



# The Painting of Rubén Leyva

Eduardo Milán\*



Photos by Carlos Alcázar

▲ *The Architect*, 80 x 100 cm, 2000 (oil on linen).

Modern art produces the wonder of apparitions. Since the end of the last century, the moment of the euphor-

ic crystallization of modernity, of the rise of the historical avant-gardes, the art of modernity has had one outstanding characteristic: surprise. For modern art, to surprise does not necessarily mean to invent in the sense of creating new forms, but also to make forms forgotten

\* Mexican poet and art critic.  
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▲ *Beneath the Waters*, 57 x 76 cm, 1998 (ink on paper).

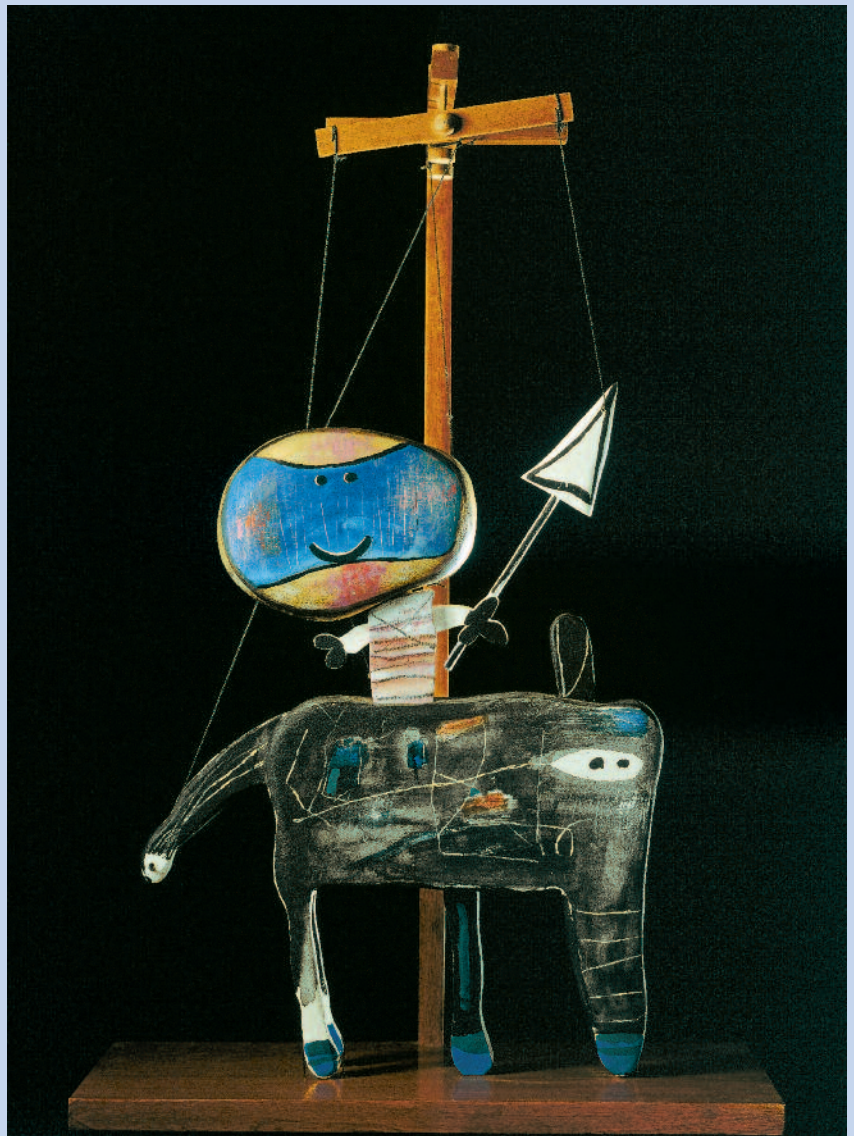
What we discover in Leyva's painting are the sketches of a forgotten, happy world.

or left aside because of their long usage and the need to generate the illusion of different images by exploring other possibilities appear in the pictorial landscape. These different images are not necessarily new, in the sense that they have been created for an age which needs them and, one way or another, they represent. What is called the postmodern age—a more aesthetic than historical term, as it is based on the recycling of forms from the past, in accordance with Hegel's statement that art, "as it pertains to us, is a matter of the past"—is founded on bringing forms which have been consistent in other times and now irrupt before

us with an astonishing fascination up to date again. This fascination is produced because these forms or images appear only as shapes, empty of their original meaning, be it mythic-symbolic, religious or sacred, and, as such, they are ready to be filled with a new meaning, the one needed by the man of the present. The question is: Which forms are needed by the man of today? This leads us to another question: Is there an aesthetic image that corresponds to the time we are living in?

