Taya Doro Mitchell: Art for Healing

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TAYA DORO MITCHELL: ART FOR HEALING

Jo Farb Hernández looks at the Baroque stylings of an outsider artist at home

The site is a non-descript white clapboard house in Oakland, CA, on a busy street corner in what is not the best part of town. Yet the plainness of the exterior belies a truly awesome interior; a mass gathering of tiny shapes, colors and volumes, encrusting the walls and ceilings with a many-layered accumulation of found and modified objects writhing with textures, intensity and movement.

Taya Doro Mitchell, at 75, has seemingly experienced several lives. Born in the small village of Heemstede in The Netherlands, she had a difficult childhood raised by a strictly controlling, moralising mother and a father who worked such long hours that he was rarely home. She and her four sisters attended school until aged 12-13, and then were pulled out by their mother who felt that those years of education had been sufficient. Taya’s mother wanted her daughters to learn to become seamstresses, the sole occupation that she felt would be open to them as lower-class women during a period that was still extremely class-conscious.

Although even at that time Doro knew that she would never follow that route, she internalised her mother’s constant harping to ‘move her hands’, to keep busy and to always be doing something. She has retained this propensity all her life.

Her strict Catholic upbringing filled her with feelings of guilt and suffering and, although during the 1950s it was extremely difficult for a young woman to leave the family home without first marrying, Taya knew that as soon as she reached the age of 18 she would no longer have to bend to her mother’s authoritarian dictates. She planned for that day years in advance and took small but significant steps in that direction by joining a family service organisation that trained young girls to help mothers and children in difficult circumstances. It was located close enough to her home to travel there by bicycle and it was tuition-free, so, despite her mother’s strident opposition, she was able to take this first step towards personal freedom. She remembers that accomplishment as ‘glorious’.

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Yet paradoxically this school was founded by a Jesuit priest, and the larger international organisation which it fed into, known as the Grail, was run almost like a convent. The teachers wore religious habits and the not-quite-concealed intent was to entice the indigent girls into dedicating their lives to the organisation as quasi-nuns, taking a vow of poverty, obedience and virginity. Taya did so and remained with them for some 12–15 years.

During this time she began studying nursing. Yet as she completed her classes to become a professional psychiatric nurse in the mid-1960s, the worldwide social and cultural revolutions that marked almost every aspect of Western organisational behaviour were felt in the Grail as well. Nuns were doffing their habits, priests were leaving the Church and many of Taya’s friends were also making decisions to move on, away from the cloistered confinement that both sheltered and imprisoned them. Taya met some people within the Grail organisation from Ohio and, with their sponsorship, came to the United States, easily finding a job at the local hospital. In her off hours, still minding her mother’s admonition, she made little pieces of jewellery to keep her hands busy. These were sold in the hospital’s gift shop and, as people admired her handiwork, her friends started to call her an artist for the first time, long before she began to self-identify as one.

In another radical decision, she moved to the San Francisco Bay Area in 1971 to follow a close friend, angering the health department where she had been working. Although somewhat remorseful about her abrupt departure, she had finally realised that it was up to her to make her own choices and direct her own life. The dramatic culture shock to her strict upbringing and the voluntary captivity that she had acquiesced to for years, when confronted with the burgeoning cultural revolution of the 1960s and early 1970s in California, produced a period of major conflict and challenge for Taya. Everything that she had been told was bad –
including sex and drugs - were now being heralded as good, and vice versa. She was a 36-year-old virgin ('People didn't believe me!' she exclaimed), (4) so she felt she needed to do some 'catching up'. This meant sex with multiple boyfriends and, falling in with some 'hippies', using fairly significant amounts of marijuana, which she found enormously helpful in trying to gain insights into her inner psyche and her difficult early years. 'I practically went psychotic at a certain point,' she said. 'That was a very difficult period where I started to feel like I was losing my sanity.' (2)

She had still never lived on her own, never spent a day without doing what someone else had told her to do and never felt that she was defining her own way: she always felt she was a 'follower'. Despite her success at nursing and her clearly empathetic nature, she knew that it was a career others had chosen for her. She still needed to work through her lingering family issues, to discover how to become her own person and to truly find her own talents. In 1973, approaching 40 years old, she decided to go to art school.

She enrolled in the San Francisco Art Institute as a painter, thinking that she would ultimately like to paint murals with children. Although she did graduate with a BFA, she essentially had no portfolio and was not accepted into any Master's programs. By this time she had given up on boyfriends ('too much free sex, and people weren't very much into one-partner deals'), (3) but was lonely, so decided to become a foster parent. She found the little white clapboard house in Oakland and moved in; but by the time she did so, her foster child, a teenager, had already run away again. So, she was again on her own.

