



Letter Without Envelope

For Alberto Castro Leñero

*Luis Rius Caso**

Dear Alberto,

I was very glad and a great feeling of tranquility came over me as I once again confirmed the forcefulness of your work. I am referring to the undoubted authority that it projects to the viewer—in this case, myself—when he or she perceives in it the guarantee that it exists purely on the basis of its sheer artistic aplomb, the obsessive rigor with which the craft is exercised and, in doing so, technically and conceptually can assert itself with arguments exclusive to painting.

I consider myself a good visual consumer who suddenly becomes saturat-

ed. For professional reasons, I have recently been exposed to not a few artistic proposals intended for a wide public, akin, from an aesthetic point of view, to publicity or different passing events whose main concern is motivating spon-



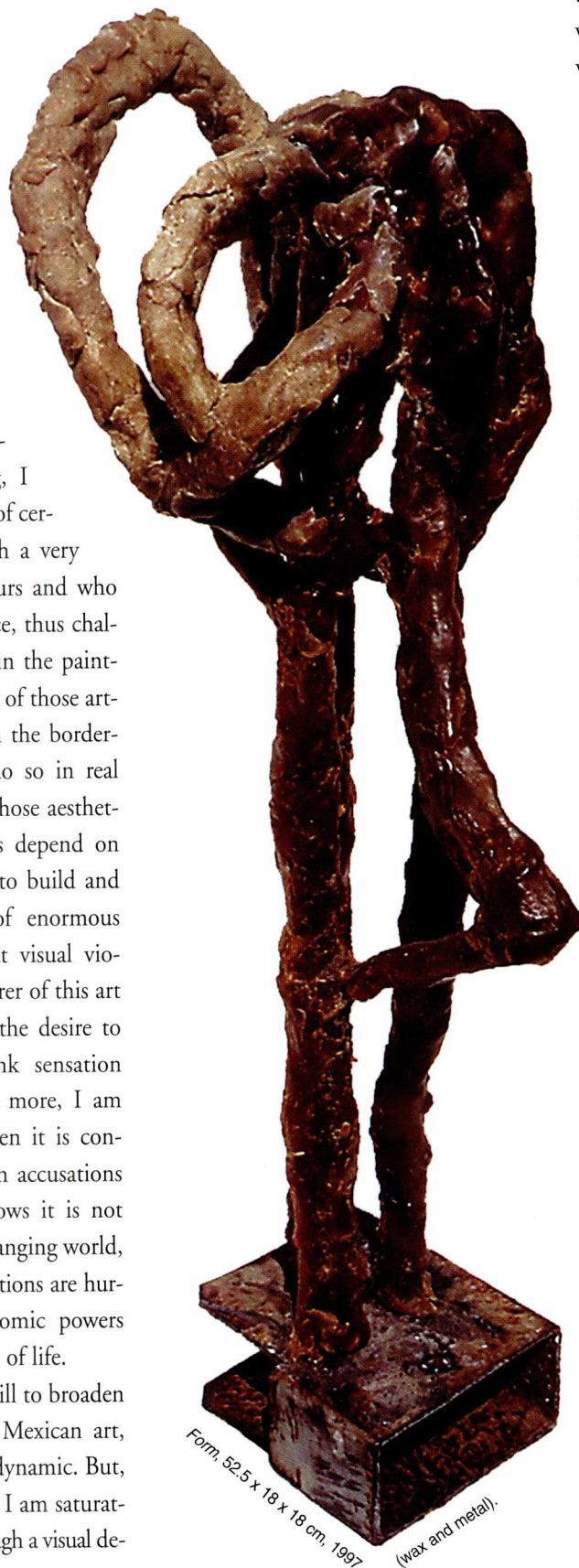
taneous reflection; or to many tridimensional productions that seek in different ways, like those passing events, to expand art to dilute it in day-to-day life; or to an infinite universe of pictorial work by artists born in the 1960s, eager to go through aesthetic categories other than beauty and so be up-to-date in our eclectic scene.

In general, I believe that this kind of phenomena concentrate on confronting one of the imperatives of art in our time, here and elsewhere: redefining the space that belongs to art in today's vast visual culture. Therefore, what is artistic is sometimes more doubt than certainty, more provocation than convention. Some contemporary exponents play on that boundary: on the dividing line

* Director of the National Center for Research, Documentation and Information About Plastic Arts, National Institute of Fine Arts.
Photos of sculptures by Dante Barrera.

between the defined and the undefined, betting on transgression and risk to expand the boundaries of what is known. The challenge is there and perhaps some artists have as their ultimate intention letting the doubt persist, establishing the indeterminate nature of the boundary. Applied to painting, I am thinking, for example, of certain artists who work with a very sparing palette and contours and who fragment the pictorial space, thus challenging the idea of unity in the painting. Or, I am also thinking of those artists who, besides living on the borderline in symbolic terms, do so in real geographical terms, and whose aesthetic and artistic dimensions depend on the vital space they need to build and therefore are possessed of enormous dramatism and even great visual violence. I am a fervent admirer of this art of our time impelled by the desire to experiment and the frank sensation of transgression. What is more, I am particularly interested when it is condemned by doubt or open accusations of fraud because that shows it is not unlike today's dynamic changing world, where the same condemnations are hurled at politics, the economic powers and, in general, all aspects of life.

