

INTERVIEW WITH DOKOUPIL

BY CARLOS DÍAZ BERTRANA

On leaving Leyendecker Gallery we go past a gym. Dokoupil wants to see how it works, because he thinks he should broaden his shoulders and lose flab. He chats with a splendid female gym instructor, and although he says nothing, it is clear that he has made up his mind. He tells me that he is rereading Marx and Nietzsche, who he much appreciates. He points out that both had the same defect, they didn't get enough sex.

JGD: It's strange, some time ago I knew something, however I now realize that I have forgotten almost everything I learnt. Yesterday, as I reread Nietzsche I recognized a few things, others I had simply and cleanly forgotten.

CDB: Perhaps oblivion is a murky well where some experiences wilfully surface, or perhaps it is just age. In 1994 you are forty years old, and you can't be considered a young artist. What do you think about all that you have done in the past twenty years of dedication to art?

JGD: I really don't know. If I look back I realize that I don't have the slightest idea of the work I've done. I'm not even very interested. When I look at the old things I've done, I say to myself, it's not bad. Did I really do it? Anyhow, I don't feel nostalgia at all. Even if they gave me those paintings I would not want them; sure, they don't interest me very much.

CDB: Painting, though, still interests you. When you first approached its medium after a conceptual period, you declared that it was a very free expression that enabled one to follow through an idea from beginning to end. You also thought you had to set up a strategy to control things right from the idea stage to the sale, and even beyond.

JGD: The strategy was a momentary thing, that doesn't worry me very much anymore. However I still like painting a lot, I like the idea there is about the canvas on a white frame, the zero point

and that the finished painting should be then hung on the wall. That's very good.

CDB: You mean knowing exactly where zero point is?

JGD: Exactly, and that's the problem that I see in many young artists that do installations and get too involved with the materials. A well made installation can move me. My education is rooted in the 70's, the installation decade. I saw so many then and almost nothing remains of that period. There were so many spectacular things. The problem of installation is the show, too much spectacle; everything very theatrical and didactic, yet with little room for mystery. I couldn't live with an installation in my house. In a museum, yes, you see it a few seconds and say "Gosh!". It's not something you can put up with a long time. It's a hard option, to get something out of it is very difficult.

If you don't have something solid helping you then you can get lost. I find it necessary to have the zero point located from which you can always start.

CDB: And once you are at zero point how do you start working?

JGD: I still think that every thing has to be considered separately, that every vision and every experience of life requires different treatment. It is so simple that there is no need to explain anything else. If one accepts it then all is said. And, Please God!, that I don't lose sensibility, because I think that one loses a certain sensibility towards things with age. You must listen to the idea, the vision, the thoughts and the materials, they tell you exactly how to do things. When I work with fire, it tells you, Look, you must do it like this. The material itself has to express its voice. And I don't believe that only happens with art. Art is a model for other things in life, if it can be minimally applied.

CDB: It seems too that you push material to create clear, easily memorisable images.

JGD: When you create something it has to stick in memory. I am always interested in clarity and if the idea is to do something unclear, then that must be also expressed with clarity.. In my work the process of how my paintings are

made is visible, and I discovered that, among others, in Picasso, Warhol or Matisse, who always leaves an open nook where the process is transparent. This is one of the characteristics of good art.

CDB: Are sincerity and freedom two of the most important values in artistic creation?

JGD: You can't cheat in art, you have to be truthful. In real life I'd like to be as I am in art, but it can't be. In art I'm cleaner, I'm more naive. In life I'm more complicated than in art. Art is a model for me.

Some artist friends have suggested that I put colour into my candle paintings, that I add a red background. But I can't do that, nor mix it with paint. It would be false. There are no serious technical problems that prevent it, but there is no adequate reason to do it. Perhaps there may be, but I haven't found it yet. The work alone must say whether colour can be added or not.

Precisely, the problem of bad art is that it includes many unjustifiable things, it mixes materials, shapes and conceals things. That's why there is so little good art, because people are full of problems.

CDB: Must the artist previously sort out his problems?

JGD: No, there are artists who have problems, yet they have something, they've managed to make them transparent. Bacon, for example, is a man riddled with problems. Yet he doesn't hide them and so he can create art. I refer to people who try. I refer to people who try. The only way of going only way of going about art is to be completely naked and to do things with the greatest possible innocence and conscience. When I did the children drawings, people said to me, "Oh, how ironic, what fun.." But it wasn't irony, I did them as I felt them. Irony as distance between one and the work never appealed to me. We have to accept that as human beings we constantly have many stupid ideas.

CDB: Yet when they are transferred to a canvas they have to be shown as real stupidities.

JGD: Yes, it's just that. If it is a stupidity, yet the truth, it must be manifested accordingly. For me it is the

only way. The paintings with “aura” in the last exhibition at Leyendecker, stem from a light that I saw emanating from a lover as we made love. It may seem a stupid thing, but it was a true experience. That isn’t enough to do good paintings, although it helped me to find new formal solutions to my work.

