



*Self-portrait*, 1952 (tempera on canvas).

## JUAN SORIANO

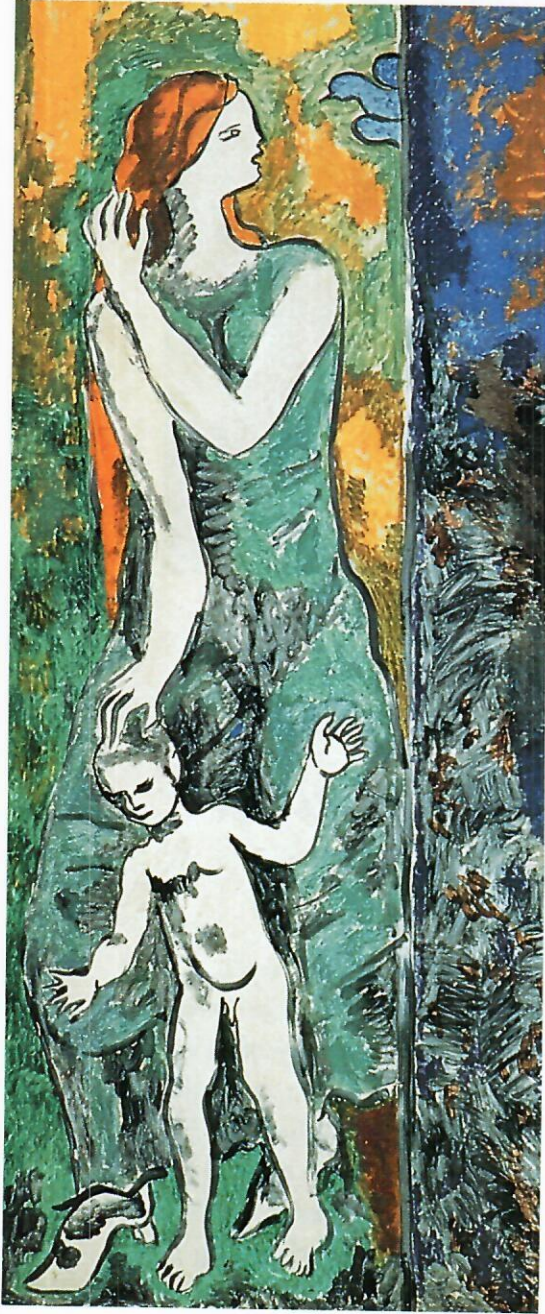
### *Creator of Visual Parables*

*Sculpture and painting were a game in his childhood. Sixty years later, the game is still on.*

**I**f anything can be said about Juan Soriano, it is that he has painting and sculpting in his blood. A child prodigy who at the age of seven heard the prophetic words, “You will be a painter.” A precocious adolescent who at 14 was noticed by his elders, María Izquierdo, Lola Álvarez Bravo, José Chávez Morado,

Octavio Paz, Alfonso Reyes.... A young, self-taught artist whose first exhibition at the age of 20 was taken seriously in the art world. The mature man whose art has attained through the decades the simplicity of the complex. A unique man full of images clamoring to be rescued and returned to canvas and sculptor’s materials.

*Soriano did not give in to the demands and conditions of “committed art.”*



*Woman Frightened by Bird, 1950 (oil on wood).*

Sculpture and painting were a game to Soriano in his childhood: making and dismantling figures with clay and wax, filling blank canvases with paintbrush and color. More than 60 years later, the game is still on; it is simply more precise in inventiveness and execution, without losing any of that combination of freedom and profundity already present in his early work.

Born in 1920 in Guadalajara, Jalisco, where he lived until the age of 15, Soriano always evokes this stage of his life as the only truly formative years, both personally and artistically.

