

Lourdes Laborde.

The passion of Fernando García Ponce

Every work of art is born from an internal phenomenon which seeks to make the essence of reality communicable. As Mario Vargas Llosa says, reality, having been badly made, is insufficient when it comes to satisfying human desires and aspirations. The painting of Fernando García Ponce is, to a certain degree, the freeing of an instinctive force which gives us the artist's own response to an imperfect reality and succeeds in giving shape to that secret order that makes painting "appear."

Almost six years after his death in Mexico City on July 11, 1987, the Banamex Cultural Foundation paid homage to this painter, a member par excellence of what has been called the "generation of the break," publishing, in 1992, a large book with a red cover. (Red was his favorite color.)

The friendship of the book's author, María Luísa Borràs, with the

painter is reflected in the great affection that shines through her comments, as well as the meticulous collection of texts on the artist's work, from his first exhibition of 26 oil paintings—which opened on April 20, 1959 at the Gallery of Mexican Art, then under the direction of Inés Amor—to his last show of collages at the Ponce Gallery in 1986.

The path leading García Ponce from those first oils to the collages of his artistic maturity parallels the transformation of his own life, a life which, in the words of Roger von Gunten, was as close as could be to the romantic ideal of the artist possessed. To seek the causes that gave rise to this intense and painful personality of contrasts would mean entering the world of coincidences, chance, fortuitous encounters; to go back, that is, to the enigma and very beginning of time.

The product of all these indecipherable elements of chance, Fernando had a somewhat lonely childhood. Together with his brother, the great writer Juan García Ponce, he studied in Mérida while the boys' parents lived in Campeche, in Mexico's tropical south. Years later, as an adolescent, he studied in the capital, later attending a boarding school run by the Marist Brothers in San Luis Potosí where, according to Fernando himself, he learned two fundamental things: that religion is worthless and that one must make his own way.



Untitled, 1985.

This sense of solitude, of facing the world alone, may never have left the painter, who despite himself was what we might call the typical former Marist student: ultra-intelligent, ultra-shy, ultra-solitary, ultra-tormented.

He abandoned the faith. Art became his protection against the attacks of the world (in the sense of that little net that protects one against the implacable attack of mosquitoes); the terrain where García Ponce could continue to follow trails, seeking lost signs, as he had done in his childhood in the woods with his "wolf cub" scouting companions: his brother Juan, Manuel Felguérez, Jorge Ibarguengoitia.

But now this extreme sharpness of the senses, this capacity for "sustained" emotion that is so rarely found in an individual, was directed towards the task of tearing off reality's veil, in the search for some kind of sign or signal. García Ponce's signs



The artist in the living room of his house in Coyoacán.

were as intense as they were contradictory, as sublime as they were impassioned.

A photo of the artist by Manuel Alvarez Bravo shows us a García Ponce whose austere way of dressing—dark sweater and pants—contrasts with his visible internal complexity. The far-away, self-absorbed, profound gaze evokes the synthesis of the contradictions every human being is made up of.

But in the case of García Ponce this intense gaze heralds what the artist will put on canvas: slices of memory in which permanent relations in space are the product of a highly complex purification of elements; of a simultaneously explosive and decanted mixture of a perception that is both sensualist and puritanical; of the inseparable relation between light and shadow.

Because this need to paint, to compensate for the world's insufficiency, is rooted in an individualism which is a matter more



Composition No. 2, 1977.

of fate than choice. Between the explosion of Van Gogh's sunflowers and the balance of Juan Gris—two of his favorite painters—Fernando García Ponce succeeded in finding a language which powerfully expressed the truth as he saw it.

"Towards the end," writes Dore Ashton in the prologue to María Luísa Borràs' book, "there were coarse diagonals which broke his surfaces and red stains suggesting disaster. Weights and balances were askew and there was a sense of frenetic haste to show the explosive feelings which tormented his days. The tragic element, so present in these final works, and which seems so fundamental to his personality, burst forth ferociously, expressing the passion, the internal struggle, which had marked all his life as an artist...."

