

Mexican Painting from the 80s Helio Montiel, Rubén Ortiz-Torres, and Saúl Villa

The Mexican poet and writer Octavio Paz finishes his essay "Contemporary Mexican Art Painting"¹ by asking one can simultaneously be an artist of his time and of his country when that country is Mexico. Indeed, in a country where tradition and the search for a national identity grew tightly interwoven with the rise of modern art, how can one escape the heaviness associated with the label "Mexican art" and be an artist of its time in Mexico?

If Neo-expressionism, Neo-surrealism and figurative art were the prevalent art forms in Latin America during the 80s, the Mexican art scene saw the rise of Neo-Mexicanism, a fusion of all three. Reflecting a new, or rather, a different kind of *mexicanidad*, Neo-Mexicanism exposed the crisis of values felt by Mexican artists and their need to reconsider the significance of their national and cultural identity.

The decade of the 80s in Mexico is synonymous with anxiety, austerity, increased corruption, scepticism, pain, and violence. The decade featured the staggering depreciation of the peso, increasing trade deficits, growing income inequality, and the damage caused by the earthquake of 1985 that left Mexico City in ruins. This period stands as a powerful reminder of the failure of the country's post-revolutionary modernity.

Visually, this was not conveyed by a specific style or united under the banner of a single movement as had famously been done in the past. Rather, Mexican artists focused on a number of common themes that, as this exhibition will show, painters chose to express in very different ways. The work of Helio Montiel, Rubén Ortiz-Torres, and Saúl Villa in this exhibition, "Mexican Painting from the 80s", mirrors that crisis felt by these artists and their somewhat violent departure from the hegemonic post-revolutionary aesthetic formula.

The world of Helio Montiel is one where the fantastic and the ironic intertwine. Painting animal carcasses in a train wagon or a marble prophet surrounded by snakes in the subway, Montiel transforms daily life into a surreal experience. Using at times an almost fauvist palette, his treatment of colours often overpowers the subject matter of his work, allowing meaning to become a hybrid entity.

Depicting an astronaut fighting a skeleton in medieval armour or turning Eugène Delacroix's *Massacre of Chios* into a war scene played by vegetables with sombreros, in the art of Montiel, violence, terror, desolation, and even death have the capacity to become kitsch. In his paintings social critique is made into parody, traditions are mocked, and the sacred becomes satire.

The Mexican artist most influenced by globalization and the advent of the Chicano movement is Rubén Ortiz-Torres. Unlike the irreverent Montiel, Ortiz-Torres doesn't turn time into parody, but rather uses it to critique his country and his predecessors. In his art, historical facts take on new, or revised meanings.

In his paintings, Ortiz-Torres often adds or juxtaposes pictorial elements that do not belong together. This gives his art a highly sarcastic, allegorical, and critical quality. Whether it is Mickey Mouse's head smiling at Mexico's desolated lost territory or religious charms on the decapitated forehead of a man at the bottom of a Mayan temple during an equinox, the act of adding or juxtaposing allows Ortiz-Torres to emphasize the failures rather than the successes of his country.

¹ Octavio Paz, *Essays on Mexican Art*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1993, 302.

Saúl Villa, the third artist exhibited, is also the one whose art aesthetically most resembles the that of his Social Realistic predecessors. Villa's art reflects the harshness of Mexico's sociopolitical climate, and does not seek to glorify its history. His work *Untitled (Coffin)* depicts the rampant violence afflicting the country. Not without reminding us of Picasso's *Guernica*, in this chaotic depiction of human figures, it is difficult to say with certainty who is dead and who is alive in this painting.

Looking at the paintings displayed in this exhibition, it is difficult to find similarities between Montiel, Ortiz-Torres, and Villa. Nonetheless, in different ways they do answer Paz's question. Through their eclectic, disordered, and spontaneous convergence of interests they are artists of their time and their country.

Marina Dumont-Gauthier, 2015.