

The Prophecies of ARNALDO COEN

Luis Porter*

The common meaning of the word “prophet” comes from the Greek and refers to the supernatural gift of knowing the future. In the Hebrew usage of the word, found in the Bible, a prophet is one who is able to bring to light something unseen, hidden truths or higher orders of things in the name of God. In this sense, in Mexican culture, the prophet is a holy man rather than a soothsayer, a being whose contact with God allows us to elucidate things which are unclear.

We cannot deal lucidly with Coen’s work without the understanding that his visual concerns, the problems he resolves on canvas or paper, are in all cases an attempt at revelation, an exercise in the ability to see what others cannot see. If the reader tries to feel or understand the images shown in this issue, it will help to

know that Coen is not trying to tell us stories, nor is he expressing his inner world, nor is he trying to recreate a contemporary language of painting in the light—or the shadow—of new artistic trends in his painting. His images could be understood as hermeneutic or cryptographic procedures that lead to a visual result whose importance centers on describing and revealing a hidden order. What order? The one that is part of the laws and invisible structures that we are all subject to without knowing it: cosmogonies, unexplainable relationships, coincidences or harmonies that penetrate our sensibilities through unknown angles and portals.

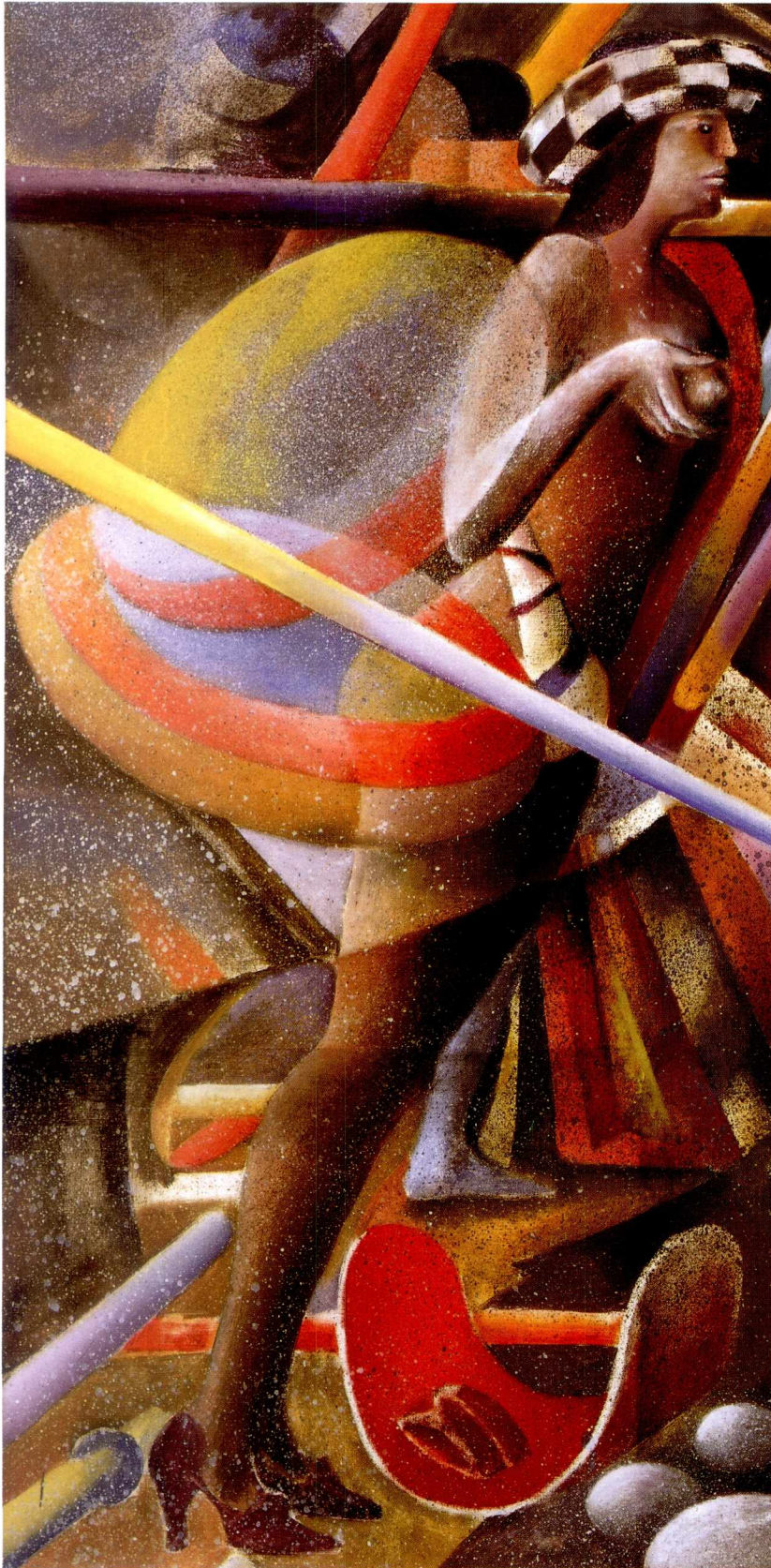
In this sense, Coen is one of our few painters who—perhaps without knowing it, perhaps deliberately—tries to comply in the last analysis with God’s plastic aims because it is in the revelation of a higher order where his inspiration and enthusiasm lie. (We should not forget that the correct meaning of enthusiasm is “deification” or “ecstasy.”) If we

