

MANUEL FELGUERAZ

AN INWARD GAZE¹

*Juan Villoro**



Photos reprinted courtesy of Manuel Felguérez



First Nature, 100 x 120 cm, 1993 (oil on canvas).

DEVIATIONS TOWARD THE GOAL

The first thing that surprises us about Felguérez' extensive, versatile body of work is that it depends on very few figures. For almost 40 years, the painter has repeated curves and rectangles, as though he were rehearsing the patient solution to a theorem. The idea of approximation is essential to his inventiveness: you must get as close as possible to the goal without ever

reaching it. His recent work, brought together under the title "The Limits of a Sequence," alludes to the final destination, the forbidden point of any journey. For Felguérez, all advances include variations. Elias Canetti shared this same impulse, saying, "There is no uniformity in true knowledge. All authentic jumps are lateral, like the moves of a knight in chess. That which develops in a straight line is predictable and irrelevant. What is decisive is twisted knowledge." This image helps explain the continuity of an iconoclastic route chosen: a fixed limit, obses-

sive, besieged by slanting blows, unexpected deviations toward the goal.

THE INWARD GAZE

In Felguérez, a sense of order coexists with refined rebelliousness, the discipline of form with the vertigo of textures and delirious signs representing sounds. As in Rothko, Felguérez requires a map for his abstraction: if for Rothko, the dominant form is the rectangle cut in two, the metaphysical clay field, for Felguérez, an ordi-

* Mexican writer and editor of *La Jornada Semanal* cultural supplement.



Snail Without Moon, 125 x 150 cm, 1992 (oil on canvas).

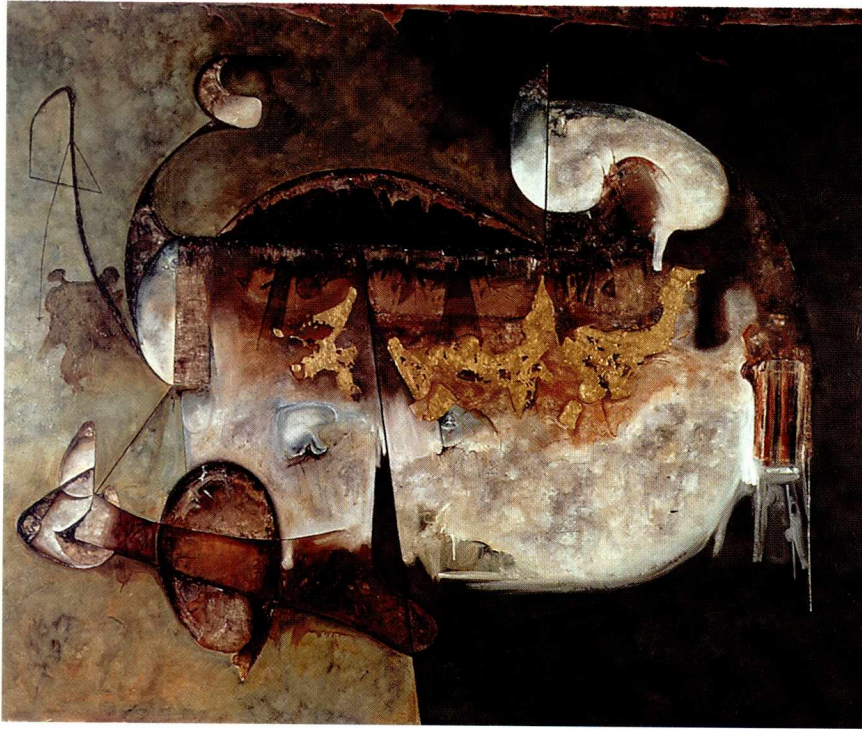
nary line requires small pairs of circles, like watchful eyes, the square (or better, an unfolded cube), organic curves that look like kidneys, French beans, buttocks, snails.

Felguérez' figures are a kind of control panel of instructions: they show the way but they are not the way. The wheels, or squares are necessary for understanding the composition of the painting and, above all, to know what the painter "overcame," the references he turned into parallel realities. We are witnessing a detective novel in reverse, in which recognizable clues become mysteries.

Felguérez'
geometric abstraction
depends not on a rejection
of the concrete, but on
inventively going beyond it.
His abstraction is not
born of someone
who repudiates objects,
but rather someone who
understands them too much.

In most exhibitions, the viewer encounters paintings dominated by emotion or paintings that are the product of serene calculations; a brush in paroxysm or an intelligent abstraction. Both mixed together is quite rare.

Can the textures of Bacon or De Kooning coexist with the geometric rigor of Mondrian? Felguérez' work is the very, very personal union of these two extremes. "Conventional," recognizable silhouettes are perturbed by the brush and palette knife until they are transformed into interior states. If in a test of perceptions geo-



The Rite of the Stars, 200 x 240 cm, 1994 (oil on canvas).

metric drawings represent the order we agree with, in the painting of Felguérez they represent reality prior to the canvas, the world of defined concepts that gave birth to the painting and disappeared with it.

