

Between anguish and hope.

Interview with Arturo Rivera

Many and diverse are the currents that have come forward in the new Mexican painting, novel both for their aesthetic vision and the themes they address. Yet one painter who is particularly outstanding for his conceptual quest is Arturo Rivera, who, in his own words, lives and paints the contradiction between anguish and hope.

Rivera was born in Mexico City in 1945. He studied painting and engraving at the National School of Visual Arts and the San Carlos Academy of the National University of Mexico (UNAM). He has presented ten individual exhibitions in Mexico and abroad and participated in 19 collective exhibitions. Rivera uses a wide variety of media, including acrylics, watercolors, casein, graphite, black pencil, oils on canvas and egg tempera.

Many have defined Arturo Rivera's work as "realist." Yet in the prologue to the catalogue for Rivera's exhibition "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell", Jutta Rütz states that the appropriate term would be "realism of intensities,"

since the artist's mental work consists of synthesizing diverse theoretical concepts and transforming them into a new pictorial language. Or as Luis Carlos Emerich states in his article "Arturo Rivera in the Infernos," published in the book

Rivera (Grupo Financiero Serfín, 1994): "here realism is the conversion of sensations and reflections into visual images."

In this sense, Rivera's raw realism, at times aggressive and at others pessimistic, is but the mani-

The key.

Photos by Jesús Sánchez Uribe



DR. FERNANDO ORTIZ MONASTERIO



Portrait of Dr. Ortiz Monasterio.

festation of his quest to present the deepest contradictions of the human psyche in his paintings. The artist himself has declared that his obsession is to find the beauty that exists within anguish, which produces the inevitable human contradiction between good and evil; or, as Herbert Marcuse expressed it, between Eros and Thanatos.

This is the inspiration behind Rivera's latest exhibition, presented at Mexico City's Modern Art Museum from July 14 to October 19, 1995. It was entitled "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell"—an idea taken from a literary work by the 18th-century English writer and artist William Blake, who believed that creative energy comes from within man and,

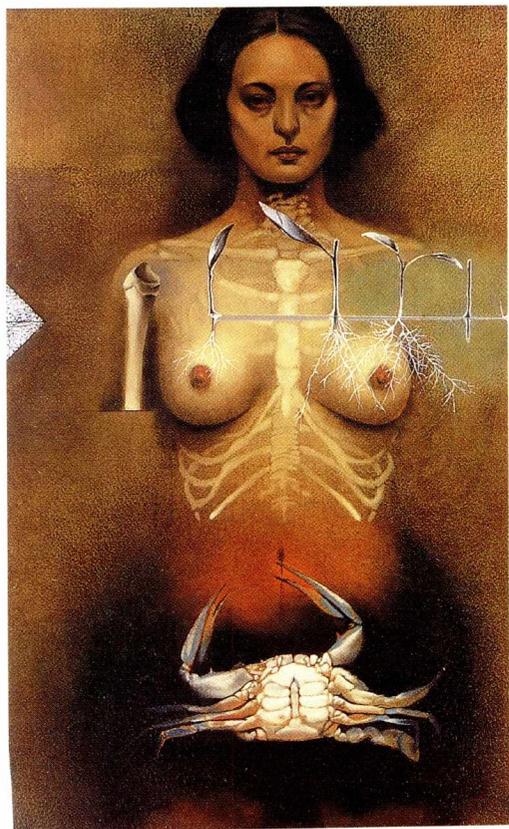
while limited by reason, expresses his passions and contradictions above all.

The paintings referred to in this interview were part of that exhibition. One sees in them the guiding idea of most of Rivera's work: "Without opposites there is no progress. Attraction and repulsion, reason and energy, love and hate are necessary to human existence."

Voices of Mexico interviewed the painter in order to gain a first-hand look at his opinions on these and other issues, above all since his work may be considered a part of Mexican painting that is well on its way to being classic.

Voices of Mexico: *What does painting mean to you?*

Arturo Rivera: My thinking on this issue has been that, for me, it has no meaning; or rather that it has meaning only for the person looking at the picture. It is the viewer who finds the signs, the meaning. For me, more than a meaning, in the final analysis painting would have a sense. That sense is my life.