try to imagine how cosmic intelligence manifests itself—not in the movement of the planets and the order of the constellations but in the images painted on canvas—and, if we think that this minimum expression executed with pencils or brushes is also ordered by a higher force, then in figures, axes, directions and volumes that in turn contain other images, figures, axes and directions, line by line, point by point, we will recognize the premises that make Arnaldo’s painting fragments of something absolute, in which there is no more chance than that contained in possible mistakes, his mistakes as a painter and ours as viewers. It is painting always aware of threatening revelations.

Arnaldo Coen is not an artist of a single passion. Another passion, very much his own and glimpsed through his painting, is language and the play of language. His vision is not at all similar to the daily, distracted tramp that takes us from events to ordinary things that we

* Architect, Ph.D. in education, professor at Mexico’s Autonomous Metropolitan University.

Opposite page: *It Says What I Don’t and Doesn’t Say What I Do*, 200 x 140 cm (oil on canvas).



Photos reprinted courtesy of Arnaldo Coen

The First Encounter, 85 x 40 cm (oil on canvas).

explain as products of chance. This does not happen in the case of a painter concerned with the designs that an infinite intelligence may have deliberately dictated to an image, where there is no tolerance whatsoever for chance. Just as Neruda asks himself who ordained the map of the butterfly's itinerary drawn on its wings, Coen tries to be both mirror and interpreter of that "stellar intelligence" manifested in images that can be painted.

To imagine this way of approaching art, Borges' explanation of the Cabala is useful. In contrast with a normal reading, says Borges, one that seeks a hidden meaning is equivalent to reading *Don Quixote* as a [Spanish-language] text that begins with two monosyllabic words ending in the letter "n" ("en" and "un"), followed by a five-letter word ("lugar"), two two-letter words ("de la") and a six-letter word ("Mancha"), and from there, using these indicators, we try to come to a special conclusion. Only someone who had lost his senses could read like this, but, for example, that is the way that the seekers of the possible underlying design in the word of God have read the Bible: nothing can be accidental in the Scriptures because it is a book dictated by God; everything has been predetermined including the number of letters in every verse. In just this way the world of images in which the cosmos takes form challenges Coen to decipher it.

