



# ZALCE DEEP CURRENTS<sup>1</sup>

*Teresa del Conde\**

Pantry with Vase, 65 x 122 cm, 1985  
(acrylic on masonite).

The life of Alfredo Zalce, full of ethical, social and pedagogical commitments, all carried out in an exemplary fashion, could make you think his work is part of some kind of unified programmatic definition. Nothing is further from the truth. With the exception of a few of his murals, the body of his pictorial work might even seem excessively eclectic if one fundamental principle could not be sussed out: Zalce is a superb sketch artist, even though he does not always make line his main protagonist. Two more principles can be intuited. The first, in my view, refers to the following: in several periods of his long, fecund career, he has been determined to oppose the dominant styles of the period (I am referring exclusively to his easel painting), even when the theme itself may fit in with the ideas current at the time. The second principle is a consequence of the first: he tries to evoke an emotional response through content, but the contents themselves are linked to a determination of form that in the end is stronger than they are. He is not tied down; everything that happens in the world of form during his time makes him restless, and as a result he somehow ends up becoming part of the so-called avant garde, without really taking on their mantle. Undeniably he has deliberately taken on

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Photos reproduced by Arturo Piera.

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*Self-Portrait*, 53 x 37 cm, 1986 (watercolor on paper).

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board different influences, to the extent that he has produced the resurgence of deep currents of diverse origin. If the very well known psychologist and art historian René Huyghe had come across Zalce's work, he might well have thought that his way of life, his savoir faire, carried with them artistic manners that the works are corollaries of.

During Zalce's youth and early adulthood, he was, inevitably, involved in the nationalist project which, of necessity —although not always explicitly— used culture as a way of fostering awareness of identity. He traveled throughout practically the whole country. A vivacious, energetic man, isolated from the persecution of fame and the polemics that took up the time of the Big Three<sup>2</sup> (he, like Chávez Morado, belongs to the second generation of muralists), he has absorbed everything in his path like a sponge and is current about what is going on elsewhere. He has never postulated, like Siqueiros did, that art is first and foremost a weapon, nor does he seem to have harbored the idea that art plays an “overwhelming” role in the lives of whole peoples,

despite having dedicated practically all his life to it. Neither has he cultivated in his work that teleological idea that presupposes the existence of progress in art. Instead, he has journeyed with curiosity and a permanent willingness to experiment in all the artistic disciplines with-

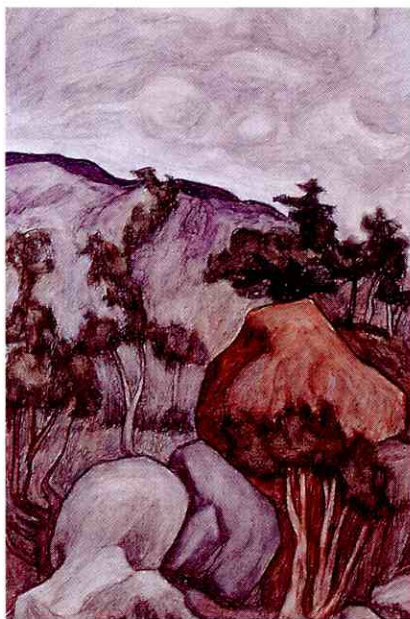


*Fish Devourer*, 80 x 60 cm, 1987 (acrylic on masonite).

out ever forgetting the demands of the cause. Several of his murals speak to this point.

