

Rogelio Cuellar/La Jornada

Transfiguring Irreverence in Art (1929-1999)

Born in Mexico City, September 26, 1929, to a Catalanian father and a Yucatecan mother, Gironella was part of a new generation of visual artists in the 1950s who opposed using art as a medium for political propaganda. Their starting point was the internal, subjective world which, through the prism of the artist's personal concerns, is revealed in different forms of visual expression. Gironella was a pioneer of installation art in Mexico, even though he personally detested "installationists" and hated being identified as one. He liked to say that his birth coincided with the second surrealist manifesto, the premier of Dalí and Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou*, Wall Street's Black Tuesday and the invention of Coca-Cola.

Before he became a painter, Gironella wanted to be a writer. Two of the writers who had the most influence on him with their critical narratives were Ramón Gómez de la Serna and Ramón del Valle-Inclán. In 1949, his interest in literature prompted him to found the art and literature magazine *Clavileño* together with painter and philosopher Arturo Souto¹ and philosopher Luis Rius, both Spanish refugees. Also, in 1957 he enrolled to study Spanish literature at the National Autonomous University of Mexico and founded another literary magazine, *Segrel*. Around that time, he began to write poetry and a biographic parody, *Tiburcio Esquirla*, which was never published.

In 1952, Gironella and painters Héctor Xavier and Vlady opened the Prisse Gallery, where he exhibited for the first time.

From then on, he continued to have shows both in the Americas and Europe. In 1953, he married journalist Ana Cecilia Treviño, with whom he had two children, Bárbara and Alberto. Later on, he would have a third child, Emiliano, with his second partner, painter Carmen Parra. That year, he moved to Guanajuato and decided to dedicate himself exclusively to painting. Four years later, he opened the Proteo Gallery.

IRREVERENCE AND ART

In 1959, Gironella visited New York where a portrait by Diego Velázquez inspired him to paint the first of a long series of canvases about Queen Mariana of Spain, wife of Felipe IV, in the studio of anarchist painter Bartolli. In 1960, he won the prize for the Paris Biennial of Young Painters and his work was included in the exhibit "Fifteen Laureates of the Paris Biennial" in the Lacluche Gallery. In 1963, he exhibited "Death and Transfiguration of Queen Mariana," a series of canvases that comprise a sort of treatise on decay, how a gem gradually becomes carrion or a horror, to use Valle-Inclán's term.

In Paris he met the Belgian painter and engraver Pierre Alechinsky and Mexican poet Octavio Paz; in Mexico, film maker Luis Buñuel, with whom he forged a deep friendship. Gironella adopted Buñuel's corrosive analogical method of narration,

placing dissimilar elements, like life and death, on the same plane and uniting them with a fascinating, ferocious process of transfiguration, as a way of painting the effects of the passage of time on the object. Gironella practiced this surrealist method in his own way, even in his private life: his house contained an enormous mix of apparently useless objects from different periods, arranged with the criteria of a connoisseur of design, texture and color. A wooden Christ would sit in secret harmony with an old sewing machine, which in turn would live with a stuffed dog and owl and the beret of naive painter Francisco Tartosa. Many of these objects appear in his canvases, adding a farcical character to the work (like some beer cans in some of the canvases of Queen Mariana), or are transfigured: a mirror ends up being a sarcophagus, the back of a chair becomes a torso, etc.

André Breton, the founder of surrealism, considered Gironella one of the best painters he had ever seen. The link between literature and the visual arts is clear in his work.

In 1963, he designed the scenery for *The Opera of Order*, by Alejandro Jodorowsky, which had some rather scandalous moments, like the appearance on stage of Gironella himself singing a Spanish couplet the words of which aroused the wrath of Mexico's Catholic Youth. The play was closed the day after it opened on the advice of movie director Alberto Isaac, and Gironella was disinherited by his father.

When awarded a Guggenheim fellowship in 1966, he spent it traveling through the states of Yucatán, Campeche and Oaxaca with painter Corneille. He then did a series of lithographs to illustrate the first edition of writer Carlos Fuentes' *Terra Nostra* (Our Land). In 1980, together with Pierre Alechinsky, he did a series of 12 canvases on the theme of the bullfight which were exhibited in 1983 in Madrid's Spanish Museum of Contemporary Art. In 1984, the Rufino Tamayo Museum in Mexico City organized a retrospective entitled "This Is a Rooster," the by-word he inscribed on practically everything. The phrase refers to Orvaneja, a painter mentioned in *Don Quixote*, who was so had that he had to write, "This is a rooster," every time he painted a rooster so that the viewer could identify it.

Alberto Gironella was part of a movement that broke with the dominant Mexican school of painting, represented among others by muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros. He did not like to be identified as part of a break, however, but as a baroque or surrealist painter (without the prefix "neo" in either case). Others of the same generation include Lilia Carrillo, José Luis Cuevas, Manuel Felguérez, Vicente Rojo and Vlado. They refused to make their painting a place for political propaganda and the representation of indigenous and nationalist themes.

Nevertheless, Gironella was a passionate reader of history, philosophy and art. He admired and sometimes associated with people who, although very different, had made history in dif-



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ferent ways: Emiliano Zapata, Luis Buñuel, actress Ofelia Medina, Sub-commander Marcos and Madonna, to whom he send one canvas a month and who responded by personally giving him pass number 000 to her first Mexico City concert.

Gironella mounted a polemical exhibition about Zapata, the series “The Burial of Zapata and Other Entombments” in 1972. He presented Zapata as a poor caudillo beaten by consumerism, shot down, riddled with a spray of bottle caps. He would say in a 1982 interview, “I painted Zapata like he ended up: a sieve ... because some politicians want to keep him alive to be used by the scoundrels.” The exhibition, presented in Mexico City’s Fine Arts Palace, cost the director of the National Institute of Fine Arts his post.

LAST PROJECTS

Gironella kept on painting until the last. Even when he knew death was approaching, he was planning several projects: the exhibition “Potlatch from Alberto Gironella to Octavio Paz”, in autumn in Barcelona, a monologue of collages, a sort of conversation with recently deceased Octavio Paz, his friend of 30 years; an homage to Nietzsche on the centennial of his death in the year 2000; the 12 book covers of a collection of Spanish classics, done together with his great friend editor Hans Meinke.

Shortly before his death on August 2, 1999, Alberto Gironella requested that some of his canvases be placed in his room together with his brushes and other beloved objects, and he asked his son Emiliano to read him Juan Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo*. Emiliano suggested he read something a little happier, like *Don Quixote*, but unbending and rough until the end, Gironella said he did not mind dying with the saddest novel ever written.

In his will he instructed that his ashes be deposited in an execution wall built in his home and that a plaque be placed there with the inscription, “This is a rooster.” His will also stipulates that a foundation be created, headed by his son Emiliano, to safeguard his work, making his home in Valle de Bravo in the State of Mexico a museum, library, archive and cultural center. 

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NOTES

¹ Gironella attributed his start in the visual arts and his first painting to Arturo Souto. After going to a Souto exhibition in 1952, he went home and began to paint a bohemian version of Paris, complete with long-haired violinists and prostitutes with dark circles under their eyes. He also recognized the influence of Velázquez, Goya, El Greco and Picasso.