

WASH Lecture (TR)

Quiz 2

Raya's Identity



MFAH, Marcos Raya, The Anguish of Being and the Nothingness of the Universe, acrylic on canvas, 2000

Marcos Raya's 2000 acrylic painting on canvas, *The Anguish of Being and the Nothingness of the Universe*, has a diameter of 69 ½ inches, and is currently on display at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. This is a painting of an abstracted point of view from the inside of a human face, looking out into the night sky. The painting features bright, psychedelic colors and geometric shapes that represent the inside view of a skeletal face. The artist is depicting an abstracted view into his own mind which represents aspects of his own identity, including his ethnicity, economic class, depression, dark sense of humor, and his experiences as an alcoholic.

A very prominent aspect of Raya's identity that can be seen in this image is his Mexican heritage. The main subject matter of this painting is the inside of a skull, which is very similar to the sugar skull decorations and masks associated with Dia de los Muertos, or Day of the Dead. This holiday is a very important part of Mexican heritage. When looking at the details of the painting, there are some lines throughout, such as the nose area, which appear to resemble stitching. This detail gives the painting another meaning. It transforms the inside of the skull into the inside of a mask. In Latino culture, this would represent the luchador mask, which is a prominent costume piece for performers in Mexican wrestling. This could be a metaphor for Raya fighting for his own culture. Finally, the bright oranges and greens in the painting can be seen painted on the walls of many traditional Mexican households.

This painting could also be indicative of Raya's economic standing. Aside from being a common aesthetic in sugar skulls, the missing teeth in the painting could represent teeth that the artist himself is missing, possibly because he has been unable to afford dental care. The loose, uneven stitching in and around the face appear to resemble that of hand sewn items of clothing, or even old pieces of fabric stitched up because new clothes can be expensive. The folds in the face that represent wrinkles, as well as the general expression of anguish in his face, could be that of a man fallen on hard times or of someone who has had to endure long hard labor.

There is a humorous sense of irony playing throughout the image that show the artist's own sense of humor. When hearing the title, "The Anguish of Being and the Nothingness of the Universe," the viewers would expect to see an image that is somewhat bleak, dark, and depressing. However, when viewing the painting they are instead met with very vibrant, bright colors, and eye catching geometric shapes that assemble into a whimsical face. Instead of nothingness, there is a universe full of beautiful stars in the background. The lines that represent wrinkles could also be interpreted as laugh lines. Only after the eye is caught by the overall humorous atmosphere of this piece, does the darker side of Raya's

identity come into focus. The anguish in the painting can be seen within the expression of the face itself. Staring into the vastness of space, the eyes are wide and the mouth is slightly agape, forming a frown at the ends. It is almost as if he is both amazed and horrified at the sight of the infinite universe, which could represent a struggle with his identity about where he fits into society and the world, or even whether it even matters. The theme of death also becomes an important factor in the image, as the face resembles a skull more so than a living human. As the bottom comes forward towards the audience to resemble the beginning of a throat, the painting suddenly loses its color and gains that bleak, depressing feeling. This painting plays on the phrase "dead inside," in a very literal sense. This, along with the title, make the viewer feel Raya's anguish and depressive state in the piece. However, Raya's ability to turn his own feelings of pain and anguish into a whimsical visual pun show the artist's dark sense of humor.

The over the top vibrancy of the painting as well as the added lines and shapes give it an overall psychedelic vibe. Especially the lines creating a small spark where the brain should be, remind the audience of the hallucinogenic experiences that are typically associated with drugs, or in this case, the artist's experiences with alcohol. The dark grays and the stair-like throat are representative of the dark path that his life takes as he continues to drink. The missing teeth could also be an effect of alcoholism. Finally, the juxtaposition of the anguish in the face with the humorous colors and shapes goes hand in hand with the happy feelings that the effects of alcohol can mimic, and the depression and anguish that tends to coincide with the struggles of alcoholism.

So, what does this painting, *The Anguish of Being and the Nothingness of the Universe*, have to say about Marcos Raya's identity? It says that his ethnicity and where he comes from has a very important impact in his personal identity. It tells of his struggles with the past, as well as struggles with his inner self and his role in the vast nothingness of the universe. And in the end, it says that he is able to look into his own mind, find humor in past or current anguish in his life, and allow the audience to laugh with him.