

IN SEARCH OF FAITH

An Interview with Rafael Cauduro

Any work of art is a proposal which can either travel the roads of an already established artistic movement or transcend the aesthetic conventions of its time to situate itself in unexplored creative dimensions. In the former case, the work is valued on the basis of already known and sanctioned parameters; in the latter, a new language must be constructed to allow us to completely perceive its contributions. This is what Rafael Cauduro's painting has done, changed the known categories to present us with an unexplored view of reality.

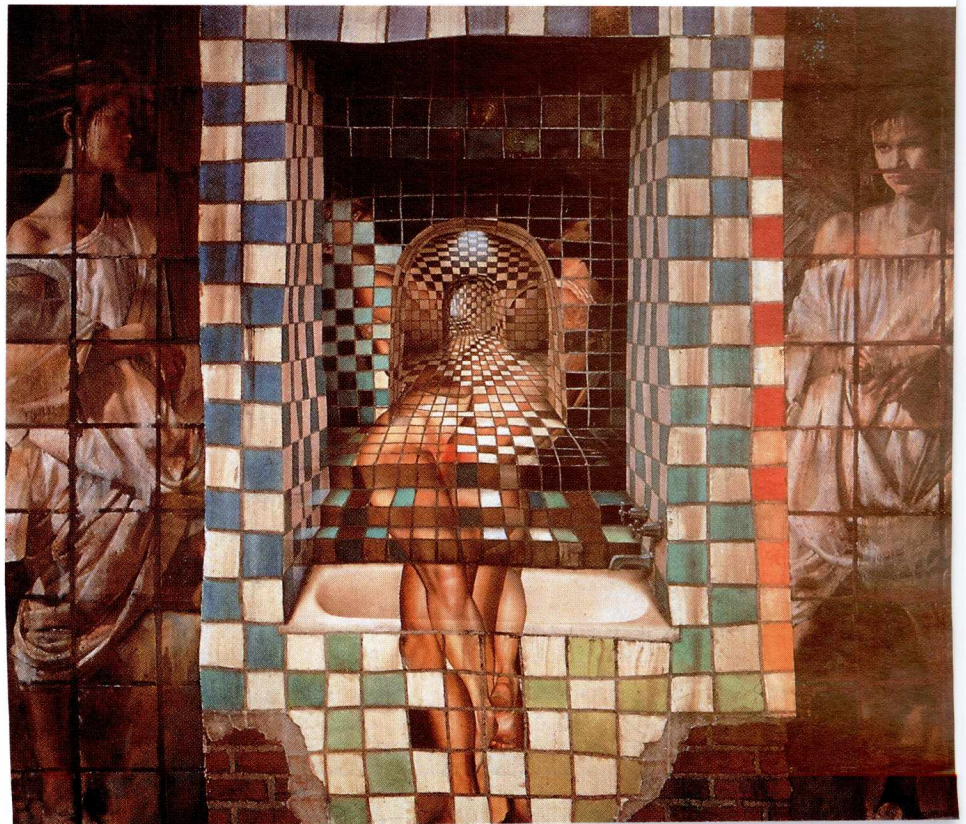
"To see a Cauduro," art critic Alfonso Ruiz Soto tells us, "is to doubt everything you see. His entire body of work proposes a reality born mortally wounded, contaminated with unreality, with an unreality which prevails on the strength of realism." When looking at his canvases, our senses inevitably doubt their perceptions when they face a reality unlike what he paints. "Reality stops being something given, consummate and definitive.... What is real becomes worthy of all suspicion: it

is what you *believe*, what you *make out* of it. A belief as much as a creation."

According to Ruiz Soto, this new proposal can be summarized in a precise formula: *Critical Illusionism = Illusionism of reality - Critical of what is real*. "This universe," he says, "is a unifying art in which different codes, perspectives and techniques come together in one unmistakable whole. It has both

the most extremely rigorous technique and the most extreme expressive freedom. In a single work we find —hypostatized— classical virtuosity and street graffiti; the pictorial-sculptural-scenery dimension; caustic social criticism and unrestrained eroticism; philosophical reflection and double entendres; muralism and miniaturism. A work of synthesis, Rafael Cauduro's production represents