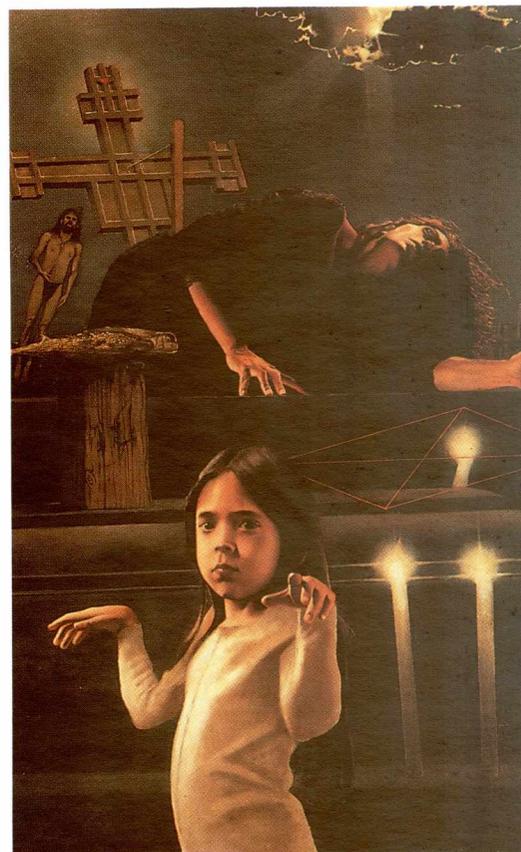
Anatomy of a Goddess.

VM: *When did you find your vocation?*

AR: It's such an old vocation that I no longer recall. For example, in the Colegio Alemán school they gave us very good painting classes. I always liked this, because I think it was the best way I could express myself and understand the world; it was my language. For me, the world entered through my eyes, as for others it enters through touch, hearing or the sense of smell. I even recall that it took a long time for me to learn to speak. So I think it has to do with something akin to a theatrical attitude.

VM: *What is the influence on your painting of the time you spent in New York and Germany?*

AR: The same influence as the fact that I was born in the Nápoles neighborhood [of Mexico City]. Everything is circumstantial. It's obvious that I would be different had I not been in New York or Germany, but this is now inescapably a part of my life. In other words, the years I spent in New York, in Ger-



The Necessary Angel.

many, London and many other places are now a part of me. They are me.

VM: *Culturally, was New York the richest experience?*

AR: Having lived in New York

Rivera's raw realism is but the manifestation of his quest to present the deepest contradictions of the human psyche in his paintings.

many, London and many other places are now a part of me. Thus I am totally influenced by those years, just as I'm influenced by having studied in the Colegio Alemán and many other things. That is, all the things which have happened in my life, whether by acci-

enriched me in many ways. For example, I had to do different kinds of jobs in order to survive. That was enriching. Nevertheless, the answer can be the same as the previous one, because there are people who have never gone abroad and have never needed to. Take



Head of John the Baptist.

the case of José Clemente Orozco, who went to New York when he was already a great painter—I would say a “really great” painter. The case of Diego Rivera was different. Diego was a failure abroad. He went to New York to be part of the vanguard, and he failed. He came back, and never again throughout his life—not even

when he had to go to Russia for an operation, a trip which would have involved a stopover in Paris—did he attend the great centers of the pictorial vanguard. In that case he preferred to get there by another route. Rather than being enriched by his travels he was frustrated by them. His last trip was to Italy; he returned with the idea of mural-

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ism, inventing a whole ideological “*rollo*”¹ and—well, I would rather not express my opinion of Diego Rivera, and it doesn’t matter at this point. But it’s an example which helps demonstrate that one doesn’t necessarily have to go abroad in order to be enriched. Travels to other countries can be valuable, or not. It all depends on the person.

VM: *What Mexican painter has most inspired your work?*

AR: Well, at one point it might have been Orozco, although that doesn’t mean he was the first. Another major influence came from the Impressionists, especially Van Gogh. Rembrandt is also a very strong one.

