

# “Inner Castle”

## Paintings by Alberto Castro Leñero

*José Manuel Springer\**



Photos reprinted courtesy of Alberto Castro Leñero

*Grey Rectangles*, 147.5 x 142 cm, 1996 (acrylic on canvas).

Alberto Castro Leñero (Mexico City, 1951) uses images to condense a series of sensual, mystical moments, encounters with nature,

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Translated by Jacqueline Buswell.

moments of the act of painting, fragments that pass unnoticed. Together these images express the evolution of painting at the end of the century. Castro Leñero’s most recent traveling exhibit,<sup>1</sup> “Inner Castle,” reveals the state of contemporary visual arts concerns.

Through the images of his work, we see the connections between the representation of the body and corporeal sensation, living in a body. “Inner Castle” reminds me of the intense sensation of the Gnostic poets, who tried to approach the notion of the divine

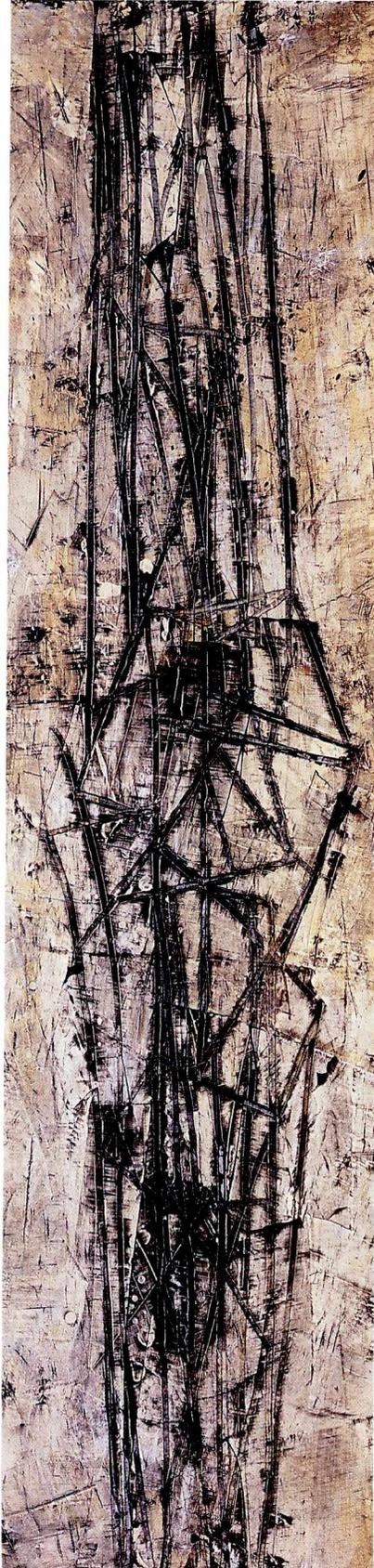
through the exaltation of the body. While for some the body was the prison of the soul, for others, like Alberto, the body is the altar of the sublime, a place where the infinite is invoked.

I have always thought that one of art's main purposes, perhaps its most important, is to put us in touch with immediate reality. This is achieved through the presentation of an anomalous space, one we are not used to seeing or experiencing. In painting this place, the artist goes outside himself to make his introspection evident. But that space is seldom very convincing. Perhaps I should say that it does not speak to us all in the same way. I do not think that this is exactly or exclusively due to the artist's talent, but to our own capacity or incapacity to connect what we see with our inner selves.

I suppose that this problem of connection—to put a name to it—can be found in the mind of every artist and every attentive observer. And, given that all explanations of art are mere speculation subject to constant review, I imagine that Alberto Castro asks himself this same question about connecting.

Like every artist, Alberto creates images to give a name to deeds and thoughts. The exhibit "Inner Castle" presents what the artist thought would serve as a connecting bridge. To a great extent I agree with his intention and the result.

I was lucky enough to have the opportunity of hanging the 16 works of art in this exhibition in the Queen's Quay Gallery in Toronto. To help myself plan the display, I decided to study the works as a continuum. It began with the work *Composition in the Form of an Arch*, a triptych with a female figure as the center piece, with the shoul-



*Interaction*, 157.5 x 46 cm, 1996 (acrylic on canvas).

der arching backward and the face looking out of the painting. The left side panel shows part of the naked body of another woman, her legs and buttocks. In both cases the bodies appear to be young and strong, a constant in this painter's work. They are pictures of elegant sensuality, emphasized with the rough lines of the drawing and the application of the paint. A semi-circle extends from the right panel across the entire triptych. The work takes on a predominantly orange tone suggesting heavenly illumination. I thought this work could be the hors d'oeuvre for the exhibit, given that the light is what gives strength to the composition and reveals the exteriority of the body, a statement telling the viewer that this is a figure surrounded by light. But since the arch echoes the curves of a woman's body, it is also a metaphor for the crescent moon, a desire to represent the feminine by referring to the semicircle.

