



Photos reprinted courtesy of Mario Nunez

Airplane, 130 x 115 cm, 1997 (oil on canvas).

Between Dreaming And a Cup of Tea

*María Tarriba Unger**

Mario Núñez' paintings are, like all works of art, the product of an internal voyage. These canvases, with their profusion of apparently isolated beings, eternally occupied in enigmatic affairs and arranged in spaces that end up by merging with dances or game boards, make us scrutinize with childlike curiosity life's infinite possibilities.

In an insecure exterior world, full of small problems, absurd and ungovernable, the artist feels at home in the space of his work. The adventure the painter proposes, however, is not only an escape: Mario knows how to create his own worlds, his own rules, his own games. The first of these games is, of course, the artist's: forgetting himself and giving himself the role of a god. "My greatest pleasure," he says, "is placing myself in a world where I decide what exists and what doesn't. The artist makes his own world: he's like a little god who decides, takes out and puts in."

In his explorations, the artist can allow himself the luxury of all kinds of experiences and at the same time remain untouchable. Many of Núñez' works have been said to have a certain theatrical nature, due not only to the many beings, who often, in the seriousness of their mysterious efforts, manage

to become true characters, but also because he offers spaces designed for short plots, with which the imaginative viewer can enjoy himself by speculating. It would not be strange if the artist were having a good time with his caverns, shelters, labyrinths and windows, at the same time that he is allowing us a glimpse of new worlds. Images can be seductive, but Mario is not a painter in the *naïve* tradition. Fear of the unknown, anxiety, the horror of emptiness also breathe in these paintings. Perhaps the artist, identified with his characters, concedes them a rest in quiet spaces: small niches of security.

In his attempts to both run away and encounter, the painter seems to let himself be carried away completely by the act of engendering beings and spaces. It is curious how amid the fantastic environment of horses, dogs, birds, humans or whims suddenly appear glasses, pitchers, goblets, bottles or ashtrays.

Mario's work does not represent only the terrain of the imagination or the madness of dreams. It also pays homage to the pleasure of the everyday world: a cup of coffee, a glass of wine, an armchair. It reveals to us another facet of "everyday life" with its small rituals, its rests; the tranquility of an order—whether real or imaginary—that protects us. From this peaceful perspective, Núñez shows us the most vital expressions of existence: an ambience of play, dance and the infinite potential

* Mexican art critic.

Photos by Víctor Carrasquedo.



Ghosts, 60 x 80 cm, 1995-1999 (oil on canvas).



Up and Down, 140 x 180 cm, 1997 (oil on canvas).



Sun and Shadow, 100 x 110 cm, 1998 (oil on canvas).



Containers, 140 x 150 cm, 1997 (oil on canvas).

of human experience. No matter where Mario Núñez is working, his attention is on possible paradises.