Felguérez' oils should be seen inwardly; his bloody textures, the squirts that resemble secretions, the gold and black dust that look like they have been dug out of some fantastic mine indicate a radical anatomical, psychological, mineral introspection: entrails, hallways of the mind, fillings.

THE NEGATIVE RELIEF

A painter of the internal, Manuel Felguérez cannot get away from emotion. While

Morris Louis tried to make sure that his colored serpentines lacked any trace of humanity—never the nervous imprint of a brush!—Felguérez is a passionate participant in his canvases. He leaves greedy marks, surrendering his symbols to the conflagration of temperament.

With the exception of his geometrical period in the 1970s, in which colors followed strict outlines, Felguérez uses coloring to discuss, and almost deny, his formal principles. A psychotic brush advances against the initial reality of the canvas and creates overflowing, uncomfortable, surprising paintings. Robert Hughes wrote of Robert Motherwell's rich emphasis on black, "In Motherwell, color is not an adjective; it's a noun." The same can be said of Felguérez. His palette, which has never



Immabile Nocturne II, 150 x 180 cm, 1990 (oil on canvas).

contained many different colors, makes color the generic topic; the careful composition sinks under challenging surfaces: the calcareous landscapes of the early 1960s; the reddish, lively consistencies, between vegetable and gastric, that dominate his daring canvases of the 1980s; the pale vapors, contrasted with earthy masses and gushes of liquid gold of the 1990s.

What does a surface mean to a master of relief? Sculptor, set designer, creator of artifacts, accidental architect, Felguérez has created paintings that look like construction maps.

In an obvious way, certain of Felguérez' compositions allude to the third dimension. They are unfolded structures, negative reliefs. However, this has not stopped him from exploring the view. Whoever



The Temptation of Saint Anthony, 150 x 180 cm, 1994 (oil on canvas).

looks at *The Rite of the Stars* (1994) or *Roving Form* (1996) will find a painter who dims his materials until he attains the perturbing interior of dreams.

Manuel Felguérez is the most intellectual painter of his generation. He has frequented kinetic art, urbanism, computing, mathematical models applied to the visual arts, and his book *El espacio múltiple* (The Multiple Space) offers a discourse unusual in a craft usually guided by intuition.

BEYOND WHAT IS "MEXICAN"

It is no exaggeration to say that the painters of "the generation of the break" (Vicente Rojo, Lilia Carrillo, Manuel Felguérez, Alberto Gironella and Fernando García

Ponce, among others) were able to supercede the localist culture in the same manner that the "Contemporaries" group² did in poetry and the essay. An artist's borders often differ greatly from those of the country he is from and Felguérez' generation established an intelligent dialogue with the avant garde and movements elsewhere that reaffirmed their personal proclivities. Like in that "gathering of the tribes," Felguérez would disdain the easy road of those who tried to show with shoe-banging if necessary that they are "typical" Mexicans.

The work of the Zacatecan painter could come only out of this country, but one of its greatest merits is that it escapes all picturesque definitions.

"THIS IS NOT A PIPE EITHER"

Felguérez' geometric abstractionism depends not on a rejection of the concrete, but on inventively going beyond it. In a masterful short story, "Signs and Symbols," Vladimir Nabokov talks about the "referential mania" plaguing a character: all objects tell him something. A spoon is an allegory; a thimble, an oracle; each new item transmits excessive information. Most abstract painters turn their backs on reality "as it is" because it does not stimulate them much. Felguérez, like Nabokov's character, knows the secret message of things; his abstraction is not born of someone who repudiates objects, but rather someone who understands them too much.



Between Two Wings, 100 x 120 cm, 1992 (oil on canvas).

In painting, Felguérez distrusts his many utilitarian abilities, his ability to dominate recognizable objects and forms. This makes his gamble on abstraction all the more significant.

“The function of painting,” writes John Berger, “consists of filling an absence with the simulation of a presence.” What absence does Felguérez’ work fill? In a century of rationalist arrogance, cubism, surrealism, informalism, abstract expressionism and other non-conformist currents painted what was unintelligible at first glance and fulfilled the mission that Mallarmé assigned poetry: to recreate not an object, but the effect it produces. Felguérez contributes to this refounding of the gaze in a special way. He starts from geometry, machines, the equations of Kepler and Mozart, the nature of the senses, full of insects, to make it (dis)appear in colors that, as Diego de Mesa observed, exist only on his canvases. Few abstract painters have over-

come so many concrete reference points; his paintings always transmit a profound tension: the smothered, submerged reality.

Felguérez is both mathematician and repairman. A friend to paradoxes, he will often chop up a cigar to smoke it in a pipe and, in the manner of Magritte, say, “This is not a pipe.” His work, revealing and elusive, moves between distant poles: immediate reality within reach of a Swiss army knife (sometimes the traveler cannot contain his enthusiasm and sticks a snail on a dragonfly on the canvas), and the metaphysical mists that predominate in “The Limits of a Sequence.”