Of all the paintings, each done in encaustic (wax with pigments), three works stand out for their reference to the female body. The rest slowly move toward abstraction with the use of geometrical shapes or splashes of color. Two paintings, *Form* and *Figure*, made me think that Castro Leñero plays with balance in his pictures. He goes back and forth between the form and the background, between definition and indefinición.

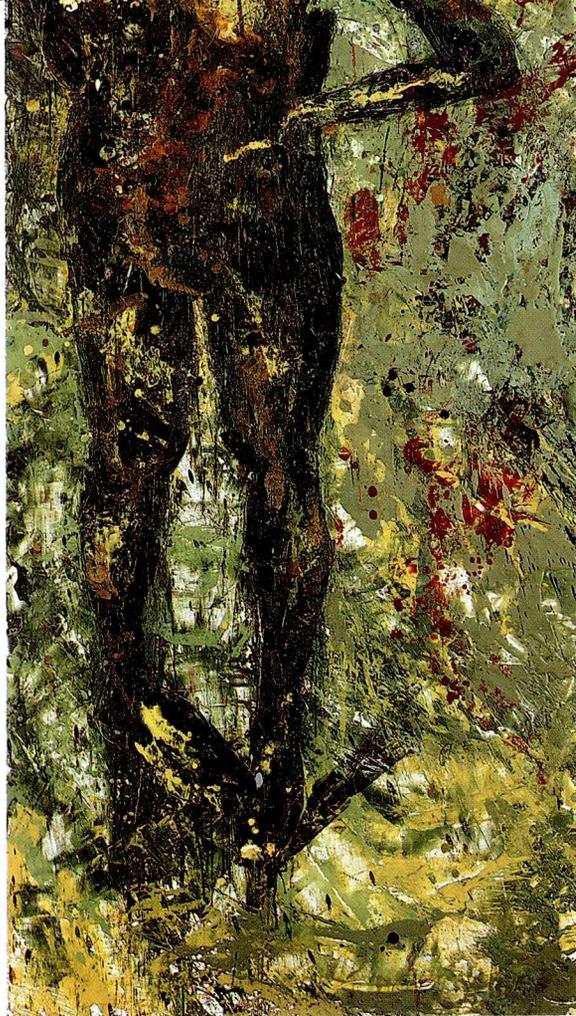
This gave me the key to ordering the rest of the paintings in the exhibition. *Form* refers to that internal space surrounded by matter on all sides. *Figure* openly represents something we can give meaning to because it refers to a real body. We understand the form as something abstract and open, while the fig-



ure has a concrete meaning.

*Illumination* is a work that marks the transition between the body and the form. This and the three subsequent works all have the uneven shape of a broken cross. Here the female body dissolves from the waist upwards and becomes part of the green and yellow background. At this point of the exhibition the observer can experience the transition from figurative sensual painting toward greater abstraction.

If, up to this point, the exhibition has managed to express the transition between the physical and the mental, it requires a qualitative and perceptive jump to introduce the concept of time in a two-dimensional space. To make this leap, I next chose to hang the work where Alberto uses objects in the shapes of forged steel swords that



*Illumination*, 220 x 180 cm, 1996 (encaustic on wood).

stick to the surface of the painting like the hands of a clock.

*Time* is a painting where the pictorial space becomes a real space. The hands move over the center of a silhouette of a male head. Next to it, another painting with an ellipsoid spiral in the middle, *Labyrinth*, suggests the course of the meditation the entire work is subject to. These two paintings together give us the idea of time as a spiral, of a repetitive mantra that enables us to focus our energy.

*Inner Castle* is the name of the work that unifies the conjunction of the artist's intentions and synthesizes a series of themes that hover in the artistic imagination of our times. It contains painted lines that obey a primitive geometric order, like the foundations of a building or a construction raised with rudimen-