VM: *What is the value of contrary forces, of opposites, in your painting?*

AR: Well, they have the same value as other forces. The same value as black and white; that is, nothing exists outside the context of the dialectic. The dialectic is the play of forces I seek to demonstrate in my exhibition. That’s why I gave it the title “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.” I took this name from William Blake, who says that the marriage between heaven and hell is explained in the sense that they are two forces which all of us have as human beings, which all the cosmos has; and this energy, which is split in

¹ This slang expression is roughly equivalent to “song and dance” or *schtick*. (Translator’s note.)

*For me, the world entered through my eyes,
as for others it enters through touch,
hearing or the sense of smell.*

two, must supposedly be in balance, since one of the forces cannot live without the other and vice versa.

VM: *In the introduction to your catalogue there is a whole explanation about the sense of "beauty in anguish." What do you think about that combination? Can there be beauty in desperation, in anguish?*

AR: On this subject we can go back to the beginning of my previous answer, when we were speaking about dialectics. If I don't stick to a force which I always carry with me, inside myself, a terrifying force, then my work will not be sincere. But if I fail to fit this force into a form which, in the final analysis, could be called beauty, then it would simply explode. That is to say, beauty has to be realistic, above all in the sense that some manifestation of anguish is always shut inside it. In painting it, you always have to consider the problem that it often contains the opposite of what is being expressed. This apparent contradiction is what keeps me in balance. For a good observer, it will always be easy to find a symbol of hope in almost all of my paintings.

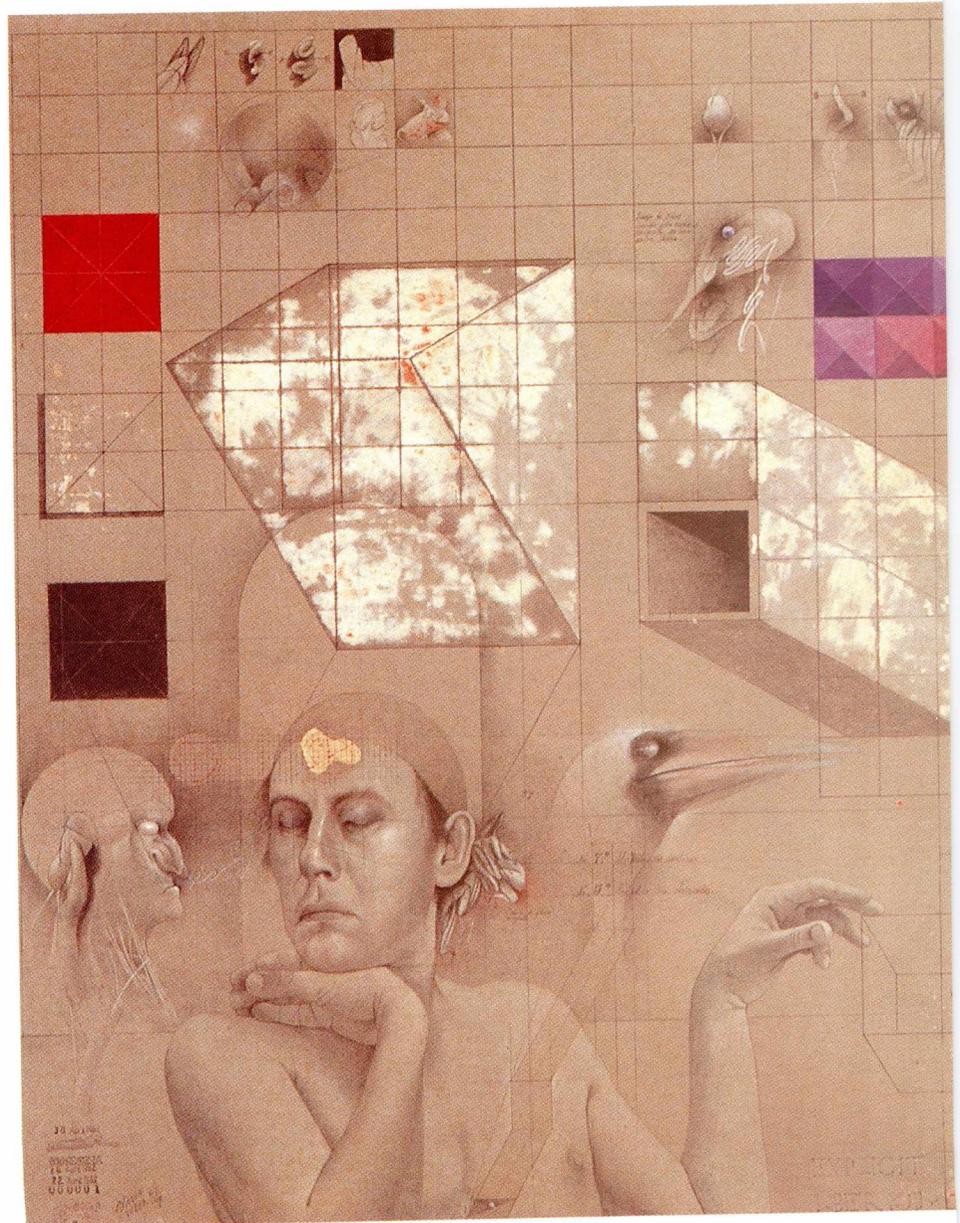
Every human being, I repeat, carries within a negative force and a positive force. One can be cre-

