

If I were asked to single out the most noteworthy development in painting in the Canary Islands over the last two decades, I would venture to say the recreation of island landscapes. We should consider the importance and originality of this re-vision of nature within the context of an artistic and ideological debate which began in the 19th century and reached its prime during the avant-garde period on the islands.

#### AN ATLANTIC ARCADIA

1- In order to see the island landscape, 19th century artists found themselves obliged to idealize it. Cirilo Truilhés and Nicolás Alfaro's romantic landscapes were idealizations of island nature. Their images of pastoral life reflected the myth of an Atlantic Arcadia, inspired by the classical paradigm of happiness which reigned in the Garden of the Hesperides, according to the legend.

This romanticism also found its expression in the exaltation of local folklore; praising the characteristics of the rural island population. Romanticism always tends to take advantage of popular customs in order to emphasize a sense of identity. And

# Reinventing the Landscape of the Canary Islands

although it may seem paradoxical, the first attempts to introduce iconographic models for this genre of regional art and traditional landscapes in the Canary Islands (from the foreigner's point of view) were the landscapes of the English colony in Valle de la Orotava (Edwards, Alfred Diston, etc.) and Williams' etchings illustrating Berthelot's work. There is really no contradiction between aesthetic idealization and the ideology of regional art because, despite its supposed commitment to reality, local art is always an idealization. These two aesthetic foundations sustained the ideology of artistic regionalism in the Canary Islands during the latter half of the 19th century and the first three decades of the 20th.

In order to understand this ideology we should consider the aesthetic principles of the Regionalist School of La Laguna. Here I would like to point out some origins of the iconography advocated by this school in order to express their regionalist view of the Canary Islands.

a) Firstly, the aesthetic basis of the poets from the Regionalist School involved a precise, delightful representation of island landscapes, which had not been achieved since Cairasco de Figueroa's description of the Doramas Forest. See, for example, Nicolás Estévez's "Canarias" and Tabares Barlett's "La Caza" or "El Salto del Negro". These examples show that there is no longer a legitimate mythological grounding: here, the scenic descriptions - local images from the vegetable or mineral world - reveal a power of observation whose intention is clearly ideological rather than merely aesthetic. The regionalism in Estévez's poetry is not anecdotal; it rises to the higher plane of profoundly nationalist feeling, albeit within a romantic notion. The idea of the homeland transmitted by these poems turns the images of island nature (cliffs, mountains, forests) into symbols of collective identity; as if the very essence

of the Canary Islands could only be inferred by describing the characteristics of its landscape.

It is therefore worth noting that the above-mentioned poets, particularly Tabares Barlett and Nicolás Estévez, had already reflected on the islands' native vegetation in some of their most important works, before the painters of the Luján School began to turn their attention to it. Nevertheless, the ideological meaning behind the images was quite different, as we shall see later.

b). The second source of iconography is urban rather than rural. It is the image of La Laguna as a dead city: a heraldic symbol of the decline of a culture and way of life. Its mossy stones appear in the poems infused with historic significance. The model was Bruges, the dead city, whose enigmatic scenery appeared in much of the poetry of the Belgian symbolists. It is a shame that no painter from the Canary Islands illustrated Verdugo's admirable verses about the frontier city at that time, as Fernand Khnopff had done with Rodenbach's poetic narrative about Bruges (*Bruges-la-Mort*, 1892). And so, towards the end of the 19th century, La Laguna symbolized a ghost town; its architecture concealed the treasured relics of an aristocratic society threatened by the unstoppable rise of the two island capitals, whose busy ports encouraged the social mobility which reflected the emerging middle class ideology. La Laguna became the allegorical image of stopped time. That

is how it was seen by the poets: a dead city which rejected the idea of progress, as well as the concept of time. What the poets of the Regionalist School of La Laguna portrayed in their images was a melancholic crystallization of history.

c). The third source did not influence the visual arts of the time



Gonzalo González, "Nocturno", Oil on canvas. 1995. 130 x 130 cm.

