

Jesús Portillo

An Artist from the Heart Of Guerrero

Patricia Gómez Maganda Bermeo*



Ironic Errant 2, 120 x 60 cm, 2004 (mixed techniques on wood).

The city of Chilapa is the door to the mountain region from where craftsmen come to sell what they produce. Visual artist Jesús Portillo Neri was born and bred here, in this place, rich in traditions, still retaining something magical, with one of the best cuisines in this southern land.

Jesús is a young painter; his precociousness is founded in an uncommon talent that has reached maturity in his work and his undoubted skill.

His use of color is magnificent. His colors “are alive” as he himself says, and his paintings have a *raison d’être*: the painter is seeking the essence of things.

I noted something very difficult to accomplish in his work: a style of his own. His authen-

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tic, honest work may cause different sensations, pleasant or unpleasant, but never indifference. Jesús never paints a canvas in a specific style just because it sells; neither is he overly concerned with criticism since in both his life and his art, he continues to be the same man. He alone rules over his life, no one else. Portillo is unsatisfied in the sense that he is constantly searching; he is also someone who answers back, just like the music he listens to when he paints, heavy metal. That is why he says outright, “I am against decorative painting that doesn’t say anything; ‘pretty’ work is dead to me. Probably they paint them to cover a wall, but artistically that’s tying your hands.”

Jesús loves literature, which nurtures his life, his analytical capabilities and his imagination. He also has another love: philosophy. This solid training and an ever-alert mind make him a stupendous conversationalist.

PATRICIA GÓMEZ MAGANDA: *What is the difference for an artist between being born in a place like where you were born in Guerrero and being born in an enormous metropolis like Mexico City?*

JESÚS PORTILLO: It has an influence on your themes, your colors and the freshness with which you paint. City painters lean toward the concep-



Window I, 120 x 140 cm, 2003 (mixed techniques on canvas).

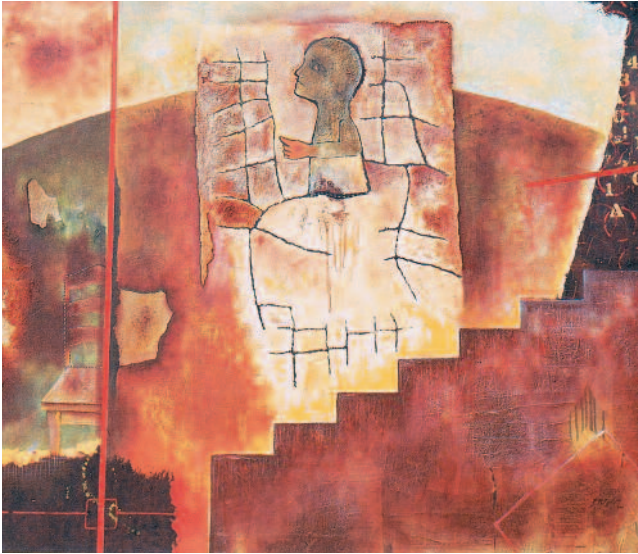


Window II, 120 x 120 cm, 2003 (mixed techniques on wood).

tual; they’re colder. They have more elements of technique than of sensibility. The difference between them and someone born in these towns full of life is above all the benign images, in contrast with the decadent images that populate large cities. In the provinces, above all where I lived as a child, everything is nature; everything is contact with the land and the water. So painting becomes more transparent. The difference in the painter who comes from here [Mexico City] is that he seeks an idea of the conceptual to achieve the universal; painters from there seek the local to be universal.

PGM: *Rilke says that childhood is an endless source of inspiration. What was your childhood like? What do you remember most about it?*

JP: What I remember most is being with my parents—I was very close to my parents—with my grandmother, with Clarita, who was my nana, like my second mother, a woman from the mountains, who was central to my life. From Clarita I learned all that simplicity and enormous wisdom of seeing things and life totally without prejudices. I mean social prejudices. You learn to see



Window III, 120 x 140 cm, 2004 (mixed techniques on canvas).

life in a more open way. Everything can be handled like something illusory. There are fantasies that are fundamental later.

That time in my life shaped my character. I consider my childhood a letter that takes me everywhere and introduces me.

PGM: *Who was the most unforgettable person in your childhood?*

JP: My grandmother. She was widowed very young, and she had to struggle for many years. I was very impressed by her strength, her decisiveness, her personality, which could be violent but at the same time was very tender. I also remember going to the countryside with my father; we would go into the hills, and he would explain everything to me. I was discovering the world around me: the countryside, that contrasted sharply with what I found in books. At that time, Chilapa was full of red roof tiles and the cathedral was very important. This sum of images is fundamental in my painting, in which candles and mystical figures appear.

PGM: *Kafka said that human beings have such interior wealth that they could stay in their bedrooms their whole lives and even so continue to constantly create.*

JP: I agree. I sometimes spend 8 or 10 days coming out just to eat or without coming out at all. You can create a universe in a room of three meters by three meters and never finish creating and recreating it. Creation is the product of the most powerful thing we have, the imagination.