CDB: You were referring to your latest work, some candle drawn portraits that were inserted into lit boxes. Something surprising, although being surprised by Dokoupil is no longer a surprise. The changes in the formal aspect of your art are constant and some critics call you the “chameleon of art”.

JGD: I’m always doing the same thing, though the result may be different; trying to make things express themselves, to manifest themselves, with undiminished intensity.

CDB: A free land?

JGD: Freedom is the summit for me. To be empty inside your head, your eyes open, to go out into the street, look at things. Better not to think and listen to things, or people, and then do something with all this.

CDB: Despite changes, the candle-drawn works tend to be the most frequent during recent years.

JGD: I’ve been more than five years working with them, and I find that I can still do better, not only technically, but in depth. What’s more it is something that I can’t really control. If I sit down to paint with a brush then I don’t find any limits, however smoke does impose them.

With a brush and colour, being a perfectionist as I am, it could take me twenty years to finish a painting, perhaps I’d paint like the Van Eyck brothers.

I’ve made progress with the candle technique, although when I see the first paintings I did in this style I find them perfect in their own terms. I can say I did them as best I could at that moment and that they manifest the truth of the moment.

The same as the fruit paintings, they have their perfection in imperfection. The candle is impossible to control. Fire expresses itself spontaneously, and that is the fundamental fact.

CDB: Yet in relation to the fruit

paintings, “the candles” create a conventional image, with figures, landscapes, perspectives.

JGD: Well, I believe that a still life done with fire isn’t exactly a still-life. However what concerns me most over the last few years is to create the paintings with minimum resources, almost with zero material. Now I want to develop the paintings with auras, paintings that irradiate light around them, that inner and outer glow. They’re buddhist sculpture faces, countenances of human beings that have reached transcendence, and that, through my painting, I want to bring down to earth again and humanise them.

CDB: You want them to suffer again, The artist has to suffer in order to create?

JGD: Without suffering it is impossible to create a good work of art, you have to have great doubts. Now that I’m beginning something new, I look back at past work and I think that I have done nothing yet. I feel low, I suffer a lot, but I don’t want to show it in the work. Essentially I think it is a positive evolution.

CDB: As spectator of your art I’m not in agreement about what you say. I think that the work you’re done up to now is very consistent and can be read, despite surface variations, as a totality.

JGD: As far as the spectator of my work goes all I want is that for a second, for an instant, he may identify with me and see the world as I do. That complicity is sufficient.

Regarding a global interpretation of my work, it’s true that it can be seen best in a big museum exhibition than in an isolated painting. What I want to say lies in the gaps between the paintings.

Yesterday you were telling me about a work by Juan Hidalgo called, “I don’t know anything, I have no ideas”. It’s something typical of John Cage, perhaps it’s the only thing that one can say this century, because that’s what we’ve achieved. And I express it in a baroque and rather silly way. The method I use is always the same, repetition. It’s like finding something, listening, reaching emptiness point, and after this to start building up so it grows.

Although one can always say some things about the work you do, it has to

function alone. If a work does not have inherently the quality of being understood, (when it is created and in its own terms), by uneducated people, then, in the long run it is going to die. The work must at least enable one to say: what nice colours, what funny shapes...

A work must include the possibility of multiple readings, and for this to happen it must be clear. I can’t paint a gun that is also a rabbit, that has to be clearly stated too.

CDB: Fine, I think that you have clearly expressed how you understand art. I’d like you to talk about the problems and new situations that the artist has to face up today.

There is an important difference with artists like Vincent Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin, who never experienced the chance to see how good works can rapidly become a common value; how something private is going to be seen by millions of eyes. That is something new, a knowledge that we modern artists have.

CDB: You have mentioned your education before. It has been basically self-teaching. To what extent has it influenced your work?

JGD: I think that when one has received a good artistic education, you spend the rest of your life fighting against it. But if you haven’t got it then you can consider every canvas as a lesson. For instance, if I need to learn how to draw a hand or an eye, that is a project, you can learn quickly.

I think that in painting innovation is fundamental. All good painters innovate, you can see that even in Renoir. One has to kill painting in order to create something new. To do something really good you have to go to the limits and exaggerate. You have to fight against your hand, a talent that nature has endowed certain artists with, and who don’t fight.

CDB: Georges Braque said that when you don’t have imagination, you resort to talent.

JGD: Talent is a damned thing, it can kill off creativity. Picasso was so clever that he was aware of this danger and he struggled. Since he was very young he realized that he had great talent. He could have stopped at the

blue or the rose period. but he preferred to take the risks.

CDB: Risk is always manifest in your aesthetic proposal. What other ideas or concepts remain in your work? Do you think that, other than intense, it is as calculated and intelligent as certain critics have pointed out?