either. Here I refer to the neo-Vianist poetic movement, dedicated to idealizing the Guanche people. But despite the exaltation of the victim (represented by the aborigines of the Canary Islands) over the tyrant (symbolized by the invaders), the nobility always won in the end and the value of both sides was extolled. This idealization of the good savage had already appeared not only in the *Poema de Viana*, but also in the work of our great historian Viera y Clavijo. On the whole, except for some images in Gumersindo Robayna's and Gonzalez Méndez's work, the representation of aboriginal life in the Canary Islands was not as important in

19th century painting as in the poetry of the Regionalist School of La Laguna.

d) Finally we should add that regionalism's iconography was not limited purely to images of the countryside and the city of La Laguna. Folklore also played an important role in their poems, with portrayals of country men and women in the pastures. Nearly all the poets sang the praises of the "Folia" in their verses, and described idyllic images of country life. One example of this is Tabares Barlett's poem "La Lechera"; the iconographic model for the images of country folk which Angel Romero Mateos and Pedro de Guezala later captured on canvas in their subgenera of regional art in the Canary Islands: the paintings of "magas".

Therefore, in order to reconstruct the history of landscape painting in the Canary Islands, which is the central theme of this article, we should be aware of the ideological link between the poetry of the Regionalist School of La Laguna and the beginnings of landscape painting and regional art in the islands.

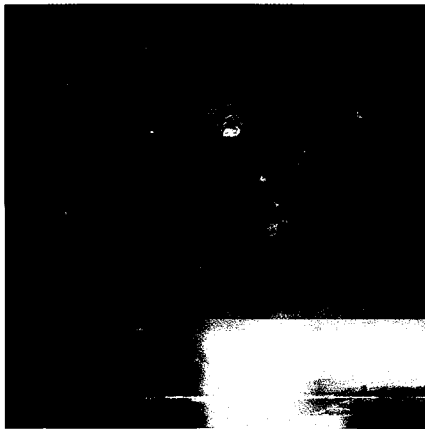
These four ideological sub-groups of island images show us that, when the Canary Islands wanted to reassess itself, when it wanted to really know itself for the first time, its only resources were allegory (La Laguna as a dead city, compared with the modern-foreign urban landscape in Santa Cruz or Las Palmas) or the idealized regionalism of the islands. In the 19th century and the early 20th century there was no

alternative to the cultural dependence which the islands had suffered until then: there was only regionalism, with all its clichés, or foreign influences, both in painting and poetry. Here I refer only to the referential function of images (the iconography) and to the representational content, since in terms of language, the work of these artists was obviously no more than an assimilation of both popular realism and symbolism from elsewhere in Europe.

The symbolist idealization of island life reached more extensive and refined heights in the city of Las Palmas in the early 19th century. I refer to the poetry of Tomás Morales and Néstor de la Torre's paintings. Theirs was no longer the old symbolism of the dead city, or the old obliging popular regionalism, with those images of the Canary Islands from the poetry of the Regionalist School of La Laguna and later the watercolours of the first quarter of the 20th century. To the contrary, both Tomás and Nestor portrayed a more optimistic, even triumphant cosmopolitanism in the Canary Islands. The former depicted the ports and commercial areas, whereas the latter illustrated the myth of the Garden of the Hesperides with a greater poetic emphasis than any other artist from the Canary Islands. It was therefore a refined, cosmopolitan, idealization of the Canaries: a far cry from that of the Regionalist School of La Laguna and the watercolour artists. Nevertheless, both were idealizations all the same.

#### THE LUJAN PEREZ SCHOOL OR QUESTIONING THE CONCEPT OF REALITY

The concept of reality did not arise in the art of the Canary Islands until the avant-garde period. Their rejection of both the anecdotal approach and the



Gonzalo González, "Nocturno", Oil on canvas. 1995. 130 x 130 cm.

uncritical exaltation of country life led to a search for the true island landscape and social reality. Previously I pointed out how the first attempts to carry out a kind of self-assessment in art (of both the landscape and the way of life), had again resulted in idealization, so that the representations of the Canary Islands were no more than aspects of falsified nature and society.