ative only to the degree that one is able to balance them. If we let ourselves be carried away by the negative force alone, this will

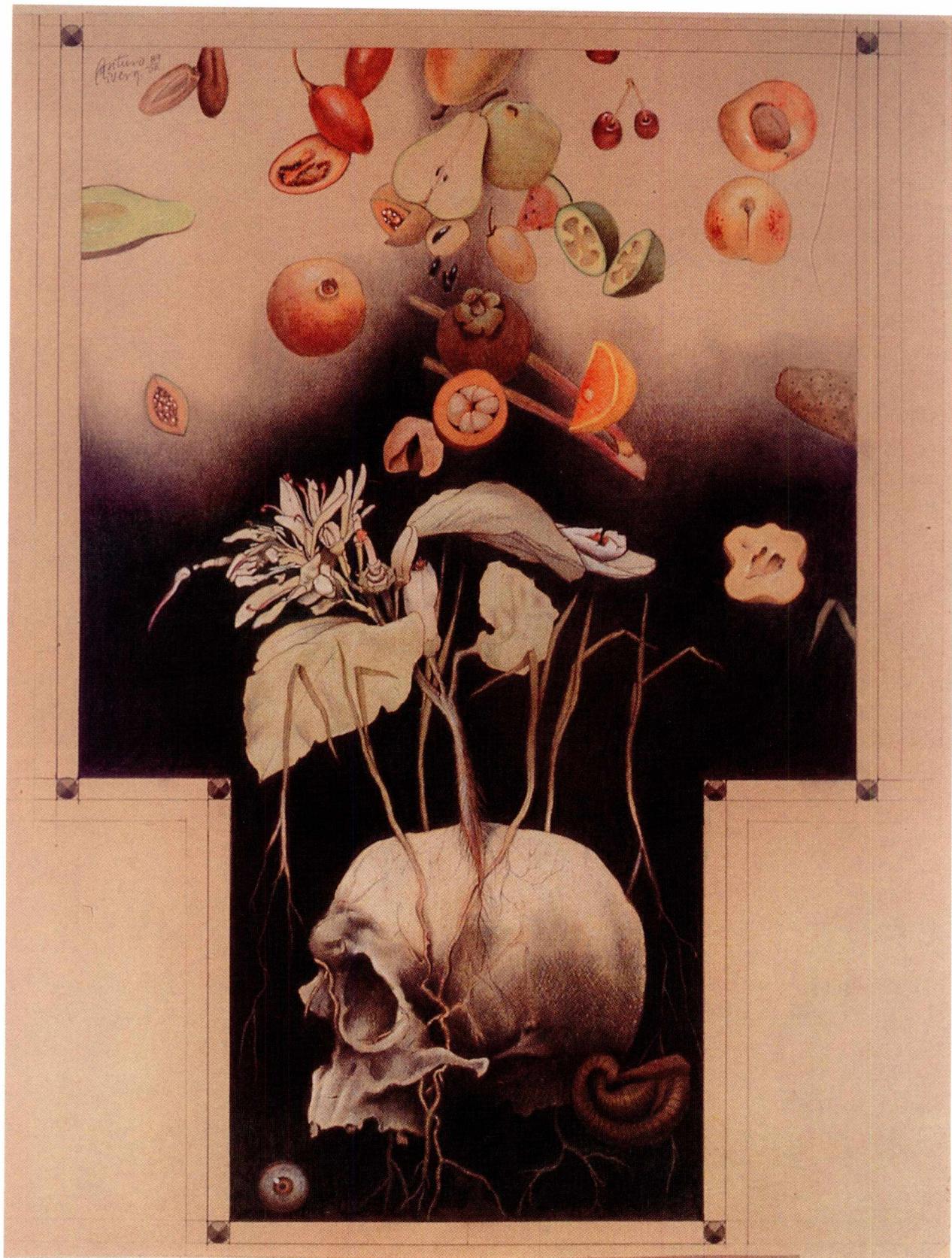
destroy us; but it is precisely because we have that negative part that we can express the beautiful and positive part. The dialectic once again.

