



Scenario with Dark Forms, 140 x 140 cm, 1993 (mixed technique/canvas).

VICENTE ROJO

Fifty Years of Constant Work

*Lelia Driben**

Vicente Rojo arrived in Mexico in 1949, when the twentieth century was just rubbing edges with its second half. The 1950s marked the emergence of the second international avant garde. It was a kind of birth, or rebirth, of

a multitude of pictorial proposals that took the baton from the century's first avant garde, made innovations and carried previous formal transfigurations to an extreme. In Mexico, the painters that most appropriated this turn by the international avant garde made their first appearance around 1960. Rojo was one of the active protagonists of the generation that introduced

*Art critic and narrator.
Photos reprinted courtesy of Vicente Rojo.

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Stela 12, 224 x 35 x 32 cm, 1996 (mixed technique/wood).

the avant garde as a group to his new home, Mexico. And since we are talking about births, we should remember that Rojo said more than once that he had been reborn in Mexico. He arrived at the age of 17 without a passport and, as a refugee, was immediately given Mexican citizenship. This is how, generously and fairly, President Lázaro Cárdenas welcomed the heirs of the Spanish Republic, banished by Francoism, inaugurating an invaluable tradition for other exiles.

In 1999, Vicente Rojo celebrated 50 years of living and working in Mexico. He began work as a designer, decisively renewing the discipline's forms as they were practiced here. He was director of the Madero Printing House and Era Ediciones publishing house, among other contributions to culture and cultural institutions. Here, he also began to paint. And for more than 40 years he has occupied an unquestioned place in the history of Mexican art. But what is most remarkable, and —why not say it— most visibly moving, is that after that almost half a century of work, his art is vigorously sound.

For Rojo, the articulation of his work in series means a moment of origin. And, in effect, it is that. There is, however, an entire body of work that dates from before and is completely unknown except to those who followed his painting from the very beginning, around 1958, and those who saw his Modern Art Museum 1996 retrospective.

He had experimented with figurative painting closely akin to realism. Some paintings and drawings remain from that learning period that show his natural talent, particularly considering that he is

self-taught except for a few very poor sculpture classes in his native city, Barcelona, after the civil war, where there were never any materials for sculpting. Among the paintings from the first period are one impeccably done canvas of a guitarist and another, small and wise, of a flautist. But his first individual exposition, at the Proteo Gallery in 1958, centered around a set of paintings called “War and Peace,” if I remember correctly. The canvases alluding to war are marked by a strident, clearly expressionist palette, a world of difference with regard to his best known work. The paintings dedicated to peace, in contrast, with their measured images, are faithful to the topic.

A year later, the same gallery presented another Rojo show titled “Premonitions”, that heralds his later organization of series. In some of these paintings, Rojo seems to be slowly finding his way. *Fire*, for example, traces a soft, luminous, swirling

mesh of abstract forms whose poetic takes up the entire surface of the canvas. It is a poetic that will flower again polarized toward the void in many works of *Signals*, the first series.

But before *Signals* —although sometimes overlapping with it— between 1964 and 1966 approximately, came *Destructions of an Order* mainly made up of diptychs, in which Rojo contrasted regular structure with chaos in what seemed like reflecting mirrors. He also incorporated geometry and waste items adhered to the canvas just as they were, without any special treatment, thus shattering its two-dimensionality. In this stage prior to *Signals*, triangles dominated, almost as though serving notice that they would crisscross the series.

