because they had apiary there. Then he knew the road, but as he grew up, that's how he remembered when he was a kid and went there. He tried to go back to that

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place to see those ruins. There was even a sinkhole. It was part of an archaeological site. It's like a cave. Yes, he could not find the place. Eventually I think the vegetation covered it and it was lost. The landscape changed. Yes.

Tomás Gallareta Cervera [00:12:45] How did your brother, who is also an artist, end up in Chiapas?

Patricia Martín Morales [00:12:50] No. My brother learned with teachers from Chiapas, but in this place here. But at that time my brother was 13 years old and like a little boy that, for example, sees that a person is working with the clay and caught his attention. And he started too, but from there he went up and from time to this date he is still at this place.

Tomás Gallareta Cervera [00:13:23] Where is your brother now?

Patricia Martín Morales [00:13:25] Right now he is a kilometer from here, near the detour, in a corner, and in this workshop he too. He is specialized in making Jaina figurines, to polychrome. He doesn't paint. Back in the day he used to paint but he specialized in Jaina figurines, making sculptures and stone stelae. He's a sculptor. Well, I could say he's the best. Yes, he made this stela.

Tomás Gallareta Cervera [00:14:09] With local techniques and material?

Patricia Martín Morales [00:14:14] It's also the same. That workshop is the same and I learned with him and he does the same techniques as me. We haven't changed a thing.

Tomás Gallareta Cervera [00:14:27] And what do your parents think that you ended up being artists?

Patricia Martín Morales [00:14:48] They were not artists my parents, but they see it as normal. Yes, yes, sometimes there are those who ask them "are your children are artisans?" Some people know them as artisans. Yes, he says, because they are proud of who we are. There are two of us, me and my brother, my husband joined later. My children, now that they are older, but they grew up in this place and started them with clay, not with clay, with *plastilina*. They were five years old. I never forget, really, it's not that I am flattering them. When he was five, he and his brother started with the daily, day and night they made their little bulls with their pens and everything. But something very, very real. I don't know if they carry it in their blood, too. And when they grew up, like 10 years old, I told their dad "give them a clay bun" and they sat some clay buns. They started making their animals, those Olmec ducklings. Yes, to date I have them, they're preserved the ducklings they made. They're good at this right now.

Tomás Gallareta Cervera [00:16:26] Your children still do this?

Patricia Martín Morales [00:16:28] Yes, in their spare time they make figures, pieces. The go to school, one of them studies archaeology.

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Tomás Gallareta Cervera [00:16:58] About which these motives that you work with. They come from books like NatGeo and other American books, so in a way they are Americans who are interpreting culture. And you're representing culture (from them), so what your opinion is, because this influences in a certain way what you're doing. What do you think about that?

Patricia Martín Morales [00:17:27] Complicated, that's complicated, easier. They could make it easier for me.

Tomás Gallareta Cervera [00:17:33] Sure, easier. Let's say, more simply. Who do you think has the authority to say what's authentically Maya and what is not Maya?

Patricia Martín Morales [00:18:06] Well I think that we who are born here and because we have it in our blood. No, no, no, not all people. There are people who by nature know that the one who is good and what is not. For example, I being here, 30 to 35 years, I have been asked about the quality of some piece or if it is authentic or not? Well, yes, but more or less to qualify if it is or is not. From experience I say I have. Well, in seeing books and, for example, comments from other people, from archaeologists who have come, and I more or less know a little about this and I like, for example, to learn more. For example, from my brother, who knows and also from him I learned little because he does know a lot about it.

Tomás Gallareta Cervera [00:19:36] Do you see anything strange or ironic in the fact that you see fonts with non-Mayan authors to make Mayan art?

Patricia Martín Morales [00:19:55] Well, it's like we could say, that's ironic. Yes, that people from other places, we could say that they want to know more about our culture, but we also have the capacity to know because we have things, we have things like that, empirically. We learn this empirically and like it's better. Yes.

Tomás Gallareta Cervera [00:20:38] Do you think that learning it empirically gives more authenticity?

Patricia Martín Morales [00:20:43] Yes, gives more value to things.

