

island of Barbados to religious imagery rooted in the soil of his native Italy. "For most viewers, Stella's palette was simply too strident and his stylistic exuberance too great," says Haskell [2]. The truth is that Madonnas and exotic flora and landscapes never made it into any major museum exhibitions surveying American painting of the period, such as the exhibition "Contemporary Painting" organized by Alfredo Baar, at that time the head of Museum of Modern Art's Painting and Sculpture Department. Years later, in 1963, at "the height of the most ardently formalist decade in American art history," critics demolished Stella's first retrospective at the Whitney, which included many of these colorful, metaphorical, and figurative works from the 1930s and 1940s.

Years away from this "ardent" formalism. "Beyond the Borders" maps out a society already emancipated from a belligerent ethnic orthodoxy. It tries to convey a pluralistic view of the immigrant experience – an experience that today links itself with cultural identity, power, resistance, and recognition. The exhibition acknowledges the various cultures of the individuals artists and embraces the content of ethnic groups in esteeming their own traditions while refusing to isolate themselves from the larger culture. Surprisingly, the exhibition presents a much more disjointed aesthetic experience than Stella's exhibition. As a whole, the Bronx Museum's exhibition projects a melancholy feeling of rootlessness, while including many intriguing and freshly individual works. Most of the artists often infuse their visual messages with social and political narratives, establishing a visible link between their home countries and the American society where they are living – from the Haitian Arnold Etienne's deliberately naive painting "Colonial Windmill," which aims to disclose the power of imperial discourse in his native country, to the recovery of Pre-Columbian ceramics by Peruvian Kulu Velarde. Other particular views of cultural identity and tradition are encountered in the photographic work of Maciej Toporowicz (Polish), Shirin Neshat

(Iranian), and Jenny Marketou (Greek).

"Beyond the Borders" relies on the innovative theoretical thinking that highlights the complicity and resistance of immigrant artists who are liberated to continuously play off history, culture, and power – validators not available to Stella. Consequently, the point is not whether the acceptance of distinctive views of cultural identity are opening doors to enlarge the aesthetic and representational vocabulary. Rather, the difference is of an other type and involves problems of both a semantic and pragmatic nature – semantic to the extent that words (as well as images) require careful translation from context to context in the global movements; pragmatic by the consequences provoked by these translations [3].

On the one hand, today's media defines the sense of place, which, in turn, has become one aspect of the sense of belonging. On the other hand, there is the question of who, or what, controls and defines the identity of individuals, social groups, nations, and culture. Within this framework, contemporary immigrant artists certainly have more artistic autonomy. They also have to grasp the facets of a much more complex set of relationships among the various levels of political and social life, the international media, and the popular culture. By extension, the boundaries between these categories could ultimately segregate the Postmodernist and Postcolonial immigrant artists into pre-fixed geographic and historical spaces.

#### NOTES

- [1] Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." In *Colonial Discourse and PostColonial Reader*. Ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). 395.
- [2] Haskell, Barbara. "Joseph Stella." Catalog Text. (New York: The Whitney Museum, 1994). 176
- [3] Appadurai, Arjun. "The Global Cultural Economy." In *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial theory: A Reader*. Ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). 335

MOMENTS EXPERIENCED  
IN THE WORK OF  
**NELSON  
DOMÍNGUEZ**

BY EUGENIO VALDÉS FIGUEROA  
SERGIO LÓPEZ GARCÍA

Any one following the prolific career of Cuban artist Nelson Domínguez might feel as if he was confronting the character in Goethe's poem *Der Zauberlehrling*, that inspired Paul Dukas' late nineteenth-century composition *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*. Painter, engraver, sculptor of glass and clay, this artist breaks out of the straight jacket that conventional limits might set between one form and another, embracing art as a great laboratory equally suitable for perfecting the result of a carefully researched and applied formula, and for the magic of chance.