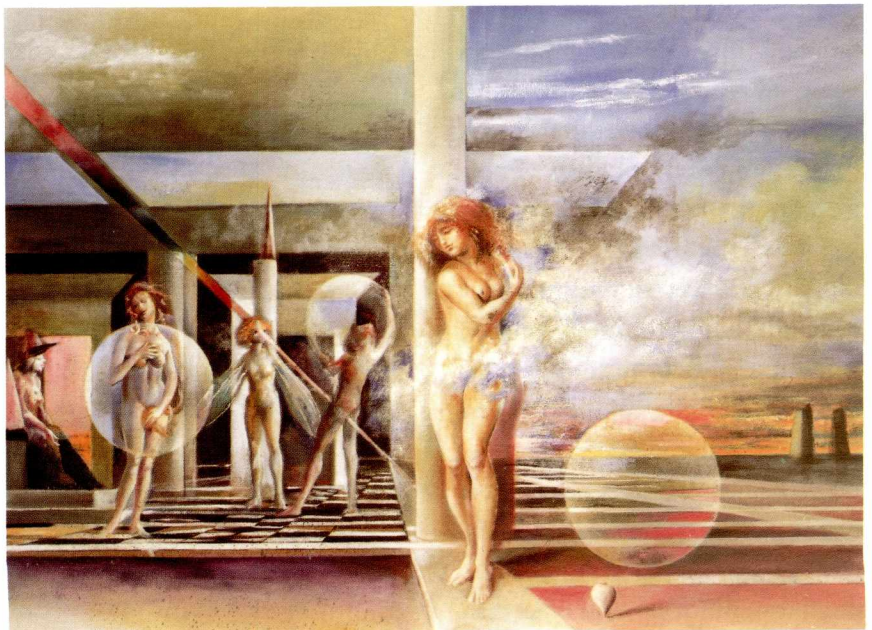
The idea, then, is to paint like someone who draws a cryptogram, and while doing it, seek out the



In the Memory of Her Abodes, 120 x 180 cm (oil on canvas).

code that explains it using the rules of geometry that order it. But to be fair, we should clarify that Coen is not only concerned with “reality,” because if he were, there would be no difference between him and an astronomer or any scientist. As an artist and poet, we should realize he is also interested in other hidden revelations, the revelations of dreams, for example. This is not, then, a vision that emphasizes an obsessive rationality, but rather one that also allows for mystery and the unexplainable as part of prophesy.

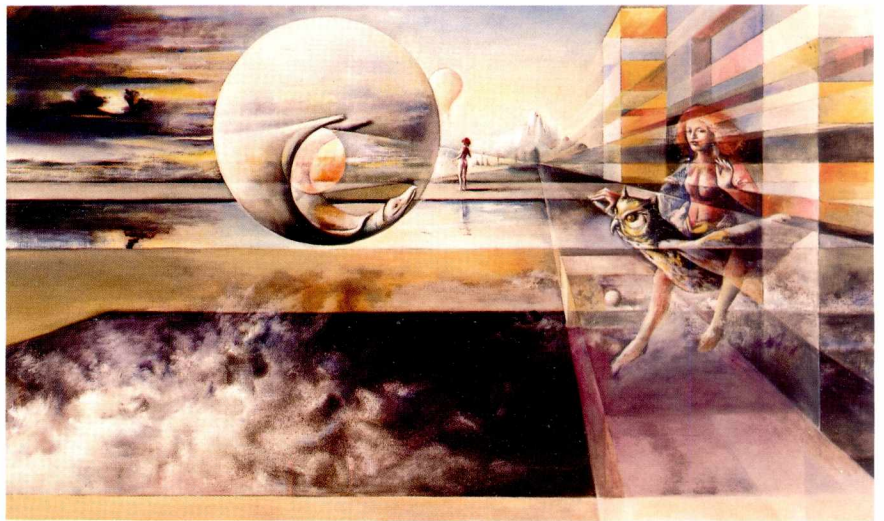
Again, it is Borges who says on more than one occasion that when



In the Clouds of Your Mind, 120 x 180 cm (oil on canvas).

dreaming that he was reading, he exclaimed, “Goodness gracious! I can see again!” But then immediately, still in his dream, he would say, “No, I’m inventing the words I’m seeing.” Borges imagined the words because his blindness prevented him from seeing a written text. Arnaldo’s painting is also a result of the ability to see what cannot be seen, another way of explaining what some understand as invention.

