

Jesús Sánchez Uribe

# RODOLFO NIETO

## Fraternal Beings

*Jaime Moreno Villarreal\**

His mental figures,  
that fluctuate between animals and anthropomorphic beings,  
introduce art that boldly attempts  
to give form to the invisible through the visible.



Carlos Alcázar

*Little Horse in the City*, 75 x 100 cm, 1957 (oil on canvas).

The work of Oaxacan painter Rodolfo Nieto (1936-1985) can be divided into five major periods. The first, only three years long, from 1956 to 1959, begins with his initial training at the La Esmeralda academy and lasts to his definition of a highly personalized pictorial language. In this period he began to excel and his career took off. With the impetus of a colorist who dialogues with abstractionism and bases himself on the icons of the Mexican cult of death, Rodolfo Nieto was able to establish a figuration radically distinct from realism that synthesized its symbols (heads, skulls, eyes, bones, etc.), fertile in its encounter with a form of its own consisting of a “mental figure” that, alone or accompanied by another, ruled over surfaces painted by sections which are either complementary or contradictory.

\* Mexican writer.

Photographs reprinted courtesy of Martha Guillermprieto.  
 Preceding page: *Man Beneath the Night*, 112 x 161 cm, 1966 (oil on canvas).



Carlos Alcazar

*Character II*, 115 x 67 cm, 1967 (collage).



Juan Francisco Ríos

*Blue Dog*, 69 x 89 cm, 1976 (oil on canvas).

This precipitous development suffered a sudden relocation: Nieto went to Paris in 1959 and was soon signed to an exclusive contract with the Galerie de France, with which Pierre Alechinsky, Zao Wou-Ki and other first-rate artists also worked. This began the second period of his work, from 1960 to 1966, when he reached maturity. It was then that he had his first Paris showing for which Octavio Paz, who had introduced him to the French artistic and intellectual milieu, wrote the introduction "Pinturas de Rodolfo Nieto" (The Paintings of Rodolfo Nieto). In this period, Nieto produced a totally innovative, memorable and definitive body of work. His mental figures, that fluctuate between animals and anthropomorphic beings, introduce art that boldly attempts to give form to the invisible through the visible. The canvas has been transformed into a place of apparitions; the uncertainty that will always stalk him borders on mystery. From this time on, Nieto's art would be a study and conjuring of the

presence. As his palette got darker, obeying the light of an interior world subjected by the grey Paris sky, the night occupies his reflections. Formally, he continued to treat the canvas by sections, forcing the viewer to balance and deal with his/her nerve and unease. At the same time, lines, stains, rhythms, figurations surge from the depths to the surface: the sensation is one of the visible event coming from behind, from the depths of the canvas, like something ineffable that the painter is recovering and reestablishing, but that nevertheless remains absorbed in thought.

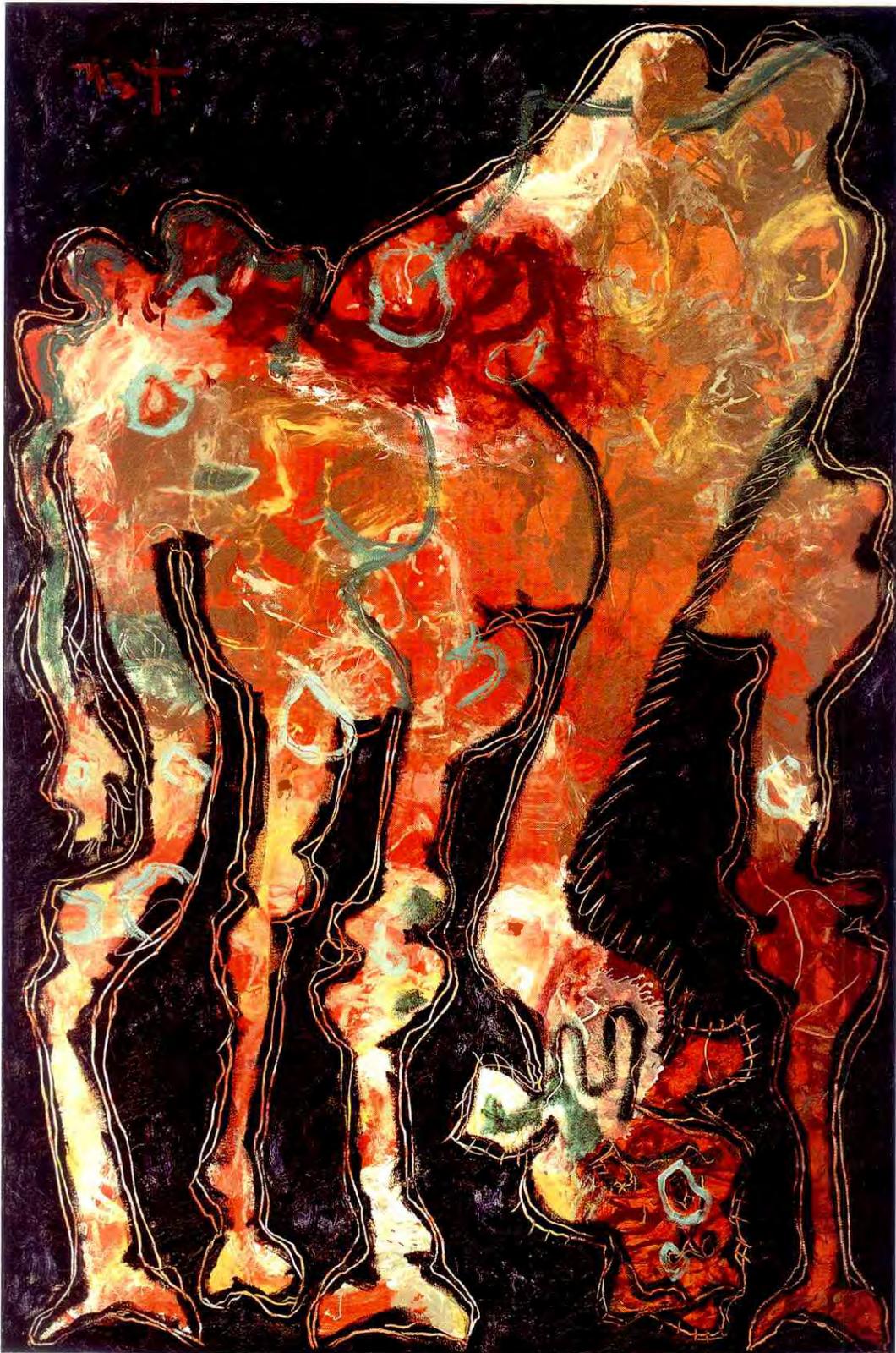
He closed this second stage with collages made from hand-made publishing paper enriched with other bits of paper and graphics transferred to the canvas. Although this kind of work was originally a sort of *divertimento*, it would soon become a strain that would grow prodigiously.

