

The Painting of Gabriel Macotela

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Photos by Carlos Akázar

Self-Portrait on the Roof, 70 x 56 cm, 1989 (sand and acrylic).



Untitled, 110 x 40.5 cm, 2001 (etching and aquatint).

Gabriel Macotela's recent painting is a vindication of the genre in today's art world. Its importance is based, like that of all great contemporary painting, on a permanent dialogue with the media and ideas that have brought about its crisis—and even denied it—and with the different cultural codices that have legitimated that crisis. This dialogue has been a constant in the history of great modern painting, of course, and can therefore be taken as an active legacy today, even when there is an attempt to negate it. However, even given this association with the “tradition of the break,” its substantiation in the current debate corresponds to very diverse questionings of a radicalism probably previously unknown, in line with the new period that Lipovetzky sees being woven in the vacuum left behind by the end of the age of duty, or that others consider engulfed in a perpetual dynamic of construction, without stable reference points, without final interpreters.

Characterizing this artist as a painter is undoubtedly inadequate given his surprising versatility and talent for experimenting in different media. This can be seen in both his graphic production and his sculpture; his magnificent set designs; his multi-disciplinary proposals with new technologies; his art books, furniture, lamps, models, pieces of jewelry and clothing design, just to mention part of the repertory that his personal poetic has spanned. However, after my experience of Gabriel's new pictorial series, I would like to emphasize here this aspect of his work given the importance it has in the contemporary debate I referred to above and that one of its clearest expressions questions the *raison d'être* of the so-called traditional art forms (painting, sculpture, sketching, prints) given the consolidation of new trends arising out of globalization in the 1990s: neo-conceptualisms, neo-minimalisms, ephemeral non-object art, process art, productions with applied technologies, etc.

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The ability to dialogue has been a constant in Gabriel's work since he began to become known in Mexico at the end of the 1970s. With a very solid academic background, he soon had sufficient resources to build his own, undeniable territory (a personal poetic), whose originality allowed him to interact with the artistic discourses of the time and propositions in vogue without being lost in them. His work was consolidated, as was a pictorial proposal that summarized and surpassed the complex discussion that criticism of the 1970s and 1980s outlined as a polarized conflict between abstraction and figurativeness given his ability to deal with problems of composition, form and color and to re-define, at the same time, a particular relationship with the world of visual reality, free from "mimetic" commitments and expressions legitimized by "neo-figurative" artists of the previous generation.

This dialogue defined the artist's relationship with the history of art, his teachers (particularly with Gilberto Aceves Navarro), his present context and also with the models. His signs became objects treated with rigor and affection, or, as John Berger says, with that sympathy with which the great painter always relates to his model, a sympathy that both are caught up in. Berger explains:

The impulse to paint is not born of observation or the soul (which is probably blind), but of an encounter: the encounter between the painter and the model, even if it is a mountain or a shelf of medicine...When a painting lacks life it is because the painter has not had the courage to get close enough to begin a collaboration. He stays at a distance of "copying." Or, as happens in mannerist periods like today, he stays at a historical-artistic distance, doing some stylistic tricks that the model knows nothing about....All authentic painting shows a collaboration.¹

This collaboration, this ancient magical impulse associated with *sympathy*, is the great absence in a large part of contemporary artis-



Auditorium of Shadows, 53.3 x 73.4 cm, 2001 (etching and aquatint).



Untitled, 44.5 x 29.3, 2001 (oil on paper).



The Boat, 57.2 x 123.6 cm, 1999 (etching).

tic and visual communication discourses associated with the culture of simulation; that is a visual and verbal culture which, in its anxiousness to produce without the concert of the object (which can be reduced to a spot or a simple stroke of the brush), has propitiated this kind of a culture of the vacuum, where signs have become dynamic and ephemeral objects. For that reason, and again in Berger's words, painting today is an "act of resistance that satisfies a generalized need and can create hopes."²

While Gabriel's painting has been nourished by this continual "creating a crisis" in the genre, caused by the different media that broadened out the limits of art in the last decades of the twentieth century, it is also true that the artist himself has generated feedback for his painting from the extension of his codes toward other creative possibilities. A dialogue without and within, in an uninterrupted process of intelligent updating, whose stimulus is the response to the challenges and needs inherent to the living, acting nature of the poetic itself and not the imperatives of mere updating that questions the artist's autonomy today.

Exhibitions in Mexico and abroad abound in Gabriel's development, exhibitions that constitute both a culmination and at the same time a new, unpredictable chapter. I remember, for

example, the exhibit called "Coin-Mint-Currency Drain [Exchange Value]" at Mexico City's Carrillo Gil Art Museum between 1997 and 1998 in which he abandoned the conventional format of the canvas. I thought at the time of a definitive transfer of his artistic interests because it seemed that his relationship with bi-dimensionality had concluded. About this exhibit, Lelia Driben wrote:

The result of this encounter of visualities is composed of different-sized flat objects made in plaster and paper, including miniatures, a very *sui generis* gloss of these coins. Organized as an installation that takes up floors and walls, it includes a fantastic mint covered in gold paint reminiscent of some of the stage sets the artist has done, as well as the integration of his own photographs and musical effects....With this work, Macotela again carries out a practice he has never abandoned, despite being one of the most representative painters of his generation.³

Now I encounter a series of small and medium-sized canvases that imply a return and a new dedication to painting. I recognize their codes and at the same time, I am surprised by the variation of their chromatic discourse, their themes and the rhythms that distribute their

forms, stemming from a long, impeccable exercise of purification. Everything is familiar, but there are many changes. “There is nothing new under the sun, but everything is new under the sun.” It is the same with *Piece of Furniture-Woman*, a splendid work that with a delicious cadence and freshness dialogues with Gabriel’s background and with a present built from painting. But, above all, it talks to us, possessed by the self-sufficiency of its own beauty, that it knows will elicit our surprise.

In the contemporary chapter of our story, Macotela is one of the first Mexican artists to achieve international prestige without any debts to the well-known folklore “nationalist” tone that was current in the 1980s. In that sense, his work has been understood as a universal proposal, if I may be permitted to use a word that has fallen into disuse. Now his future

offers other guarantees: that of settling with true value, not anything invented in market strategies or curatorships for export and, on the other hand, of offering himself from his own territoriality, from which the painter, and what is more, the autonomous artist, is championed. ■■■

NOTES

¹ John Berger, *Algunos pasos hacia una pequeña teoría de lo visible* (Madrid: Ardora Ediciones, 1997), pp. 40-41.

² Op. cit., p. 42.

³ Lelia Driben, “Moneda Coladera o la oscilación de la utopía,” in *Gabriel Macotela. Moneda-Coladera [valores de cambio]*, catalogue for the exhibition in the Carrillo Gil Art Museum, Mexico City, 1997, p. 12.



Nocturnal Landscape, 38 x 58 cm, 1999 (oil on canvas).