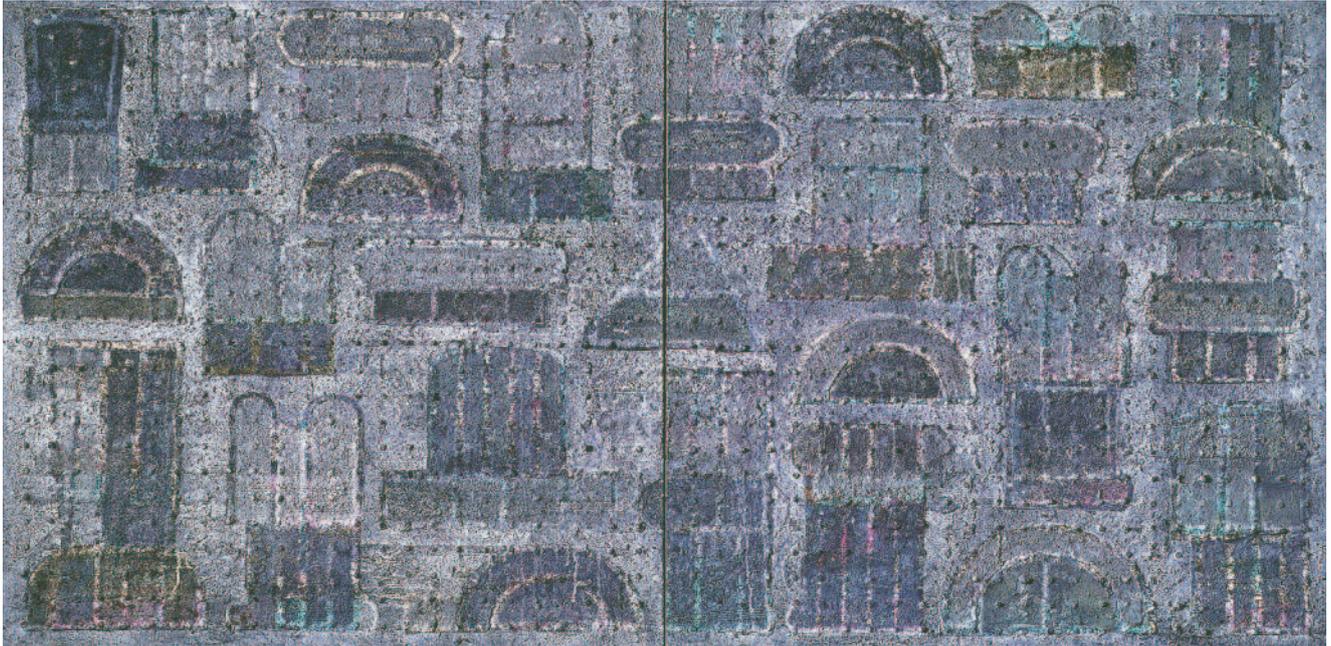
Signals was painted from 1965 to 1970, years in which the artist transits among images close to design and others that return to the viewer a pictorial-ness crammed with



Mexico Under the Rain S 13, 50 x 50 cm, 1987 (silk screen).



Mexico Under the Rain S 16, 50 x 50 cm, 1988 (silk screen).



Codex 26 (diptych), 130 x 260 cm, 1991 (mixed technique/canvas).

secret marks, suspenseful latencies, the speech of a naked space, naked and loaded with enigmas impossible to grasp. And there is the triangle, a unifying point, representing the signal, colored at times, inhabited by shadows at other times, to allow the gradations of light to unfold on the surface. For Rojo, the signal is nothing more than a simple element of geometry, the organizer of the structure. That is how he explains it. However, in his work the signal can combine many meanings that link up the non-decipherings of an enigma. They are signals drawn in upon themselves and upon the blaze or somber (somber from its lighting up) poetic inhabitableness of the image.

Then came the series *Negations* (1970-1975), sparked by the letter “T”, an element extracted from another cultural code, that of language. The analogy may seem somewhat forced, but it is not at all absurd to think that this man, whose activity spans several levels of knowledge (paint-

ing, design and the publishing that has made him an untiring reader) resorts to a small sign from writing, imbricating it with the other forms of the canvases.

Rojo plays with these intersections and will do it again in a third series, *Memories*. But, like with the signal, the “T” stops up another enigma, suspected but not revealed. The non-disclosure of that suspicion impels us to not be introduced onto the folds where certain imprints lie or oscillate.

