



Arnold Belkin: a neohumanist

Arnold Belkin was born in Calgary on December 9, 1930. He later studied painting at The Vancouver School of Art. He came to Mexico at the age of 18, attracted by its murals and became a naturalized Mexican citizen in 1958. "I am Mexican by choice, not by accident. It is here that I want to do my painting." (*El Gallo ilustrado*, February 6, 1966). He died of cancer at the age of 61 on July 2, last year.

Robot-men, cybernetic heads, slashed figures showing their internal organs and the inside structure of the human body, were resources he used to emphasize man's nature and martyr status, as well as creating the illusion of movement and constantly evolving dynamism.

Belkin thought that true artists should not remain silent, painting and sculpting to amuse the buyer while they were aware of what was going on in the world. In his book, *Against amnesia. Texts: 1960-1985*, he comments, "Complacency is terrifying. Art should have content and show concern for man's destiny. Given the total annihilation facing the world, how can one possibly produce art that is simply decorative and cowardly?"

In August 1961, he and the painter, Francisco Icaza, produced the manifesto, "New Presence," which highlights his rejection of "good taste" in art, academicism, intellectual criticism and myths. Together they published five issues of a poster magazine of the same name.

He, photographer Nacho López, and painters Francisco Corzas, Rafael Coronel and José Luis Cuevas took part in an art exhibition called "The insiders"¹, organized in July 1961. The exhibition highlighted similarities between the work of these artists who had had no previous contact: the choice of dramatic subjects, the predominance of black and the limited use of color; for a long time, Belkin based his paintings on ochre tones.

Since the publication of *New Presence* coincided with the exhibition, all the participating artists were regarded as a group who agreed with the manifesto. Belkin's

Painter, engraver, costume and set designer and muralist, Belkin was a non-conformist, rebel artist, the theorist behind his own artistic proposals who created series, paraphrases and epic paintings and was an advocate of portable murals.

responded, "We are not a group. Some of us reject the term 'insiders'".

In spite of his dislike of labels, he preferred the term 'neohumanist' to 'insider', although both imply art with a commitment to man, that seeks images of truth and the possibility of communicating at a broader level, without compromising the integrity of art's message.

Belkin defined neohumanism in art as the defense of human existence against the danger of man's dehumanization through machines and an inhuman form of social organization invented by man and to which he is chained.

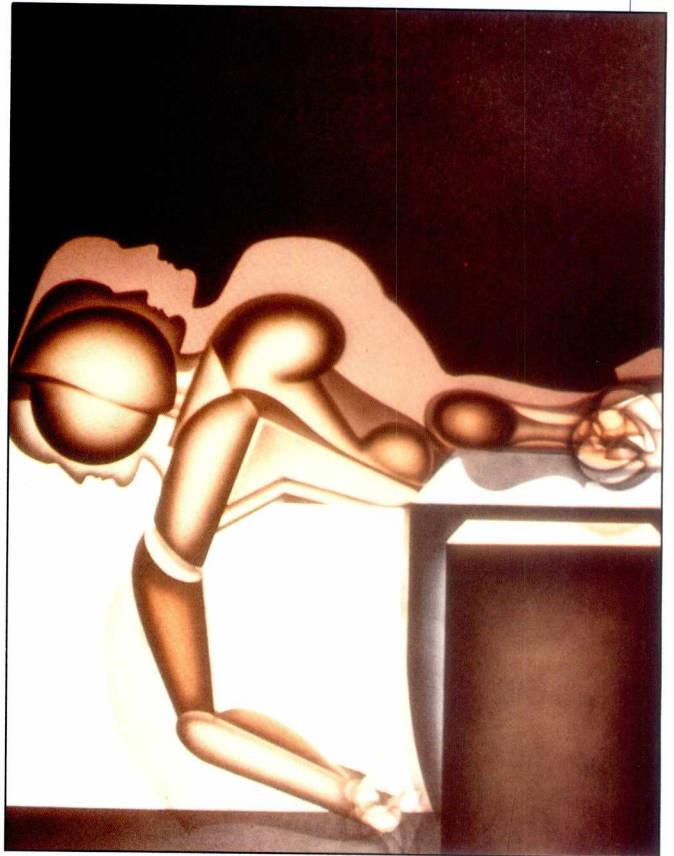
"It is not a simple denunciation of everyday crimes; it is a grand denunciation of crimes that man commits against himself, by means of artistic language that can transcend time. We have to represent a new man, since we are in a stage of transition and want to address present and future generations, not those that have already died."

In 1975, in *Excelsior's* cultural "Diorama," he explained the motives that led him to live in New York, "Living in the heart of the monster made me much more politically aware. The world's largest city is a microcosm... I went there at a time when artists, intellectuals, and people from the neighborhoods were

¹ As they were called by the American critic, Selden Rodman.



