



23- Lula Mae Blocton
Untitled 1977
oil on canvas, 62 x 62"
courtesy the artist

or lesbian art; in the seventies, women were looking for the "femaleness of the image. Now [in] the eighties, I find the same questions coming from lesbians. I am not concerned with definitions of words, but with making art which is true to myself."¹¹⁷

At first glance, Blocton's paintings and drawing, with their colorful patterns, seem to be in the tradition of African American abstraction. But pictorial space, for Blocton, is not necessarily what it first appears to be. It is full of dimensionality, intersections, and contradictions. For years she has drawn and painted from a still-life model composed of interwoven acetate ribbons. The calm weaves of layered transparent color, ambiguous space, reflective color, and cast shadows, carefully blended together into a seamless surface, reflect Blocton's person-

ality. Not concerned with individual marks or rupture, Blocton reflects her ongoing negotiation and integration of multiple identities occupying space together as she struggles to find an authentic subject:

As a young adult in college, one attraction for being an artist was that I thought art was color and gender blind. Who would be able to tell this kind of information from pictures? It was quite an awakening when I realized that the art world is no different, and in many cases, worse than the rest of society. . . . I learned early that my work would not please everyone but I tried. When Black people would ask me about the blackness in my art, I started to paint portraits of my heroes, including self-

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portraits. It is interesting to see these paintings now because of my shallow attempts at defining what it meant to be black. Dealing with what I thought was the gender issue in my work, I rationalized the influence of weaving and transparencies. This again was a superficial and stereotypical way of justifying why I make an. Being a lesbian was explained by referring to many of the elements in my work such as shapes and colors as sexy.¹¹⁸ (fig. 23)

With few exceptions, it was only when women of color were involved in the organizing, planning, and coordinating stages that feminist art projects truly reflected racial and ethnic diversity and drew a racially diverse audience. In New York, third-world feminist art groups like Where We At and galleries devoted to showcasing work by third-world artists such as Just Above Midtown or Intar began appearing in the '80s. But sexual diversity was another matter; these new forums were overwhelmingly heterosexual. Just as white lesbian artists did not seem to know any third-world lesbians, feminist artists of color who were straight did not know any lesbians, or so they said. Third-world women's literary journals, however, frequently included photographs and illustrations by lesbians (along with the work of many openly lesbian writers).¹¹⁹

Few women artists of color openly identified themselves as lesbian. Unlike writers, most remained quietly closeted within groups and galleries organized around race and ethnicity. Artists who were public, like Blocton, tended either not to make work about identity issues at all, or else they privileged race over gender and sexuality. Some have explained their reluctance to deal with lesbian content or to exhibit in lesbian shows by pointing out the absence of community support for lesbian artists of color. For others, the word lesbian signified a white cultural context that was exclusionary or did not adequately describe their identity.¹²⁰

Artists like Judith F. Baca, Lor Roybal, Bernadette Vigil, and Ada Medina were out, but did not (and still do not) make work specifically about lesbian experience. Baca is from Los Angeles, but Roybal, Vigil, and Medina

live and work in northern New Mexico. Their work reflects a range of ways that Chicana/Mispana lesbians claim and represent multiple identities, emphasizing race, but referring to gender and sexuality through coded imagery. The three New Mexican artists struggle against a "folklorization" of their work while maintaining connections to and making art out of their cultural roots. Of the three, only Medina consistently speaks out publicly as a lesbian and places her work in contexts of gay and lesbian art. Vehement about her Xicana (to use her preferred spelling) political and cultural identification, she simultaneously resists the violence of any reductive representation or categorization. There are no easy readings. The strength of Medina's work comes from its refusal to disengage the racialized, gendered, and sexualized self. The art object functions as a Mexican tilma—"a barely perceptible track or image, bearing traces and fragments of truth." (fig. 24)¹²¹



24-Ada Medina

Hecho a Mano 1995

acrylic and gesso on cotton with collaged drawings, 37 x 36 x 2 1/2"