From the beginning of his career, experimentation has been one of Nelson Domínguez's basic methods of creation. For the artist does not permit himself to consider a work in process as finished, but rather lives it intensely. He must produce successive variations of the theme, one after another on the base as if leaving traces of what could be until the initial spot practically disappears in function of a carefully articulated semantic structure. Even then he isn't satisfied, and executes an extensive series until every possibility the subject offers is exhausted. It is as if he has tried to include in his work even the most minimum living experience. Everything is important to him.

This unusual way of understanding the creative process is more comprehensible if we take as a point of reference the values of Pierre Francastel concerning the role of time and space in a work of art: "...The artist's aim has nothing to do with reproducing an integrated spectacle of phenomena, but rather with establishing imaginary relationships that bring together elements extracted from diverse moments of experience. Without the combining function of time in memory and place, there really is no image; and



it, by definition, is never identical to a momentary vision or some ephemeral form of action. Thus every image represents the point of convergence, in space and in time, of elements extracted from various kinds of experience.” [1]

This intentional play with the temporal and spatial dimensions of the work is not confined solely to the immediacy of the creative act, the innovating flow with which he fuses and reinvents techniques and materials to achieve what his imagination and instinct dictate. Nelson also selects themes and topics by reviewing sequences from his past. Customs and yearnings that shaped country life during his childhood and adolescence are references for the artist’s work. Clearly, the unique way in which Nelson perceives and appraises things, his cosmographic vision, was formed in the Sierra Maestra, where he was born. This factor, the key to understanding his subsequent development, has influenced each new point of evolution in his artistic production.

In the nineteen-seventies, such works as *Al golpe del pilón* (At Mortar Blow) and the series *Bodas guajiras* (Country Weddings) and *Los rostros de mi Isla* (The Faces of My Island) present a romantic view of rural life. The artist bases himself on the legacy of the masters of Cuban painting, seeking, by contrast, a much more up-to-date version than the accepted one, a version inscribed within the ethical and aesthetic concerns that motivated an extremely advanced current of thought at that time. In some of these works, Nelson goes still further in his attempt to find the identifying characteristics of Cuban nationality, offering a solution of continuity in treating the matter as it stood then. Dialogue over the avant-garde’s historical proposals seemed to be the most effective vehicle.

In 1975, at the National Salon, Nelson exhibited *Preludio de un rapto guajiro* (Prelude to a Peasant Rape), now in the permanent collection of the National Museum of Fine Arts and considered one of the most significant paintings of that period of Cuban art. An apparent naiveté and a great deal of lyricism are apparent in the treatment of the theme. This subjective, rather

dreamy, atmosphere is charged with connotations because of the intentional recourse to a tautological topic. Again, different times and places converge within the same scene, but now from a different angle, since the bases of a conceptual proposal are reordered. The artist effects a kind of thematic and compositional montage that preconditions the spectator’s acceptance from his first contact with the artistic image. Semantically, the work is achieved and sustained by the public’s predisposition, avoiding a purely contemplative relationship with the aesthetic object. His allusion to the work of Carlos Enriquez leads us to a critical revision of the theme from a historical point of view. “If, in *El rapto de las mulatas* (The Rape of the Mulattas), Carlos Enriquez presents an image of violence, of subjection by force, in order to put down an absolutely carnal act perpetrated by rural bandits, implicit in *Preludio de un rapto guajiro* by Nelson Domínguez is the accord of a couple disposed to consummate a desire to live together permanently that goes beyond the prejudices imposed by family order.” [2] There is not an attempt to suggest vulgar comparison, but rather to stimulate the evaluation of two moments in history, to recognize differences between codes of value applied in different periods.

About this time, a significant transformation began to take place in the work of Nelson Domínguez. Background and figures tended to blend as the artist tested solutions that would offer possible metaphorical substitutes for the peasant figure. Human figuration was still present but nature began to claim a participating role in his works. In his extensive series of *Cabezas* (Heads) and his varied expressions of *Rostro de agua y fuego* (Face of Water and Fire), Nelson persists in using the outline that reinforces the value of the drawing, but his compositions are more complex and the colors are diffused, achieving transparencies that favor the surrealist vein in his image adopted during that moment of transition. Stalks of sugarcane, reeds and other elements of the countryside cross and fuse with human faces as if wishing to supplant them. Man is the center of interest, but

the creator tries to call attention to the space in which more than one meeting of differences seeks the integration of affinities between the individual and his surroundings in order to evoke the essences of peasant life, its links with the land, the meeting points between the natural and the social world.