PGM: *Doesn't it seem risky to you to be an artist in the midst of an economic crisis and a crisis of values like the ones we are experiencing? What do you need to be an artist at such a difficult time?*

JP: You have to be courageous and have character. You can't fight against the exterior world because it might defeat you. The struggle is with yourself to begin with. You need self-discipline and self-criticism. Being an artist today is a risk because we're in a world that daily becomes more technocratic. Now, the risk also makes you more creative. You even get ideas that make you paint originally.

"My windows open up on dead eras.

They are a reflection of the voracity of time, of the angst created by the intangible."



Window IV (diptych), 120 x 120 cm, 2004 (mixed techniques on wood).

I'm a little ironic about his. I did a painting called *Ironic Errant*, which is a dancing horse, like the ones in training, but it has a no-parking sign and a raised hoof, with a net on top of it: it is a contradiction. This painting refers to humans trapped in a spiritual vacuum.

PGM: *What do you think of the young people of your generation in this time of a crisis in values?*

JP: Thirty percent are productive, working on literature and pictorial art. The rest are apathetic about what is happening in the world and in our country. That apathy worries me.

I just want to say this about the lack of values: the value from which all the others are derived is respect. It is the only thing I consider a value because it survives over time and it encompasses freedom and loyalty.

PGM: *Why did you go from painting brightly colored canvases to colors like ochre and gray?*

JP: People think gray is sad and they associate it with a feeling of melancholy. The change I made from strong colors to monochromatic was technical. My previous work was more colorful; those were the colors of Guerrero, of its mythology, of its regional stories. The change was not a break, but a visual search; the attempt to make rusted effects is another step in my learning process as a painter.

PGM: *You're a Taurus; your element is earth. What is the earth for you?*

JP: The earth is our mirror. Every human being is the earth, dust, whether metaphorically or literally. All the shades of the color ochre are earthy



The Dominions of Dust, 140 x 120 cm, 1999 (mixed techniques on wood).



Ironic Errant 1 (diptych), 120 x 120 cm, 2004 (mixed techniques on wood).

and exist in the countryside. In my painting, light was like an exorcism. Before, I painted more with feeling than with my head. I had a sentimental prejudice.

PGM: *Tell me about your liking for literature. What else feeds your imagination?*

JP: I had more contact with books than with painting. The idea of literature grew inside me before painting. My father used to tell me stories about what happened in Guerrero. He tried to find a way to tell them so that I could understand. He bought encyclopedias and all kinds of books. I liked the smell of the paper, the black and white photographs.

One summer my mother took me to an aunt's house in Mexico City. She took me to the Tamayo Museum and there I saw some of his work and I was fascinated. When I got home, I asked my aunt

for some watercolors and began to paint some porcelain ducks. My aunt couldn't believe it. That was my start as a painter.

PGM: *Why do you like heavy metal?*

JP: Because it's a force, brute energy —a superior kind. I like the din, the feeling of euphoria; it's the expression of a human being with a sense of protest.

PGM: *Is painting your other voice? What do you express with it that you don't usually express verbally?*

JP: Yes, painting is my other voice. The themes I paint are not personal. I don't paint what I'm feeling at the moment; that would be very narrative. My work is the synthesis of my handling of time. There's a part of my life that I carry inside

"The rust effect in my work represents the distance of my childhood, the weight of all the absences and of the continuous gnawing of the days."



Two Rooms, 120 x 60 cm, 2003 (mixed techniques on wood).

myself and that I don't share because they are the "the spoils of battle." I don't externalize everything. I prefer to keep it as nourishment to recreate not only those longings, but I want to keep that aroma, that time, that life for myself.

PGM: *I once read that you liked the painting of Francis Bacon and Chagall. Why do you like it?*

JP: Francis Bacon's work has lively, primary colors; it is strong work and expresses human loneliness. Bacon revolutionized the meaning of painting in the post-war period; his work is not realism, or surrealism. It's something very different. I like it for its purity in the use of spaces, the movement of its figures. The faces look like unshaped masses; they denote people's loss of individuality at that time. Chagall is the painter of my first period. His themes and colors are extraordinary. His naiveté and fantasy are the total opposite of Bacon. He exalts the feminine with great purity and respect. I also like Rembrandt and Carvaggio, the Mexicans Tamayo and Cuevas, and I like Jacobo Borges from Venezuela very much.

PGM: *What is success for you?*

JP: Success would be if my paintings looked more and more like what I have in my mind. Total success: being happy.

PGM: *Does failure exist?*

JP: Only if I couldn't paint, if I did something that didn't include painting. That would be failure not only as an artist, but as a human being.

PGM: *Will you live in Guerrero again some day?*

JP: The idea is not only to live there but to organize workshops. I would like to use them to contribute to changing the image of art that exists today in Guerrero. There are a lot of very capable people in my state. Of course, I will go back to Guerrero to live. **MM**