

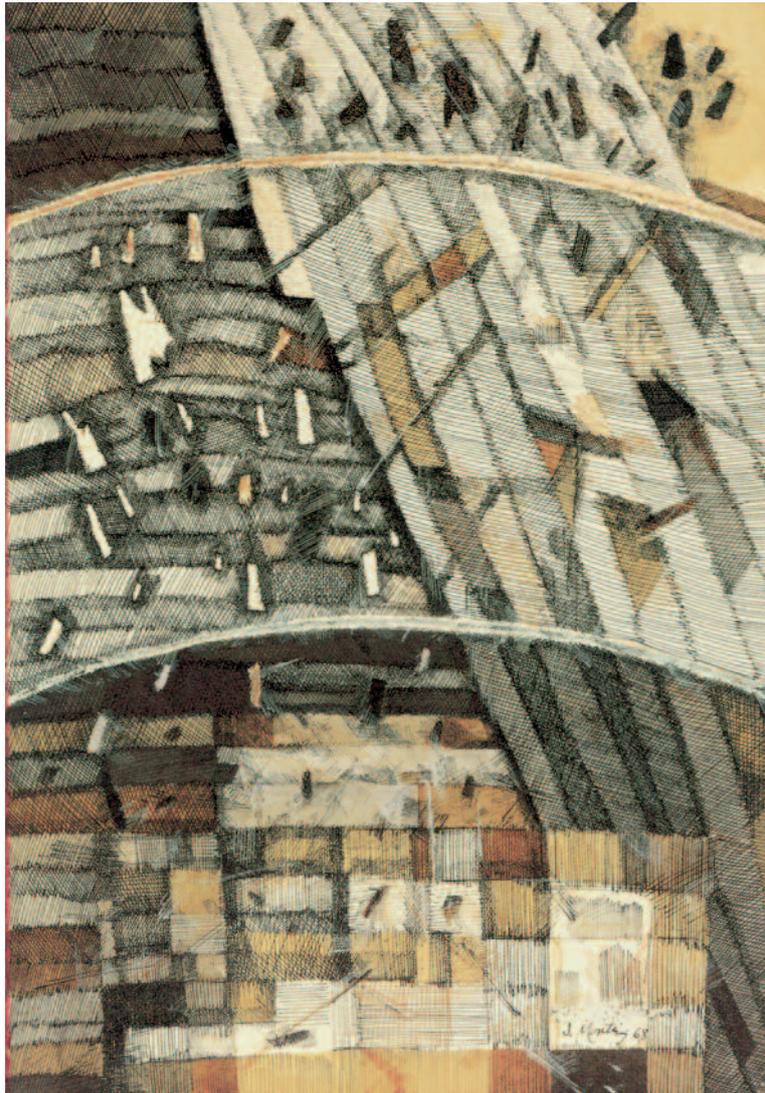
# Jesús Martínez A Passion for Engraving<sup>1</sup>



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*The Grandmother*, 16 x 12.5 cm, 1966 (dry point).

Jesús Martínez



*Memory*, of the "Horror Vacui" series, 49 x 31 cm, 1969 (ink on paper).

A passion for engraving and research have characterized the work of Jesús Martínez, one of the few artists who has limited his work to sketching and prints, who has understood the value of multiple images over single images and enjoyed the work of printing plates filled with images made originally for that medium. His firm conviction that the appropriate vehicles to represent his ideas are sketching and engraving (emancipated from painting and with their own lexicon) has won him an outstanding place in national graphics as both artist and teacher.

#### ENGRAVED FROM MEMORY

Born in 1942 in Los Sauces, a tiny hamlet near León, Guanajuato, Martínez's parents were rural teachers in the times of Lázaro Cardenas. So, he spent his childhood in different parts of Mexico's Bajío region: Santa Ana del Conde, Colonia Nuevo México, Silao and later in the city of Guanajuato. He remembers the *huizache* bushes and the mesquites "like squiggles," like Nature's whimsical, irregular writing on the landscape. He also finds graphics in the first scratches he made in the dirt to play marbles



*Crucified*, 41 x 31 cm, 1982 (collage, oil on pastel).

and in the business of plowing rows to prepare the earth for planting.