This concern is pertinent when we consider the work of Rubén Leyva. Leyva's painting has an impact because it presents itself as sit-

uated outside the aesthetic debate that seeks to resolve the question of art according to narrow historical parameters, if not to a specific consideration of the evolution of forms. Precise historical parameters and the consideration of aesthetic forms from the point of view of evolution both involve the idea of a constant creation of new forms. In this way, neo-abstractism or neo-figurativism are the forms which attract the debate on the aesthetic pertinence of this historical moment. Leyva surprises in his paintings since he initially seems to be a painter who returns the sense of painting to a timeless dimension. The cultivation of his forms is animated by the supposition of an ex nihilo creation, placed on the very edge of civilization, bordering on a pictorial notion linked to magical or savage thinking. Essentially figurative, his representations precede the consciousness of what is represented. His human figures are conjectures or, rather, prefigurations. Man, objects, the things of the world seem to be placed before the knowledge of men, things and the world which supports the wisdom of contemporary man. In their linear disengagement, they are figures—in fact, his figuration consists rather of lines moving toward a figuration—of innocent, almost childlike, precariousness, with a touch of childish innocence led by intuition rather than by knowledge, the essence and not the appearance constituted according to the legal cannons of how things are. What appears before the viewer is a landscape which misses the natural spontaneity of line, the nostalgia of an image of the world not so pierced by the angst of a devastating rationality, which wants to say that the world is just as it appears. Given this supposition of apparition as a consciousness of another condition of the image—a condition which lies in our unconscious and manifests itself in neat, elementary forms, deprived of the complexity of a knowledge that frightens—colors and forms mingle in a special dialectical relationship. On a flat surface, in the foreground, full of little men who remind us of the representation of primitive man, of objects



▲ *Medieval Conquistador*, 38 x 34 x 6 cm, 1999 (acrylic on multicolored wood [puppet]).

lowered from the heights of Sense down to an almost original simplicity, colors are presented stridently, with a vitality that destroys by contrast any old feeling of time. It is the colors in Leyva's painting that make us remember that it is happening here and now. Not in the apparent reality of the viewer's world, but in the constant interior of our perception.

At first view, the "problem" of Leyva's painting is time. Not historical time where pictures live, one of the dramatic concerns of our era, but rather the historical time that the painting transmits, what it tells us, what it suggests to us, what it makes us see. The landscape where



▲ *Arcanum*, 200 x 150 cm, 1998 (oil on linen).



▲ *On the Silk Route*, 57 x 76 cm, 1998 (ink on paper).

Leyva's painting takes place looks anachronistic. Or, it looks like the stubbornness of someone who wants to return to the origins of pictorial art, when painting was similar to hieroglyphics or the mimetic representation of the state of the spirit of man, a record of his fears, the graphic conjuring of a curse or a blessing. But the time of the painting is not an account of what it represents but, precisely, what it succeeds in representing. The man who appears in Leyva's pictures is not a finished man. He is not even the design of a man. There is no proposal or theory here, no promise of a better or happier future. Far from any idea of a utopia of representation, for Leyva, the world is made of sketches. The question now is: Is the world sketches because it is only barely on the border of being or because, despite the dynamics of technology and science, we have not yet overcome our condition of being a rough draft? In the case of Leyva's painting, the answer does not seem to manifest any discursive complexity or the hidden assistance of a mysterious power. What we have, the only things we have, are presences: presences freed from history, from science, from all logically organized knowledge. Nevertheless, his painting is far from any possibility of chaos. It is also far from any consideration of existence as a tragic representation, like in a world of puppets governed by something called chance or destiny. There is a memory of being; also a memory of what exists. But it seems that, for Leyva, they are both better placed in the depths of the unconscious. An unconscious not as a Freudian synonym of the emergence of a sudden low blow, but as an archetypal chamber of the essence of being, of what belongs to it by its very nature. That would explain the mean condition in which Leyva represents the world: a state that knows no fear, not too far from a placenta which legitimizes any form and not too close to the strictness of a law of the objective that restrains the founding force of feelings.