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Four of the 16 paintings in the "Marat" series, 1971.

taking part in political movements, protests against Vietnam, the Greek coup, the restriction of Blacks' civil rights and discrimination against women."

He dedicated most of his work to Latin American revolutionary leaders such as Simón Bolívar, Che Guevara, Emiliano Zapata, Francisco Villa, the Serdán brothers, Felipe Angeles, Rubén Jaramillo and Lucio Cabañas, of whom he was a great admirer. However, one of his sixteen paintings of the French revolutionary, Marat, was chosen to preside his funeral homage at the Museum of Modern Art.

Belkin rejected academicism, but he was a disciplined artist. He was a master of the airbrush and sketches using photographic projections. Cameras and projectors were key features in his visual metaphors. "Photography has always been a wonderful source of images and information and has been an increasingly important tool for fine artists in recent years."

Belkin studied Siqueiros' theories, and reviewed Neoclassicists, Romantics, Constructivists, Futurists, Cubists and Expressionists before finding his own style, characterized mainly by the creation of series (variations on a theme) and paraphrase (the transfiguration of famous works of the past).

In Belkin's view, the progression of an image through a series of pictures and constructions that have a similar

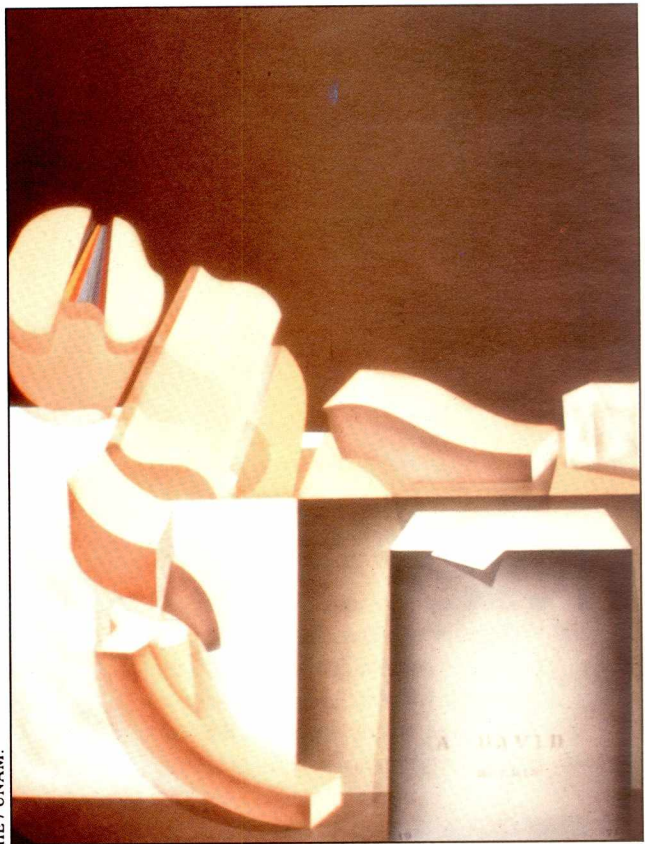
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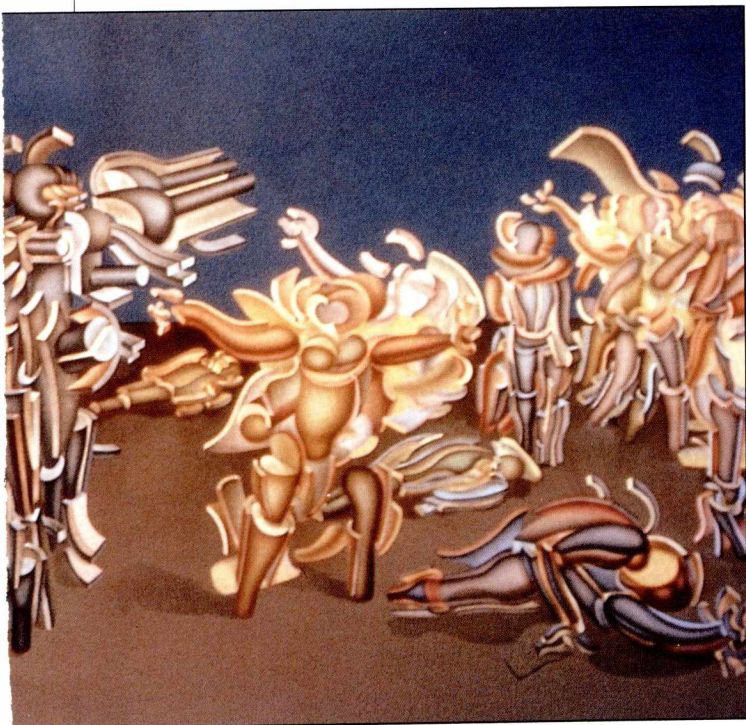


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The 1970 Kent State University killing, 5.50 x 2.44 m. mural in New Hampshire, 1974.



