

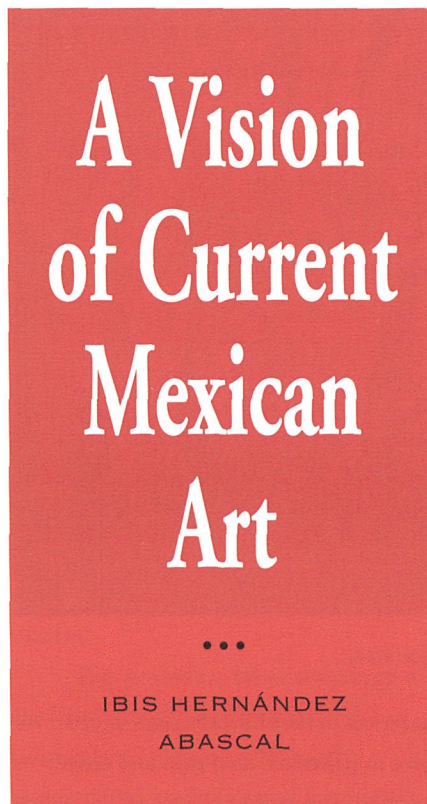
TERRITORIES

Diversity was one of the distinctive traits of visual arts in Mexico during the 80's and the beginning of this decade. Currently, there are several generations of artists who at one time or another have taken a leading part in the History of Mexican Contemporary Art.

On the other hand, the process of diversification of idioms that began with the so called "Ruptura" ["Break"] has been intensified. This generation's common ground was the adoption of fashionable international trends during the 50's and the beginning of the following decade in search of a "plastic universality" as labeled by Octavio Paz. It thus established a break with the nationalistic art of previous decades, already institutionalised by that era, and overthrew Siqueiros's postulate, opening new paths for Mexican art as it struggled toward plurality. The members of the "Ruptura" managed to dominate the scene in the 60's (although not without facing serious polemics) and through their proposals "new art" reached museums and galleries.

During the following decades and mainly during the 80's, phenomena such as transculturism, migration and postmodernism brought important new proposals, morphologies and content that enrich and bring complexity to the structure and variety of artistic proposals. Affiliation to the widest range of tendencies is confirmed, as are attitudes and different stances with regard to creativity. Consequently, to offer a panorama of this country's visual arts during the last ten years proves to be extremely difficult and inevitably full of omissions.

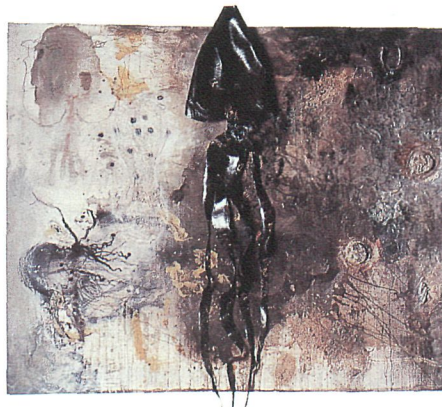
Nonetheless, the theme of the 5th Bienal de La Habana — Art, Society and Reflection — offers an analytical



perspective through which it is possible to arrive at a vision highlighting some of the artistic orientations, themes and representational forms of the period.

PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Different moments of Mexican art reveal the close relationship between the nation's cultural expressions and its



Gil Garea. *Submarina*, 1993.

social problems. The victory of the Mexican Revolution brought an atmosphere of renewing enthusiasm in the 20's, creating favorable conditions for the development of a national culture that reached its peak of expression in mural painting and engraving. Much has been said about the Mexican School of painting and of this nationalistic art that working through social realism addressed important issues in order to respond to the urgent needs of the period.

The phenomenon of "Los Grupos" ["The Groups"], which reached its height in the 70's, is also well known. Through the exercise of their art these artists questioned public art's function and the individual artist's role as social entity and ideological transmitter, while raising issues of collective creation and alternatives for the perception and consumption of art.