Tomás Gallareta Cervera [00:20:47] And finally, in your opinion, how do you see the future of what you do? Are your children or grandchildren going to keep doing this kind of art?

Patricia Martín Morales [00:21:03] Well I think so, because just as I sometimes tell them this, I tell them that we are doing it, but first because we like it, because we are born to do it. And secondly, because we live of this and not because we also live from this, we are going to do it quickly. Not because, for example, there are pieces that I paint that when I finish them are already well done. I sometimes say I don't want to sell them; I don't want to sell them because I like them so much so much and love to do my job and see them. I feel like it's not time for it to leave. And that's how I keep them, that's how I keep them. For example, I have several pieces that are about 10 years old. Once an archaeologist came from abroad. He came to do something, and his wife tells me his husband wants a vase, I ask her what vase? The Buena Vista vase. I

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don't know if you know it. A vase outlined with orange color, with some hieroglyphics around. Famous the famous Buena Vista vase. I grabbed it and had it stored in the chest for 11 years, I had the vase kept. The gentleman saw it. But look, he loves the vase so much that he didn't want to let it go. A beautiful, beautiful, beautiful super vase, I never forget and what are you going to do? It does not matter. But I like it because there are people who appreciate it. Yes, and I know its in good hands.

Tomás Gallareta Cervera [00:23:13] And in a way in giving these works, those reproductions, do you feel that you are contributing to spreading culture?

Patricia Martín Morales [00:23:30] Yes, yes. And I like that, for example, same with you guys who come and ask questions. You are really welcome. I love it because I'm spreading part of a culture that there are people don't think it's important. It is so much love for this that we have to. That's my life. It's my world of painting and things and dealing with people coming, I know they're coming because, they come to the place, I don't know how they get here because sometimes they tell me it's hard to get here, but we look for it, they say.

Tomás Gallareta Cervera [00:24:17] Is it because it's not on the avenue? It's not in sight.

Patricia Martín Morales [00:24:21] Yes, and that is the detail of this work to try to spread it.

Tomás Gallareta Cervera [00:24:39] Is there anything that you want to say?

Patricia Martín Morales [00:24:40] Well, there are so many things that I don't know

Tomás Gallareta Cervera [00:24:47] Very well.

Patricia Martín Morales [00:24:54] This is the Dresden Codex. It's taken me four years.

Tomás Gallareta Cervera [00:25:00] And you reproduced it?

Patricia Martín Morales [00:25:01] I'm still doing it, but it's not done.

Tomás Gallareta Cervera [00:25:08] Looks pretty good. And how do you decide which project to focus on? Because you got several.

Patricia Martín Morales [00:25:19] I have several projects, yes, I go as I like, sometimes I rest from ceramics and from there I go with the codices. It's local material too. It's the amate paper and here I don't have it painted like with a brush, it's not a pencil, or a pure brush pen, the same as when I paint the ceramic. This is the shaman's, the steps of making shaman. It's the detail of a vase.

Tomás Gallareta Cervera [00:26:03] And what about this one?

Patricia Martín Morales [00:26:05] Yes, you can touch it, nothing happens to it.

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Tomás Gallareta Cervera [00:26:11] And when I finished making the reproductions of codices will you be able to sell them?

Patricia Martín Morales [00:26:51] It is the last page of the Dresden Codex.

Tomás Gallareta Cervera [00:27:16] Is it finished?

Patricia Martín Morales [00:27:24] Yes, that's the codex, this one doesn't have much color. Here, because it's a recreation that I did because it is originally carved in bone, but I used some of my imagination.

Tomás Gallareta Cervera [00:27:34] Is it one of the lords who goes to the underworld and is in mourning?

Patricia Martín Morales [00:27:50] Yes. The canoe with the lizard, this is the god of rain, the god of corn. Here I put some of my imagination, a Kawil with his tail.

Tomás Gallareta Cervera: If I didn't keep the codices as soon as I sold it?

Patricia Martín Morales: East in 1500 pesos.

Tomás Gallareta Cervera [00:28:27] It is given away.