Engraving has been a recurrent technique in the work of Nelson Domínguez, but the decade of the seventies is undoubtedly his most fertile period in graphic production. Suffice it to recall works such as *Teatro infantil* (Children’s Theater) or *Vegetalias* (Vegetables), in which oppositions of black and white planes serve as contrasts, different tones of gray are superimposed on blots of color and the hard graphics produced by the incision of the gouge to obtain highly expressionistic images. Nelson himself has confessed that, while he has no preferences in techniques or expressions, working in graphic arts is much more rapid and permits him to test himself constantly with new experiments. His investigations into the medium’s possibilities became almost an obsession. He tried big formats, superimposed images using dry print and elaborated a secondary screen that complemented the works from a conceptual and iconographic point of view; he used oriental procedures to manufacture paper so he himself could make the bases; he respected their capricious configurations and took advantage of the textures or collage effects to obtain extraordinary variations. The artist believes that the base should be worked again and again after being withdrawn from the press, until the desired results are obtained. For that reason, there are times when each example in a press run becomes a unique piece, liberated from the technological aura that always accompanies an art conceived for multiple reproduction. A tension is created between the series nature of this discipline and the artisan appearance, the warm mark of direct work with the materials before and after printing.

Of course, this diversion in technical and constructive matters is not gratis. The artist himself recognizes that “...each theme, each message, demands specific means, and for each new work

you take into account...the expressive necessities that the content demands.” (3) For that reason, he moves daringly from one manifestation to another, searching for technical and formal enclaves that satisfy his communicative propositions in the project he is developing (this, perhaps, justifies his recent incursion into ceramics and glass).

The decade of the eighties began with heated discussions among intellectuals. Generational conflicts revealed an awareness, through the new promotion of artists, that reigning ideas and aesthetics were undergoing a change in direction. The youngest perceived an ageing of the figurative forms and expressed their irreverence toward traditional plastic-constructive methods. They were interested in conceiving a much more convincing artistic image, in applying new criteria to artistic research, in liberating formal structures by using more up-to-date visual codes and, above all, in revolutionizing content with a more analytical perspective that would permit them to contemplate the essence of the reality in which they lived.

Nelson already had a long history and a defined style, but he realized the need for change without renouncing the coherence of his existing work. The shattering of the axiological structures and aesthetic standards that had governed the preceding decade, promoted by the polemic and renovating spirit of the new generation, stimulated the artist to assume a critical position toward his previous work. Nelson’s artistic interest coincided with the requirements of the new period, for he rejected orthodox methods and worn out formulas. His themes became more universal at the same time that he was motivated to deepen his knowledge and valorization of the new national art. His persistent nonconformity with the acceptance of definitive schemes and procedures, his essentially experimental creative method and the humanist projection of his work encountered affinity with the propositions of art in the eighties, while facilitating, dialectically, actions that corresponded to the dynamics of his own work.

The change was gradual, so that no abrupt rupture is observable in the new

interests and efforts that continue to affect Nelson’s creations. In the previous decade, his doubts about using the landscape as the scene for man’s activity were already apparent. Nature continued to gain terrain and, at the beginning of the eighties, it came to occupy the entire surface of the base. In this period, man is absent, but his eyes appear on an unexpected landscape of “small things”, where even the coupling of the grasshopper becomes an event of vital importance. Detail acquires monumental rank in a macroscopic approach to nature and a universe inhabited by insects and small animals appears, and these still inspire expressionist works of his most recent production. Equilibrium, the harmonious disposition of that natural order, are complemented by compositional rigor and exquisite design arrangement.