If the myth can be defined as a setback, Leyva's painting is a formal setback. It acts against solemnity, against skepticism, against the final

defeat of hope. This world that chose the middle way, to be amidst crystallized forms —this world, literally, without perspective, or worse, without any possibility of improvement or progress; this world, finally, possessing the omnipotence of the foreground of that which breaks the eyes— is a world that proposes joy, a reconciliation with our half-finished creation. It stands against all pedantry of sufficiency, of maturity, of adulthood. That is the world of Leyva's presences; that is the cosmos that redefines or should redefine states of seriousness, of Logos, of law, that, deprived of tenderness, lead to a Thanatotic end. If Leyva's painting returns to a previous instance of painting —which I doubt, and if it does, it does so from a critical level—, then there is no fear: as Deleuze said, seconding Spinoza, "only joy returns".

Leyva's painting could be historically placed in the time of the astonishment experienced by European painters in the early twentieth century when, amidst the avant-garde boom, and having broke all links with past, they still turned their eyes to the so-called "primitive" cultures to take from them something that reminded them of objects' aura. This "re-aurification" did not correspond, of course, to any content of the object as such, to any external property, except for the inhabitants of those places which were almost mythical to Europeans. It was our gaze which gave them a new aura.

The European gaze. Europe literally "turned its eye" to a still idyllic exterior, trying to overlook its responsibility given the "primitivism" of those peoples removed, as a collective possibility, from the overwhelming impulse of the myth of progress. As is well known, that change in Europe's gaze situated those objects outside of time, in this case out of "European time", avid for new objects and fed up with novelties invented at the last minute. What European artists did with that richness abandoned because of velocity is another story. But what really concerns us is that all that object-ness implies an imagery needed by the civilization of progress. They are sources for it. In Latin America,



▲ *We, You and They*, 150 x 200 cm, 1999 (oil on linen).



▲ *The Tenacious Beetle*, 35 x 39 x 7 cm, 2000 (mixed media on wood [puppet]).



▲ *Signs of the Middle Ages*, 80 x 100 cm, 2001 (oil on linen).



▲ *Where Dreams Boarded*, 80 x 100 cm, 2001 (oil on linen).

The postmodern age is founded on bringing forms which have been consistent in other times and now irrupt before us with an astonishing fascination up to date again.



▲ *Lands of the Countryside*, 55 x 75 cm, 1998 (pastels on paper).



▲ *Traces of the Soul*, 80 x 100 cm, 2000 (oil on linen).

happily —and here we have Leyva as an example— art does not need to strengthen its present in the sources of a primitive or magical past. In Latin America those sources are running waters that flow nonstop everywhere. This cohabitation of all time periods is our wealth, never our handicap. We do not need to discover what surrounds us every day. It is sufficient to show it, to make it a presence. And since aesthetically speaking, the dialectic of before and after does not exist for us, neither does the dialectic of outside and inside, that boundary imposed by the frontier between the objective and the subjective. Latin American art does not need to look to any past: it is sufficient for it to open its eyes and see. That

quality of presence that appears for the first time because it has always belonged to the imaginary space is what dignifies Leyva's aesthetic enterprise, what gives it credibility and acts in the viewer as a discovery. What we discover in Leyva's painting are the sketches of a forgotten world, the sketches of a happy world. But that forgetfulness does not mean belonging to the past or being non-existent here and now. Leyva, rather than going back, gives back: he gives back what exists to the domain of being, that we, blinded by always wanting to look ahead, pass over. Leyva's pictorial lesson seems to be that: because we try to look too high we can no longer recognize —that is to say, see— our true dimension. **MM**