Unschooling as a painter, he showed great ability for self-expression and considerable dominance of technique. He received his first lessons in beauty during frequent visits to the home of Jesús Reyes Ferreira, a young antique collector, who shared his enthusiasm for Mexican art, objects from the past and far-off worlds like France and Italy. By the age of 14, Soriano was in the Evolution Workshop directed by Francisco Rodríguez “Caracalla” where he sketched, prepared canvases, mixed colors and participated in his first group exhibition at Guadalajara’s Regional Museum. His work surprised and interested Lola Álvarez Bravo, José Luis Chávez Morado and María Izquierdo. They encouraged him to move to Mexico City, which he did at the age of 15 “armed with all the weapons of

adults without any of their hypocrisy.”<sup>1</sup>

In the capital, he met and joined the painters, photographers and architects of what has been called the second phase of the “Mexican Renaissance,” who were rebelling against the impositions of public art, “nationalist” painting and the muralists like Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros. Soriano did not give in to the demands and conditions of “committed art.” Neither did he evolve toward a style of his own; his only commitment was, and continues to be, to his art, in a style which is unique and varied at the same time. That is the essence of his work’s authenticity and the effectiveness of his art.

Octavio Paz, a friend and admirer, wrote in 1962, “Few Mexican painters provoke in me the diversity of responses that Juan Soriano does, at the same time both changing and loyal to himself. Twice—in 1941 and in 1952—I have attempted to fix a few hasty words to his images... Today, more than 20 years after my first attempt, I feel the same enthusiasm for his work and the same critical impossibility to judge it.”<sup>2</sup>

Contemporary art critic Juan García Ponce concurs in the difficulty of categorizing Soriano’s work. Writing about Soriano’s exhibition in Bellas Artes, which in-

<sup>1</sup> Octavio Paz, “Rostros de Juan Soriano,” in *Las peras del olmo*, UNAM, Mexico City, 1957.

<sup>2</sup> Octavio Paz, *Puertas al cambio*, UNAM, Mexico City, 1966.

cluded works from 1934 to 1984, he says, “The personal nature and the difficulty of defining his vision is surprising; it is a vision that follows at all times permanent external and internal changes and yet somehow is always the same in a way also difficult to define.... From his first canvases, it is surprising to see what the painter sees when looking at himself, when looking at his sister, when painting a still life. And that surprise becomes a style; but that style changes continuously until it disappears. You cannot find Juan Soriano through it. What remains is the surprise, even though it takes different shapes.”<sup>3</sup>

Soriano’s work reminds us not to art history, but to what has been experienced day-to-day, to the people he has known: Carlos Mérida, Rufino Tamayo, Juan de la Cabada, Elena Croce, María Zambrano, Antonio Saura, Julio Cortázar, Alberto Gironella, Pedro Coronel. Soriano lives in Mexico, in Paris, in Rome. He paints always, even in difficult times: portraits, landscapes, still lifes, allegories; he experiments with abstraction and retreats from it; he makes ceramics; he sculpts monumental works; he designs scenery.

He has been honored in many ways: the Mexican government has given him the National Prize for the Arts; in his home state he received the Jalisco Prize for Art;

<sup>3</sup> Juan García Ponce, “Juan Soriano: uno de los caminos del arte,” in *Imágenes y visiones*, Editorial Vuelta, Mexico City, 1988.

he has been named Gentleman of Arts and Letters by the French government. He has had 91 individual exhibits and participated in innumerable group exhibitions in Mexico, the United States, Europe, Japan and Latin America.

All this is more than enough reason, then, for *Voices of Mexico* to want to share with its readers this interview with the man whom Luis Cardoza y Aragón said was, above all, “a poet, a deep painter of visual parables.” His opinions, interests and obsessions reveal a man who lives both his life and his art to the full.

**Voices of Mexico:** *Juan, when did your love of painting begin?*

**Juan Soriano:** It began when I was about 40 years old. Before that I wasn’t aware that I loved it. It was a spontaneous, natural thing which was part of my life, something like a game. From the time I was very small I did sculpture and painting, but I didn’t know it had any special value. I confused play with the creation of things and I thought all children were the same.