Considered a Third World country, toward the end of the century Mexico has experienced a series of unresolved economic and social problems that generate severe contrasts in the heart of its society. The capital, one of the largest and most overpopulated cities on the planet, suffers high levels of environmental pollution. Each morning the inhabitants wait for the weather report to tell them which areas are most affected by smog. The state has taken measures only in reaction to the criticality of the situation, while Mexicans ask themselves what will happen to their habitat in years to come.

Likewise, garbage is dispersed throughout the city due to the lack of effective recycling methods. "Mexico differs from other geographical and cultural environments in the type of garbage generated here and the



Germán Venegas. *Sin título*.

relationships established with by the city. Heirs to technologies already obsolete in industrialised countries, in Mexico we toss non biodegradable waste into the environment along with large amounts of wasted and unclassified organic material (...) On the streets it is possible to find fractions of materials that can serve as raw material capable of being transformed into the primary elements of works of art. Consequently, the artist interested in working with waste must carry out a task of archeological salvage in order to find second-hand material with objectival value.” [1]

Decontextualisation (as well as other practices) facilitate the inclusion of waste in works of art, endowing them with multiple connotations that range from the distinct aesthetic proposal implicit in the contrast of non-conventional materials with those traditionally used to create “beauty all the way to social messages that cause alarm and provoke reflection.

Carlos Aguirre and Helen Escobedo are two of the artists who have used such

materials in their installations in order to refer to pollution, acid rain and other corrosive agents that harm and destabilise the ecosystem.

Towards the middle of last year, the Museo de Arte Moderno showed “*Lesá Natura, reflexiones sobre ecología*” on the occasion of World Environmental Day. The exhibition, which included the participation of Mexican and foreign artists settled in the country — Marco Arce, Gabriel Orozco, Silvia Gruner, the Quiñonera group, Francis Alys and Thomas Glassford, among others — revealed different aspects of the problem and different approaches from the perspective of art. Some of the issues dealt with by the participants were: to preserve nature as a guarantee of human existence; recognition of mythical and popular beliefs in search of solutions; the defense of our natural environment, not as an isolated entity but rather in its interaction with technological development and current systems of values and cultural codes.

Along the same thematic lines, the

paintings by Gil Garea invite us to reflect upon the devastation of nature “...his paintings (*Submarina, Mamífero, Humana Naturaleza* and *Tanatos*), laden with waste and gestural violence, want to tell of the involution of nature (...) Gil Garea searches for a depressing image: a painting made out of rags and patches recalling Antoni Tàpies, creations that idealise poverty and desperation. Gil Garea is also referring to nature through omission, or, in other words, in contrast as a future regime of disintegration: an agonising Arcadia and a simulacrum of a near future that, according to the painter, will rhyme with the primal origin of species.” [2]

The river Lerma supplies some of the water consumed in Mexico City. Unfortunately, several industries pollute its waters with their waste. Worried about this situation, the photographer Eugenia Vargas, who has resided in Mexico since 1985, presented the photographic installation *Aguas* at the State University Art Museum of Long Beach, California: “...With this installation I wish to make an analogy between the environment and the photographic process (...) I feel that I am a part of the problem with the photographic chemical waste that is produced daily in my dark room; at the same time I question the photographer’s preoccupation with photographic images that display the problem of nature’s deteriorating resources, while highly-contaminating chemicals are used for this process.” [3] The installation consisted of a dark room in which photographic images of the river Lerma were subjected to a process of putrefaction, having been placed inside brass containers full of water.

The artist’s view of her environment is not restricted to the nature, but also extends toward the city and its inhabitants — approximately 20 million in Mexico City — who also shape the visual landscape.

Roberto Parodi offers a nostalgic vision of the city that could be referring to the dangers of a nuclear war, an earthquake or any other type of disaster. Gabriel Macotella has created a series of models that he exposes to a process of oxidation through which they become the representations of palaces in ruin, which ironically are for rent. José Castro Leñero focusses his attention on the repertory of images that are superimposed in the city. "...At a time where the overabundance of images galvanises us with its insistence, the investigation, deconstruction and recycling of images does not represent a small challenge..." [4]. The creative process develops, undertaken by this artist whose work has been classified as realistic, although he transgresses his limits in terms of method and results.

