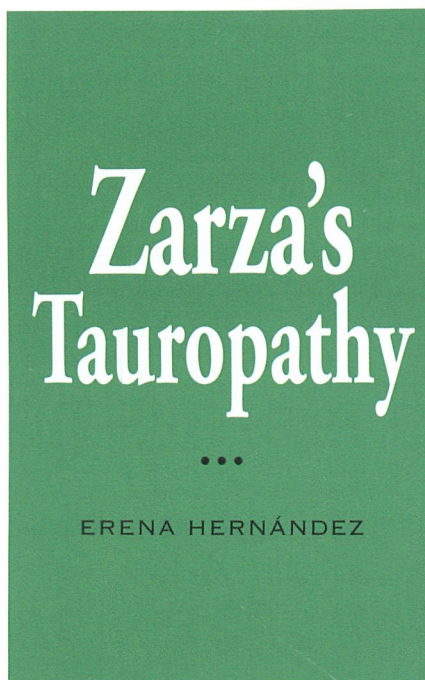


REVIEWS

Rafael Zarza is a Cuban artist from the 70's. This phrase — which is in some ways absurd — holds multiple connotations at the local level. There is an automatic association to artists who painted military subjects, cane-cutters, athletes, heroes or martyrs: in other words, official art, a trend which had been superseded by the opening of the following decade. At the present time, the most accurate thermometer for taking the temperature of the body politic can be found in the island's artists (despite the fact that so many have left) by means of critical work that is stylistically, technically and poetically diverse.

As always happens with labels, the label of official art of the 70's is given the lie by Zarza as well as others who entered the scene at that time. Zarza has painted, drawn and etched bulls from the very beginning, when he graduated from the San Alejandro School of Plastic Arts in 1963 and even when he entered the experimental workshop of the Cathedral Plaza two years later.

This type of taurine pathology is his way of rendering tribute to his Spanish ancestors, natives of the Canary Islands. At the same time, he attempts to highlight the powerful Spanish component of Cuban culture, using it as a counterweight to the fashionable tendency among cultural institutions to promote the African heritage to the exclusion of all others and nearly to the point of exhaustion. But beyond all this, for Zarza the bull is the supreme symbol of liberty, since it never bows its head to the yoke and dies struggling.



At first Zarza used bovine skeletons to make his point. Later, when he tried his hand at human figuration, it was in order to satirise Cuba's colonial history in an exceptional 1977 exhibition entitled *Tauroretratos* ('Bull Portraits'). Those portrayed were Spaniards whom the artist ridiculed because they represented the dark side of Cuba's past, having repressed Cuban attempts at independence.

Zarza continues producing variations on this theme, up to the point where bulls have even appeared in still-lives. In 1994 he had an exhibition on bullfight maneuvers because, as might be expected, he is a bullfight fan. This was the means for tracing an outline of the nation's economic, political and social situation.

He began with didactic illustrations of the bullfight known as *Tauromaquia*, along the lines of Goya, but his own day-to-day experiences soon

began crossing into the ring. He noticed that the municipality where he lived was called Plaza, named after the Plaza of the Revolution which was located there. It was a mythic place, the site of numerous popular gatherings during more than three decades of revolutionary government. He mixed the bull ring (Plaza de Toros) with the other Plaza; via the ambiguity of the terms he imbued his drawings with a ludicrous quality.

Among other elements, he employed ambivalence as a resource: for example when referring to the bulls' black and green identifying ribbons, he was making an allusion to the nation's need for dollars. The same occurred in other pieces until ultimately a sort of rhetorical game with ambiguity was achieved. He constructed a large bullring in Cuba and, working with nothing but the shortage-laden stuff of daily life, he also fashioned a bull. The bullfighter in this case was none other than the average citizen who must fulfill his daily duties, always on foot due to the lack of petroleum and gasoline, suffering shortages of electricity, paid a salary in Cuban pesos while necessities are sold in dollars, etc. etc.

But it should not be thought that there is bitterness and resentment in Zarza's work. Humour always springs to his aid in order to soften those tensions that might otherwise generate the acrid side of catharsis. Tragedy becomes farce — as in everything done by Cubans — particularly when Zarza manipulates the almost esoteric system of signs that government rationing has made

obligatory in grocery stores and butcher shops: the signs read "Child Meat" and announce the arrival of the ration that sporadically belongs to the youngsters.

