



Jerónimo Mateo, *Corpus in Janitzio*,
50 x 65 cm, 2002 (oil on canvas).



Jesús Escalera, *Searching*,
80 x 120 cm, 2000
(oil-transpainting on canvas).



Luis Palomares, *Golgotha*,
120 x 150 cm, 1994
(oil on canvas).

Behind the Art Three Michoacán Painters

Ariel Ruiz Magaña*

Twentieth-century Michoacán art is marked by Alfredo Zalce, painter, sculptor, promoter of the arts in his state and distinguished representative of Mexican muralism. Nevertheless, Michoacán, a land of artists, has given our country other brushes. Jerónimo Mateo, Jesús Escalera and Luis Palomares have received differing degrees of recognition for their work nationwide and in their home state, but they have always had their own voices. Those voices are based on solid careers and an authentic pleasure in the art of painting, as they themselves show in three brief interviews for *Voices of Mexico*.

JERÓNIMO MATEO

MICHOACÁN ARTIST

Anchored in traditionalist painting, Jerónimo says he is not interested in other currents, much less in “specialized” critics’ opinions. Our interview begins amidst canvases of the Pátzcuaro Lake region.

“My history is a bit strange, very special. I was born in a Purépecha town, San Jerónimo Purenchécuaro. It is very marginalized, even more so when I was growing up. I was born in 1936 and I’m 68 now. At that time, it was a forgotten town, with no means of communication. When I arrived in Morelia, the city was foreign to my culture, my experience. I spoke Purépecha and didn’t understand Spanish. Arriving in a strange place is like being mute, using just sign language. So much so that many people made fun of me because I couldn’t communicate directly. All that was frustrating, but I look at it positively: I think it was my destiny.”

With only a primary school education, Jerónimo entered the People’s Fine Arts School to take Alfredo Zalce’s painting workshops. “The workshops were taught by two teachers, Trinidad Osorio, who taught sketching and painting, and

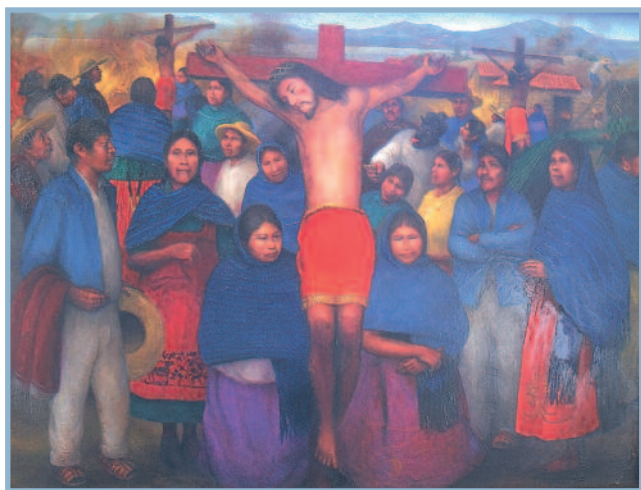
Antonio Trejo, who taught engraving. Both resigned—I don’t know why—two years later, so Alfredo Zalce took over the class. I wanted to get closer to him as a teacher, but he thought I already had enough tools thanks to my previous teachers, so he taught me very little. I think he respected me a great deal, which is why he made me his assistant. He told me to take charge of the new students, and that was a compliment.”

After six years in the workshops, Jerónimo went back to school, progressing to medical school. Halfway through his major, however, the rector of the San Nicolás Hidalgo Michoacán (UMSNH) University asked him to take over the painting and engraving classes at the People’s Fine Arts School. “At the same time, the Social Security Institute appointed me advisor for artistic activities. This left me with no choice but to leave medical school and spend all my time teaching. One of the benefits at the Social Security Institute was training; I took advantage of it every year to go to Mexico City and bring myself up to date. I spent 30 years at the People’s Fine Arts School and retired both there and from the Social Security Institute. After that, I was free to spend all my time painting.”

Jerónimo recognizes the influence of Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco in his painting.

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Photos by Ricardo Carreón.



Purépecha Easter Week, 50 x 65 cm, 2004 (oil on canvas).



Corpus Christi, 50 x 65 cm, 2003 (oil on canvas).



Straw Bull, 50 x 65 cm, 2002 (oil on canvas).

“I like to go into the towns and paint the people. It makes them happy to see themselves on a canvas, and I please them.”

The differences, he says, are in the themes, since his work is completely given over to Purépecha customs. “I still have more to paint because there are many ancestral regions in Michoacán. I have already been in Ostula, a Nahuatl region. There are also Otomís and mestizos in Tierra Caliente. I tend to paint what is ours, reflecting Michoacán customs.”

