Maria Thereza Negreiros

The Patricia and Phillip Frost Art Museum is presenting Maria Thereza Negreiros. Offerings until April 1, 2012. The curators, Francine Birbragher-Rozencwaig and Adriana Herrera Téllez, wrote a text for the catalog describing the contribution of her work, transcendental for the present moment of the planet. She performs through her paintings an act of offering to the Amazon of her birth, and promotes an environmentalist message that of living in harmony with nature and promoting balance on Earth.

In Maria Thereza Negreiros’ work (Maues, Brazil, 1930-Lives and works in Cali, Colombia) the myth of the return to the origins is inseparable from an affirmation of identity as a Latin American painter whose universal vocation answers the question formulated by Levi Strauss on what we want and we intend to save as human beings. The paintings of the Amazon, where she was born and to which she has dedicated the last three decades of her life, cannot be detached from where the artist grew up, “looking at the rocks of the bottom of the river,” in the untamed territory where her father cultivated large fields of guaraná.

After being recognized by important art critics such Marta Traba as a pioneer and avant-garde artist in Colombia, fate took her back to the tropical forest landscape where she asked herself, humbly, about the vocation of the artist in a continent where violence is not only a social issue but also an environmental one, and she embarked on her search to find “a new expression of the American man.” Against the tacit conventions established by the avant-garde, having been an abstract expressionist, an informalist looking for an imperishable material, and a pioneer of minimal optical installations, she immersed herself in the search for a new expression as a Latin American artist returned to painting at the time its “death” was foretold. The ultimate experience, the point of no return in her journey, happened the day she witnessed a raging fire caused by the hand of the man and heard the groan of the dying forest, tortured by the blaze. Her feeling of smallness against the immensity of the destruction of the powerful rainforest -that according to the artist “was alive and squirmed upon its imminent death”- not only terrified her, but also constituted a revelation: It amounted to an initiatory experience that allowed her to confine to paint with an impenetrable tenacity, the mystery of the sources of life in the Amazon, what she calls, “a world of sacred beauty which was doomed to disappear.”

Thus arise, within her great Amazon Series, the Igapós included in the exhibit (a series from 1979 to 2011), which illustrate a mastery of an apparent abstract expressionism combined with glazes and details almost hyperrealistic, prodigious water shoots woven with the ribs of the branches in amazing frameworks representing a reality which only seems unusual for those whom have not made one with the jungle’s landscapes as Negreiros.

In contrast to the vitality of water flowing between the profuse green -“the color of the jungle and its loneliness”- her Amazon Fires show death as a fiery red field which extends breaking all greenery and leaving only smoke. In that game between Genesis and end, between the jungle’s powerful life and its extinction driven by human dementia, Negreiros only path was one of exorcism and complaint, to create a work that transcends into the sphere of the political, and on the other hand, to revere the sacred immensity of the jungle.