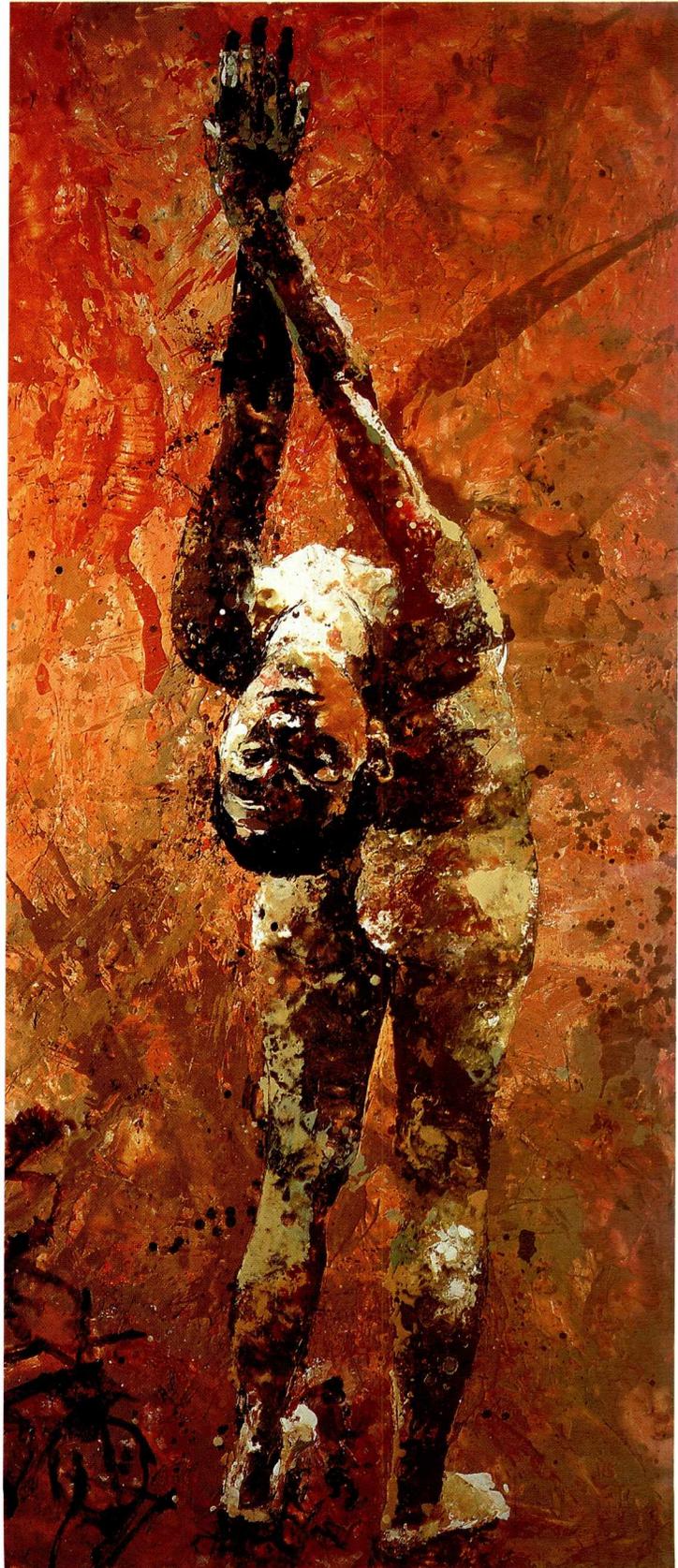
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reminds me of the intense sensation of the Gnostic poets, who tried to approach the notion of the divine through the exaltation of the body.

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tary elements. This is another work in the shape of a T; in the center a female body stands on one leg while the other leg moves in the air. The color is violent. The work makes me think of purgatory full of flames. Religiosity and sensuality come together under the guidance of an impassioned reasoning, themes that I find are common among contemporary painters who use symbolism and metaphors to make a call to the spiritual.

Opinions obviously vary on the relevance of this theme in this day and age. The approaching end of the millennium, a temporal concept that makes us think something old is coming to an end and something new is about to begin, forces us to take a stand. And of course the notion of change acquires diverse shades of meaning. Even so, I think that modern painting has been trying for years to find a philosophical handhold that justifies its survival in the flow of virtual images that make up our culture today.



*Composition in the Form of an Arch 2 (detail), 200 x 100 cm, 1996 (encaustic on wood).*



Composition in the Form of an Arch 1, 200 x 100 cm, 1995-96 (encaustic on wood).

They are pictures of elegant sensuality, emphasized with the rough lines of the drawing and the application of the paint.

If *Inner Castle* is an affirmation of values about sensibility guided by reason, the rest of the exhibit sets out to show where this sensibility can be anchored. And here I think is a good moment to mention another contemporary tendency in art and culture: ecology, the awareness of a physical environment that sustains our very existence.

The last two paintings suggest to me a return to a physical environment: the ocean. Water, the oceans and marine life have always been part of the spiritual kingdom, opposite to the earth, where human materiality resides. The final paintings, two works entitled *Metaphysical Landscape* and *Mouth* are both studies of reflection and purification.

The metaphor that Castro Leñero's paintings offer is not an exhaustive one. It does not present something as perfect but rather, some point halfway between what we see and what we desire. It is just a moment in that sinuous path that takes us back to the beginning, to what is inside us. ■■■

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>This article reviews the Canadian segment of Alberto Castro Leñero's itinerant exhibition, "Inner Castle," in different galleries in the U.S. and Canada in 1996 and 1997. The author refers specifically to the exhibit in Toronto, the last place it was shown, which closed on November 7.

#### Opposite page:

Above: *Nut*, 24 x 14 x 13 cm, 1996 (bronze).

Below: *World of Worlds*, 147.5 x 142 cm (acrylic on canvas).