In February 1967, during a stay in Basil, Switzerland, Nieto visited the zoo, sketch pad in hand, and, with the fruitfulness of a *rencontre* with his childhood, did an extraordinary series of pencil and charcoal sketches of the penned animals. The child who—as he confessed—lost his happiness when he moved to Mexico City at the age of 13, found in these beasts the manifestation of those kindred spirits he had left behind, forgotten, on the family plot: domestic animals, barnyard animals, wild animals and toy animals. In the zoo, he was able to alleviate that intuition of the creatures, halfway between fervor and horror, that populates his canvases, with the presence of fraternal beings. Nieto was entering into his third period.

Openly admiring French painter Jean Dubuffet, who would call the pictorial quest for brute human inventiveness by withdrawing from knowledge and technique “art brut,” Nieto—without completely obeying these principles, but looking through them—oriented his work to experimenting with spontaneity. The result was the revelation of a plethora of similar beings, in which zoology gave way to what Alberto Blanco called *sología*, or “the study of lone-ness”: “That part of natural history that deals with the loneliness/lone-ness of human beings.”<sup>1</sup> The problem of existence (Who am I? Who are you?) that had taken the form of mental zoological figures (in the series “Mental Zoology,” ca. 1964) embraces the real presence of animals.

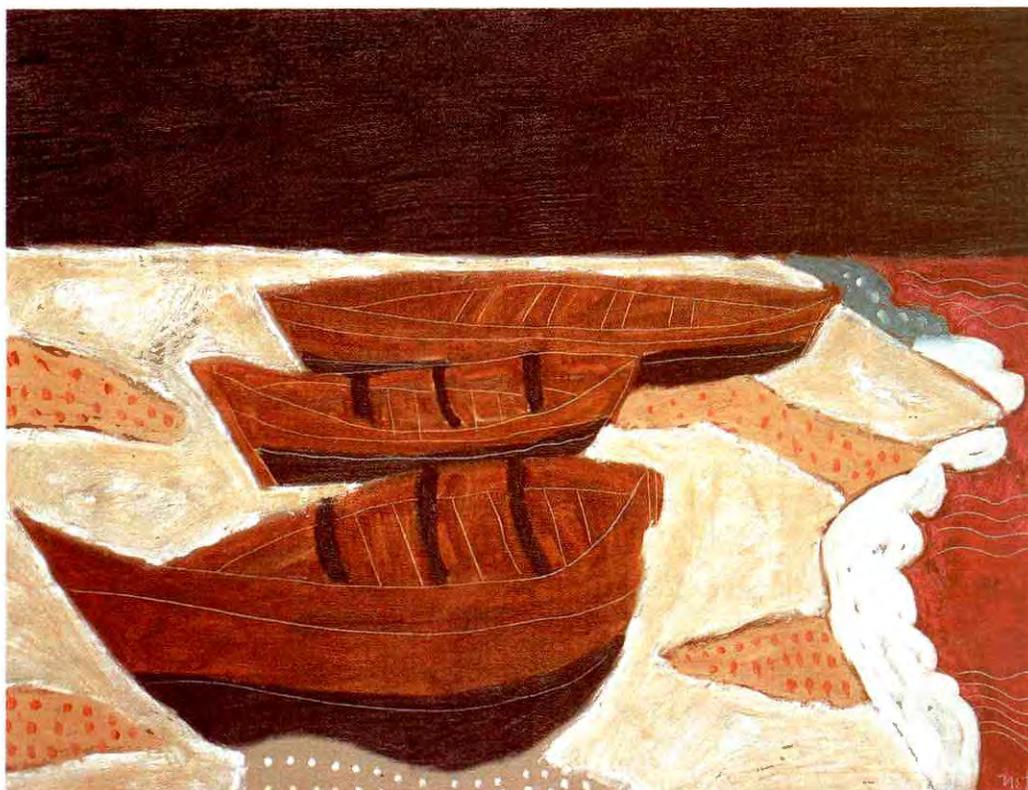
As he developed his bestiary, he continued to work in collage and brought together the exhibition “Laboratory in Paper” (1969), whose catalogue included an introduction by his close friend, the Argentinean writer Julio Cortázar. In those years, Nieto waffled about what would be his complicated return to his native land. After a first visit to Mexico in 1968, he returned to France and unsuccessfully tried to settle there again. That was a period of crisis in which he produced some profound, violent works. It would not be until 1972 that Rodolfo Nieto would definitively return to live in Mexico.

