

Jesús Gallardo The Art of Landscape¹



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La Bufo Hill in the Mist, 100 x 120 cm, n.d. (oil on canvas). Jorge Videgaray Collection.

J. Gallardo

Jesús Gallardo is heir to a highly developed regional sensitivity to the profound cultural roots of mestizo groups from Mexico's Central Highlands, specifically the Bajío area: La Luz, León, Guanajuato, San Luis Potosí, whose deep feelings of identification with their rural and urban surroundings made up a psychology that tended toward intimism, subjectivism, romanticism, melancholy and contemplative catharsis.

This condition of the spirit oriented his vocation toward the figurative arts and identified his inclinations with those of a very dynamic group of painters who would reclaim landscapes as another manifestation of cultural nationalism: among others, José Chávez Morado, Alfredo Zalce, Luis Nishizawa, Nicolás Moreno, Francisco Moreno Capdevila, Amador Lugo, Feliciano Peña and Celia Calderón. They all had rigorous academic training and shared their passion for the art and pop-

ular manifestations that somehow identified their surroundings.

SOMETHING ABOUT HIS LIFE

Gallardo was born in León, Guanajuato, in 1931. His father's death, when Jesús was 13 years old, changed his life radically. He and his mother moved to Mexico City where he finished his primary and secondary education, taking his first sketching classes there from a Professor Nieto.

He was already beginning to perceive his artistic vocation. His family, disconcerted, finally told him that if he wanted to be an artist, he should talk to a professional about it; they sent him to watercolorist Rafael Muñoz López, who, after seeing Jesús' drawings, suggested that he take his work more seriously since he did show promise.



Summer Landscape, 80 x 120 cm, n.d. (oil on canvas on wood). Marcela and Fernando Guzmán Bretón Collection.

Muñoz's opinion motivated Jesús, but he had to overcome his mother's misgivings, since she had heard that students learned little or nothing good from art schools. In the end, Jesús managed to enter the San Carlos Academy in 1947, at a time when the academic environment at the National School of Visual Arts was very rigorous, dynamic and diverse. Among his most memorable experiences is watching Diego Rivera at work for a year, between 1950 and 1951 on the frescos in Mexico City's National Palace.

Gallardo finished his studies in 1951 and the next year returned to Guanajuato. He maintained links to his alma mater, however, and to the capital city's artistic milieu. He went through the local government to get an interview with the dean of the University of Guanajuato, Antonio Torres Gómez, who supported him by asking him to organize a visual arts workshop, which in-

roduced graphic production to Guanajuato. It was spacious, comfortable and had everything necessary for working on etchings and engravings.

There, Gallardo painted and did his first professional work, both in painting and in engraving, all in the company of his students. The Guanajuato workshop brought Mexico its first monumental-sized rolling press, which Gallardo acquired thanks to his relations with Japanese artist Yukio Fukasawa. This was an important precedent since monumental graphics have been one of the most prolific currents of Mexican art in recent times.

A VOCATION IN MOVEMENT

The discipline he acquired at the National School of Visual Arts gave Gallardo the technical and



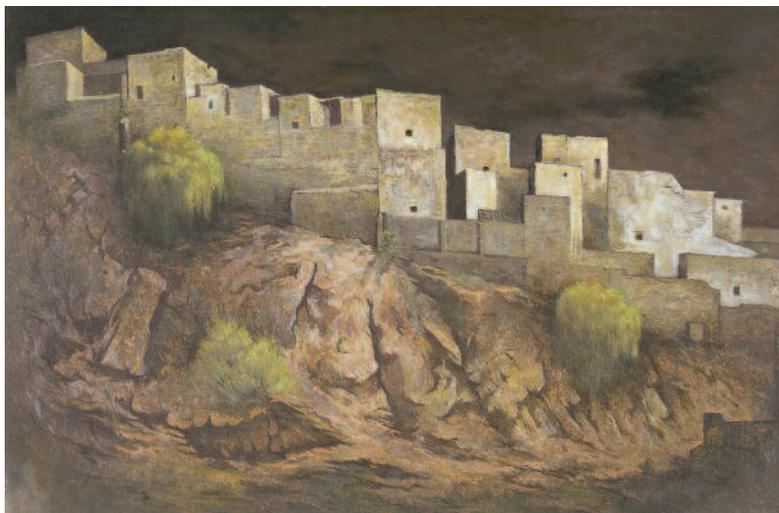
Wood, 80 x 120 cm, 1995 (oil on canvas on wood). Erika and Francisco Arroyo Collection.



Barren Hills, 60 x 90 cm, 1970 (oil on canvas). María Gallardo vda. de M. del Campo Collection.