I didn’t begin the study of art and aesthetics formally until I was over 40. Before then, I was self-taught. It was really quite difficult for me to accept painting as a vocation. I felt that it limited me, it put me on a road already mapped out. My personal experience also kept me away from art: the history of the [Mexican] Revolution, my childhood during the Cristero rebellion, and then the advent of painters



*The Flower Garden*, 1970 (oil on canvas).

like Orozco, Rivera, Siqueiros.<sup>4</sup> It felt like an obligation, something imposed which was meant to seek power or to mold consciousness. Naturally, at the time I didn’t express it in these words but I didn’t like it. And later on, I liked it even less because all the galleries and people that wanted my work asked me to deal with the same topic: being Mexican. This horrified me. The

<sup>4</sup>These were the main representatives of Mexican muralism; for them, art was not only aesthetic, but also had a social and cultural function which it performed through the visual exaltation of different historic moments and post-revolutionary values. [Editor’s Note.]



*Girl of the Green Jug*, 1953 (oil on canvas).

idea of “being Mexican” was incomprehensible to me. I was completely identified with my culture emotionally, but not politically or geographically. For me, being Mexican included the history of the world, of Spain, the Jews, the Arabs; everything I read: cloak and dagger dramas, great poetry, the Iliad, the Odyssey, etc.

Those of us interested in art in Mexico don’t limit ourselves only to Hispanic culture; we want to know what’s written in the United States, what’s painted in Russia, what’s danced in this or that place. The crowd I was in all my life

was very interested in world events. But, when I lived in France and Italy most people were interested only in what was going on in their country, despite the proximity of all the countries in Europe, I realized that they are not very familiar with each other and that we know much more about them than they do about us. I remember someone saying that Mexico was a country without a history. I answered, “Maybe for you, because you’re ignorant. You know nothing about history and what the discovery of America meant for the world.”

**VM:** *What was your experience like abroad, in Italy, in France?*

**JS:** It was wonderful. I discovered there were cultured languages in which you can express yourself in a very refined way; that all the things that I had been interested in because of books—paintings, monuments, plazas and cities—were not only much more beautiful, but that they had acquired a dramatic quality because of the destruction of the two world wars, particularly the last one.

People in the cities, even today, are terribly marked by the effects of the wars, the persecution and

fratricide. They lived on the run, permanently in hiding; and both sides turned out to be the same: fascism and communism were equally totalitarian and destructive. It was like a moral epidemic, worse than AIDS, that destroyed people's souls. The disillusionment was noticeable, for example, among the existentialists, with the statements of Sartre and the intellectuals of his time. The movements in painting, in architecture, and the so-called "cultural" movements were, at bottom, profoundly destructive: they sought to put an end to tradition without substituting anything for it. An enormous, compulsive desire came about to build powerful weapons to destroy cities, monuments and, above all, to destroy human beings.

Life is very short and limited; it is not easy to understand why there is so much hatred. If life, no matter what happens, is going to come to an end, there is no reason to cut it short. Besides, it should always be possible to come to an agreement. Arguments over land, money, profits, could be solved through dialogue and tolerance.

Art, until then, was not mixed up in this vicious circle. Post-war art became something horrible, and it continues to influence many young people who seemingly are not studying to be artists but to rid themselves of their sensitivity, to transform art into something "pseudoscientific" or "curative." Many are artists because it "relaxes" or "calms" them, because they think

it allows them self-expression. But you can't express yourself artistically just because you want to. You have to study your possibilities of expression. Today, everything seems to be mixed in a kind of enormous "music hall." The music is deafening and when you reproduce it, it becomes even more so. You want to have much more hearing, but you can't hear more than what is to be heard. The limits of the senses must be respected if you want to cover the immensity of experience and emotions fruitfully.

**VM:** *What do you think the relationship is between art and life?*

**JS:** I always felt like I was on the edge of an abyss when I talked about painting: either I took a nationalist stance or a political one, but in either case, painting began to fade, the object of painting disappeared. Only when I could forget all that could I paint, draw, sculpt. I did it for myself, without directing it at anyone, because the "public" began to horrify me, mainly because it made demands on me. The public wasn't like the one I had read about, a public that understood that a painting was a metaphor for something. It was a public that confused art with life.

Today, many "artists" use chairs, pieces of television sets, mirrors, bowls, all in big installations, because they can't draw, they can't suggest concrete reality with a few lines and a little color. They have to use objects, to objectify reality.

That was the moment when I felt that no matter what I did I

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*Death in a Cage*, 1983 (watercolor).