After the images of Fernando García Ponce as a child in 1935, of Fernando and Juan in the uniform of the Marist Brothers' Montejo School in the Mérida of 1938, of the brothers on vacation in Lerma, of Fernando with such close friends as Juan Vicente Melo, José Luis Cuevas, Maka Strauss, Vicente Rojo, Manuel Felguérez; of García Ponce facing the

marvelous portrait Francisco Corzas made of him; of the artist drinking coffee, or with his cat at his house in Coyoacán; of García Ponce making a collage; of the painter's hands holding a piece of cardboard as if his life depended on it... the last and final image is that of the death of the painter as seen by another painter (Manuel Felguérez):

"...He was in bed face down, dressed, as if he had fallen asleep. His room had no door and you could see to the end of the hallway as if it were enclosed in a wooden frame. To me, it looked like a carefully set scene. On his bedside table a book by Schewitters lay open; a sort of fireplace was decorated with empty beer bottles. A recently finished picture lay against a bookshelf and another lay on the floor, half-painted. It was a very large composition... so it left only a narrow passage to walk through. It was very moving. All in an atmosphere of calm and peace. He died in the midst of his work. A very beautiful and very sad image, which will remain with me forever."

Nevertheless, in the language of Fernando García Ponce's work tranquility is contrary to art. His work



Untitled, 1976.



Lourdes Laborde.

Untitled, 1979-1980.

stands against conformity, creating dissatisfaction and discontent. I think that would be the highest compliment to a man who was always a defender of truth and pitiless nemesis of posturing and hypocrisy. I can only say I am sorry not to have met him.

Laura Emilia Pacheco

García Ponce, the poet of the void

The painter was part of the generation which in the 60s —when the mural painting of Siqueiros, Orozco and Rivera was still at its height— presented the “Confrontation 66” show at the Palace of Fine Arts in which young artists exhibited “the new Mexican painting.”

This group of painters went from the quest for a more spiritual abstract art like that of Gunter Gerzso and Matías Goeritz, to a more lyrical and

contained geometricism like that of Vicente Rojo, Kasuya Sakai, Manuel Felguérez and García Ponce.

In addition to providing a new vision of what painting is about, this generation brought fresh air to the static and rarified Mexican art milieu.

Any discussion of this generation of artists brings to mind the rise of geometrical abstraction in Mexico, a phenomenon which was more than the product of simple coincidences in time and technique. It involved a conjunction of historical factors and individual wills.

García Ponce’s work went through several stages, while always conserving its rational and orderly attitude towards composition and the intellectual investigation of pictorial structures. He was a courageous artist who always expressed what he thought, believed and felt throughout his long career, in his own artistic

handwriting. Some called him “the poet of the void,” and writers considered this highly personal painter to be one of the most significant abstract artists in Mexico in the past 25 years.

In the 1980s, after several exhibitions in different parts of the world, he began a new kind of work: a play of abstract forms and audaciously expressive works, using —for the first time in Mexico— the collage technique, incorporating such variegated elements as pieces of paper, charcoal and magazine clippings into his canvases.

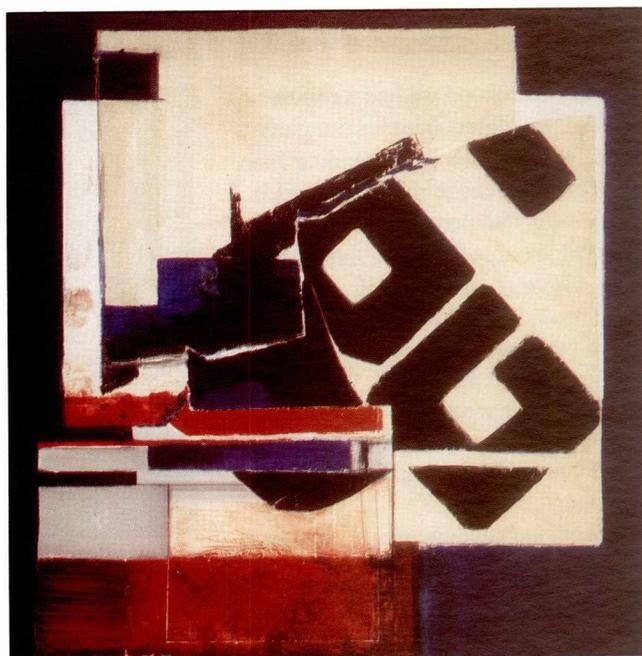
It was thirty years of meditation, searching, development and practice that led to García Ponce becoming one of the most important abstract painters in Mexican art. Now, several years after his death, his work is beginning to be known and appreciated abroad. In 1965 he was awarded the National Prize for Fine Arts as Mexican art’s first abstract painter.



Fernando García Ponce is a member of the “generation of the break.”