We might discover a certain nostalgia in some of these works. The fantasies and imagination of the child of the Sierra rush to mind. Again the artistic discourse finds its foundation in memory, in past experience, in the spell of the unknown that filled his childhood with strange figures.

However, these are not the only springs that feed the thematic changes and the esoteric language that characterize this new stage. Nelson is fascinated with Carpentier’s poetic of magic reality. The artistic image appears to emerge from the stimulus of that instant of “privileged revelation” that the famous writer called “final state”, and that consists precisely of finding magic in what is common; that surprising, the “unexpected alteration of reality during a change encounter with heretofore unknown facets of the world.” [4] The similarities between Nelson’s cosmic vision and Carpentier’s thesis permit the organic and coherent incorporation of new aims and perspectives into Cuban art. During this period of Nelson’s artistic production, the landscape is established, but the omission of the human factor from the iconographic point of view does not imply its conceptual exclusion.

In the realization of these works, Nelson uses a traditional genre, not to bask in sensory pleasures, but to approach the same phenomenon –man’s

relationship to his environment– from different angles.

In his *Micromundos* (Microworlds), the image takes a biblical form. The factor of estrangement in the act of reception is foreseen by the artist. The spectator is taken by surprise when he sees, as through a magnifying glass, an incomprehensible, fearful and nearly intangible world that he passes through every day without noticing. Although we know that a bitter struggle for survival takes place there, it is not death but its opposite that Nelson Domínguez tries to reveal to us. Thus, to avoid possible analogies with medieval *Bestiario*, he prefers to call this series *Animalario* (Animalary).

The artist can insert a series such as *Hormigas* (Ants) of 1983-1984, that expresses an allegory of man’s persistence and the miracle of creation. Here, he attempts to establish a parallel between human intelligence, the labor of culture and the immanent logic of the natural order.

However, in other works, nature is implacable, unforgiving of man’s slightest error, with powers and mysteries that lie beyond his ingenuous and pretentious persistence in subjecting and controlling her without calculating the ominous consequences of this sterile rivalry. Nelson is interested in exploring the sociocultural implications of man’s intervention and the interrelationships between nature and man. His series *Huellas* (Tracks), *Interior de la manigua* (In the Woods) and *Resaca* (Undertow) reflect these links: the vestiges of man’s actions on a landscape already over-polluted by civilization and the answer of natural factors that, with intromissions into the world of men, try to demonstrate their hegemony.

Such concerns, basically anthropological, may be among those that motivated him to delve into popular cultures and their symbolic representations. His *Ofrendas* (Offerings), *Bilongo* (Witchcraft), *Nganga* and other more recent works embark on the enigmatic plastic universe of Afro-Cuban cults. Some followers of his work have grouped these pieces under the title “black period”. His palette of brilliant colors is muted with black rubber powder mixed in an oil-

base paint that is applied in depth to produce a more organic sense of design elements and a velour-like texture of provocative tactile sensation. Not only does this imply revitalization of his work on the basis of a novel use of materials, but, at the same time, the rearticulation of the code in function of new content.

The artist does not deal with these themes as folklore, but neither does he propose a cold conceptualization of the phenomena. "...If, in treating these themes, we compare him with the sophisticated intellectual vision of José Bedia or the participating complicity of Mendive, Nelson seems to assume a position of non-involved contemplator, respectful and attracted by the visual and symbolic wealth of the *bilongos* and by the plastic value of the ritual instruments." [5] The artist is interested in taking advantage of this relation to incommensurability, in showing respect for the magic and the solemnity of the surroundings, the almost morbid pleasure in trusting one's fate to the unknown, that strange combination of fear and surrender.

Nelson is not involved. He remains the spectator who cannot withdraw himself from the awe that such surroundings produce nor from the emotional atmosphere that surrounds such ceremonies. This justifies the theatrical image in some works where the Oricha or deity takes on a human form and receives from the believer's hands the candle lighted to "pay a promise." This type of ceremony in Afro-Cuban religious practice consists of a soliloquy the practitioner recites before the cult object, which usually –with the exception of Eleggua, identified in Catholicism as the Son of Atocha– has no anthropomorphic features. Nelson, however, prefers to emphasize in a scene that, while very intimate and personal, adopts the appearance of a fraternal dialogue between a father and his son.