With the use of resources related to graffiti and posters, the paintings of Alberto Bellón retrieve individuals who display deified features due to consumption, re-configuring the city landscape. Not lacking in humour, his work is a criticism of the aggressive urban environment.

The series of portraits of murderers and their victims by Daniel Guzmán has little to do with the conventional parameters of a subject so often dealt with in the history of art. In this case, the portrait is simply a pretext to talk about violence and the relationship of power in society. This artist takes possession of resources drawn from horror movies, comics and television, breaking away from traditional drawing, giving the work the nature of a document.

APPROPRIATIONS AND INTERCROSSINGS

One of the most influential artistic movements of the 80's holds a close relationship with another sub-theme of the Havana Bienal: *Apropiaciones y*

Entrecruzamientos ["Appropriations and Intercrossings"], which went beyond a trend and pointed toward a phenomenon that characterises an entire area of Third World art. Coinciding with the curating interests of the above mentioned event, this work does not refer to those entries brimming with quotations taken from the "cultured" History of Art — which several Mexican creators have reproduced with differing objectives, ranging from simple exercises and variations to tributes and parodies. Instead, it refers to other proposals that indicate the presence of an art that feeds on traditional popular culture, vernacular culture, the lexicon arisen from the mass media and from the symbolic production associated with the market.

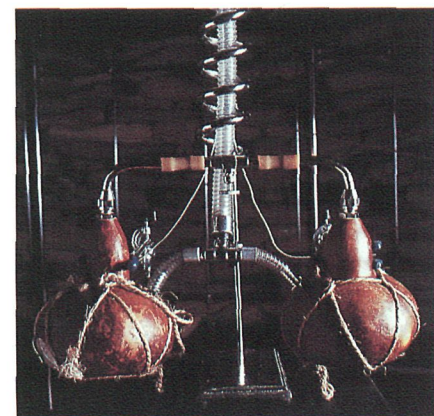
This procedure takes advantage of the "authorised" openings for postmodern currents, deliberately manipulating traditions and legitimising its links with the vernacular and the kitsch. Whereas in Mexico's specific case some attitudes reveal slight nostalgia and attempts at rescue and vindication of presumptuous symbols, others put them in doubt, either explicitly or on the basis of the metadiscussion within the works.

Germán Venegas has recovered a technique very much linked to certain traditional expressions of Mexican culture; he relied throughout his training on exercises involving wooden engravings and he worked with his family in making religious images for the national Easter holidays in Iztapalapa. More than taking possession of a tradition, Venegas has been absorbed by it, carrying out the work of an artisan. His current work acquires other parameters in accord with art created for galleries, distancing himself from the concept of popular art, although elements of religious and urban popular iconography are still identifiable in his work.

Repetition is one of the main aspects in the work Ismael Vargas, an artist from Jalisco. He recovers themes from the popular imagery and Mexican crafts and repeats them insatiably in search of a fixed compositional structure. "Images of the Virgin of Guadalupe, dolls, Mexican landscapes, shop windows, market and crafts scenes - irrevocable signs of what is 'purely Mexican' — become his subject and are expropriated to daily life, to popular culture and tourism in order to integrate them into pictorial art that appears to be decorative." [5]

Ricardo Anguia's glass cabinets contain a wide variety of objects and images whose "heterodox cohesion" — to paraphrase Luis Carlos Emerich — stems from his singleminded participation in the hybridity of current Mexican imagery. Into the traditional iconic repertory, Anguia incorporates objects from the consumer world that have been popularised through the powerful promotional mechanisms of the market and publicity. His glass cabinets seem to suggest a conception of popular culture that, although springing from certain clichés, erases the frontiers established by the studies that have reflected on the meanings of this controversial term.

Javier de la Garza's work can be interpreted as inquiry via a series of signs



Thomas Glassford. *Pulmones*, 1993.

and symbols from representations of what is “purely Mexican.” He adopts icons from the pre-Colombian past — already recycled by the tourist industry — as well as images originating from street calendars or from Gabriel Figueroa’s cinematography, to name just a few examples. His work, representative of a type of parodied kitsch, reveals some of the intersections between the aesthetic systems that coexist in contemporary society.

