

# DREAMS OF STONE AND SAND<sup>1</sup>

*Augusto Isla\**

Poetry is the only  
concrete proof of Man's existence.

*Luis Cardoza y Aragón*



*Fishermen*, 56 x 71 cm, 1979 (duco on cardboard).



“I want to paint reality with the internal vision of my surroundings....My fantasies are always supported and justified by reality,” wrote Alfredo Zalce in 1983.<sup>2</sup> More than the austerity and modesty of an artist who does not like to talk about himself and thinks of his work as a verbalization expressive enough in itself, these lines denote the sobriety with which he devotedly approaches his life and his work. The sobriety of a poet in love with the things that other eyes miss but that he picks up and holds on to in images, like children absorbed in the patient, silent labors of the sea, hoarding their favorite shells, grains of eternity.

We could say he is a realist painter. But, also, what he wants to paint, the reality that supports and justifies him, as it passes through the labyrinths of the soul, turns into something quite different from the simple raw material it is made of, as though hoping that a reflective, innocent dexterity will simultaneously touch it and discover its expressive potential. For Zalce, art is not a photograph done by hand.

It is mystery and revelation: poetry. Quite early on, he began to conceive of his vocation in this way. Xavier Villaurrutia, with that shrewd eye of his that caught glimpses of remote places and talent, celebrated his first discoveries. In the legendary magazine

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*The Lawyers*, 92 x 122 cm, 1952 (oil on masonite).

*Contemporáneos*, commenting on Zalce, Villaurrutia wrote, “Inverting instead of transcribing, making instead of repeating: these are the duties and also the unique pleasures of the poet, the artist.”<sup>3</sup> How has Zalce complied with these duties and pleasures? Seeking both within and without himself, seeing and divining things, caring

for their hidden beauty. We are surrounded by marvels and we do not see them.

To be the confidant of the unexpected, you have to be alert and avidly pursue the incessant recreation of life. More than turning the naked eye to things, you must open your soul to surprise. It is then that reality bends its will to lyrical intention; rhythms, volumes, color all become something else, fascinating in that only essences, the sweet or bitter extracts of what is real, are opened up within it.

The meanings are less important than the effect the lyrical vision produces: changing daily things into an emblem of magnificence. A pile of old odds and ends is transformed in *The Tower of Babel*

(1987); a *Chair with Watermelons* (1991) is at the same time a compendium of universal harmony. Because nothing is to be disdained as material for the poem. Neither the fisherman cutting up the beautiful animal, nor a pair of women helping each other to carry a humble jug, nor the man decked out in his dead chickens, nor the smoker about to light his cigarette, nor the infinite variety of still life

arrangements. Nothing is to be disdained, I say, if the painter allows the image to hurt him, to leave its scars, its marks like those aged trees that he, the artist—minutely ordering their forms—paints, etches, transforms into luxurious splotches of color, into graceful lines that give us a synthesis of what is lasting.