VM: *Your work shows the strength of the Catholic religion. What relevance does this have in your painting?*

AR: I don't know what you interpret as Catholic. In reality I am not a believer in the Catholic reli-



Sleeping Man in Grey.



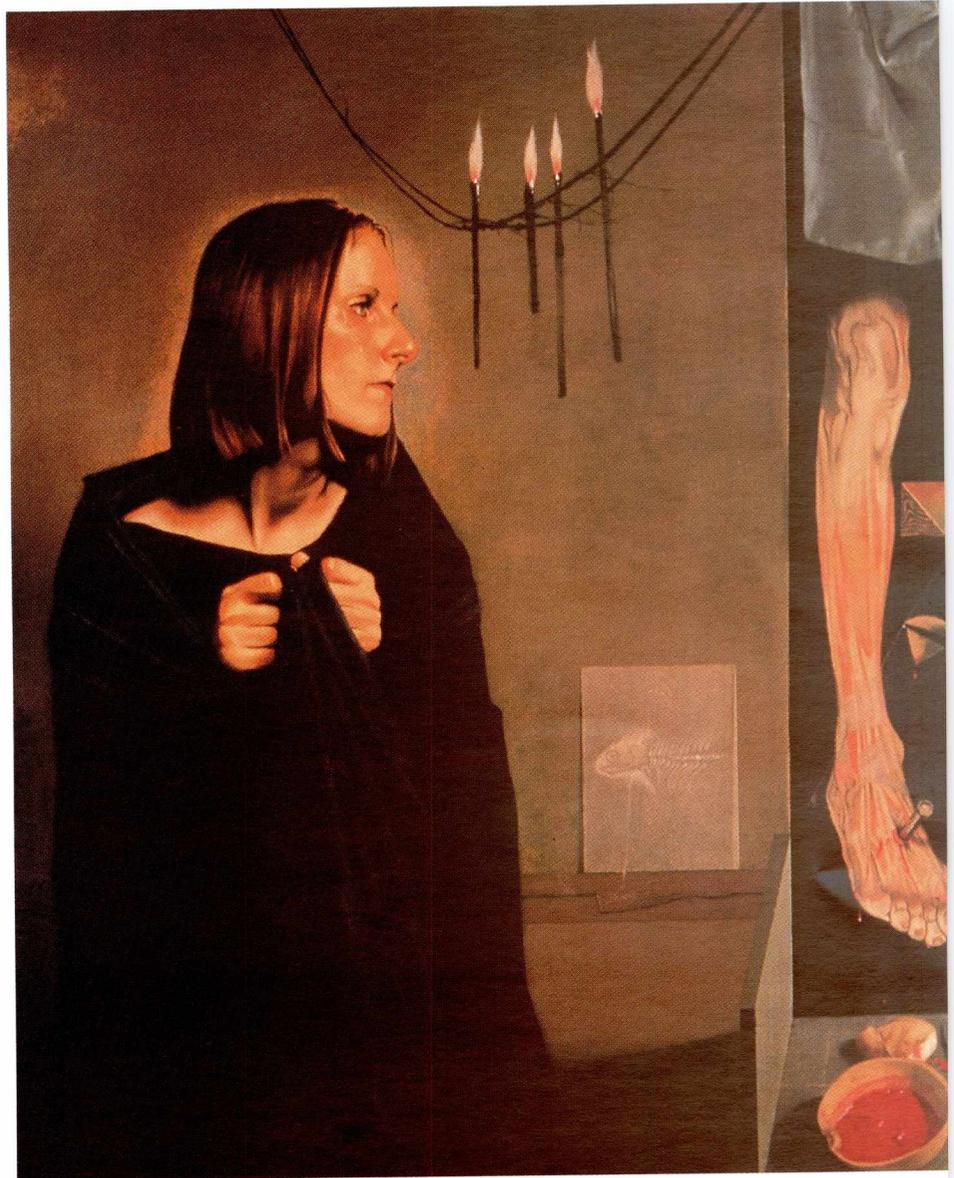
Tribute to García Lorca.