I celebrate, then, the will to broaden out and redefine today's Mexican art, which is so vigorous and dynamic. But, as I said at the beginning, I am saturated. In fact, I am going through a visual de-



Form, 52.5 x 18 x 18 cm, 1997
(wax and metal).

toxication process in which I identify with a Julio Cortázar character who vomits images to clean his eyes. And it is precisely in that process in which your painting has let me recover a clear, spontaneous perception guided by personal taste. When I look at it, I value its rigorousness and the undoubted hierarchy from which it reveals itself. To a great degree I believe that this hierarchy exists because your work puts the viewer at a healthy distance, and he/she registers this on the basis of —and despite— the immediate impact of what catches his/her eye, reminding us of the idea of the auratic value of art coined by Walter Benjamin. That feeling is also the effect of the self-sufficiency you have doggedly forged in dominating your craft and in your ability to affirm a personal poetic the signs of which remit us to the work itself rather than any reference points of immediate visual reality, even though your work often contains them.

Speaking of those reference points, the clearly recognizable figures that often populate your paintings —nudes, geometric structures, or your own face, among others— I would like to say the following: I agree with the critiques that have so often and so positively referred to your work saying that these figures constitute a kind of pretext of supporting elements to give way to the main protagonists, the colors, brush strokes, transparencies, textures, veils and the whole spectrum of resources that give your artistic discourse a declaredly pictorial character. I agree. but I also think that these recognizable

shapes are a cross between the artistic and the aesthetic dimensions that have always predominated in your work. I will admit as visual pretexts the woman viewed from above in *Fortunes*, the human figures in the paintings *Illumination 1996* and *Composition in the Form of an Arch 1* and *2*, or the bronze shark jaw which is the theme of the admirable piece *Mouth*, for example. But my gaze cannot avoid the fascination that they project as shapes nor the "landing" in the world of visual reality that as a viewer they force me to make. It seems to me that your painting puts forward an up-to-date re-assignment of meaning to beauty and other aesthetic categories which many artistic discourses have dealt with, but almost always without that healthy distance I mentioned.

Among the disquieting efforts to revalue painting as an artistic genre, carried out in different fora throughout the world with what in Europe was called the trans-avant-garde as their starting point, I think the Mexican experience has been important. I also believe that you have contributed decisively to that experience, to a great degree because of the vocation that distinguishes your career. I recall round table discussions in which we emphasized the difficulties confronted by artists of your generation who grew up without the founding myths so typical of the avant-garde (like the Mexican Renaissance which gave birth to muralism or the rupture of the 1960s which projected a group of young artists), or the extra-artistic support of all kinds that in their time opened up insuperable showcases.

I would like to talk to you now about those difficulties that at a distance seem to have brought about very positive results in terms of artistic quality. They established routes with no more handholds than those of the craft itself and, as was your case, they served to set early on original poetics whose solidity made them immune to both the folklore, old-fashioned manias and the crazes on the other extreme of the spectrum that have accompanied globalization.

Please forgive the disorderly presentation of my ideas that I have just jotted down in this letter but that I have begun to develop after looking at your painting, which I have fortunately had the opportunity to enjoy again.

I hope to see you soon. Meanwhile, I send you my most affectionate embrace.

Luis Rius Caso

Alberto Castro Leñero

Born in Mexico City in 1951, Alberto Castro Leñero studied graphic communications and visual arts at the National School of Plastic Arts from 1971 to 1978. In 1978 he received a scholarship to study painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Bologna, Italy. Castro Leñero has illustrated different cultural and educational publications for institutions like the Public Education Ministry, the National Institute of Fine Arts and the Fondo de Cultura Económica publishing house. From 1982 to 1987, he taught visual experimentation in the UNAM National School of Plastic Arts.

Since 1974, Castro Leñero has participated in seven group exhibitions and has had nine of his own, in Mexico, different European countries, Japan, the United States and Canada. Some of the group exhibitions he has participated in have been Mexico City's Modern Art Museum "On the Other Side of Time" in 1983; "Mexican Art," a mobile exhibit that toured several countries of Europe and Japan in 1992; and "The Compound Future" at the House of Latin America in Paris. Of his individual shows, "No Turn Allowed" (1982) in the Modern Art Museum and "Symbols" (1990) at the Modern Art Gallery, both in Mexico City; "Ex-temple" (1995-1996), a show of painting and sculpture in the city of Zacatecas, Mexico; and "Inner Castle" (1996-1997), his last mobile exhibit that toured the United States and Canada.

Alberto Castro Leñero has been a member of Mexico's National System of Creators since 1993. In 1995 he was selected to participate in the National Fund for Culture and the Arts Exchange Program that involves artists from Mexico, the United States and Canada, enabling him to visit New York for two months to meet other artists and see their work.