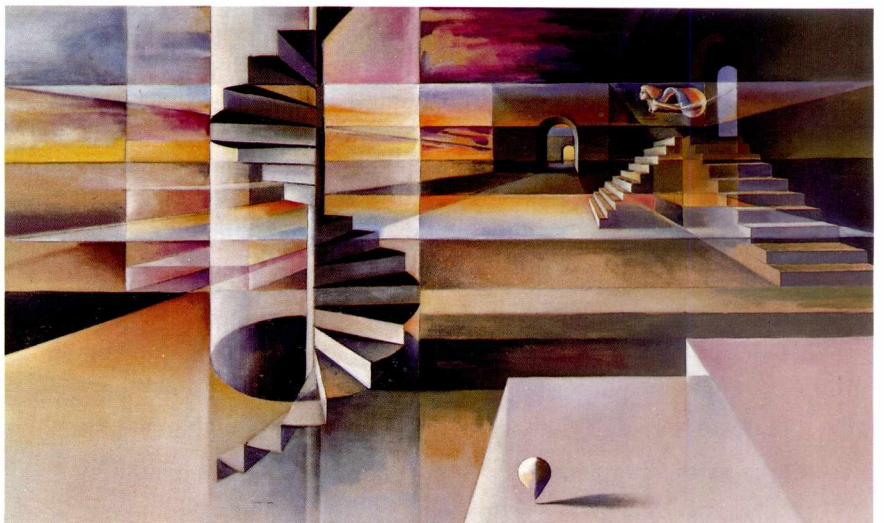
So, tops and eggs, spheres and cubes, structures, lines and meridians, all Coen’s geometric paraphernalia is not scaffolding; it is not the kind of order proven through axioms, arguments or the conviction that geometry is infallible because that would only produce artificial systems. Quite the contrary, Coen’s geometry is the plot through which the characters and symbols in his painting are revealed as they wander through plainly illuminated byways. That is why, despite the fact that Coen’s paintings are figurative and “plain to the eye,” they are also filled with secret, mysterious images that no one could really ever know, together with figures, people or evocations of people who none of us doubt at all having met. That is why it is painting that changes and continues to change with time because the latest revelation is the revelation of each viewer, the revelation that you, as a reader, have right now, at this moment, upon seeing something which is not in view, that is, you bring into the light, in the name of Coen, other truths and hidden orders, which are none other than your very own. **W**



Still, Under the Sun, 120 x 180 cm (oil on canvas).



Under the Arches of Your Light I Enter, 120 x 180 cm (oil on canvas).



Diaphanous Like Silence, 120 x 180 cm (oil on canvas).



The Hoped-For Satiation of Her Desire, 155 x 300 cm (oil on canvas).

ARNALDO COEN

Born June 10, 1940 in Mexico City, Arnaldo Coen began as a self-taught painter. Diego Rivera, who met him in 1956, recommended that he continue painting without any formal training. From 1957 to 1960, however, he did study graphic arts at the Fresnos Institute of Advertising Arts in Mexico City and graphic design with Gordon Jones, who enriched his knowledge of painting.

In 1959, Coen began experimenting in abstract expressionism. However, in his first solo exhibition in 1963, he presented figurative expressionist works, and after 1964, he began working in fantastic expressionism. As he developed as an artist, Coen began to work with object paintings and sculpture, making different treatments of the female body his main theme.

In addition to painting, between 1964 and 1983, using panels, mobile objects and body painting, he created environments, scenery and costumes for plays and dance pieces which were performed in Mexico City venues like the Palace of Fine Arts, the Benjamin Franklin Library and the Tamayo Museum as well as at the Alhóndiga in Guanajuato.

He made several trips to the United States and Europe, and in 1967 the French government awarded him a fellowship. In 1972, Arnaldo Coen participated in "Stealing Art," a film shot and shown in "Documenta 5" in Kassel, Germany. From 1977 to 1978, he worked in collaboration with a group of architects in Dodoma, Tanzania, designing the new capital. He also painted several murals in different countries and illustrated books and magazines.

Coen has had innumerable exhibits in Mexico, the United States, Canada, Latin America, Europe and Japan. His individual exhibits at the Palace of Fine Arts' National Hall and the Modern Art Museum in Mexico, the Claude Leman Gallery in France and the La Vorpall Gallery in New York are some of the most outstanding.

His work has received worldwide recognition and earned him many awards and prizes. Art critics, intellectuals and writers such as Octavio Paz, Claude Bouyeure, Singrun Paas and Guillermo Sheridan have dedicated hundreds of pages to his role in the art world. ❧