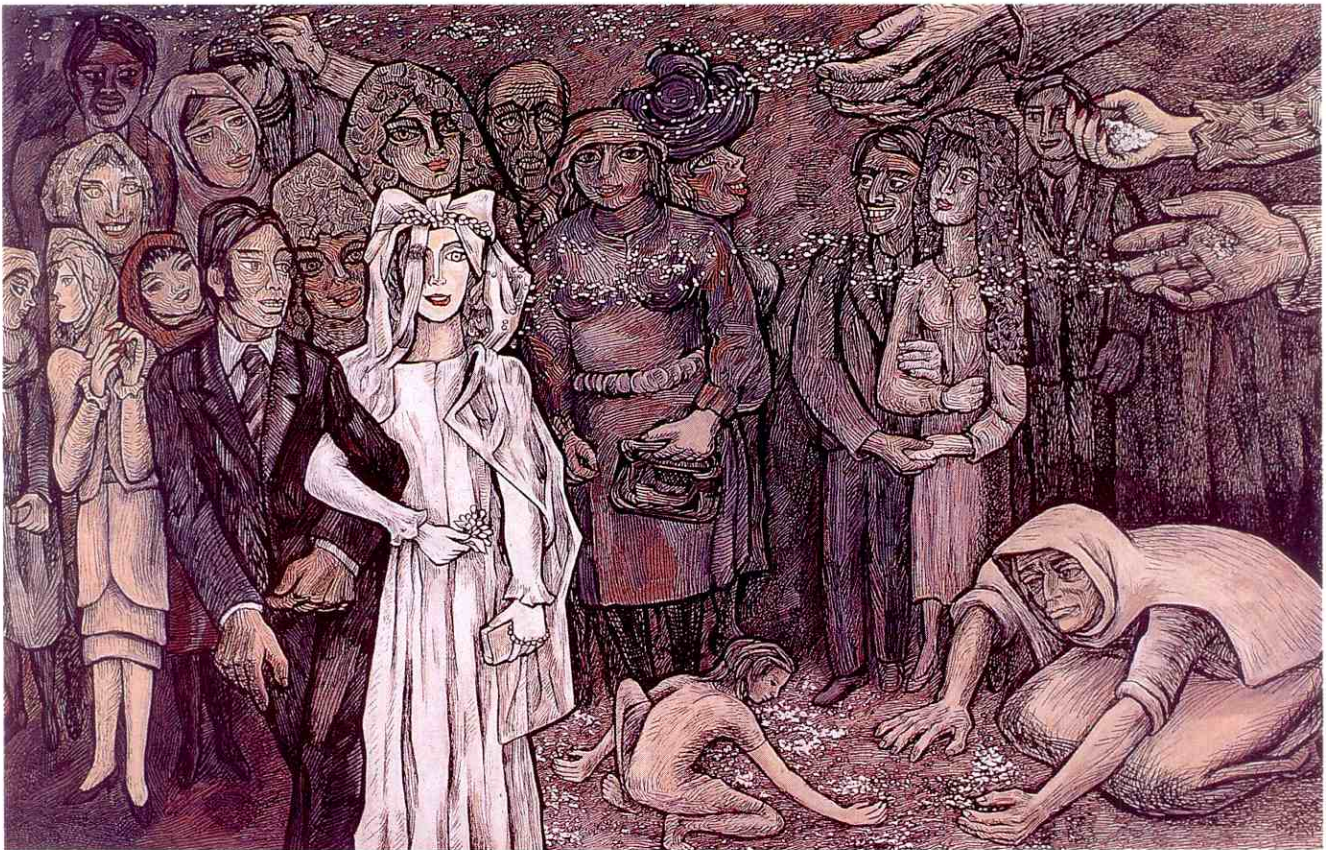
\* Mexican art critic.



But Zalce's lyrical hunger does not end with the recreation of a seated woman waiting —perhaps for love— with her umbrella, of another who interrogates us from her window, with the couple talking on a sleepy afternoon. It is tenderness and incandescence, friendliness and venom, distilled in the magnificent composition of *The Lawyers* (1952) who, shielding their faces, walk over the body of the poor man,

arable. Once I thought I had understood, the examples of the paintings I saw did not seem so clear to me...Concretely, the 'revolutionary content' of some paintings did not go with the form, which seemed to me 'academic' or 'modernist.' My confusion stemmed from the widely generalized idea, written in articles and critiques, that called the theme the content....And that's it in a nutshell: some-

transgression. It is the disposition of the spirit that allows him at the same time to alter the chromatics of realism and discover in the landscape unsuspected transparencies as well as to enjoy their multiplied and deformed image; in *The Reflection* (1948), to parody beauty; to carry out the hunt for what is impossible to grasp: movement, something belonging to a siren, to the trapeze artist's flight.



*Married Couple*, 40 x 62 cm, 1983 (watercolor and ink on paper).

or in *Married Couple* (1983), a grotesque scene of the impoverished picking up rice that others in their insolence have thrown into the air.