*The Window*, 1967 (oil on canvas).

would be on the sidelines because I couldn't lead my life following those guidelines. They seemed banal to me, silly, sometimes entertaining and even funny, other times the liberators of small emotions, but never great pieces of art.

VM: *Who has had the most influence on your painting?*

JS: Almost everyone I have ever met has had an influence, but the

strongest influence has come from the people who raised me, particularly my nursemaid. It seems a little ridiculous now, but I still have a nursemaid.

Until very recently in some places in Mexico, part of your inheritance from your grandparents were the servants. We called the nursemaids "aunts" and gave them pet names. It was almost always one family that lived with another family because they had fallen on hard times. I felt that my servants were like part of my family; they were just like all Mexicans, of all colors: light-skinned, dark-skinned, with a wide variety of features. I never had racial prejudices. They were all treated very affectionately by my father and my mother, sometimes even better than we were. It was an old, sacred custom going way back. We were all grateful to them for their services and their loyalty. There were times when we were very poor, and they still continued to live with us. Sometimes I used to go home with them, to an old hacienda they had inherited on the outskirts of Guadalajara, and I would stay weeks, months. They took good care of me.

In later years my mother would invite my nursemaid to lunch at her apartment in Mexico City, but they would end up fighting because my nursemaid didn't want to sit down. She just wouldn't give up the place she had had.

These people taught me stories and legends. They were also very free in their talk about sex. They

bathed the little girls and the little boys, naked, together. We had water fights. It was all very normal. I never had strange thoughts or strange desires because everything was absolutely normal for them. There were people among them who were very cultured. Not cultured as in book-learning, not well-read, but people who were very well educated. It was actually an education in which the main value was respect for other people, an education with many advantages that I appreciated.

When I lived in more "cultured" milieus, people's hypocrisy really surprised me because there were many things which couldn't be talked about in public even though they did them in private. In Guadalajara, life was appearances. It was a fictional world where you had to pretend to be someone you weren't or to have something you didn't. That bothered me enormously. I do not have pleasant memories of my adolescence in Guadalajara in the sense of a flowering of my spirit. I remember more that I was closed to everything natural, everything spontaneous.

VM: *What does Juan Soriano feel when he faces a blank canvas?*

JS: The desire to fill it immediately with colors. I have never been afraid of ruining it. I also don't think much about it because I don't think it has value until it's painted. And when it's finished, sometimes after struggling for months or years, I always feel that I could

make it better. Sometimes, when I see a painting of mine when I visit someone's home, I want to correct it. But by then, what does it matter?

I want to correct everything, even life. The day after a party I think about what I said, what I did, and sometimes I'd like to change whatever it was. I always want to do things very well. Sometimes you fail and do very bad paintings or drawings. I love feeling the desire of starting a painting, of dirtying the canvas or staining that marvelous blank page.

VM: *What are your favorite materials or colors?*

JS: I don't like all materials. I only like to use pencils and brushes. I don't like air brushes or tools like that. Today there are many mechanical tools to make sculptures and engravings; I'm sure they save a lot of work, but the piece is born of the domination of technique, which must be constantly reinvented. They say an engraving can be made by photographing a drawing and transporting it to a plate, but I like to copy it myself. If it is very large, I ask an assistant to help me bring over the paper and stretch it. I like to do it myself because as I go along, I feel the need to change the lines, the shapes, that will later be etched with the acid. I also put more or less acid on. And if all that is done with a computer, you don't enjoy it. It's a real problem when I go to the large print shops where if you just give them a small piece of paper they repro-

duce it in any size they want. But then it's no longer completely your work.

I just did a cat: initially it took me a year to ruin it. It just wouldn't come out right. Later I began again and after another year and some months, it finally came out right. Technicians say you can avoid all that, but I don't want to because every time I do it I invent a technique. For example, the cat I was going to do didn't exist. Now it exists just as I invented it, crooked or straight, but it is a cat that I made with my hands.

