

Photo by David Maerwad

Untitled, 1992 (oil on canvas).

RODOLFO MORALES

The Nostalgic Company of Loneliness¹

*Antonio Rodriguez**

The silence of Morales' characters depicted in groups are reminiscent of those mystical conversations about religious art in which no one speaks to anyone else.



Untitled, 1992-1993 (oil on canvas).

Sometimes we get the impression that Morales marks what he does not show, what he hides, with a sign contrary to what he wants to express.

At first glance, few artists are as simple and straightforward as Rodolfo Morales. Everything in his work is clear and open; it all goes in through the eyes effortlessly: women, plazas, hamlets, trains, facades, public buildings, churches, flags, dogs, musical instruments.

His painting also looks so spontaneous. The colors of his palette are so natural and his forms so far from classical perfection that it is not at all difficult (for some at least) to think of him as an innocent or populist painter, who takes from his native Oaxaca (or from Russia or Spain) what among common people are “fiesta,” “happiness,” “revelry,” and “color,” “lots of color.”

For us, on the contrary, the more we penetrate his work, the harder it is to read, the more complex and full of mysteries it seems to both our reason and our senses. Everything in him is, of course, “simple,” if we take no note of the paradoxes that this simplicity brings with it.

The plazas, by nature the proper places for encounters, are almost always depicted empty, empty, at least, of human beings.

His women, frequently dressed as brides, wait eternally and in vain for the yearned-for husband to appear. Sometimes, the silence of Morales’ characters depicted in groups are reminiscent of those mystical conversations about religious art in which no one speaks to anyone else.

His trains, a symbol of movement, that shorten distances and take man from one world to another, are always stationary, even when the locomotives spew smoke. The music that his oft-portrayed instruments suggest is never heard, and what outwardly has the trappings of joy fills us with melancholy.

The very color, so seemingly “festive,” bears within a grave, austere harmony, as though it were a nocturnal color fooling itself with promises of sun.

Sometimes we get the impression that Morales marks with a sign contrary to what he wants to express what he does not show, what he hides.

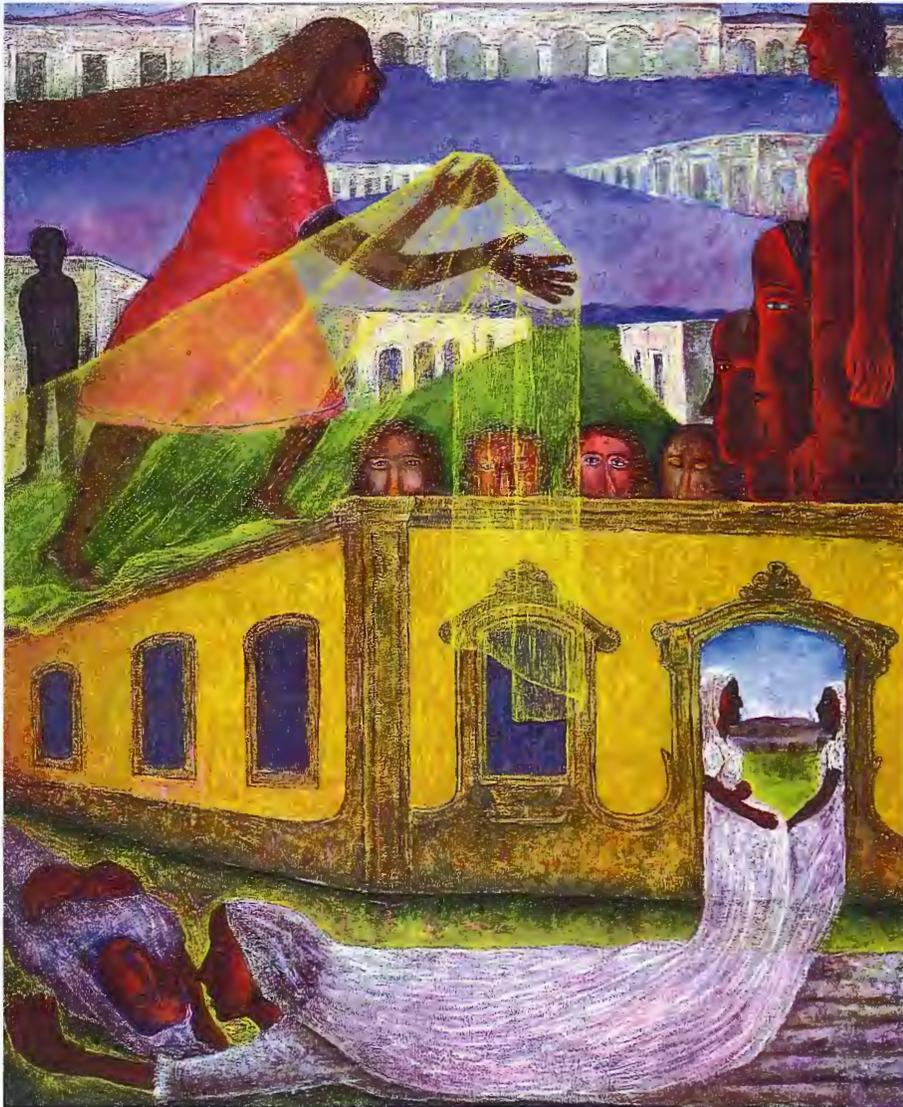
His empty plazas negate themselves; his groups of silent figures only affirm the nostalgic company of loneliness. Even in the few scenes in which his women speak or try to speak, conversation is impossible because they are all absent, immersed in loneliness, even though present, because in Morales’ work, everything is vain waiting, an arrival that never comes, lone-