Juan Manuel Trujillo, one of the first avant-garde intellectuals in the Canaries, once said that "the Canary Islands are unaware of themselves and are unaware that they are unaware". In short, they believe they possess self-knowledge, but in fact they do not. The

avant-garde considered regionalism a counterfeit of reality. For artists, the Canary Islands were yet to be discovered.

The painters of the Luján School reacted against both regionalism and symbolism. In the early 30's, with the first attempts to combine avant-garde linguistic experiments and a new vision of island landscape and reality, the aesthetics of the surviving Regionalist poets and painters were called into question. Some, like the poet Manuel Verdugo, made quite extreme counter-attacks. For the author of *Estelas*, enamored of Greek culture, the aggressive iconography of the avant-garde artists in the Canaries must have been even more intolerable than for any other poet of the Regionalist School of La Laguna. The way the painter Aguiar insulted the avant-garde artists in his diary reflects the regionalists' feelings of dismay at the arrival of such trends in the islands.

The magazines *La Rosa de los Vientos* and *Gaceta de Arte* both criticized regionalism and its supporters, whom Ernesto Pestana Nóbrega called "regionalist customs officers". This metaphor shows that, for avant-garde cosmopolitanism and internationalism, there could be nothing worse than the construction of barriers to the free circulation of artistic ideas.

La Laguna thus and its significance as a dead city played no part in the islands' artistic development; it was no more than a reference point in

history. In their attempt to invoke life and progress, the new artists wanted to go beyond what they perceived as the artistic paralysis of the Regionalist School. This was their motto: no more folklore, no more history. Or, as Pedro García Cabrera said: "No straw hats from Tenerife or island mantillas. These are splashes of local color. But they can never be the central themes of art. That is not regional feeling" ("El hombre en función del paisaje", 1930).

However, avant-garde essentialism in the Canary Islands was open to a new interpretation of regional life. Ernesto Pestana Nóbrega, the critic from Tenerife who had previously coined the pejorative term "regionalist customs officers", did distinguish between good and bad regionalism when he visited the first exhibition in Tenerife of the young artists from the Luján Pérez School: the distinction between anecdotal, regional art on the one hand, and essentialism on the other.

#### THE 80'S: REINVENTING THE LANDSCAPE OF THE CANARY ISLANDS

This distinction fueled the debate about landscape painting in the Canary Islands up until the mid-1980's. Around that time, the reinterpretation of island landscapes became a task of the utmost importance. Here I refer particularly to the work of three artists from the so-called Generation of the 70's: Juan José Gil, Gonzalo González and Juan

Hernández; and two others from a previous generation: Pedro González (a key figure of the 60's) and the poet and painter Manuel Padorno who, as a theorist, was linked to Manolo Millares and Martín Chirino in the 50's and 60's.

Within the context of the crisis of avant-garde ideas, a reinterpretation of



Juan José Gil, "Orilla XIII". 1993. 80 x 80 cm.

the island landscape became essential. This involved questioning the concept of reality first developed by artists in the 30's; this time, not from a social or ideological perspective as in Felo Monzón's work, but from a phenomenological, poetic viewpoint.

Reconsidering the island landscape is a poetic task, in the sense that when the creator embarks on the restoration of the concept of natural reality, he does not renounce the critical capacity of subjectivity. The phenomenological reduction which the subject establishes becomes an innovatory experience rather than a redemptive ideology, excluding

the naive idea of objectivity.

Reconsidering the island landscape is also a way to greater knowledge, in that it reveals not what is visible, but what is possible; not the appearance, but the very essence of the phenomenon.