That return marked his fourth period. In much of his work done at that time, paper cut-outs in the form of feet appear to walk through maps in the background: plausible images of the instability and lost feeling of a man who wanted to return to a self-imposed exile. Other works show Dubuffet-like goats lording over the scenery.



Carlos Aléazar

*Giraffe*, 130 x 195 cm, 1968 (oil on canvas).



Juan Francisco Ríos

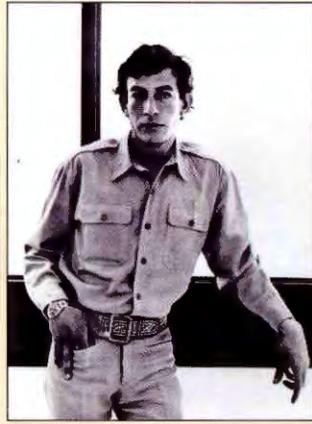
*Boats*, 89 x 116 cm, 1982 (oil on canvas).

moments in the quest for the roots that Nieto only found when he returned to Oaxaca, in the surroundings of his origins and his renewed passion for the aboriginal, the cornerstone and also the vital justification of his new path of development. Other presences inhabit his canvases, but now he called them “personages” and they came out of the pre-Hispanic Zapotec ceramic ware that he began to collect.

The artist who quite young had found the ideal means for his own, very personal form of expression, culminated the curve of that expression with new mental figures before giving over the last decade of his life to the influence of and convergence with Rufino Tamayo. Newly chosen affinities would shine then, not only related to this older painter who he admired so much, but also to the bestiary of Mexico’s streets and countryside and with the personages that the city would offer him. Never satisfied with himself or his painting, Rodolfo Nieto left in his wake a series of invoked presences in which he was always, to the end, subordinated to life. It can be said, without reproach, that his talent was his wound. **MM**

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Alberto Blanco, “Manual de zoología fantástica de Rodolfo Nieto,” *Rodolfo Nieto. Bestiario*, catalogue (Mexico City: Galería López Quiroga, 1993).



Hans Beacham

## RODOLFO NIETO

Rodolfo Nieto was born in the city of Oaxaca and studied in Mexico's La Esmeralda National School of Visual Arts from 1953 to 1954. Four years later he traveled through Europe, settling in Paris from 1960 to 1972. While there, he studied graphic arts at famous ateliers like Mourlot's lithograph studio and Hayter's engraving workshop; he was named the Galerie de France's exclusive painter; and he made friends among European and Latin American painters and writers like Octavio Paz, Julio Cortázar and Carlos Fuentes. In addition to other awards, he was twice given the Paris Biennial prize, in 1963 and 1968.

Nieto has been recognized as one of Oaxaca's master painters along with Rufino Tamayo and Francisco Toledo. He worked with extraordinary skill in oils, silk screening, lithography, engraving and water colors. He designed scenery for the theater, illustrated books like *La zoología fantástica* (Fantastic Zoology), by Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges, and *Bestiario* (Bestiary) for the Manus Press publishing house in Stuttgart.

In 1972, Nieto returned to Mexico and worked in the lithographic studio of Mexican painter Vlady and the wood engraving studio of Leo Acosta. From 1980 to 1982 he lived in his home state, where he did tapestries in the town of Teotitlán del Valle. He died in Mexico City in 1985.



Carlos Alcazar

*Lent*, 47 x 83 cm, 1958 (oil on canvas).