One day she dialled a friend's phone number and, after speaking with the man on the other end for several minutes, she realised that she must have misdialled and that it wasn't her friend at all. Yet she had an enjoyable conversation with this new acquaintance - John Mitchell, an African-American 14 years older than herself and recently a widower, called her back and, despite his family's opposition, they later married.

He was always quiet, and as she was interested in working on her art - including free-standing sculptures and small paintings - they were a rather reclusive pair, which suited them both. But within about 30 years of their marriage, he began developing Alzheimer's disease. Given her vocational background she wanted to nurse him herself rather than placing him in an institution - however, as his disease progressed she realised that she could not leave him alone.

In October of 1989 the deadly Loma Prieta earthquake rocked the San Francisco Bay Area. Taya's...
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free walls sustained several large cracks in the walls. She wanted to fix them and creatively cover the cracks, but she did not want to just hang paintings or cover the walls with wallpaper. She decided to install mirrors in the hallway to make the narrow corridor seem more spacious and to help lighten the space. Once the mirrors were up, she felt they needed frames around them as they looked too stark; she chose to make her own frames, slicing and cutting and painting and gluing on ornamental elements that fanned out from the simple geometrical mirror shapes in grand, Baroque style. She moved on from the 'frames' to covering the entire walls and ceiling of the hallway, loving the effect that made her feel as if she was standing inside of a jewellery box.

In the meantime, her husband's disease was taking its toll. She put him in a hospital bed and began working on the walls of the room that he was resting in, so that she could watch him constantly - and so that he would not be alone, and so that he could watch her. She nursed him, bathed him, cared for him and to 'keep herself sane' began transforming his sick-room as well. Obsessively creating this intricate artwork was calming for both of them.

Literally hundreds of thousands - perhaps millions - of little objects now adorn the interior walls and ceilings of this little wooden home. The textural quality of the surfaces is mesmerising, with multi-tiered strata and elegantly symmetrical design development. Taya divides up the spaces into smaller areas - a rectangle here, an archway there - and begins gluing the pieces on, one by one, without pre-planning or even finalising which materials will be used. She haunts thrift stores and flea markets, constantly on the lookout for frames she can cut, old sewing accessories she can paint or glue, pen tops, bottle caps, beads, buttons, earrings, clothespins... and on and on. She has a small worktable in the kitchen, where little ashtrays separate the different components into orderly sections, ready for painting or carving or assembling. She also has a small studio two blocks from her home where she stores the raw materials, ready for combination into the precious lodes that will envelop the flat surfaces, transforming them from two to three dimensions. Her early training as a seamstress serves her in her eye for pattern and her sense of craft; the effect is tapestry-like in its intricacy. Never lacking for inspiration, she has all of the small tools she needs at hand - drills, scissors, band saws, glue guns - so she is always busy, making a given little ornament over and over and always keeping her hands moving.

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2. Ibid. pp. 45-46.
4. Ibid. pp. 50.

Primary fieldwork on Taya Dora Mitchell's home environment in Oakland was carried out in May 2009, with follow-up research by telephone, past and email through the present. All otherwise unattributed quotations by the artist were recorded by the author during those conversations.
'SHE HAUNTS THRIFT STORES AND FLEA MARKETS, CONSTANTLY ON THE LOOKOUT'
Following her husband's death, Taya moved down the street to the studio but came over every day to work on the walls of her home. She moved the furniture out of her husband's former sick room (a.k.a. the living room) and the dining room, and began to focus her efforts there. The kitchen has not yet been ornamented, and she was excited about the potential use of the shelves and cubbyholes, which she planned to fill up with assemblaged ornaments. "I'm starting to fly again," she said. She is also continuing with free-standing sculpture of various sizes and small paintings, and looks forward to resuming her psychiatric nursing work as well.

Then, during the latter part of 2009, Taya had the opportunity to purchase some property in New Mexico, and she moved out there, yet again dramatically changing her life. Although at first she vowed that she would continue to come back to the Bay Area to work on her extraordinary home, she soon realised that this much travel was too difficult and she placed the Oakland house on the market. She is hopeful that the new owner will care for it, and will enjoy and maintain the interior, though the walls remain "unfinished". In the meantime, she is grateful to have lived long enough to move to New Mexico where she finally, in many ways, feels complete. She is looking forward to beginning to ornament the interior of her new home there, too. Taya's husband was sick for a long time and incoherent for months before he died. Yet suddenly he had a brief moment where he said to her the last thing he ever could: 'You really made this place beautiful.' (4) And so she had, and, in so doing, she helped to diminish his suffering as she healed herself as well.