Here we should point out that the work of these artists is closely linked to Pedro García Cabrera's reflections on the landscape in articles such as "El hombre en función del paisaje" or "Teoría de un día gris", as well as Agustín Espinosa's "Lancelot" and Andrés de Lorenzo Cáceres' "Isla de promisión".

Just like the above-mentioned painters, the motto of these avant-garde writers was also the reinvention of the landscape in the Canary Islands.

Towards the mid-80's, Gonzalo González was painting neo-romantic visions of the island scenery. The aesthetic emotion stirred by such images put him in the romantic category of the sublime, whose only precedent in our tradition are the *Paisajes cósmicos* of the surrealist artist Oscar Domínguez. The desolation of these territories of fire seems to illustrate the following lines of poetry by Pedro García Cabrera: "the lava was the rock/ that sought freedom and burned in the wings/ of the fire-bird; it is all that remains/ of a paradise of golden apples".

These burned landscapes signalled the end of the benign vision of the idyllic Canary Islands as described in the myth of the Garden of Hesperides. Already in the 60's and 70's, César Manrique had

tried to de-dramatize the country's scenery, although his paintings are really abstract visions of volcanic nature rather than landscapes as such. What Gonzalo González's paintings portray is quite the opposite: a neo-romantic dramatization of the landscape.

We could say that some of Gonzalo González's paintings depict the landscape as it is seen from the middle of the most mountainous island, according to the phenomenological viewpoint which Pedro García Cabrera described admirably:

"The mountain dominates the north of the island, drawing its topography with vertical strokes, incising the sea. In the south it falls away in hilly slopes, its gentle curves lapped by sandy beaches. Then the open blue of a round horizon: flatness. The landscape of the Canary Islands, to a certain extent, is two-fold - both flat plains and mountains (...). And even when the inhabitants, fleeing from the sea, from the sea-borne invaders, climb up into the mountains, their horizon is the sky up there and not down below, as if it could extricate itself from the high position of the viewer. From the settlement, the slopes descend to the water's edge. From the beach, the sea rises to the horizon. In this crystallographic geometry, the flatness of the sea and the earth form a right angle whose edge would be the shore. The scenery, then, portrays a relevant depth. A depth soaked in grays. The clouds regulate the extension of the landscape.

There is a clearly living mechanism. The distant balance of clear, static days, when the horizon is defined by a perfect, classical, majestic stroke, is broken by the presence of gray. Dark avalanches take possession of the whole panorama; the rich blue vein contracts, fades and disappears. The field of vision grows



Juan José Gil. "Orilla XX". 1993. 70 x 70 cm.

smaller; it shortens in direct proportion to the intensity of grays. To the island no sea comes: paths. From the island no sea leaves: treading paths also" ("Paisaje de isla. Estudio del día gris", *Algas*, 1935).

The link between distance and proximity underlies the entire pictorial language of Gonzalo González, in the musical sense of repetition, to which Pedro García Cabrera also refers:

"The art of island dwellers is that of repetition. Of variations on a theme". (...) "This action of the spirit, communicated to the body, makes him turn like a spinning top. And he soon

exhausts the narrow field of the island. Then he has to go over and over the same landscape. This is where a split occurs. Either the reiteration of the same things over and over (wherein island art is monotonous). Or arhythm - dissonance - as a consequence of inaction". (Pedro García Cabrera: "El hombre en función del paisaje", 1930).

There is dissonance in Gonzalo González's seascapes; dissonance and dizziness resulting from the contemplator's inaction: according to García Cabrera, "island dwellers are contemplative. That is, dreamers. Dreaming is a rapid form of activity. The capacity to dream is directly proportional to the dynamism of the landscape". There is dynamism and calm in Gonzalo González's paintings which, in the light of Pedro García Cabrera's theory of landscape, seems to reflect the musical condition which permeates the aesthetic sensitivity of island-dwellers: serenity and dizziness, melody and rhythm. The Baroque nature of his painting is musical, like the music created by Baroque architecture, but also like paintings by Rubens: as if the obsessive repetition of one element were the portrayal, in sculpture, music or painting, of Esquilo's image of "the countless laughter of the waves".