However, it was not until 1969 that several different events decisive for the maturity of his work and his particular roads of expression occurred: an album of his engravings was published accompanied by Juan Bañuelos's poem "No consta en actas" (It's Not in the Record), about the criminal repression of the 1968 student movement; he had his first individual show in Mexico City in the French Institute for Latin America Gallery, then directed by art critic Antonio Rodríguez, where Martínez pre-

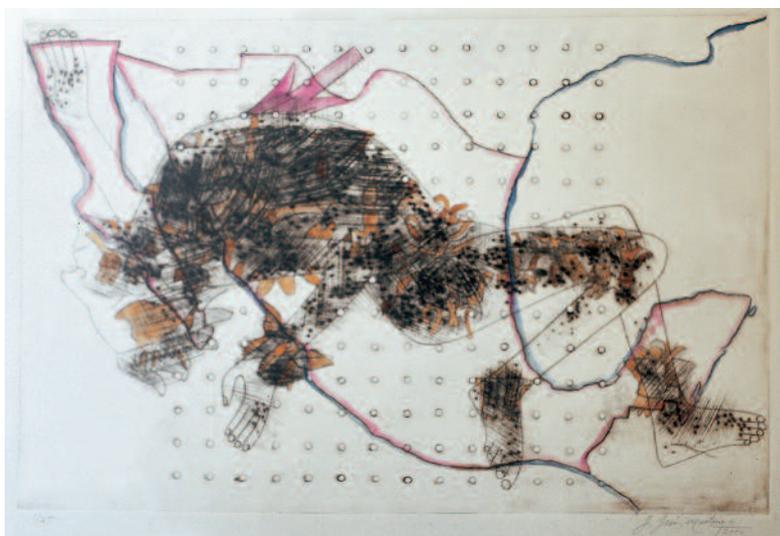
sented a series of 17 drawings, *Horror vacui*, also about the student conflict, and 15 splendid engravings on different themes. Lastly, a series of his sketches, *Narcosis*, were presented at the National Polytechnic Institute, with which he closed his thematic cycle on the events of 1968 and which marked his political and social activity and established the basis for the purified sketching that would be seen in later exhibits. On the basis of the series of engravings and sketches that he presented in his first exhibition, he established two different forms of expression that run parallel throughout his work: drawing



*Time of Sacrifices 1*, 100 x 100 cm, 1997 (etching).



*Time of Sacrifices 2*, 100 x 100 cm, 1997 (etching over aquatint).



*Borders*, 50 x 100 cm, 2001 (dry point over acrylic).

Sketching and engraving have won Martínez an outstanding place in national graphics.

in ink and engraving with traditional techniques (to which he added photo-engraving).

Once the passion and pain brought on by the violent events of 1968 subsided, he began a process of introspection and broadened his knowledge about Mexican history, particularly the pre-Hispanic period. This scrutiny of his origins and his bedazzlement by the artistic production of the time would bring forth their best fruits in a later series of engravings where the topic occupied a central place. By this time, he was working with more experienced artists like Adolfo Mexiac and Francisco Moreno Capdevila.

#### TO THE TUNE OF HIS OWN LINE

Jesús Martínez's early work experience was of undoubted importance for his graphic vocation, since it was in publishing that he familiarized himself with the uses of photography, photo-engraving, type-setting and materials like "dragon's blood," shellac, nitric acid and resins like asphalt that he would later use in his engravings. He also ventured into journalism as an illustrator. He began to draw without any training. To educate himself, he took drawing and painting classes with Salvador Zúñiga in a school that would later become the Francisco Eduardo Tresguerras Regional Cultural Center in Guanajuato. He stayed there for several years before moving to Mexico City.

In the search for his own voice, Jesús Martínez pushed aside his taste for both the "interiorists" and Rufino Tamayo and Carlos Mérida. But his determination to find his own lexicon of forms and techniques dates back to his 1967 participation in the group "New Engravers" which sought to make engraving in Mexico jibe with

Martínez's interest in poetry is a central part of his graphic production.

the new times. As the catalogue in his first exhibition says, engraving had stagnated notably in Mexico and developing a broad, vigorous movement was urgent.

His relationship with photography in this experimental phase is worth some attention, since he picked up fragments of reality that he would later put onto a metal plate through photo-engraving. This, combined with traditional techniques (etching and aquatint), constituted a very defined tendency in his style.

