

# Cuevas, Galán and Rojo: The mexican embrace

The spanish poet José-Miguel Ullán is curator of an exhibition that comprises of Mexico's pictorial faces, together with many other mexican artists that have managed to cross their own frontier. The effect is poetic and plural as indeed is mexican cultural diversity. The choice of Rojo (1932), Cuevas (1934) and Galán (1958) is a challenge set by the singularity that, nonetheless, unites them in the shared individualism of their intentions, rooted in a context of pluricultural coexistence. This syncretism of the personal and social, this shared embrace, between reality and ideal, tradition and modernity, defines the mosaic of multiplied identity, which is the case of the mexican, mirroring itself.

## A POETICS OF THE PYRAMID

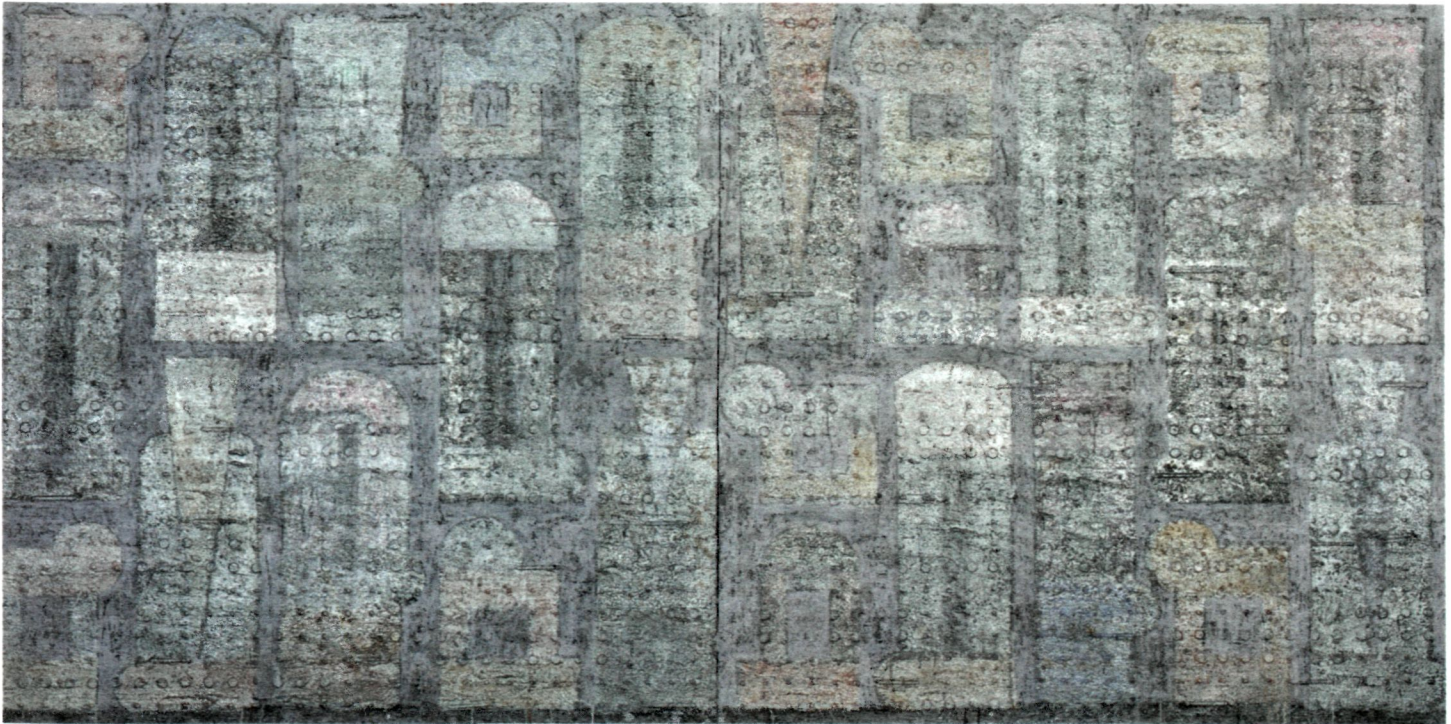
Rojo, designer of Octavio Paz's magazine *Vuelta*, is seen like this by Monterroso: "I don't like working, but when I do I like working like painters. They stand in front of their canvas, behold it measure it, calculate; then they make some pencil marks and (I believe), get frightened and go out or read, (they're great readers) and then return; from the door they see *that*, to which they now bring a few brushes and a little table full of many or few colours, depending: red, blue, green, white, violet; they think, doubt, dally, behold the canvas, get close to it, put a bit of colour here and there; they stop, they move to one side and look, doubt, think and read or go out again another while". It's a literary view for someone who's been so close to García Márquez, Juan Rulfo, Octavio Paz, Lezama Lima, Severo Sarduy, Carlos Fuentes or José-Miguel Ullán.

Yet Rojo's work is also the poetics of the pyramid, a territorial spiritual geography with european notes (Klee, Morandi, Tapies, Dubuffet). A child of the spanish exile, Rojo fits perfectly into his adoptive country which gives him the necessary stimulus to devote his life to graphic design and painting, though he remarks: "As graphic designer and in my participation in cultural projects, I have felt socially valid, but as a painter I feel socially useless. I've never been able to define what is the usefulness of art in general, and in particular that of my own".

However, it seems reasonable to trace to design a constructive kindredness with his art and the persistence of primitive universal traits. To avoid either facet of Rojo is impossible, as indeed to separate his mixed blood, catalan and mexican. His painting moves in a universe of primordial references, intimately linked to the prehispanic world that survives and talks openly with him.

