



Photo by Jesus Sánchez Uribe

Devils Playing with Rings, 150 x 110 cm (oil on linen).

LUIS ZARATE Sorcerer of Form¹

*Christine Frérot**

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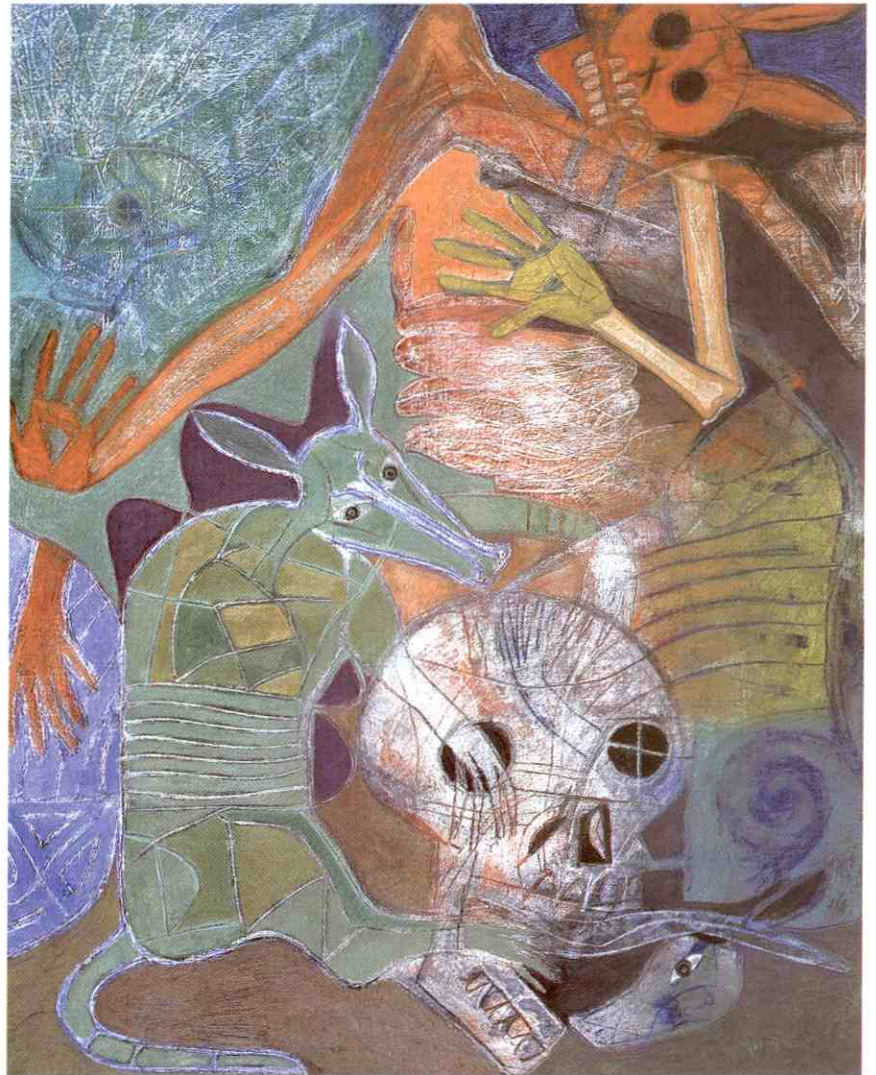
Fish, 188 x 206 cm (oil on linen).

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and some of his compositions possess the mystery and magic of the rites
and offerings whose timelessness he extends.

Zarate's painting has always seemed to me to be like a game of mirrors (and drawers?) in which the cracks and cuts dramatize and desiccate the image, also fragmented on the inside by a new weave of striates, streaks and stripes that the artist is currently practicing. "I want to give my colors the look of weaving." A "tidy" painting, without dribbles, drawn with care, in which the artist, in a kind of scaling of space, builds a false chaos that must put the multiple shinnings of the human kaleidoscope back into their proper place. In this organized, sometimes hermetic, chaos, Zárate's syntax introduces the chain of forms and characters in which the correspondence of forms and ideas reveals a will to unity.

Like Morales and Toledo, Luis Zárate exercises the art of de-multiplication, repetition, visual incentives of that magic that the artist distills with the tip of his brush. The exalted variegation of his paintings merges with the pleasure (or angst, as he himself underlines) of painting. This implosion of the structure, this delirium of colors, simultaneously dull and shining, opaque and transparent ("to keep my distance from drawing, thanks to the streaks and stripes"), this tactile aspect of matter, have liberated his painting from the subjection to line. They have opened his space to visual vibration, to a cinetism that multiplies the viewer's readings. Fragmentations, transparencies and coverings recreate infinite combinations, the incisions that cut the images are more than mere formal artifices; they are the expressions of gestures anchored in the painter's memory, who is also a sculptor: the pictorial dough is kneaded with the hands, like the earth; the forest is opened with machete blows, to let the light filter or pour in.