Through an imaginative combination of techniques and trusting in his capacity for synthesis, Martínez achieved good results in prints like *Km 13*, *Textural*, *Asphalt* (for which he won a prize in the Buenos Aires 1970 Second International Biennial of Engraving) and *Necrópolis*, in which he expressed his interest in walls and fences tattooed with urban inscriptions and in automobile junk yards. Art critic Raquel Tibol saw in *Asphalt* "a visual metaphor for urban death."<sup>2</sup>

#### POETIC IMAGES: LIGHT AND WRITING

Jesús Martínez's interest in poetry, the necessary companion and source of inspiration for his images, is a central part of his graphic production. The link between text and image has been fundamental in creating the nine albums of engravings that he has produced, from *It's Not in the Record* (1969) to *Andante with G Major* (also translatable as *Walker with a Larger Sun*) (1989). His work is not that of an illustrator who sticks to the text, but of an engraver who dialogues with the work of another artist, the poet. Chiapas-born poet Juan Bañuelos says about the unity of text and engraving, "Martínez confronts his reality with that of the poems



*Panel of Hearts*, 100 x 100 cm, 1997 (etching).



*Time of Sacrifices 5*, 100 x 100 cm, 1997 (etching).



*Landscape*, 55 x 75 cm, 1995 (sumi-e ink).



*The Tortoise*, 24.5 x 20 cm, 1981 (etching over aquatint).

and sees them as twins....He underlines the junction of his artistic endeavor with the essence of humanity, and once again we see how it is history that achieves the expressive media in art.”<sup>3</sup>

The 40 works in the exhibit “To the Tune of the Line” presented in the Mexican Salon of Visual Arts in July 1980 reveal the maturity the artist achieved in his drawing. In the 1980s, Jesús Martínez repeatedly used pre-Hispanic forms. Our colonial past has appeared only in his series of crucifixes (sketches and pastels done in 1982) and in two portfolios of engravings of the city of Guanajuato.

Martínez repaid the city where he spent his childhood and that nurtured him with its forms and ambiance with the album *Landscape in Seven Acts* (1986), which is a historical-graphic trip through Guanajuato from its foundation until today. Combining leaf-marking, etching and photo-mechanics, he made a coherent collage where his own images consort with others’ and traditional techniques congregate side-by-side with modern ones. Full of discoveries, this portfolio is the best example of how Jesús Martínez made engraving something alive, malleable, to bring us a renewed Guanajuato cityscape.

In the series *Dog of Waters* (1983), he uses hybrid language: pencil and watercolor. In some works the color weighs more while in others it is more discreet and circumscribed to specific areas, putting more emphasis on graphic expression.

Jesús Martínez has not been satisfied with mastering graphic techniques, but has explored the expressive characteristics of each of them to make engraving malleable.

#### THE OTHER JESÚS MARTÍNEZ

Parallel to his activity as a graphic artist, Martínez works in cultural dissemination, an undertaking that has benefited many.

In 1968 he collaborated with critic Antonio Rodríguez in the Cultural Department of the

National Polytechnic Institute, becoming part of the department’s film workshop. In 1972, he began a collaboration with poet Óscar Oliva in the Autonomous University of Puebla’s Cultural Department where he founded and coordinated the Visual Arts Workshop and did a collective mural with his students. In that same year he designed books, pamphlets and posters for the National Institute of Fine Arts Literature Department. In 1974 he designed scenery for the dance group *Expansión Siete*.

He has been the founder or advisor to different engraving workshops, as well as the editor of albums at the Cincolote publishing house, founded by his wife María Eugenia Figueroa, Juan Berruecos and Mario Rangel Faz. Outstanding among the albums they have published of works by established artists and Martínez’s students are *11 Engravers* (1978), *5 Images 5 Texts* (1980), *Saurios* (1982) and *Marine Animals* (1984), accompanied respectively by articles by Efraín Huerta, Álvaro Mutis, Óscar Oliva and Carlos Pellicer.

In the 1980s, he faced two challenges that enriched him as a print-maker. The National School of Visual Arts commissioned a re-printing of nineteenth-century academic artists’ plates. Then, the National Institute of Fine Arts asked him to do the same with the plates of José Guadalupe Posada. Today, artists of the standing of Luis Nishizawa also entrust him with their plates because they know the care he takes with his work.

Jesús Martínez’s passion has trained a great many talented young people who have quickly achieved some standing thanks to their strong grounding in technique. His own work has allowed him to put down deeper roots, base himself on tradition and, at the same time, revitalize its visual language. **NM**

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Abbreviated version of Gutierrez Aceves, *Jesús Martínez: grabador y dibujante* (Guanajuato: Gobierno del Estado de Guanajuato, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.