*Open Codex* (Código abierto) is the general title of the work presented in Seville, and for which Miguel Fernández-Cid has written a brilliant essay in the catalogue, leading us through a detailed mnemonic tour of Rojo.

The use of a rectangular format that doubles the normal grid of his work and an evident figurative accent are eloquent innovations that express the vitality of his dynamic vision; transforming, avoiding exclusion and integration; the diagonal becomes *Mexico in the rain* (México bajo la lluvia), one of his most remarkable pictorial symphonies. Rojo's world is refined, touching architecture and music, expressive and intimate, in it poetics and technique unite in an open structure, in a code open to the formal polyvalency of memory and the wish to transform it.



VICENTE ROJO: *Open Codex 7*. 160×320 cms. M.T./Canvas. 1992. Pabellón Mudéjar. Seville. Junta de Andalucía.

## THE FIGURES OF DESIRE

In a beautiful text, acting as prologue, Carlos Fuentes places Cuevas's figures in a distant and fraternal tradition. Art and desire, in their unity, establish a poetic universe that embraces both shores, the two faces of the plural vision of the modern world, whose principal virtue isn't quite the integration of one face in the other, or the exclusion of one of them to the advantage of the other, but in the harmonious autonomous endurance of their multiplicity, their promiscuity and dispersion. Before the insane choice between this or that, Cuevas chooses the frank cohabitation of both parts, for those and these that shape a superreality beyond any preconceived structure, beyond any universal and cultural ideological codification that ghettoizes the coexistence of values that are antagonistic, and occasionally surprise and don't know each other.

"Cuevas, —writes Fuentes—, author of a second reality, is, for that very reason, author of a second history that belies official histories. Cuevas's figures are bodies that don't only imagine and form an unknown reality, but narrate another history, the repressed, hidden, undesirable dangerous history, that Cuevas's necessarily figurative art can only tell through the means of deformed, dwarfish, obese, mutilated and marginal bodies, akin to the history they experience. Carriers of silence of invisibility and blindness, their presence terrifies, moves, repels, but for those reasons it expands the reach of history; it includes the undesirable, the rejected, the 'unreal'".

And he continues: "One of his traditions is that of sacrificial space, the sacred zone of consumer-indian culture (a blood consuming culture as Bataille indicated). The other is

the spanish tradition of the pluralist mishap in uniform order, of unorthodox exception in an orthodox world".

Later on: "We are all this. All that we have been. And as well all that we want to be. Nationalism?. Does any one read Italo Calvino because he is italian, or Milan kundera because he is czech?. Who can be rid, though he wish it, of that intimate fatherland so perfectly described by José Emilio Pacheco in that very well named poem, *High Treason* (Alta traición):

*I don't love my country. Its abstract gleam is beyond reach.  
However, though it sounds bad, I'd give my life  
for ten of its places, certain people,  
ports, pine woods, castles,  
a broken city, grey, monstrous,  
several characters of its history,  
mountains  
(and three or four rivers).*

Realism?. Isn't Don Quijote more real than most creatures of flesh and blood?. Fantasy?. Is there any reality that first has'nt been imagined and desired?. Conscious art?. Is there any art that doesn't compromise the artist or the beholder?. Purist art?. Is there any art that isn't tainted, stained, not by the yellowing news of the day, but by the colour of exclusion and oblivion?.

Cuevas's figures are, in brief, constants of a reality that is inherently excessive, unapproachable, for it runs away us when we try to harness it to schemes that a flowing, overwhelming reality contantly belie.





JOSE LUIS CUEVAS. *Selfportrait with lover*. Paris. 1981.  
M.T. on paper. 27×25,5 cms.  
Pabellón Mudéjar. Seville. Junta de Andalucía.



JULIO GALÁN. *The seven climates*. Oil/canvas. 1991. 230×150 cms.  
Col. Diego Sada. Pabellón Mudéjar. Seville. Junta de Andalucía.

## THE FUTURE OF HISTORY

Being the youngest of the three artists that José-Miguel Ullán has chosen to take us closer to Mexico, Galán confirms that polyvalent direction we noticed already in Rojo and Cuevas. Octavio Zaya has recently described it: “In a context devoid of universal values, where the regional and the global coexist as equals, and also past and future, Galán takes on the tastes, the images, the styles and the feelings of tradition to develop personal language, sometimes cryptic and narcissistic, that rejoices in its own ambivalence and struggles in the syncretism of its autobiographical demise”.

“On one hand, the paintings of Julio Galán suggest the bankruptcy of original creation through its imitation of Mexican frontispieces, of the artisanal murals that adorn canteen walls, bars, hairdressers and wine-cellars and colonial portraits that already were inspired by Spanish art. (Furthermore, the

artist has appropriated the images of calendars and cigar boxes).”

And he concludes: “Galán attempts to trace multiplied identity, dissolved and spilled in the fragments that make up a fertile mosaic of meanings and references; a visual space that spans equally the decadent and the voluptuous drama of religious martyrdom, the kitsch and popular ingenuity, irony and devotion, contingency and immortality, to illumine, at the end, the labyrinth of all solitude.

This exhibition of course doesn't exhaust the plural character of the Mexican universe. However, without being exclusive, the three realities, define within difference, an irreducible identity, animated by a discourse open to the suggestions of tradition and modernity, that has emphasized its eternal alternating current.

A.Z.