In this *Tauromaquia* series a kind of Pop Art is predominant, although in a form that Zarza has Cubanised through the use of contextual referents taken from commercial publicity dating from the nation's capitalist era. But while those messages used to encourage consumption, Zarza assigns them a new role. He retrieves them with a burlesque sense of distance, and they serve as a comfortable bridge from which he can hurl stones in the direction of his true interests: the current social, economic and political situation.

Taken as a whole, Zarza's work is like the cry "A cheerful face in times of trouble"; with it he has been fashioning a sort of chronicle of daily life. At the same time, the works are a reflection of the state of mind of the artist himself. The state of affairs influences his efforts, from which we can see that his most festive work has been the series

dedicated to rock in the 80's: this was the "softest" period in the hard life in Cuba, a time when Soviet subsidies permitted a parallel market where problems of supplies were resolved.

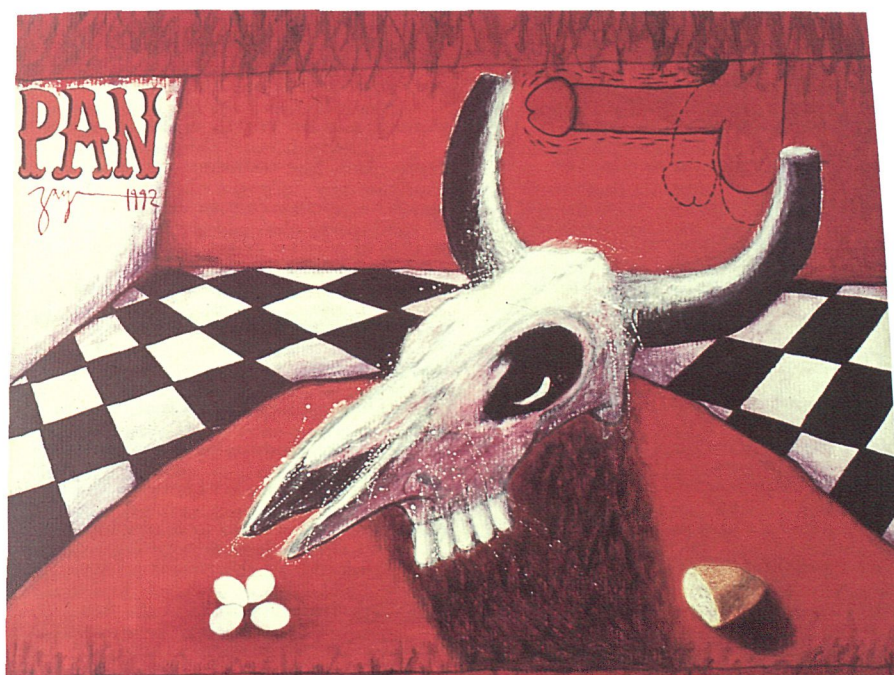
The validity of Zarza's work, regardless of which media is used, is rooted in the sincerity of his intentions. He has always been cutting and incisive, verging on the violent, unbound, with an emotive emphasis. His approach to political ideology or to history is always made from a meditative perspective, critical and without sugar-coating. There is an organic quality in the course of his career which also dominates the formal resources that have served his purposes; in any given moment, he has made use of those which he believed necessary to express his interest.

When he felt the time had arrived to create a work saying that the eagerly-awaited 10 million tons of sugar would not be possible, he created it: when he believed it honest to confront the mental rigidity of civil servants disposed to "parameter" cultural efforts, he amused

himself in making outraged satires. Thus although Zarza "is an artist from the 70's" because he arose during that decade, he has stayed alive and active by making artworks of bulls that bellow on cardboard — for at times he even lacks the basic materials with which to work

His last exhibition, in August 1995, covered 30 years of printmaking, a field in which he has adventurously sought out experimental paths when few others were doing so. He has primarily worked with lithographs. The show was a refreshing break among the multitude of rambling, overly-intellectualised works in Cuba these days, filled with works which almost function to a greater degree on the level of words than of images.

Although Zarza also uses texts on occasion, they are only one more resource used to make his visual already valid discourse yet more complete. What is most important is that his work continues to be alive, always ready to take the bull by the horns.



El milagro del pan y los huesos.