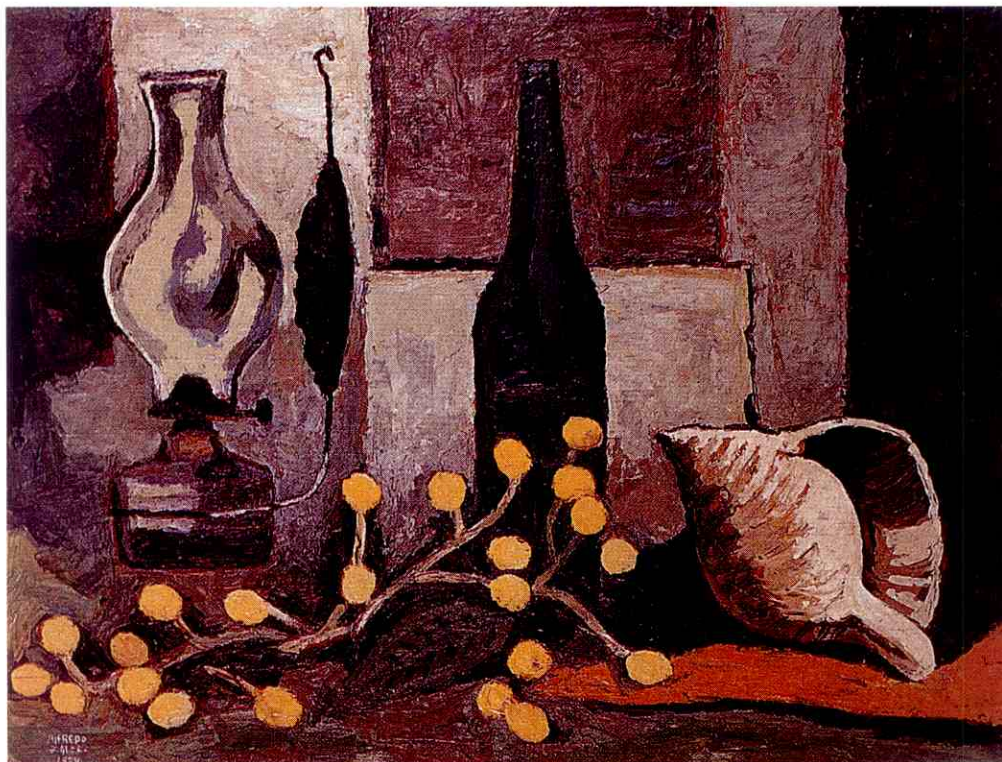
Pablo O'Higgins wrote that, besides their quality, Zalce's murals renewed the social content of the muralist movement. For the most part, this important segment of his work has been painted far from the hubbub of the capital. His murals "were soon surrounded by the silent admiration of the inhabitants of the cities and towns where they were created," writes O'Higgins.<sup>3</sup>

I feel the need to say that the topics of his murals —except perhaps the one on the main staircase at the Michoacán Museum, which is probably his best— fit into the idealistic, confident context



*Large Rocks*, 57 x 37 cm, 1993 (watercolor on paper).

that determined the movement's rhetoric and special character. It can be argued, as Robert Hoozee understood so well in his 1993 essay "An Upsurge of Images," that what was being so diligently sought was not an iconographic social program, but the creation of a kind of gospel of images divided into familiar categories of opposites: oppression/liberation, consciousness/barbarousness, dignity of the common man/vileness of the capitalist, corruption/the fight against corruption, violence/peace. No one should be surprised, therefore, that Zalce's murals — like those of all the muralists except Orozco— tend to overestimate these sharp distinctions that real life experiences too often blur.



*Still Life with Conch Shell and Medlar-Tree Berries*, 53 x 69 cm, 1979 (duco on masonite).



*Carnival*, 79 x 60 cm, 1987 (acrylic on canvas).

With regard to Zalce's easel work, we cannot really speak of an "evolution" in his painting. His modernistic impulses mixing Mexicanisms with Frenchified strands —art critic Raquel Tibol jokes that Zalce belongs to "l'école mexicaine"— are already present in his youth.

Zalce has simultaneously practiced multiple modes, most of them related to post-impressionism, with the use of geometrical shapes rooted in a "Mexican style" cubism, with cloisonné synthetism in a slightly "Gauguin style." He has paid tribute to Matisse and at various times been one of the most typical exponents of the Picassoism also sometimes cultivated, although very differently, by Alfonso Michel and Manuel Rodríguez Lozano.