How can the proper expression be found for each lyrical tonality? The artist leaves us his reflections. "It is a commonplace to say that form follows content and that form and content are inseparable.

thing can have a revolutionary theme and be a terrible piece of work."<sup>4</sup>

In expressionism, Zalce found the liberty to move freely across the canvas, across the engraving plate. Zalce's expressionism is more—or less—than an "ism": it is a demon that, whispering in his ear, urges him to emancipate the soul from the slavery of the copier, urges him on to

Freedom does not excuse the artist from rigorousness. Zalce's learning breathes this demand that gave his friends from the *Contemporáneos* group sleepless nights. Xavier Villaurrutia, José Gorostiza and Jorge Cuesta all thought about discipline and rigorousness; the three, each in his own way, were rigorous in their poetic endeavors.



Zalce engraves in wood, linoleum and plastic; he etches with nitric acid, aquatint, dry point; he paints in tempera, oils and acrylics and does frescoes and batik. He goes from one thirst to another without ever being able to satisfy them: he is also a sculptor, a potter and a goldsmith. But he does not worship techniques; they are means of expression, resources that if wrongly chosen, spoil the adventure.

"Technique is sometimes used to create the illusion of excellence. Commercial art is theoretically perfect. Show me something better made than a frosty Coca-Cola. It is impeccable, but it says nothing; perfection is not detail. There are painters who go into detail and attain nothing, because a painter is known more by what he takes out than by what he adds."<sup>5</sup> For that which cannot be named to have its way, all ballast must be jettisoned: art is an exercise in purification and, likewise, in daring, both conditions of modernity. Zalce is a modern artist.

However, Zalce does not abhor the academics. He found his soul mates in San Carlos.<sup>6</sup> In its patios, he felt worthy of himself for the first time at the age of 16. His passage through its classrooms yielded a crop of both stimuli and disappointments, of contradictory examples.

In the late 1920s and the early 1930s, young men like Zalce developed a feeling that resulted not so much from personal proclivities but was rather the objective of an artist immersed in a cultural ambience.

Together with others, he confronted the challenge of solving problems different from those faced, let us say, by the previous generation.

With no stridency whatsoever, Zalce unties knots, searches. But he is always far from trying to be the paladin of novelty "because novelty, if baseless, is sterile. Novelty must become something alive, solid. Once I saw a horrible Polish

sion and elegance in which technique, precisely because it is effective, goes unnoticed, like secret underground currents or rivers. He is living in his time: the winds of Cézanne, Picasso and Matisse languish in him to later take on another dynamic. He is not afraid of following other inspirations. But he never tries to be up to date. Edmundo O'Gorman once said that being up to date showed a lack of imagination.

Zalce places no importance on changes that may well lead nowhere. "Artistic novelties are continually coming onto the scene like fads. I think, in contrast, that my entire life would not be enough for my painting to evolve."<sup>8</sup> If even a long life is not enough for a painter to reach his prime, why interrupt the journey bothering to dialogue with foolish fellow travelers? **MM**



*The Tower of Babel*, 121 x 79 cm, 1987 (acrylic on canvas).

exhibition. There was a fish stuck on with glue. It was new, and that was all."<sup>7</sup>

Over the years, with admirable dedication, he has enriched his personal language; he has turned his longevity into a privilege for refining his drawing and engraving, for achieving unequalled preci-

## NOTES

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<sup>2</sup> *Revista IPN* no. 15 (April 1983).

<sup>3</sup> Xavier Villaurrutia, "Alfredo Zalce," *Contemporáneos* (May 1931).

<sup>4</sup> Alfredo Zalce, unpublished notebooks (1946-1948).

<sup>5</sup> Alfredo Zalce, unpublished notebooks (1946-1948).

<sup>6</sup> The author refers to Mexico's San Carlos Academy, the seat of the academician art school. [Translator's Note.]

<sup>7</sup> Alfredo Zalce, conversation with the author taped October 16, 1996.

<sup>8</sup> *Revista IPN* no. 15 (April 1983).