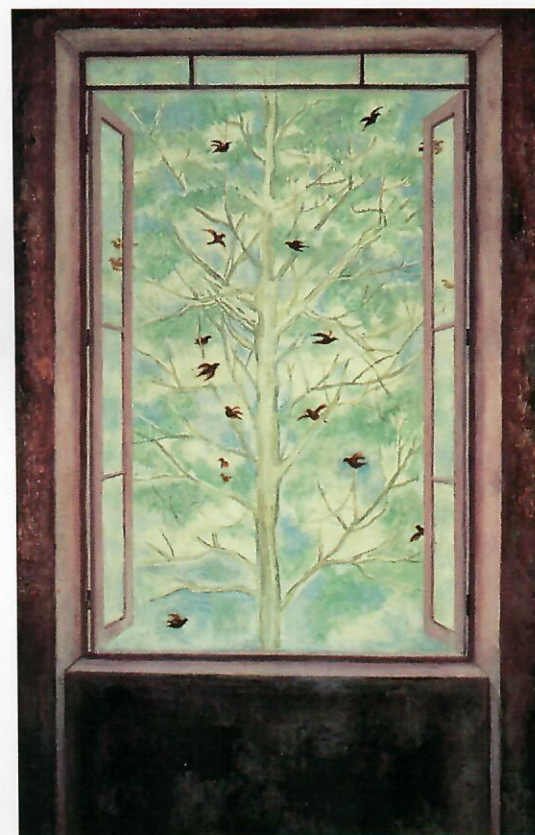
VM: *When did your love for sculpture begin? Was it at the same time as your love for painting?*

JS: It was at the same time, so I really can't say which came first. Today, sculpture gives me more physical happiness. Painting tortures me a little because I have a problem with the idea that it's flat, that sometimes a few lines make it too deep. The proportions of a canvas also horrify me because they change by just changing a color. Sometimes when I begin to paint a large drawing that I like very much, I reduce it little by little until it ends up tiny. This happens to a lot of sculptors. It doesn't happen to me with sculpture, but it does with painting. At the same time, it is all very pleasant because the canvas itself changes size according to the figures, the spaces and the colors you put on it.

VM: *How do you pick a topic?*

JS: It picks me. It is a very strange process because it's all mixed up:

forms you see, feelings that these forms produce inside you and a critique of these feelings. It's like an obsession. It's always at work. All this together creates an emotion that may later turn out to be a painting. But when I see it done,



*Window*, 1972 (oil on canvas).

*“I would like my work  
to give someone  
the joy that work  
by other artists  
has given me.”*



*Dead Girl*, 1944 (oil on wood).

I always think of the moment that produced it. Twenty, thirty, forty or fifty years may go by, and when I see a painting, my mind is illuminated with the sensations of that moment, like when you hear a piece of music again.

VM: *What is Juan Soriano's work-day like?*

JS: Lately, it's full of anxiety because every day I think to myself that I have less time left. Now I feel very free; I'm not as concerned about whether what I paint will be correctly interpreted or not, whether I'm going to have a public or not, or whether this is a bad time. I have become reconciled to my time: everything in life seems sacred to me, the good and the bad. I always have a desire to do something. I always have half-finished pieces in progress, always more than I can

finish. So, some anxiety grows out of this. For example, if I have to go to a dinner and the next day I have to get up early, I leave the dinner early. I decide not to make too much effort and just be calm so I can get everything possible out of the day and I can do something complete, without leaving it half done.

All this makes me a little anxious until I calm down and tell myself, "Oh well, there will come a time when something will be left half done, so just calm down and get to work," I want to go to parties; I want to paint; I want to sculpt; I want everything. I like life. The terrible things that happen in the world also cause me much pain. But then I think that you shouldn't suffer so much about things that are far away from you, that aren't

part of your daily life. At the end of the day, they do affect you, but that's life and you have to accept it as a whole.

VM: *Do you have a favorite work?*

JS: They are all my favorites and not. Your own work is always important to you. But I would like my work to give someone the joy that work by other artists has given me. Sometimes I remember the first times I saw Tamayo's paintings, which fascinated me. I felt very moved and happy. Hopefully, someone will appreciate this whole day-in-day-out struggle to create when looking at my work and feel the pleasure of seeing an artist's work without it mattering who the person is. **W**



The artist in his studio.