

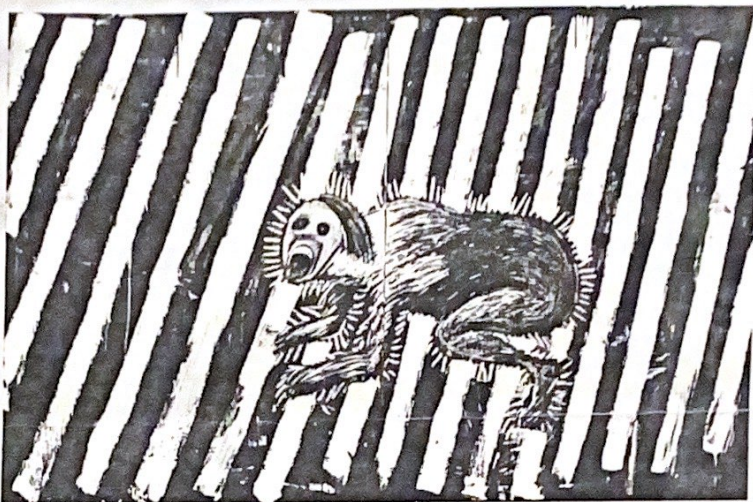
PAINTING FROM UNDER THE VOLCANO

THIS WAS a new-figuration show with a difference, exploring as it did the Pan-American manifestations of Neo-Expressionism. For the two-part exhibition, recently held at the Center for Inter-American Relations and the City Gallery, curator John Stringer chose 19 artists from 11 Latin American countries and one from Canada to prove that expressive brushstrokes and emotive subject matter are alive and well in an area usually neglected by New York curators, critics and dealers.

Walking into a room of "New Forms of Figuration" the visitor was immediately struck by the intensity and range of color. Oranges, reds, blue-greens and yellows blared forth in jarring combinations. Gestural brushwork—slashes, squiggles, washes, blobs, splatters, gouges—caught urgent sensations, transcribing them at top speed. Within the expressionist mode, the handling varied widely: fast, textured strokes for Paul Sierra, Carlos Almaraz and Luis Cruz Azaceta; slick, buttery ones for Roberto Gil de Montes; deft illusionism from Luis Frangella and Edgar Franceschi; a fine calligraphic sense from Andrew Moszynski. In many works, the sensuous oil or acrylic medium combined with delicately drawn marks in pastel or pencil to produce surprising effects.

A sense of danger, of potential violence, prevailed. Azaceta, one of the strongest artists in the exhibition, confronts this violence head on. In the last ten years, the Cuban artist has devised a striking shorthand for the urban nightmare—especially as dreamed in New York City. *Victim* (1984) presents a modern martyr, a bleeding, dismembered man stretched in a yellow-orange grid. Equally terrifying was *The Urban Beast* (1984): half beast, half human, it is both victim and predator and screams in terror at its own fate. More specific forms of urban violence preoccupy the Mexican-born Almaraz. *Midday Crash* (1979) haunts us like a slow-motion replay of a highway accident. The delicate colors and fine pastel-like handling of the oil paint contrast sharply with the brutality of the image, underscoring the horror.

The Bolivian Gaston Ugalde moves violence from the realm of the personal into the political arena. *Desde El Ecuador para Abajo* (From Ecuador downward) (1984) is a diptych constructed of two mutilated parts of a torn, gouged and maimed particle board. In the jagged gap between the boards kneels a nude male twisting in agony. He is helpless to rescue the disembodied heads and hands floating in a sea of blue and purple—a metaphor for the powerlessness and despair of much of the Third World.



COURTESY ALLAN FRUMKIN GALLERY

Luis Cruz Azaceta, *The Urban Beast*, 1984, acrylic on canvas, 70 by 112 inches. Center for Inter-American Relations.

The Argentinean Moszynski is more concerned with natural than man-made disaster. His romantic grisaille landscapes seem to exist in the void. Everywhere there is silence and rubble, as after some great natural catastrophe. But Moszynski's is not a totally despairing view. In the absence of color our attention is drawn to the emerging forms of a tenderly delineated new world. For this artist the end of the world implies a new beginning.

The frames of the paintings of the Mexican-born Gil de Montes are decorated in the manner of Mexican *retablos*, simple narrative works of folk art offered in commemoration or supplication. The images derive from Mexican *corridos*, popular songs in which, in the artist's words, "death and disaster are the common elements; suicide and stabbings in the heart, de rigeur." The level of anxiety and agitation that these images provoke is astonishing. In spite of their sentimental titles (*Always in Love*, *The Last Kiss*, *Falling Heart*) and melodramatic soap-opera plots, the works exert their spell. *Mum and Dad* (1984), a dreamlike scene that combines elements from the story of Cinderella with the approaching storm in *The Wizard of Oz*, comes across as a childhood memory. In *The Last Kiss* (1984), even though we see that the embittered lovers are on the stage, we may still fear for their lives—here, the gun may kill.

Jorge Tacla's works are striking in their obsessive intensity. The large painting on display here (similar to others recently on view at the Nohra Haime Gallery) explores the Chilean artist's preoccupation with initiation rites involving mutilation,

clitrectomy and the disemboweling of elephants. His fascination with self-mutilation has recurred throughout his career in countless self-portraits showing Tacla crucified, his eyes gouged out and his head split by an ax and punctured by nails and knives. Asked about his obsession with violence, Tacla said he could find no other way to express his tenderness.

There were gentler sides to the exhibition too, of course. Carlos Loarca escapes to an ideal mythical world in *Los Perros de Papiro* (Papyrus dogs) (1984), an evocation of cave painting. And there is humor in Marcia Grostein's summer wonderlands gone awry and in Marcel Llorens' charmingly disastrous intrusions of art-historical personages into modern life. Maria de la Paz Jaramillo's paintings are snapshot caricatures of Latin disco nightlife that transcribe the Latin clichés of the femme fatale and the strutting macho man into elegant stylized images. Jorge Salazar, a splendid colorist, evokes Miró—transported to the tropics. In his works a delightful bestiary parades against saturated color fields of high intensity. Although he inherited this coloration from the example of the folk art of Mexico, Salazar's talent for unique color combinations is his own.

In the end "New Forms of Figuration" did not show us anything so new. Work not unlike this has been coming out of Europe and the United States for years. Nevertheless, these artists have appropriated the style to their own needs, proving the power of Neo-Expressionism as refracted by the lens of contemporary Pan-American experience.

—Susana Torruella Leval