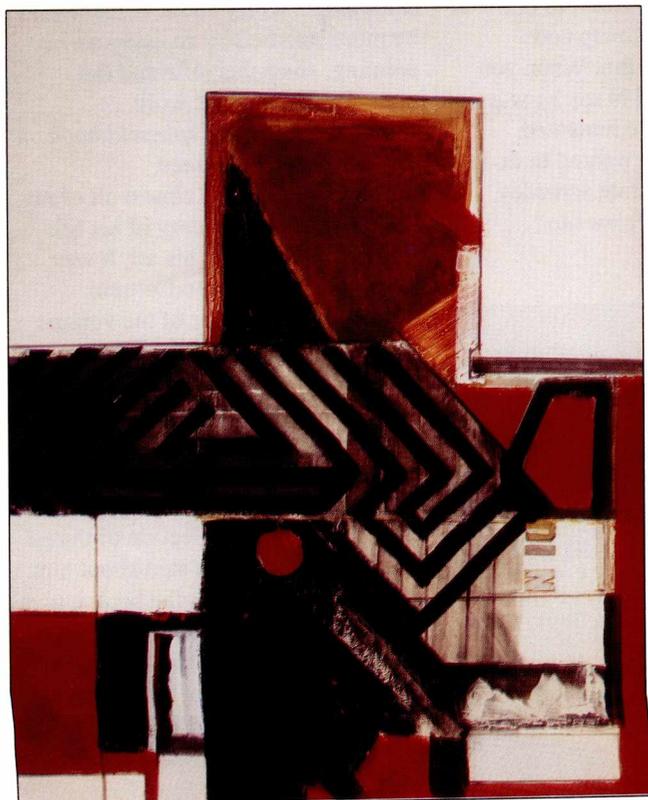


Untitled, 1975.

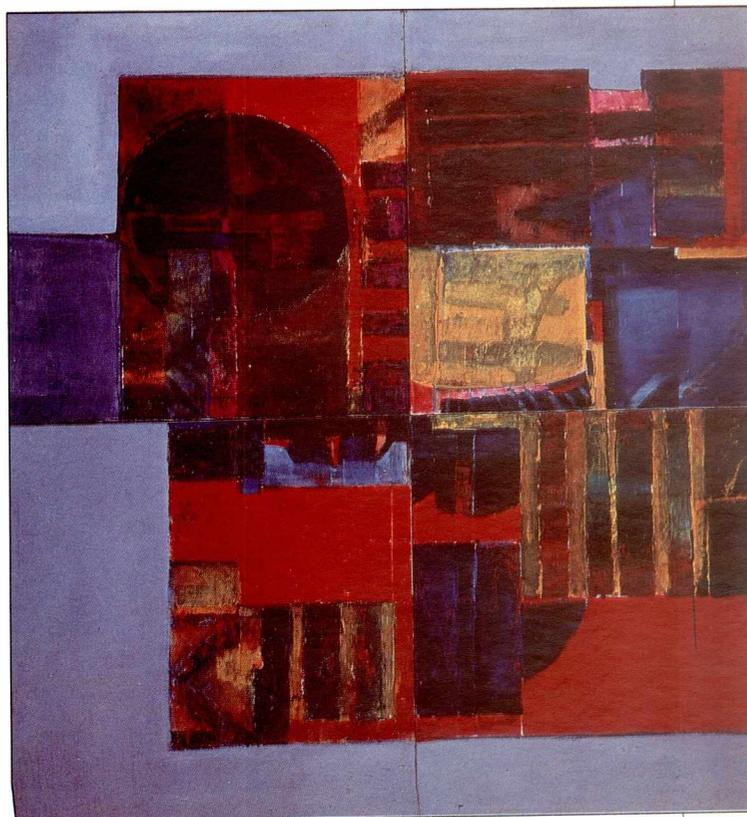


Untitled, 1973.

Lourdes Laborde.



Untitled, 1978.



Untitled, 1969.

An interview with the artist's brother Carlos

● *What sort of childhood did you and Fernando have?*

■ In our childhood we had a certain sense of loneliness because our parents lived in Campeche while sending Juan, Fernando and me to school in Mérida. I don't think that period influenced his painting, because it was a very tranquil time, although that tranquility might have made him introverted.

● *Do you think Juan had an influence on Fernando's painting?*

■ While they were very close, I don't think Juan influenced his painting since Fernando's work was always very personal.