VELOCITY OF MULTIPLICATION

Intentionally or unconsciously, abstract painting has carried on a polemic with the technologies of our century. Painting what the camera cannot see is a way of alluding

to photography. In a world full of apparatuses designed to copy reality (from the cinema to holograms, including video), abstractionism offers mental landscapes divorced from the principles of redundancy of the Polaroid culture.

A decisive impulse for non-figurative composition has been velocity. In the twentieth century, Man discovered the things that went fast; in an airplane cabin, in the glass and steel cage of an elevator, in a streetcar or a motorcycle, he spies new “instantaneous.”

Manuel Felguérez’ work is a reflection about the use of time in abstract painting. In his paintings, the slow thicknesses alternate with spiraling vertigo. Sharp geometries are suddenly contemplated; they are stopped, fixed spaces; by contrast, the seething areas suggest spinning vanes, maelstroms, greedily sucking drains; they have not stopped moving.

RUFINO TAMAYO AND POETIC LANGUAGE

Juan García Ponce, an unsurpassed observer of Manuel Felguérez’ development, has written that, from the moment of his 1958 exhibition in the Antonio Souza Gallery, García knew that he was witnessing “an artist the value of whose work did not lie in any model that existed previously to the works themselves.” An explorer without maps.

It is worthwhile stopping and thinking about this statement. The originality García Ponce detects in Felguérez is not that of a cultural recluse who ignores his contemporaries. Quite to the contrary, few painters have such a clear sense of the historical nature of their work. Felguérez’ work could hardly exist without his fertile dia-

logues with abstract expressionism, with the sculpture of Ossip Zadkine, whom he studied under in Paris, with Mexico's "generation of the break." We should also stress his relationship with Rufino Tamayo. In the 1960s, when Felguérez was defining his style, Tamayo was Mexico's main renovator of visual art. He was also the Mexican painter most admired by the "generation of the break."

Felguérez shares his interest in public art with Tamayo in a special way. As Octavio Paz has said, "Since Tamayo's rebellion against ideological muralism" there have been few examples of truly creative muralism in Mexico. The clearest exception to this is Manuel Felguérez who "has created another, truly monumental mural art, in which painting is allied to sculpture." In August 1997, Felguérez was the first Mexican painter to have an exhibit at the Tamayo Museum.

CELESTIAL GRAVITY

The discoveries that Juan García Ponce discerns in Felguérez are not some kind of pictorial patent—a vain sense of anticipation: being the first abstractionist—but rather a language of his own, a personal attitude toward visual art. It is impossible to look at these paintings without entering into dialogue with them; looking at them is always an act of criticism. Although viewer participation is an integral part of all abstract painting, in the case of Felguérez, the active role of the viewer is enlarged by the variety of stimuli: each canvas demands a truth from him and not infrequently makes him uncomfortable.

A few years ago in *La constelación secreta* (The Secret Constellation), a mono-



Only the Air Answers, 1993-94 (oil on canvas).

graph about Lilia Carrillo, Jaime Moreno Villarreal emphasized Felguérez' interest in aerial outlines, geography and cities seen from a distance that disfigures them and allows the eyes to drop sharply. In the 1990s, the painter seems to be following the exact opposite principle: on the ground, he brings his gaze upward. Manuel Felguérez has become a painter of mists, winds at high altitudes. Although they are always based in the earth, a definitive black or brown, the paintings gravitate upwards toward the clouds or smoke. The repertoire of golden dust, liquid ochres, the explosion of a wine-colored gas, make us think of Gerardo Diego's title *Manual de espumas* (Manual of Foams). Nothing strains more against precepts and tranquility than foam; nothing is more attractive for those who seek surfaces where the unspeakable is ordered. From his balcony in Puerto Vallarta, Felguérez observes and collects surf. But, it would be banal to attribute to that

the breadth and lightness of his recent textures: his landscapes are emotional, the foams of his manual come from interior breakers.

Cézanne said, "All painting is yielding to or resisting the air." "The Limits of a Sequence" is a profound reflection about the solidity and fragility of painting. From the pierced depths of the earth the viewer's gaze rises to the frenzy of the airy heights. We already know that the goal is unattainable. We are always on the edge of what the naked eye can see. Behind, begin the stars. ■■■

NOTES

¹ Short version of Juan Villoro's book, *Manuel Felguérez. El límite de una secuencia* (Mexico City: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1997).

² A group of Mexican poets and writers who proposed, among other things, a quest for universal art. The best known among them were Xavier Villaurrutia, Gilberto Owen, José Gorostiza, Jaime Torres Bodet, Salvador Novo, Carlos Pellicer, Bernardo Ortiz de Montellano, Enrique González Rojo and Octavio G. Barrera. [Editor's Note.]