

# Gunther Gerzso

## The Appearance of the Invisible



Courtesy of Conaculta

The urgency of freeing the spirit from the ideological blackmail of orthodoxy (whether in art or in politics) and the need for space for an “intimist” sensibility—to allow for the appearance of the emotional and the abstract—in surroundings dominated by the post revolutionary epic journey were some of the motifs of Gunther Gerzso’s work. Painter, sculptor and professional set designer, he founded the Mexican abstractionist school, although he classified his style as “psychological realism.”

Born in Mexico City June 17, 1915, to Oscar Gerzso and Dore Wendland, he was sent to Switzerland in 1927 to live with his uncle Hans Wendland, a collector who trained him in the different schools and styles of art. In artistic soirees he met painters like Paul Klee and set designers like the Italian Nando Tamberlani, who were influential in his becoming an artist.

In 1931, Gunther returned to Mexico to continue his studies. Three years later he went into the theater as a set designer, and director Fernando Wagner used his work in productions of Molière, Lope de Vega and Shakespeare. Later, encouraged by an American professor, he went to Ohio and worked at the Cleveland Playhouse as an apprentice and assistant set designer from 1935 to 1941. Surprised by his talent, an art student who thought that set design “had no future,” recommended that he turn to painting. In what would be a prophetic act, he gave Gunther the paint and brushes with which he would execute his first canvas in 1940, *Two Women*. A little later he met and married Gene Rilla Cady.

He returned to Mexico in 1941 with the idea of dedicating himself fully to painting, but his economic situation did not permit it. Gene and Gunther decided to return to the United States.

The night before they were to leave, he received the providential offer to design the sets for the third film version of the romantic novel *Santa*. This would be the beginning of three decades of an intense career as a set designer for 137 films, most of them Mexican. “The cinema has allowed me to see the world and life ... [and] how people on the margins live, people like madmen.” (Alfredo Camacho Olivares, “Homenaje nacional a Gerzso en mayo,” *Excelsior* [Mexico City] 25 April 2000). Some of his paintings display a certain voyeurism as though the viewer were looking through a keyhole.

“THE IMAGE,  
A CREATION OF THE SPIRIT”

Although he admired Mexico’s muralists and pre-Hispanic art, particularly that of the Mayas, he was not interested in either government-line nationalist painting or the great topics of the socialist left of the time. He sought a more universal language, but a language that at the same time would mean a return to the “intimate homeland,” an aesthetic treatment of impressions and memories. His work takes the sediment of dreams and Freud’s hypotheses very much into account. In 1944, he met the leading protagonists of surrealist painting exiled in Mexico (Remedios Varo and Leonora Carrington, among others). Immersed in that “school of the senses” that is Mexico and influenced by surrealism, he tended toward its combination of ethics and aesthetics in the act of painting. *Bird Woman* (1944) and the oil painting *The Days on Gabino Barreda Street* (1944) are two examples of work from this period.

Gerzso defined himself as an “intuitive painter” and his painting as “the image of a state of mind.” He used to say that technique is important only if an emotional element is obtained from it, since each painting is a variant of the primeval emotion. “When you want to look into my paintings, you will always find a wall that keeps you from entering, [that] will stop you with its

dazzling light, but at bottom, there is a black plane: fear,” he once confessed to Rita Eder (*Gunther Gerzso. El esplendor de la muralla* [Mexico City: Conaculta-ERA 1994]).

In 1950, encouraged by the German painter Otto Butterlin, he put on his first show at Inés Amor’s Mexican Art Gallery, at a time that was not very propitious for paintings that did not represent the great artistic trends of the moment. Despite the show’s lack of success, the gallery owner, very impressed with his pictorial proposal, tried to convince him to continue. “Mr. Gerzso, you are a painter above all else,” she said (Carlos Monsiváis, “Gunther Gerzso,” *Letras libres* 18 [June 2000], p. 84). Unbelieving, Gerzso thought he would concentrate wholly on set design for film, but Gene encouraged him not to abandon painting.

#### PUBLIC RECOGNITION

After 1960 Mexican critics and the public gradually opened up to the possibility that Mexican art could exist that had meaning from the universal human point of view, without being strictly committed to any particular ideology. This made it possible for the avant garde, represented by Gunther Gerzso, to receive more recognition and opportunities. Throughout the 85 years of his life, he eventually presented 30 individual exhibitions and participated in 60 collective ones. Among other honors, in 1963, the National Institute of Fine Arts organized a retrospective, and in 1994, the Carrillo Gil Museum did the same; in 1984 he was given the National Prize for Science and the Arts. That same year the book *Gunther Gerzso* was printed in Switzerland, including texts by Octavio Paz and John Golding. He was a member of the National System of Artists and a member of its executive board until his death in April of this year. California’s Santa Barbara Museum will organize a retrospective of his work in 2002.

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