Two years ago he visited Parthenay, France, where he gave a lecture about Purépecha culture. “Some of my works stayed over there. Thanks to this kind of exhibit, we can disseminate our traditions, but there isn’t much official support for promotion. My work is not avant garde or anything like that. I simply try to maintain what is mine. I respect those who seek other kinds of expression,

like Zalce himself. But not me. That’s not my style. I am not interested in being influenced by other currents. It’s enough for me to talk with people in the towns, people who tell me their story. I think that before imagining ourselves, we should observe and think about what we’re seeing. That, in broad strokes, is my current.

“You know that critics want new things, very strange things. But I like to go into the towns and paint the people. It makes them happy to see themselves on a canvas, and I please them. I’m not interested in academic criticism. I’m interested in people, in my people being painted. That’s what I like and makes me happy. Sometimes people tell me I should modernize, seek out other currents. But I was born Purépecha and I’ll die Purépecha.”

JESÚS ESCALERA

AN ARTIST'S ZIGZAGS

Originally from a little hamlet in Peribán, Michoacán, where he lived as a country boy, Jesús Escalera kindly accepts talking about his start as a painter and his work today. “I have wonderful memories. My early childhood was happy. It can’t be compared with life in the town I went to after the birth of the Paricutín Volcano in 1942. My father couldn’t raise cattle any more because the land was covered with ash, and we had to leave for Jacona, south of Zamora. I did my first drawings in primary school. That’s where my liking for painting was born.” He says that having been an altar boy may be the reason he likes religious art. “I began to like the objects, the paintings, the sculptures; while there, in fact, I copied the Dolorosa, the Divine Face and other saints.”

Escalera met Rosalío González, a magnificent religious artist who taught him to use oils, to prepare canvases, to sketch his first images and copy saints. In time, he won a scholarship to study in

Morelia. “I went to what was left of the Porfirio Díaz Military School in the Clavijero Palace. At school, I met a wonderful director, Melesio Aguilar Ferreira, whose secretary was another intellectual, Samuel Calvillo. Together, they decided that I should go directly to the workshops of Alfredo Zalce and his assistant Manuel Pérez Coronado (Mapeco).” In 1951, Jesús painted a canvas of Morelia’s old airport. This was the preamble to teacher Trinidad Osorio helping him travel to Mexico City to participate in an exhibition in the recently created National Institute for Mexican Youth. “They gave me a 500-peso scholarship, an enormous sum for a student. That would have been enough for me to go to the Esmeralda Academy in Mexico City. But Zalce offered to do the paperwork so that the scholarship could be used in Morelia. He was successful, and I began to work in the People’s Fine Arts School. In 1955, Osorio offered me a job at the Visual Arts Normal School. I spent 30 years of my life there.”

In the mid-1960s, Escalera mounted exhibitions in Mexico City’s Chapultepec Gallery and the People’s Fine Arts School in Morelia. “Together with the poet De la Torre, we founded the Contemporary Art Museum in Morelia. We organized some good exhibits. In 1967 I was named director of the People’s Fine Arts School, and in 1978, I was asked to bring the National Fine Arts Institute’s Center for Artistic Education to Morelia and create one there.”

Jesús Escalera takes the time to reflect on his chosen profession: “The life of a visual artist is peculiar: it is not a group effort. It’s a solitary existence. The world passes us by, and we concentrate



Spring, 80 x 60 cm, 2001 (oil-transpainting on canvas).

“The life of a visual artist is peculiar: it is not a group effort. It’s a solitary existence.”

on our own world, which is our studio. And sometimes we pay the price of not knowing people, of not having any contact with people except in galleries.”

About his relationship with Alfredo Zalce, Escalera says, “He taught me about life. He was not a theoretician about art, and I say that in recognition. He himself was unfamiliar with technique, which is why he always worked in workshops. But he was an extraordinary engraver. That is the kind side of Zalce. Things changed with time because he didn’t let us develop, and I had other aims. I wanted to change my painting. He didn’t like that and I preferred to strike out on my own.”

Situated in interiorism, amidst the student strife of the late 1960s, Escalera’s canvases reflected anxiety. “But then I started doing a different kind of painting, with a different use of composition, of at-

titudes: landscapes, fruit, children’s faces. I remember that the poet Martínez Ocaranza used to say to me, ‘Why do you paint the happy faces of children laughing when you should depict them in ashes, in uncertainty?’ I simply answered that that was how I wanted to see them. The artist has the gift of bringing to life today’s situation in his figures. In one of my last exhibitions, I showed a canvas about the military intervention in Iraq, seeking a peace that had been destroyed. By the way, I had the good fortune of that painting being the background of José Saramago’s lecture when he visited Morelia.”