JGD: No doubt when I was four years old I was much more intelligent. There is always a concept and an emotion, frequently sexual. Sexuality is a very important force. But what unites my work is a sound, a particular sound. If you pay attention you hear: "bi.bi.bi.....uh.uh.uh". It's got to be that way. As soon as I begin to hear that sound then I know the painting is finished. If it doesn't have it, if I don't get it, then I get depressed and I destroy it. All my work has got it, it's not music, it is a sound.



A CARIBBEAN LOOK AT THE CARIBBEAN

SECOND PAINTING
BIENNIAL
OF SANTO DOMINGO

BY JOSÉ MIGUEL
NOCEDA FERNÁNDEZ

Santo Domingo is a sanctuary for the extraordinary. Every day its streets are filled with people who go about their business leisurely, tinkers and salesmen who offer you peeled sugar cane lollipops, it vibrates with the infectious local rhythms of the "merengue", and through it run public buses that would daze followers of everyday magic and probably the author of "In praise of folly".

In the midst of such a singular scenario the Second Painting Biennial of Santo Domingo was inaugurated last December 1994 in the Museum of

Modern Art. This exhibition was an initiative that resulted from a decree signed by President Balaguer, as a follow-up to the celebrations of the polemical "Vth Centenary of the Discovery and Evangelization of America". Although it is early to predict the future, the event looks like being one of the most serious efforts so far made to put an end to the cultural isolation and the limited contact that still permeate relations between Caribbean nations, endowing the region with its own exhibition space and a point of encounter and artistic debate that will serve to define our "common destiny" in the field of aesthetics.

The meeting at Quisqueya was more like a family get-together, a sincere analysis of the "intimacy" of our production, unharassed by the voracious pressures of the market. Save certain exceptions, the editors of the great international art magazines didn't turn up, nor did the promoters of sanctified biennials, nor the world famous critics.

The biennial was opened till February 1995, exhibiting the work of some two hundred artists representing more than thirty three countries. A jury made up of Caribbean and Latin American intellectuals, Gerald Alexis (Haiti), Lilian Llanes, (Cuba), David Boxer (Jamaica), Alissandra Cummins, (Barbados) Dominique Brebion, (Martinique), E. de Garuz, (Panama), Ivonne Pini, (Colombia) managed to give twelve individual prizes that were objectively and fairly distributed among: Jean Claude Garoute, (Haiti), Lilian Lira, (Venezuela), Eleomar Puente, (Cuba), Raúl Recio, (Dominican Republic), Stanely Greaves, (Barbados), Carlos René Aguilera, (Cuba), Dénis Nuñez, (Nicaragua), Nora Rodríguez, (Puerto Rico), Armando Lara, (Honduras), Kamid Moulferdi, (Martinique), Néstor Otero, (Puerto Rico) and Milton George, (Jamaica). Acknowledgement plaques were awarded to Venezuela, Honduras and Cuba for the best collective exhibitions.

Biennials and their prizes have left a bitter taste in recent decades, casting doubt over their potential efficiency. Some forecast their imminent disappearance and saw them as entities on the blink in cultural terms. They are

always involved in polemics and they have steadfast critics who condemn their commercial interests, having set themselves up as branches of cultural hierarchy and dominance and for the relativity of their validity. However, biennials, triennials, and "dokumentas" multiply on the face of the earth and emphasize the transnational action of international languages on the periphery. When the promoters of these great events invite Caribbean artists they set up a "kind of cabinet of curiosities or hunting-trophy room", that perpetuates the notion of utopia or reinforces notions of the "marvellous" to define artistic practise in this part of the Western hemisphere.

We are dealing with a difficult area. The fin de siècle comes to the Caribbean as a mixed bag of things, with artists that have experienced ups and downs in their careers and countries who have gone through manifold crises, that face vast contradictions and contrasts in their educational standards, the assimilation of modernity in the postmodern era, the reception of contemporary issues and the precariousness of promotional mechanisms. In such context prizes and biennials help to better the reputation of these events and they can act as a centripetal force which stimulates creativity.

The second edition of this event stimulated dialogue between different traditions and styles, (considering all those countries that had a museum legacy as valid participants). The biennial seen in general terms resembles the typical creole "ajiacó" dish seasoned with multiple visions of the region's visual panorama. Under the same roof it grouped the Centroamerican states, with coastlines giving to the Caribbean and the "painful islands". The organizers assembled well-known artists such as Raúl Martínez (Cuba), Carlos Dávila Rinaldi (Puerto Rico), the Hondurians Aníbal Cruz and Ezequiel Padilla, Manuel Zumbado (Costa Rica), Ofelia Rodríguez (Colombia) or Radhamés Mejía (Dominican Republic) and lesser well-known young artists. They also tolerated the exhibition of certain works that transgress the concept of painting.

The biennial revealed the debt that