Raquel Tibol entitled her essay for the catalogue of the retrospective that she selected for the Chapultepec Modern Art Museum in 1981 "Zalce y la indagación plástica" (Zalce and the Visual Arts Inquiry). And it is very true that Zalce has spent his life inquiring into all the plastic arts disciplines and forms. In his *Self-Portrait* (1943), the good-looking face that gazes outward from the canvas at the viewer inquires above all into his own personality, more serious and contemplative than the smiling, cordial visage that the painter usually presents people in real life. In this painting, he does not opt for the linear, a term coined by Bernard Berenson in his studies of the Florentine painters, but for the pictorial. By contrast, the linear keynote is patently clear in the stylized portrait of the young blond woman wearing a straw hat. To my



Head, 147 x 87 cm, 1972 (tapestry).

Zalce has simultaneously practiced multiple modes, most of them related to post-impressionism, within a "Mexican style" cubism.

knowledge, there are two versions of this painting, the first more or less contemporary with the *Self-Portrait* mentioned above and the second from a much later period, resolved in shades of blue.

In 1986 and 1987, the painter did another self-portrait without showing a physiognomy of any sort whatsoever. His half-body figure is depicted immersed in the atmosphere of his studio, reflected in a glass ball, a recourse with a remote precedent, that of the famous self-portrait by Parmigianino (ca. 1530) and several other more recent ones by Roberto Montenegro.

Zalce's fascination for rural or urban landscapes has made this a unique genre for him. He has done them in all his periods, in a variety of styles, from the realistic and very elongated *Landscape of Morelia* (1966) to the turbulent *Large Rocks* (1993), which although painted in watercolors, still reminds the viewer surprisingly of Van Gogh and, therefore, of Pablo O'Higgins.

The still lifes are another notable body of work and several of them are masterpieces of twentieth-century Mexican painting. Some in a rather *sui generis* fashion allude to the way in which painters of all latitudes absorbed the splendid lessons of Morandi. Others recreate the possession of objects that should be dear to the painters, like the one that brings together an oil lamp and a bottle of wine, a shell and a spray of medlar-tree berries (1979), creating volume among the elements through chiaroscuro effects. Still others are purposely flat, imitating collage although absolutely nothing has been

glued on, like the one that shows a head in profile (which is a thing, not a person), flanked by an earthen jug and a glass bottle.

These two genres, the one that opens itself to the exterior and the one that closes itself into the interior of a space, have become recurring motifs. And in the same way, traditional scenes are very frequent, whether they show several figures doing something or taking part in a ritual or, on the contrary, they capture the moment, the movement, the demeanor (conduct, attitude, idiosyncrasy) of a single figure. The young Yucatecan woman who, seated and barefoot, is putting her little finger in her mouth as she looks into the distance with indescribable parsimony is an example of the latter; this 1979 painting is done in broad strokes.

The next year Zalce painted a scene inspired by the Day of the Dead festivities in Janitzio, dividing the composition starkly in graded planes using lighted candles, the figures in front of them honoring their dead and the shadows they project to achieve the effect. This is not a "naturalist" painting (Zalce only very rarely uses imitation); rather it is a studied composition with a conscientious effect. Seven years later, in 1987, he



*Sleeping Woman with Mirror*, 136 x 79 cm, 1977 (oil on canvas).

Painted a *Carnival* with some reminiscences of the stridentists.

I am not so sure that one of the primary functions of art is objectifying the subjective with the aim of being able to perceive it with one's own eyes. The first viewer of any painting is the artist. But the perception of quality is a psychological phenomenon linked to taste. Each person develops it differently. It can even be an aptitude inherited from the earliest phases of life, but social and cultural conditioning is also inevitable.

As people say in the countryside, "You have to know how to find the river again, regardless of its volume or what drives it." And I think this saying is applicable to Alfredo Zalce's career. ■■■

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> First published in a longer version in the Government of Michoacán's *Alfredo Zalce, Artista michoacano* (Mexico City: Gobierno del Estado de Michoacán-SEP-IPN-Instituto Michoacano de Cultura, 1997), pp. 23-26.

<sup>2</sup> The author is referring to painters and muralists Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros and José Clemente Orozco. [Editor's Note.]

<sup>3</sup> Pablo O'Higgins, *Mural Painting of the Mexican Revolution* (Fondo Editorial de la Plástica Mexicana, 1985).