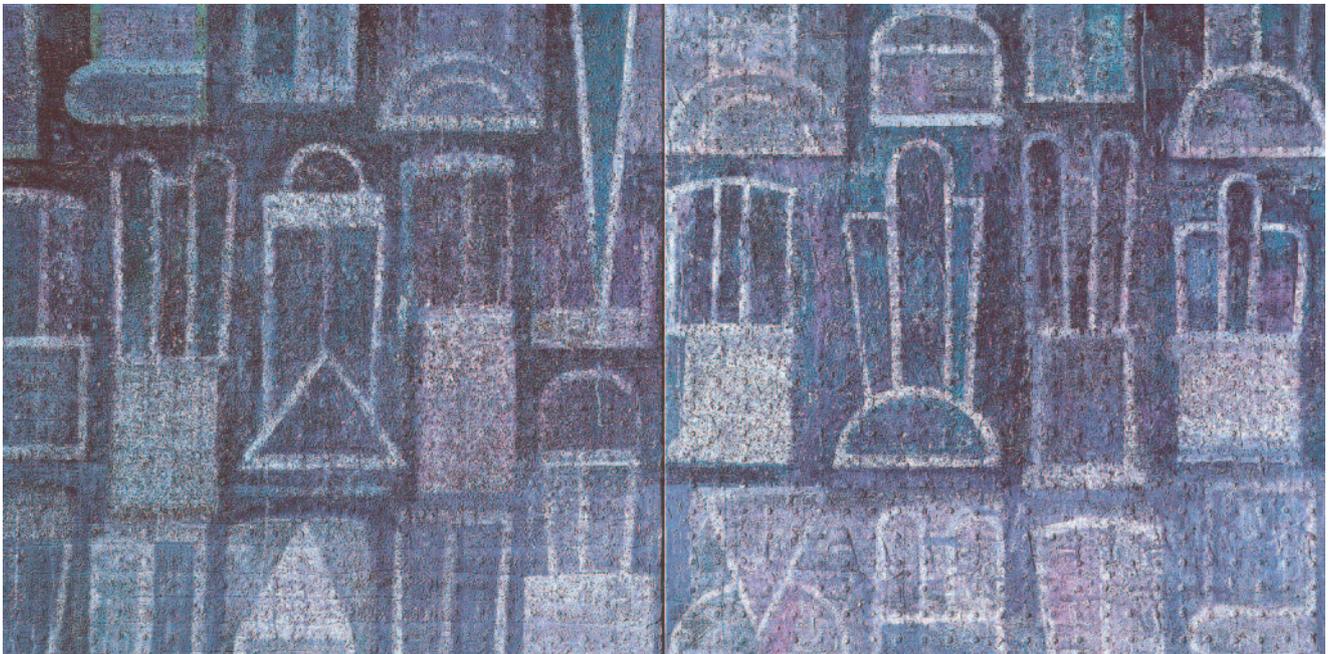
What does the title *Negations* deny and what does it keep? From the specificity of what has been painted a second moment of inflection is to be found in Rojo’s two-dimensional work: in 1969, almost at the end of the series *Signals*, he builds his *Artefact*, clearly a piece of object art. Rojo broke with flat surfaces between 1964 and 1966. Negating two-dimensionality at the same time that he consummated it is to put painting in parentheses, a questioning that still affirms

it, but in the context of a movement that alludes to it critically: the central nucleus concretized by the “T” does not constitute a traditional element of painting, but, I would emphasize, is extrapolated from another code.

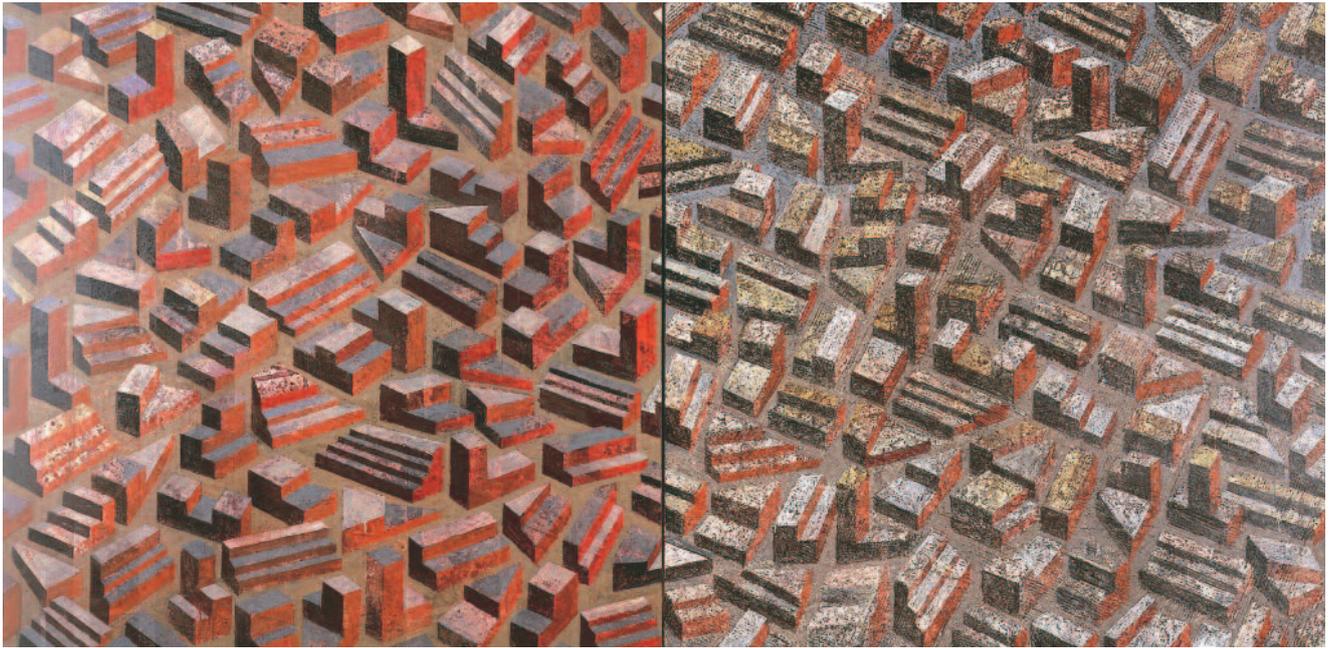
The series *Memories* (1975-1980) uses the square as its central image and here, the grid that was already insinuated in some “negations” emerges. The segmented square has an air of childhood notebooks. Then, like an elliptical turn, the artist introduces small geometric signs and signs of another kind, like the remains of childhood scribbles. He already had done this in some of the “negations” because his creative process includes both continuities and changes. In *Memory 113* (1977) the grid-like diagram disappears, giving way to a rich pictorial modulation. Other paintings of the same series, by contrast, are permeated by a colder, reflexive objectivity. These oscillations between lyri-