For his *Ofrendas* (Offerings), Nelson has relied on a rigorous study of still life as genre throughout the history of universal art. He checks out the "classics" and uses structural enclaves that fit his compositional aims. Yet he eliminates the vacuity and artificial

perfection of the genre that fills it with prefabricated coldness. The offerings to the deities of Santería and Regla de Palo Monte, far from being "constructed types," have a wide margin of variability that fosters a heterogeneous and mutable visual appearance, in which the intervention of change determines a constant physical renovation of the sacred object. "Giving food" to the saint, while constituting one of the most important ritual acts in the relationship between the deity and the believer, also "gives life" to the object, animates it, and at the same time, ensures that it will be functionally operative. Nelson tries to capture the values of this dynamic visuality. He does not try to reproduce the ceremony, but rather to trap the emotional atmosphere of the ritual space and the internal vitality of the liturgical object through the representation of impressions of that mutant appearance –without liberating it from its "desire for change;" and, on behalf of the message, he uses the possible contradictions that arise from the relations of opposition between the artistic genre and the ritualistic "moments of experience" that serve as reference.

The telluric and the mysterious are ever present in the painting of Nelson Domínguez, a point of communion between his concerns about physical and human surrounding and his inquiries into cultural behavior that has its roots in vernacular tradition.

Two paintings in the *Ofrendas* (Offerings) series are especially significant. In one these, *La ofrenda del coronel* (The colonel's offering), a man raises in his arms the sacrificed rooster that will be given as an offering to the deity. The good fortune or misery, well-being or disgrace of the believer will depend on this sacred act. The animal's blood "fertilizes" and "feeds" the ritual object. In return, the deity or the ancestor who resides within the god, will gratify this act of faith by protecting that person from the obstacles and dangers of life, making the terrain on which he or she walks "fertile." In the other painting, *Ofertorio* (Offertory), the bearer of the offering is the rooster, the animal sacrificed is the man. The roles are inverted, and this discourse on life and death acquires a new meaning. The

symbolic representation of this process of metamorphosis refers to the initiation rites, devotion, and complete surrender to holy and otherworldly designs, to the very ceremony of consagración to religious practice. From that moment on, a complex order of relationships is created in which the neophyte, the ritual object and the animal participate. With its blood, the animal infuses the person with life and gives him a "magic charge." In *The Golden Bough*, James Frazer asserts that the "semblance of life and resurrection" in the initiation rites of this type of practice is linked "...not only to the belief in the possibility of permanently depositing the soul in some external object animal, plant or whatever but also to the real intention of doing so." [6]

In attempting to represent that point of intersection between the real and the virtual, between what is known and what is believed, where the limits of certainty and hope are confused, Nelson reveals and exalts inherent values in life.

What seduces us in Nelson's art is the unusual manner in which he makes the testimony of his individual experience coincide with his metaphors about existence. His cosmogonic preoccupations, his constant effort to discover hidden meanings, the exquisite style and the eloquence of his images, establish Nelson Domínguez as one of the most innovative and talented artists of his generation.

#### FOOTNOTES

- [1] Pierre Francastel: *Sociología del Arte*. Alianza Editorial, S.A., Madrid, 1975, p. 73.
- [2] Marta Arjona: *Revolución y Cultura*. Havana, 1993.
- [3] Author's interview with the artist, May 1993.
- [4] Alejo Carpentier: *De lo real Maravilloso Americano*. Ensayos. Editorial Letras Cubanas, Havana, 1984.
- [5] Jorge de la Fuente: Unpublished material from the artist's files.
- [6] James G. Frazer: *La rama dorada* (The Golden Bough). Editorial Ciencias Sociales, Instituto Cubano del Libro, Havana, 1972, pp 784-785 (retranslated into English).



## 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