gion, nor any other religion or ideology. I am "a-ideological," which is also an ideological position. So I don't belong to any sect or group. I am irremediably myself, by misfortune and fortune, because absolute individualism is the only thing that can save you now at the end of this century. Instead, I make use of all of human knowledge, whether it be literary or ritual, of which Catholicism is obviously a part.

However, it is true that my painting has a lot of Catholic content. I should add that my relationship to the Catholic religion is not a fortuitous one, since even while studying at secular schools I was always related to a mainly Catholic world. My cousins are Catholic, as are most of my friends and acquaintances, and it's obvious that I belong to and have developed within a Catholic culture, and cannot remove myself from its symbols and influences. The phenomenon of religion can have an unconscious connotation; I don't know what this consists of, but what I am sure of is that I chose symbols from the Bible as well as some from Greek mythology, looking for an archetype. My quest is for an archetype, since for me what is important is to find the essence of things, an essence which is being lost.

VM: For you, what is the significance of the Last Supper and the characters who participate in it?

AR: The Last Supper is also, like everything having to do with the



Stabat mater II.

Catholic religion, or more accurately the Judeo-Christian cultural tradition, a kind of generic symbol, a kind of archetype. In reality not much is known about the Last Supper as a genre within painting. We know that the first comes from the 6th century and the most famous is Leonardo's. I wanted to continue this genre, which so many painters have participated in; it's like nudes or still-

lifes, among the many other genres of painting.

However, while the Last Supper is a symbol which has been very widely reproduced, it is not so common artistically or pictorially. Let me explain: this is a symbol which has instead been reproduced in many kinds of artisan or pseudo-artistic ways. An example is the one by Salvador Dalí; in addition to the fact that I don't like it, I



The last Supper.

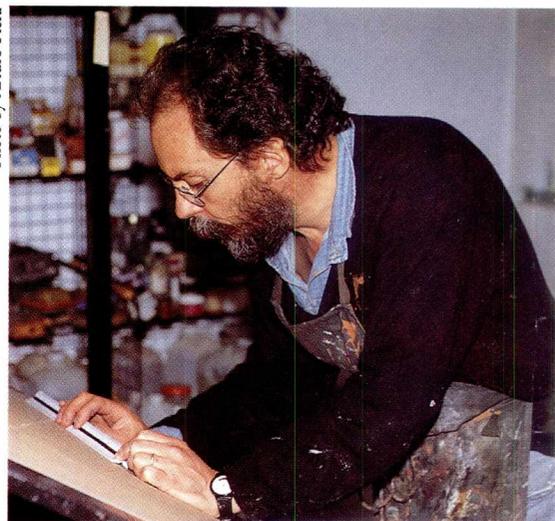
don't think it can be considered artistic in the strict sense. More than an artistic genre, more than a symbol, the Last Supper is an archetypal idea. The symbols are explicit in its content. One cannot conceive of a Last Supper without the blood and bread of the eucharist. These really are symbols. I say this because symbols are often confused with what I call metaphors. When someone asks me what I meant to say when I painted a snail next to a woman's head, as I did in one of my paintings, I answer that this is a met-

aphor. Separately, the two elements are not symbols; alone they don't mean anything, but when placed together they produce a different image with its own meaning. This is what I call a metaphor.

In the Last Supper there are symbols which express the word and the philosophy of Jesus Christ, for example when he said "This will be my blood," etc.

Finally, in terms of the characters who appear in my Last Supper, I just simply wanted to paint a group of friends. ❧

Photo by Arturo Pierra



The artist at work.