● *What kind of memories do you have of your childhood together?*

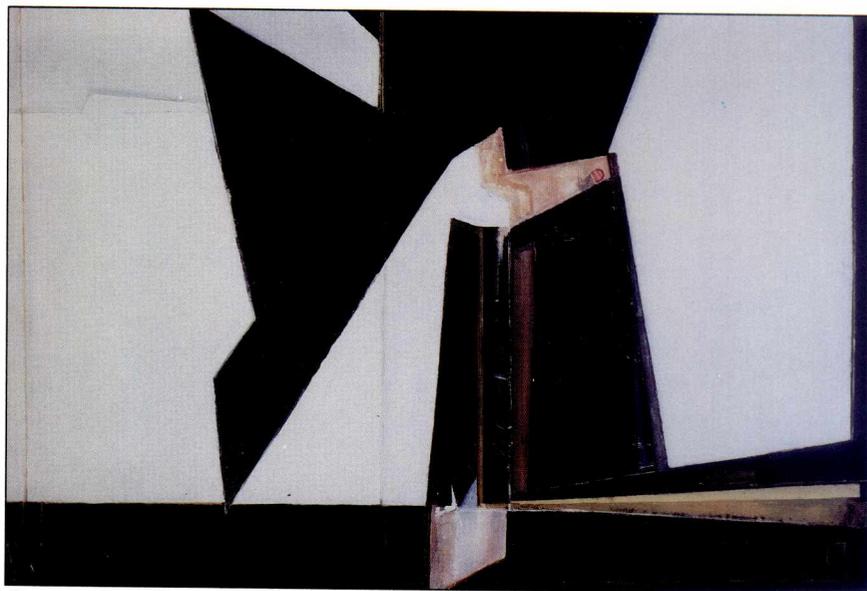
■ Juan was the key figure in our games. We accompanied him, whether it was swimming, tree-climbing or organizing imaginary wars.

● *What was Fernando's life like?*

■ Peaceful, in his house in Coyoacán. If he wasn't drinking he would paint, and if he was painting he wouldn't drink.

● *Why do you think he began to use collage?*

■ In conversation he would change topics with great ease. He would suddenly tell you something, like that he changed his way of painting because he had changed women or houses. Fernando's personality was like a collage, and when he began to



Composition, 1973.

include photos in his collages he was doing his biography.

● *What sort of character did he have?*

■ Although Fernando appeared to be a "lone wolf," his character seemed like a lot of fun; he was a lot of fun. He liked to recall the period when he was married to Leonor Laesas. He lived ducking the plates she used to throw at his head, and to him living and painting seemed like fun. When you talked to him he used to say he was a lucky person, since he remained conscious of what he wanted to do in his life.... A good picture someday.

● *What was life for Fernando?*

■ A search.

● *Was he satisfied with it?*

■ No.

● *What was the primary personal influence on your brother's painting?*

■ His mood. His painting is closely linked to his life.

● *Did Fernando believe in art criticism?*

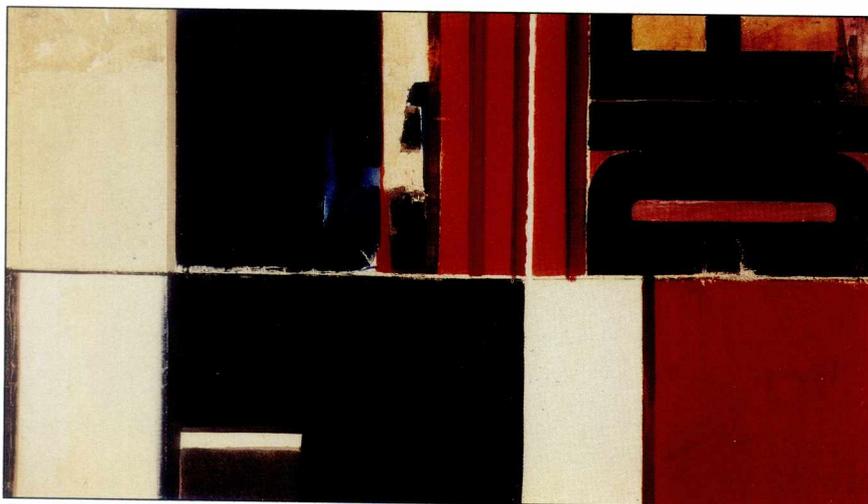
■ He didn't worry about it. He would be more satisfied by an essay on his painting, since this reflected the central attitude of his work.

● *Tell me about this splendid book on Fernando García Ponce.*

■ The book sums up almost all of my brother's work, the story of his life and the best texts on his art. It was published by Fomento Cultural Banamex. The author of the volume was María Luísa Borràs, and Sara Sierra Knopfler was in charge of the coordination and research.

The book has met with great success, since instead of seeking a new appreciation of his work it is a very praiseworthy selection of things that had already been said about him.

When you look at the book it gives you the impression that Fernando painted one single picture that spills over into the infinity of works that make up the totality of his production. It was published as a tribute to him 



Painting No. 4, 1973.

Karla Vander