Untitled, 1993 (oil on canvas).

* Mexican art critic.

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Untitled, 1992 (oil on canvas).

liness that never ebbs: loneliness, in short, which everyone ends up getting used to.

It would serve little purpose to use the word “surrealism” for what in this work seems voluntary or undesired incongruence: trains that fly; airplanes stopped in mid-air; seats placed, complete with occupants, in the air. More than the incongruence of a waking dream, the “absurdities” of the formal representation so frequent in his work present us, certainly, with a desire to rebuild everything, under the influence of an artistic will that is free only in the exercise of creation.

This is the only way we can explain that Morales inverts reality by placing—in a multifaceted ambiguity—a landscape going in and out of the room, turning the countryside into a painted wall and the painted wall into a screen of illusions, the walls into mountains and the roofs into the foundations of an imaginary, uninhabited city.

Scrutinized with a certain superficiality, Morales’ work is similar in its apparent clumsiness to naive

painting. He changes the proportions; he creates in a single painting three or four different perspectives with separate vanishing points; he distorts architecture. There is no ingenuousness in this, however, but rather the disdain that imaginative artists of the people have for “perfection” (almost always cold, almost always inert), while favoring emotional earthquakes. Perhaps for this very reason the artist, so closely in contact in his childhood with folk art, with crooked domes, with twisted altars, does not shy from following his own aesthetic conviction and breaking the rules of harmony with dissonant notes that, since they cause surprise and discomposure, arouse paroxysm and emotion.

His pencil sketches are extraordinarily fine, very often without chiaroscuro, pure lines. Clearly it is in this field where the artist trains with utmost rigor for the unrestricted flights of his imagination. Once in the picture, he allows the drawing to take the course that fan-