cal incisions and the conceptual is another constant in all of Vicente Rojo’s work.

Later, the moment came when he incorporated a paradigm of local nature in the series *Mexico in the Rain* (1980-1990), in which he introduced a multiplicity of diagonal lines that occupy the entire painting. The image changed here, crammed with bright colors and, in some cases, with objects like ribbons or cloth knots hidden underneath the paint, for example, that erode its flatness. At one point, around 1985, the little items adhered to the surface and pictorially re-elaborated acquire more drama thanks to their somber colors and the thickness of the relief, a thickness full of dark tonal gradations. The metaphor of the rain is transformed into earthly echoes, associations with walls, like a nocturnal, inverted sky. These, perhaps, are the best results of the series. On the other hand, in addition to the drawings



Codex 27 (diptych), 130 x 260 cm, 1991 (mixed technique/canvas).



Double Open Scenario, 140 x 280 cm, 1999 (mixed technique/canvas).

and graphic work included in all the series already mentioned, in 1985, Rojo began producing clearly geometrical sculptures, establishing a subtle relationship with the thick tissue of his last “rains.”

Scenarios, the series Rojo is currently producing, began in 1990 and engendered subseries called *Codices*, *Pyramids*, *Stelae*, *Volcanoes* and *Saint John’s Walk*. Like in *Mexico in the Rain*, certain paradigms blossom in them linking Mexico’s cultural past—that of its ancient peoples—with nature, obviously represented by the volcanoes, and with a street in Barcelona, Saint John’s Walk, painfully put away among the hollows of memory, put away and recovered. For the first time, *Scenarios* comes close to a slight neo-figurativeness at the same time that it maintains the density of Rojo’s previous stage, created through objects stuck to the canvas and pictorially reprocessed. As time passes, the combination of paint

and thickness becomes more vigorous, well merged, iridescent.

Let us go back to the beginning: in 1999, Vicente Rojo celebrated 50 years in Mexico and to commemorate it he had two exhibitions: *Secret Scenarios*, where he introduced a new component, hidden mirrors, and almost on the eve of the year 2000, *Open Scenarios* whose novelty consists in giving his geometric forms volume in the form of different labyrinths. *Secret Scenarios* was exhibited at the López Quiroga Gallery, which has been showing Rojo’s work for 10 years. *Open Scenarios* was shown in the Juan Martín Gallery where the artist has exhibited his work regularly since 1965, when he began sending out signals that his work would be consistent and ongoing. **NM**

SUGGESTED READING

Lelia Driben, *Vicente Rojo. El arte de las variaciones sutiles*, Círculo de Arte Collection (Mexico City: CNCA, 1996).