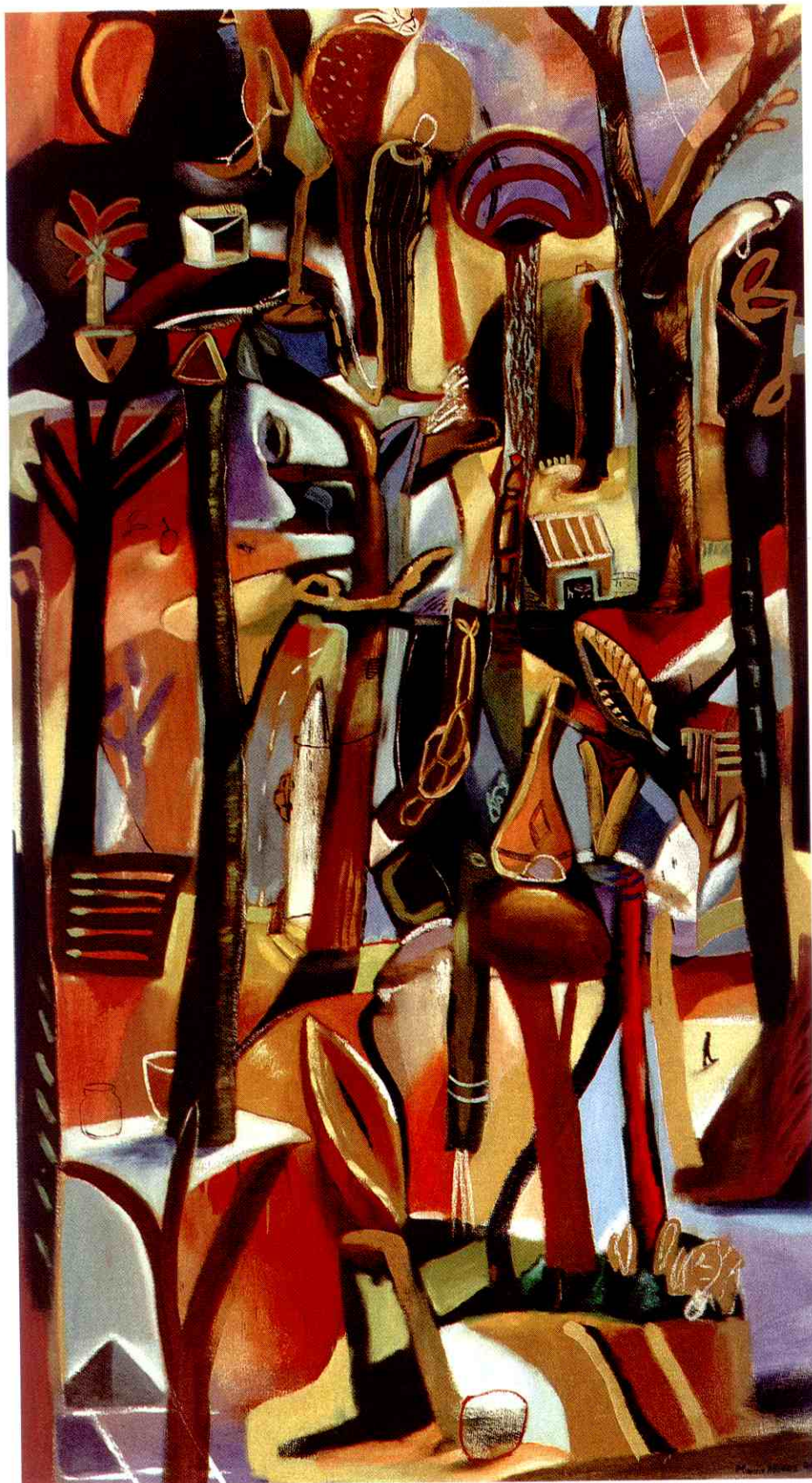
THE CREATIVE PROCESS

“Painting is realizing that the important thing is to be alive, to love people and what you do....A painting that isn’t connected to that is silly, senseless.” For Mario Núñez, like for any Mexican artist, being a painter has implied difficult going economically. He says, however, that this can have its positive side. “I have never had a boss, for example. [laughs] In that sense, the process has been very free. In fact, in the beginning, I didn’t want to sell my paintings....I placed a lot of value on them and felt that separating myself from them would be like an

amputation. It’s silly. Now I think it’s better if they’re sold and ‘they go away’ so I can go other places more easily.”

His creative process has been slow and in stages. As he himself says, “My being self-taught has led me to be isolated to a certain extent. Working in a group with similar projects and ideas facilitates things in the market, propitiates dissemination and sparks the interest of the critics.”

Mario Núñez does not have a specific working method, but he says that his creation usually leaves a great deal of room for chance. Sometimes, random strokes made to clean the brushes on the canvas decide the fate of a painting. Starting from spots or lines that make up bare structures, Mario discovers or allows himself to be carried forward by a process that determines the exact balance of chaos and order.



Habitat, 190 x 100 cm, 1998 (oil on canvas).

Chaos is necessary, since an excess of order produces a sensation of stagnation. "It is like a game of metamorphosis: a line takes you to a figure, which in turn takes you to another, and so on." This kind of free association makes a game possible, both for the painter and the viewer, who discovers that a leaf is really a dancing woman, or sometimes both things at once. In this game, Núñez faces his canvas and is forced to paint "immediately, without thinking about it. I say to myself, 'Do it!' and I paint a brush stroke." The result is the creation of a general rhythm of the composition, decided by a mixture of chance and metamorphosis.

As a self-taught painter, Núñez recognizes that his lack of schooling slowed down his creative process, especially in formal efforts. On the other hand, he notes that there is an advantage in not having been subjected to the pressure that comes from working with a teacher and doing things in a particular way. This can lead to the search for a style of one's own, which constitutes a way of discovering one's self, as an artist and an individual.

REINVENTING REALITY

Núñez lets go of the imperious need to express his joys or sufferings. The cathartic function of his painting relinquishes space to a formal and conceptual exploration. He tires of motifs and compositions that he knows beforehand "will work." He now needs to "reinvent reality." Thus, he begins to paint on already-finished paintings, mainly lines that become nets or webs superimposed on the recurring motifs in his earliest work. "I broke with my previous sense of landscape: I broke with the horizons, played with absurd sizes and with different relationships among the forms. In my current

stage I am seeking greater harmony between the abstract and the figurative. The purely abstract does not interest me; it is very cold, vacant....I need to find human reference points in day-to-day life or nature."

CHANCE AND METAMORPHOSIS

We always find animals in Mario's paintings. Their not being human and their morphology facilitate giving them the personality the painter wants. Núñez does not seem to think about concrete animals: what is represented may be a dog, but it could also be a cat. He places human beings at the same level as animals, mocking but not without tenderness. "I detest solemnity. You shouldn't take life seriously, particularly your own life... although I recognize that I take the most absurd things seriously. Going to pay the light bill causes me weeks of anxiety."

Núñez' painting has been likened to that of Hieronymus Bosch because his compositions include a multitude of beings doing many things simultaneously. Mario Núñez, however, does not conceive of Heaven as separate from Hell and therefore presents us an innocent universe, free and indifferent to human strivings.

Perhaps, at the end of the day, the work of Mario Núñez is nothing other than a reflection on the freedom to express oneself and create. "Art must speak out without pamphleteering. Curiously enough, I think that part of the eclecticism of today is due to the fact that people either don't want to say anything or they have nothing to say. For my part, I am perfectly aware that I don't want my painting to develop along definite lines. There are many ways to paint; precisely, I identify with an orientation that doesn't know where it's going." **NM**