



THE GREAT GOD PAN IS DEAD

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A Brujas' Mystical Art: Becky Soria

[Virginia Billeaud Anderson](#)

To create boar, bison, and horses for her 2011 *Primitive* exhibition at Redbud Gallery, [Becky Soria](#) borrowed from Paleolithic cave paintings. The voluminous animal in *Bison* appears in profile with its head down similar to its source, a 15,000 BC bison in Spain's Altamira cave. Soria looked closely at the Paleolithic painters' handling of red and yellow ochre to formulate the animal's body, and at how the uneven surface of the cave wall enlivened it. In *Horse* Soria referenced the spotted hide of the 14,000 BC horse in France's *Pech-Merle* cave.

When she presented *Primitive's* eighteen works of art exactly a year ago, Soria said she was intrigued by their faded plasticity, as well as by the potential of using it to establish her own modern idiom. About cave paintings she added, "I sought to capture their mood" and in this she succeeded. She translated primitive vocabulary with varying thicknesses of vermillion, glittery crimson, and magenta interrupted by black, blue and green acrylic. Her colorful painterly abstraction has energy and emotion.

Soria's five painted abstractions of the human figure in the *Body Talk* exhibition at [Deborah Colton Gallery](#) through August 18 indicate there's more going on than capturing a primitive mood. Body Talk's figures are totemic. Just as Paleolithic cave artists assigned magical properties to painted animals, through abstraction Soria invests human forms with symbolism and bespeaks the mystical.



Becky Soria, *Flowering*, 2012, Acrylic, 36 x 36

I contacted Soria to ask about the paintings at Deborah Colton and her reply addressed "female" figures, which seem to have major iconographic presence in her art. They link directly to ancient fertility figurines. Paleolithic and Neolithic artists carved bulbous fertility goddesses to invoke rejuvenation and female fecundity. Their Paleolithic expression represents man's earliest imagination and creativity, earliest use of symbolism. Like painted animals on cave walls they possess magic. "The very well known Paleolithic carving of the Venus of Laussel," Soria told me, "is important to me because it makes the connection between the Female and the Bison."



Venus of Laussel, 23,000 – 20,000 BC, Limestone relief carving from Dordogne France

Soria's esoteric mystical leanings are evident in her artist statement, "Subject matter in painting is merely the trigger that allows the expression of something more profound, unconscious and possibly hidden even from oneself, and therefore all inclusive, so viscerally immanent to mankind."



Becky Soria, *Standing*, 2012, Acrylic with graphite, 36 x 48

Symbolism was prevalent in her Bolivian upbringing. For one thing her physician father was a poet, so she understood the symbolism of language. As well, her father had an important collection of archaeological artifacts that significantly influenced her art. "I spent my childhood surrounded by pre-Columbian images that my father collected and these made a powerful impression on me."

According to Soria she incorporates, "forms, colors and textures that are part of a well known Latin American pictorial vocabulary that has roots in ancient Paleolithic forms." The pictorial vocabulary to which she refers is derived from the architecture, sculpture, pottery and textiles of various Andean cultures, one being the pre-Incan [Tiahuanaco](#) which flourished from 1500 BC to 1000 AD around La Paz.



Carved stone stelae – monumental statuary in the courtyard at Tiahuanaco

Tiahuanaco is not the only pre-Inca Andean culture on which Latin American pictorial vocabulary is based. Chimú from the northern coast of Peru is another. Like Paracas and other indigenous cultures, [Chimú](#) artists skillfully made textiles, the *Chimú Mantle* being a fine example. The mantle features abstracted natural forms such as pelican and tuna fish motifs in bright reds, yellows, blues and brown set against rectangular designs. Chimú culture Soria pointed out, like others, had fertility figurines.



Chimú Mantle - textile from Peru's northern coast, 1000-1476 AD

Those rectangular geometric designs in the Chimú textile represent an important stylistic element in Latin American artistic expression. Rectangular shapes seem to color relief carvings, and statuary such as the Tiahuanaco stelae. I observe rectangular shapes in the bulky columnar [Moche](#) statue on my coffee table, that weirdly primitive form beneath a fan shaped head which perhaps references a feather head dress. Soria told me the Mochica is another culture from which she and other Latin American artists borrow. The influence of pre-Columbian rectangular designs on [Joaquín Torres-García's](#) art is obvious.

Because Peru is one gigantic cemetery, you can't go very far without standing above or around mummies. Many early Andean cultures such as the Moche, [the Nazca](#), and the Inca wrapped the dead as mummies, some by way of human sacrifice, and many decorated with false heads and faces. I recall standing at a Peruvian excavation site and staring into pits full of mummy bundles. Soria's abstracted human figures are surely inspired by mummies.



Peruvian mummies - Nazca burials at the Chauchilla cemetery

You'll be certain of your death in a single prop plane the size of a bath tub, but it's the only way to see the lines of Nazca. From the air it's easy to spot the fantastic monkey, the dog, the human figure with a rectangular space helmet-like head, and other early Nazcan images rendered with distorted linearity. As on textiles and pottery, natural forms speak symbolically.



Nazca Lines, Peru, *The Monkey*

Soria believes there is another important factor informing her art. She studied biology and has a love of science, and spent a great deal of time looking at her father's crystal collection. The irregular forms she paints, especially human ones, have a distinctly organic flavor. But it is directed by an inner vision.

When I asked Soria which post conquest artists influenced her, those she listed employ the primitive to speak symbolically: [María Luisa Pacheco](#), Arnal, Wilfredo Lam, Picasso, [Fernando Casas](#), Anselm Kiefer and Bacon. I'm reminded of a film artist's assessment that [Francis Bacon's](#) squishy distorted figures have faces eaten up by something that comes from within. I also recall Cézanne's description of himself as a primitive with a new vision.

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