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basic form, but vary in color and intensity from painting to painting, creates internal variety and dimensional richness that cannot be achieved with individual paintings or a set of different images.

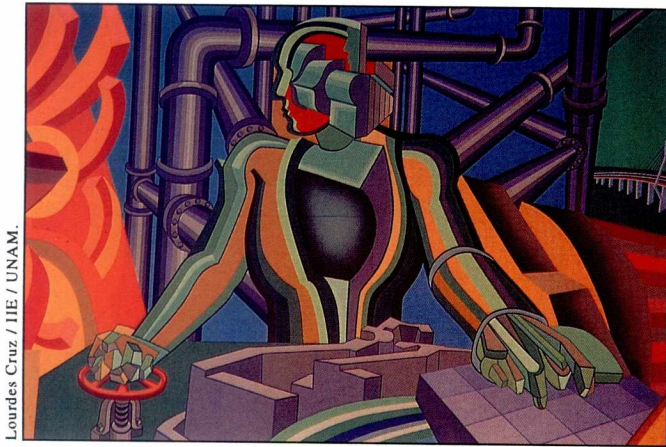
The "Marat", "Zapata" and "The lovers" series are particularly outstanding. "The lovers," inspired by "Poems of love and indifference," by Mario Benedetti, was an interdisciplinary work in which Benedetti himself took part in the selection of his poems and Rafael Donmiz provided a series of photographs that Belkin used to project onto the canvas.

The paraphrase, "The annual anatomy lesson" links a press photo of the dead Che Guevara, surrounded by journalists and soldiers, with the Rembrandt painting, "Dr. Tulp's annual anatomy lesson."

Belkin took advantage of the similarity of the corpse's position in Rembrandt's painting and Che's photograph to produce three paintings: one of Che's death, as if the press photo had been painted by Rembrandt, one of Rembrandt's painting as if it were a press photo and one of Che's death as if it were a Rembrandt painting.

On the subject of muralism

According to Belkin, there is the same difference between a painting and a mural as there is between a private



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Inventing the future, detail of the mural, 1990.

conversation and a speech, since the latter is public and therefore has to be more precise, elaborate and weighty.

He painted his first professional mural, "We are all guilty," in 1960 commissioned by the Federal District's General Prosecutor's Office, having undertaken an extensive study of criminal psychology, with Dostoyevsky as one of his main sources, before carrying out the painting.

When the mural was unveiled in the Santa Marta Acatitla Penitentiary, one of the prisoners remarked, "For

being the 'owners' of a mural that attracted the public and aroused its sympathy rather than repulsion or fear."

However, Belkin was aware that the theme of this type of mural might not be topical for very long and that such works would have a very short life span, either because the paintings did not last more than fifteen years or because the buildings on which they were painted might be demolished.

Arnold Belkin was a great defender of portable, mobile murals, "This is a genre or sub-genre of mural art that has been extensively employed by muralists (one of the finest examples being Picasso's "Guernica") but scarcely written about by critics and theoreticians of the fine arts.

"Mobile murals have very special features. Like paintings, they bear no relation to architectural space, but because of their size, they are regarded as public art and their internal organization is faithful to the concept of a mural. The artist chooses a large format to handle an epic topic, because the smaller, more intimate size of a studio painting does not lend itself to this concept."

Another of Belkin's concerns was to fight for the creation of an archive of Mexican muralism. Paradoxically, the largest archive of this type is to be found in Uppsala, Sweden.

He frequently remarked that bibliographical and visual material, studies, notes, sketches, preliminary sketches,



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The annual anatomy lesson, in its three versions, 1972-74.

those of us who have temporarily been deprived of one of life's most precious gifts, our freedom, Arnold Belkin's mural represents the hope that society and justice may rectify the errors that destroy many valuable lives.

Belkin thought that a new form of muralism could only be executed by a new generation with the wish and ability to work in groups, as did the US urban muralists between 1967 and 1971.

"The methods used to paint murals, their popular content, and references to social problems and local politics make this a truly democratic form of art for the people."

In the 70s, Belkin painted a mural in the Hell's Kitchen district of New York, taking into account the community's opinions and suggestions. "The district changed. Crime and aggression levels went down. Why? Because lots of new people came to see the mural. Residents were proud of

tracings, photos, slides and videotapes, provide valuable documentation to a mural's progress, recording changes in ideas and variations in the development of a topic, particularly for art students.

In 1977, Belkin proposed the creation of the Museum of Contemporary Mexican Art, so that 20th century Mexican art could be permanently displayed.

Arnold Belkin was not content to be simply an accomplished artist and, although criticized for doing so by an art critic, he never hesitated to write about his ideas on aesthetics and his concerns as a human being, or share his knowledge, since he was a tireless campaigner against amnesia ❧

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