Fighters, musicians, actors and other characters that participate in popular shows presented on television and other media were transferred to the (often sanctified) territory of a gallery space by the painters Marisa Lara and Arturo Guerrero. Without any signs of prejudice, these artists have shown the results of their investigation concerning some of the aspects of urban popular culture in spaces such as the XIX Sao Paulo Biennial and “Los Angeles” Dance Hall in Mexico City. In codifying their images, they recover the representational patterns of posters and comic strips; visual art solutions which have coherently interacted with the themes in question and raised to a level of dialogue with the average viewer.

The photographic work of Rubén Ortiz alludes to the substitution and/or transformation of traditional symbols in popular, religious and even tourist imagery with the appearance of new consumer icons. He is especially interested in recovering the inter-cultural processes that take place on both sides of the frontier between Mexico and the United States. In these works, Ortiz (who is also a painter) parodies the type of tourist souvenir sold in the border town of Tijuana; in the tiny squares Bart Simpson is wearing Mexican clothing and changes his name to Bart Sánchez in an obvious expression of his hybridism.

One might add the names of other artists whose work has shown the intersections between the traditional and the contemporary, the western and the non-western, “culture” and “the popular”, among other examples.

However, it should be pointed out that although this text has not analysed proposals pertaining to other sections of the Bienal, there are many Mexican artists whose work addressed phenomena such as marginalisation (in its many forms) and migrations.



Ricardo Anguía. *Caja con historia*.

The subject of women as domestic or sexual object and women’s place in society and in religious and popular culture has been addressed primarily by women — Monica Castillo, Rocio Maldonado, Monica Mayer, among others. Working from different perspectives, they have reflected on the feminine condition. And in terms of the issue of sexual segregation, artists such as Nahum Zenil and Julio Galán have examined the ethical parameters and conventions that for so long seemed to be unchangeable.

In general, it might be considered that the phenomenon of migrations has been handled primarily by photographers. Eniac Martínez documented the migrating process of Mexicans who travel to California in search of better living conditions; Lourdes Grobet participated in the

project *Tijuana, la casa de toda la gente*, a sociological investigation; Antonio Turok, Graciela Iturbe and Pablo Ortiz Monasterio, together with four American photographers, were part of the exhibition *Vecinos, dos caras de una moneda* — organised by the San Diego Museum of Photographic Arts, California and displayed in several Mexican museums during 1991 and 1992 — that dealt with “...different aspects in the lives of immigrant workmen in the San Diego County: Tijuana’s strong tourist industry, the growing foreign flow towards the U.S., the border patrol’s task, the living conditions of workmen in the corn industry, the existence of mestizos in different California cities and the precarious condition of children who live and work on the streets of Tijuana.” [6]

Although the 5th Bienal de La Habana offered a prism through which it was possible to summarise an entire area of Mexico’s recently-produced art, in the same context there are many other proposals within other movements that are setting the guidelines in the 90’s.

NOTES

- [1] Springer, José Manuel. “Arte y Basura en México.” *Poliéster*, n. 3, otoño 1992, Ciudad México, p. 8.
- [2] Medina, Cuauhtémoc and Roberto Tejada. “Lesá Natura.” In the catalogue of the *Lesá Natura* exhibition, Museo de Arte Moderno, Ciudad de México, 1993, p. 15.
- [3] Vargas Eugenia. “Río Lerma en Long Beach”. In *Poliéster*, n. 1, primavera 1992, Ciudad de México, p. 30.
- [4] Blanco, Alberto. “Políptico del instante o La imagen encontrada. Obra reciente de José Castro Leñero.” In the catalogue of José Castro Leñero’s exhibition, *La Imagen encontrada*, Museo de Arte Moderno, Ciudad de México, 1992/1993, p. 13.
- [5] Merewether, Charles. “La cultura popular y lo imaginario”. In *Nuevos momentos del arte mexicano*, Madrid, Turner Books, S.A., 1990, p. 91.
- [6] Flores Olea, Víctor. “Vecinos; dos caras de una moneda.” In the catalogue of the exhibition *Vecinos; dos caras de una moneda*, Itinerant, 1992, no page number.