In Juan José Gil's work, the reinvention of the landscape uses water as the poetic element. It is also musical painting, as Pedro García Cabrera stated:

“A musical feeling predominates in island dwellers. Therein lies distant love. But it is an active love, a dynamic distance which moves nearer or further according to the clouds and melancholia. Sea, horizon, music, melancholy: this is the island soul. The land is like the orchestra at the cinema. Before the film - water - the sonorous lines, the luminous outlines become hazy and all that remains is the impression of a confused stain of sounds. Absorption of distance, complete” (Pedro García Cabrera: “Paisaje de isla. Estudio del día gris”).

I think that some of Juan José Gil’s series from the 80’s, based on the island landscape, are a result of this musical feeling which belongs to island dwellers, described so precisely by Pedro García Cabrera in the 30’s. I refer particularly to two of his most successful series: “Paraislas” and “Fragmentos de la isla de San Borondón”. There is an almost Wagner-like feeling radiating through these works, both in an ancestral, mythical sense, and in the sense of roots. In the first series, the music is the experience of what is out of reach; a symbolist evocation of an other-island (“paraisla”). The musical harmony evokes a weightless world, a more transparent place. Whereas in “Fragmentos de la isla de San Borondón”, the musical concept is one of ruins. It implies an Atlantic “Gotterdammerung”. Ghostly music which sounds through the thick fog, inviting us to dream of “a former life”,

as Baudelaire said; the scene of an imaginary Atlantis which Platonic legend turned into a political myth.

Juan Hernández infuses his images of landscape with love. This infusion stems from André Breton’s poetic interpretation of the island nature in his text “El Castillo estrellado” (1936), where he describes his first climb to the top of the Teide. This excursion glowed with the love which the surrealist poet felt for Jacqueline Lamba, his wife at the time, who had accompanied him to Tenerife for the famous International Exhibition of Surrealism. In his series called “El Faro”, Juan Hernández depicts the painted emblems of unobtainable happiness. In the warm Atlantis night, Cupid rides the length of Maspalomas beach on a dolphin, whilst the diamond shimmer of the lighthouse beam shines on the outline of another starry castle where man knows no law other than desire. The island is reinvented by love, iridescent with its light which can cancel out the tyranny of time.

In the early 90’s, Pedro González held an ambitious exhibition based on the theme of island seas, using the words from a poem by Tomás Morales: “The sea is like an old childhood friend”. In these large-scale paintings, Pedro González depicts a somber, powerful sea; no more than the painter’s intense emotional projection of the existential world. The sea is reinvented by the subject’s memory, as phantasmagoric as the rest of his work. Whereas in the work of Gonzalo González and Juan José

Gil the sea is musical, and for Juan Hernández it is an allegory of love, to Pedro González it represents the lost time which that “old childhood friend” evokes in us. A melancholy sea, precisely because it proves the impossibility of freeing ourselves from the tyranny of time.

And, finally, I would like to mention Manuel Padorno’s view of island nature in his series “Nómada marítimo”. He paints a constellation of radiant images to illustrate the phenomenology of island dwellers described in his book “Egloga del agua”: joyfully declining to return to the mother country. In this series of paintings, all the luminous metaphors of his poetry can be seen: “the seagull of light”, “the tree of light”, “the sea’s road”, etc. This link between painting and poetry can only be understood in terms of his absolute dedication to the task of poetically reinventing the emblematic landscape of the Canary Islands, with its scenery shining under a different sun. Poetry, painting and ideology are inseparable realities in his work. And we should remember that although this series was painted in the early 90’s, the images stem from aesthetic ideas which Padorno had already laid down much earlier in his book *A la sombra del mar* (1963). There he coined the phrase which was to guide all his future creative work, both in painting and in poetry: “beautiful workshop, my island”.  
The island is, for all these artists, a wonderful workshop.