Before concluding the interview, Escalera briefly commented on his murals. “I am proud they are in such important places as the building of the *La Voz de Michoacán* newspaper, the Normal School or the auditorium of Morelia’s University City. And I am here, at your service.”



Cándida, 42 x 12 x 12 cm,
1998 (high temperature
fired ceramic).



Torso, 80 x 60 cm, 1978 (oil-transpainting on canvas).

LUIS PALOMARES

A GREAT LANDSCAPE ARTIST

Palomares was born in the small Michoacán town of Huaniqueo de Morales in 1932. He grew up in the countryside, working long days on the land. In 1947, he began to want to study painting. He did not conceive of it as a career, but since the time he had been a small boy, he had had a talent for drawing. “I went to the People’s Fine Arts School in Morelia and learned the basics of drawing and painting. I liked it very much; I spent three years there and then left for Mexico City. I managed to get into the National School of Visual Arts at the National Autonomous University of Mexico.” Smiling, Palomares recognizes that he was filled with fear when he finished his studies. “I didn’t think an artist’s life was so difficult. I thought it was a matter of finishing a painting and selling it the next day.”

After traveling a year and a half through Central America, in 1957, the young Palomares took his final exams and, right away, met with the difficulties inherent in the art market. “A long time went by, and I came to the conclusion that I needed something secure. I wanted to be in the art world, but I also needed to fill my stomach, because you can’t just live on air. I thought I should become a teacher, which I had always avoided.” So, he went to the National Fine Arts Institute to apply for a job as a drawing teacher in primary and junior high schools or in one of the art initiation schools that existed at the time. “I was just starting out. I didn’t dare even exhibit in galleries because I thought my work wasn’t solid. I had to work very hard and combine my work with teaching. Fortunately, I managed to get a grant to organize an exhibit and then go back to work.”

Time went by and Palomares’ work was not noticed. But, with perseverance, he managed to enter a few contests and finally he got his first one-year grant. “I couldn’t believe it. I could spend all my time painting without worrying about anything else. I took an enormous step forward in my development, discovering what it was I wanted and how I wanted to do it. Several currents influenced me. At first, the academicians, then an impressionist stage; and another Orozco-centered stage. I could-



Popocatépetl 2000, 230 x 120 cm, 2003 (acrylic on canvas).

n’t find my way forward. In that year, I figured out what I wanted to do. I did a lot of painting. I discovered a way forward that I have continued to travel until today.”

Fortunately, the scholarships and grants kept coming and he was able to dedicate himself solely to art. “There was a proposal to give any teacher who received three scholarships the title of Creator of Art and give him a life-long grant. Fortunately, I have that honor. So, I spent all my time painting. I had exhibitions often. But my son became ill, and we had to leave Mexico City and come back to Morelia. To a certain extent, this gave me peace. I arrived in 1991 and since then I have been able to dedicate myself to my projects. Leaving the country’s capital, however, did mean I lost a lot of contacts, to the extent that today, a lot of people ask them-

selves who Luis Palomares is.” The artist speaks of his two loves: landscapes and the human figure. “I have become a painter who denounces the damage done to nature. That is an artist’s job: telling the viewer that there are other ways of seeing it and that there is also beauty there. I think I am rather revolutionary with regard to composition. I am influenced by a difficult childhood and all of that is reflected in my work.”

Palomares has had individual exhibitions in the Fine Arts Palace, the Siqueiros Polyforum, San Ildefonso, the San Carlos Academy, the University City Museum of Michoacán University and, to celebrate his fiftieth anniversary as an artist, in

the Alfredo Zalce Contemporary Art Museum in Morelia.

Finishing up, Luis Palomares says that “if God grants him life,” he would like to exhibit his work in other regions of the country because he has done a great deal in 55 years. “I got the National Council for Culture and the Arts to pay attention to me and organized a traveling exhibit in Central-Western Mexico. It will give me the chance to go back, for me to be recognized. I am interested in constructive criticism. I want to have shows. I hope they give me the chance to do it. I have tried to in Mexico City; there are steel barriers that are not easy for me to cross, but I hope to be able to.” **MM**

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Thicket, 180 x 130 cm, 1978 (oil on canvas).



Craters, 180 x 130 cm, 1996 (acrylic on canvas).