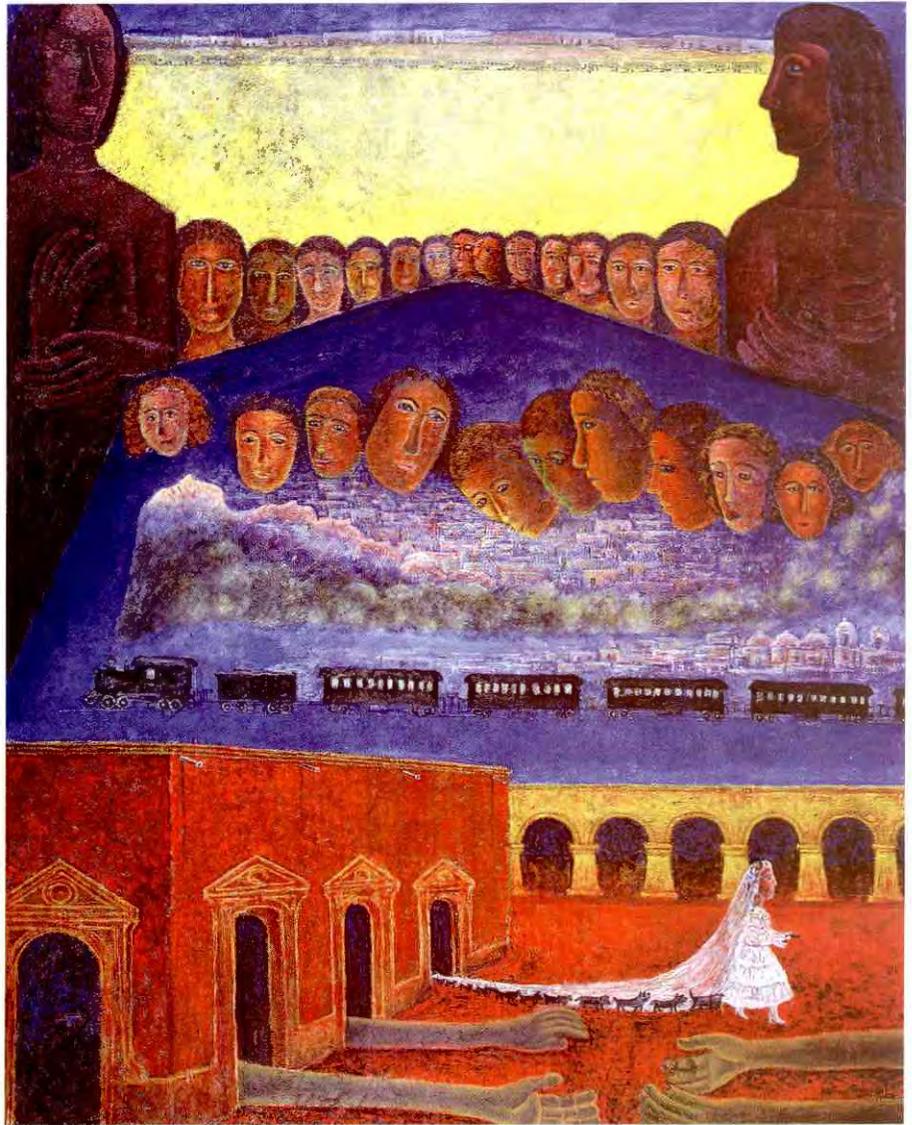
tasy requires; but he subjects it, without torture, to the demands of his expressive needs.

In his tonal harmonies, the color recalls the painting of María Izquierdo,² for whom he professes great admiration, but his palette is more charged with mystery and denser. He is nocturnal when he paints the day and phantasmagoric when he evokes the nights illuminated by sleep.

Even without figures, the color would still attract the imagination and the eye; it could live on its own, apart from the mountains and the valleys, the plazas and the trains. It is a great abstraction that unites well with what Morales designs and paints; it is a vital element of his organicity.

It is difficult to find in a painting from another part of the world a color of equal resonance; but it is certain that he did not take it from Mexican folklore nor from the outward look of things. His baroque facades, a constant in his work—he is an eminently baroque painter—start off, without a doubt—and he himself admits it—from the surroundings in which he spent his childhood. But not the color! The color is born, for him, in the cradle of hallucination. The composition is a game of chance in which the only rules are the ones the painter decides not to follow.

This is why Morales, who appears to burst forth in all his simplicity from the soil of his hometown, is a challenge to anyone trying to scrutinize the mysteries of his complexity. ■■■



New Life, 1991 (oil on canvas).

NOTES

¹ Abridged version of the original pamphlet, *Rodolfo Morales, La nostalgia compañía de la soledad* (Mexico City: Instituto Politécnico Nacional, October 1981).

² See Teresa del Conde, "María Izquierdo: Melancholic Nostalgia," *Voices of Mexico* 38 (January-March 1997), p. 29. [Editor's Note.]



RODOLFO MORALES

Born in Ocotlán de Morelos in the state of Oaxaca, May 8, 1925, Rodolfo Morales went to Mexico City at the age of 23 to study at the San Carlos Academy. From 1953 to 1985, he taught drawing in a Mexico City high school. An untiring traveler, he visited Europe, Latin America and the United States.

At a 1965 *posada* or pre-Christmas party, in the home of sculptor Geles Cabrera, Morales' collages were used as decorations. Geles, excited by the work, proposed a trade: one of his sculptures in exchange for a Morales canvas. This kind of recognition was the stimulus Morales needed to decide to dedicate himself fully to painting.

Rufino Tamayo "discovered" him at his first exhibition. After that he had a series of showings in Europe, the United States and, of course, Mexico. In May 1998, Rodolfo Morales painted a mural for the Mexico City subway line Fine Arts Palace station, entitled *France Through Mexican Eyes* and inaugurated by French President Jacques Chirac.

Today, as a sort of repayment to his native Oaxaca, he contributes the proceeds of his work to the Rodolfo Morales Cultural Foundation, the aim of which is to foster Oaxaca's cultural values and support young people from Ocotlán in their studies.



White Flowers, 1990 (oil on canvas).