Pot Plateau, 80 x 120 cm, 1992 (oil on canvas). Casa de Gobierno de Guanajuato Collection.



Temezcuicate, 80 x 122 cm, 1967 (oil on canvas). Ma. del Carmen Carrillo vda. de Gallardo Collection.

didactic resources he needed to develop important educational work in his native state, where in addition to the workshop, he founded the University of Guanajuato School of Visual Arts. Immersed in that project, he researched techniques for gravure or intaglio engraving, which increased his proficiency and enriched the repertory of his resources for expression.

As an etcher, he achieved extraordinary virtuosity. The richness of his attacks has made him one of the best engravers of our time. His tonal variations are the product of the patient alchemy of an appropriate selection of varnishes, able handling of the stylus and a succession of acid baths programed with method and ingenuity.

Using all these elements, Jesús Gallardo gave himself fully to landscapes, holding a permanent dialogue with the topography and the light of the Bajío region. He created a passionate vision of the highlands in which his existential concerns and world view are projected in prototypical forms that we can categorize as follows: first works, the Mexico Basin and environs; Guanajuato, the river and mines; abysses and horizons; summits and unusual rocks.

His landscapes of Guanajuato reveal a deliberate dramatic—even tragic—treatment, with skies that like an immense, foreboding bird darken the atmosphere, reminding us that the glory and splendor that came out of mineral wealth was accompanied by pitiless exploitation.

Gallardo projects his bond with life and his homeland with summits, abysses and mountains, through an analytical spirit that leads to the poetic moment. The manipulation of matter, conceits and consideration give him abilities that could be summed up as the serene greatness of the classical ideal of Greco-Roman antiquity, but which in our times could be defined as the ambiguously monumental and intimate character of Mexican-ness.

Unusual rocks move us to surprise at what Thomas Mann called the deep well of history, given which human beings can only experience wonder and an awareness of their own diminu-



Peaks, 150 x 100 cm, 1987 (oil on canvas).
Jorge and Tere Rangel de Alba Collection.



Stone Geometry, 150 x 100 cm, 1983 (oil on canvas).
Private collection.

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tive size. Megalithic formations without testimony of a past, with which Man shares only the primary, material condition. But the artist discovers in them the infinite patience of a nature that builds, transforms and pulls asunder to begin again. Perhaps for that reason, Gallardo often paints them under storm-swept skies and bursts of blizzards and dust.

As counterpoint and complement, the fields of the Bajío reflect a tranquil, toning feeling, Virgil-like visions where the wildness of the terrain is tempered by the fragrance of vegetation. It could be said that Jesús Gallardo portrays the

spirit of the people of his state through a poetical representation of its topography.

THE PATHS OF A STYLE

Stylistically we can situate Gallardo without undue complication among the Mexican nationalists. His landscapes have clear precedents in the Central European romanticism brought to Mexico by Eugenio Landesio, the teacher of José María Velasco, cornerstone of Mexican landscape artists and precursor of post-revolu-



Old Woman of the Skulls, 48.5 x 78.5 cm, 1969 (etching-mixed technique). Jesús Gallardo Collection.

tionary realism. Velasco, in turn, taught Gerardo Murillo (known as Dr. Atl) and Francisco Goitia, who together with Pastor Velázquez, Leandro Izaguirre and Saturnino Herrán, laid the technical and conceptual bases for art teaching in the first half of the twentieth century at the National School of Visual Arts.

On the other hand, certain expressionist tendencies manifested above all in his landscapes of the rivers and mines of Guanajuato, but also in his unusual rocks, have their origins in Mexico's post-revolutionary romantic tradition that merged with the legacy of folk art and the regional spirit of ethnic groups and communities.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Gallardo's work would become significantly simpler, making way for paintings with a great economy of elements, almost abstract, that would recover the synthesis of spirit of some German romantics like Caspar David Friedrich, Overbeck and Cornelius, who in the perfectionism of simplicity

revealed a profound mysticism, like a kind of quest for the secrets of Man's existence on Earth.

Today, Jesús Gallardo is —together with José Chávez Morado, Alfredo Zalce, Luis Nishizawa and Nicolás Moreno— a landscape artist who represents the continuity of this genre in Mexico. His characteristics allow him to be at one and the same time and without contradiction a representative of the spirit of the Bajío, an outstanding member of a generation of Mexican artists who have managed to express the post-revolutionary period, but, above all, to be himself, exactly who he dreamed of being when he decided to dedicate his life to landscapes. **VM**

NOTES

¹ Abbreviated version of José de Santiago Silva, *El paisaje de Jesús Gallardo* (Guanajuato: Gobierno del Estado de Guanajuato, 1994).