Zárate does not like to talk about his history. There is a profound permanence in his truth, that of painting and that of living, both closely linked and inseparable. Zárate is a solitary man and it is not easy to penetrate his mystery. Probably he is at one and the same time as simple and as complex as his painting, which requires subtle reading. His life in Oaxaca with his children and his dogs is slow and follows the rhythm of the Earth. All the baroque-ness



The Armadillo's Dance, 100 x 80 cm (oil on linen).

* Art critic.



Grasshopper Scribes, 110 x 140 cm (oil on linen).

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of the shining of long banana leaves, of the power of horses and bulls
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that emerges on his canvas comes from the night of time, from the poetry and beliefs of his ancestral culture and from nature. While Mexico is what inspires Zárate and what he paints, his imaginings should not be confused with the “Mexican-ness” that he distances himself from and denounces, saying, “At the beginning, it is a resource necessary to painting, but it can become definitive. Sometimes it is a kind of refuge from fear. It is a form of retreat and in that retreat lies the danger of Mexican-ness. I think that if we should fear anything it is that thing called ‘Mexican-ness.’” He also has his reservations about the Oaxacan school. “I think it is very limiting to talk about a school. For me, it was a market that created that school and that market demands the existence of a typically Oaxacan style. We should be cautious and very prudent.”

Zárate says that the quest for identity “is also a Western discovery” and that he cannot see things like that. “To a certain extent, identity is conscious, but it disappears when you paint.” Zárate, however, has picked his side. And it is not, as might be thought, the side of the past. It is the side of the whisper and trembling of the forest, of the shining of long banana leaves, of the power of horses and bulls and of the erotic tenderness of women. The artist is not an illustrator of myths, but a creator; his work, in a true sexualization of reality, is dedicated tacitly or explicitly to creation and copulation. Neither messages nor literature should be sought in his painting. Rather, what should be understood is that we are dealing with the essential elements of an invisible, syncretic, metaphoric order where you experience a life cycle in which women are the chosen.

Zárate makes no reference to any pro-indigenist hypothesis, to any Mexicanist exoticism. He paints alone, more for himself, for the idea that he has of life. Beyond fashion, currents, obligations, in the solitary pleasure of finding himself, in love with that rural world of which he partakes, Zárate has nevertheless been able to renew the teachings of his Oaxacan mentors by creating new images. The sunflowered vibrations of his colors have a sort of savage brilliance, and some of his compositions possess the mystery and magic of the rites and offerings whose timelessness he extends. ■■■

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Three Heads, 46 x 65 cm (oil on linen).

NOTES

¹ Abridged version of the original article published in the catalogue *Les Sorciers de la forme* for the collective, itinerant showing of Oaxacan painters in France (Paris, 1992).



LUIS ZARATE

Luis Zárate was born in 1951 in Santa Catarina Cuanana, Tlaxiaco, in the state of Oaxaca. From 1974 to 1986 he lived in Paris, where he studied first in the National School of Decorative Arts and later at the famous Atelier 17. During that stay, he purified his line and nourished the obsessions that always parade through his paintings, whether hidden or visible: horses, women, birds.

Zárate had showings before he left for Paris. Over the years, he has had more than 100 exhibitions in different countries of Europe and the Americas. Among his most significant individual exhibitions are the 1970 show at Oaxaca's Ex-Convent of Santo Domingo, "The Spirit of Metamorphosis" in the Xalapa Anthropology Museum in the state of Veracruz in 1992 and his most recent, this year, "The Oscillations of the Imagined" at Oaxaca's Quetzalli Gallery.

Among the group exhibitions are "Latin America in Paris" (1982) at the Gran Palais and "About Juan Rulfo," at the Mexican Cultural Center in Paris (1984). In 1986, he participated in the Magic-Image Collective which presented *Documenta*, a collective work, in Kassel, Germany, where many of the latest trends in art converge. In 1992, he participated in "The Sorcerers of Form" in France, as well as in the inaugural exhibition of the Contemporary Art Museum of Oaxaca. He has received several international prizes.

In addition to painting, Zárate has another passion to which he dedicates part of his free time: plants. He is also part of the Technical Committee of the Santo Domingo Cultural Center's Botanical Garden in Oaxaca, where he currently resides.



Talking with the Dog, 52 x 93 (oil on linen).