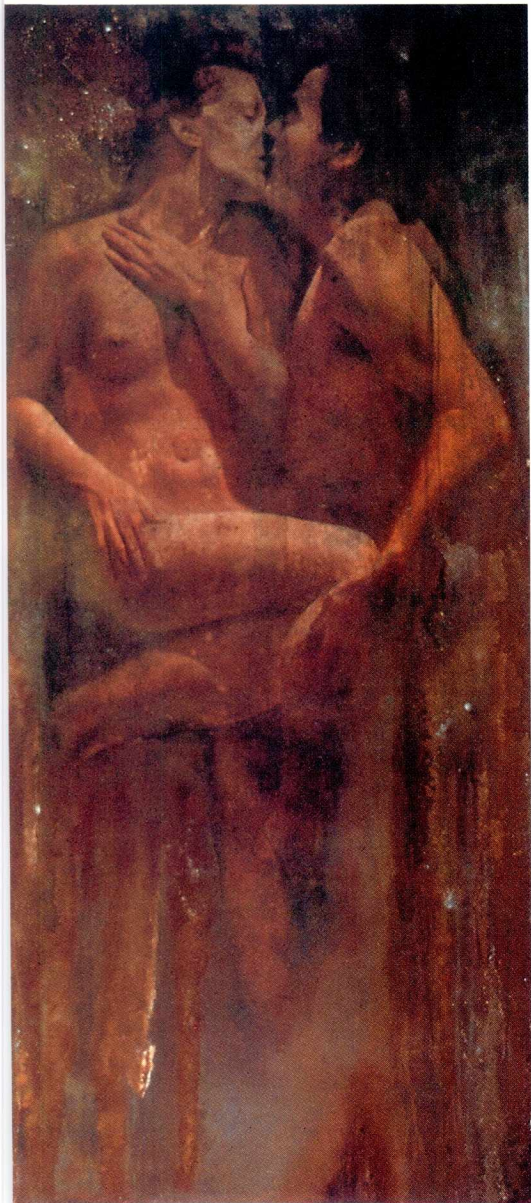
Angels of Conscience, 1995 (oil and acrylic on canvas).



Photos by Antonio Berlanga

“To see a Cauduro is to doubt everything you see.”

ALFONSO RUIZ SOTO



Rusted Couple, 1991 (oil and rust on metal).

like no other our moment in history: the Gordian knot where everything is possible. And where everything possible is visible.”

Rafael Cauduro was born in Mexico City in 1950. A self-taught painter, he studied industrial design at the Iberoamericana University; he never worked as a designer because he was convinced that his true vocation was painting. From 1976 on, he has participated in 33 collective exhibitions and has had 23 individual ones, both in Mexico and abroad.

His work, after 20 years of intensive labor, reflects his insatiable search for innovation and the perfection he has achieved in the use of all different types of materials. He has gone successively from flat painting to texture, to relief and, finally, to sculpture in painting. Cauduro has shown total virtuosity in all these techniques, in the management of his materials, which he measures out, shades and revolutionizes until he achieves the formal perfection which is one of the seals of his artistic execution. But his search is not only for technical perfection, he also tries to achieve spiritual improvement. In an era characterized by skepticism and disillusionment, Cauduro is still a seeker of faith, of illusions beyond reality that can unveil to us the magic of living.

In an interview granted to *Voices of Mexico*, Rafael Cauduro tells us about his beginnings as a painter, explains the motivations behind his most recent work and

expresses his opinion about the categories which define his view of the world in the 1990s.

Voices of Mexico: *Rafael, when did you discover your ability for painting?*

Rafael Cauduro: Ever since I can remember, I was the typical kid who drew well in kindergarten, in primary school. I spent the whole day sketching; every time a teacher asked who knew how to draw well, my fellow students said, “Cauduro.” In all other things I was like everyone else, but in this I was different; it set me apart from the others, and that made me feel very interesting and I was on my way to finding a vocation.

VM: *When did you decide to make it your way of life?*

RC: That was exactly in 1975. It was almost an epiphany, and I use the religious term intentionally because it was a magical event. I am absolutely convinced of that because it was from one day to the next. I had always painted; I never stopped painting or drawing, but I did other things—related to painting, of course. I earned my living as an illustrator and cartoonist. But one day I realized what I wanted to do, what would make me happy and what I would do well in: painting. I felt enormous faith and that day I decided to be a full-time painter. From that day on I did nothing but draw—stumbling occasionally if you will—but from then on I was wholly dedicated to painting.

VM: *Did you study at an art school or are you self-taught?*

RC: I owe painting to school because it was so boring that I spent all day sketching. That was where I accumulated my first hours of flying time in drawing. All day long I sketched and played; I never lost my playfulness. I think that explains why I still have that sense of fun in the studio. I was actually never very good academically. The way I passed exams was to get right into a book by myself and study before exams. I was never able to pay attention to anything that didn't interest me directly. In academia they go around in a lot of circles before finally getting to the point. I've never been good at that. The way destiny took me to painting was clearly self-taught.

VM: *How did your family react when you made that decision?*

RC: It was quite difficult because of the milieu I was in, the school where I studied, the kind of family I had. There weren't really conditions to be able to dedicate yourself to art.

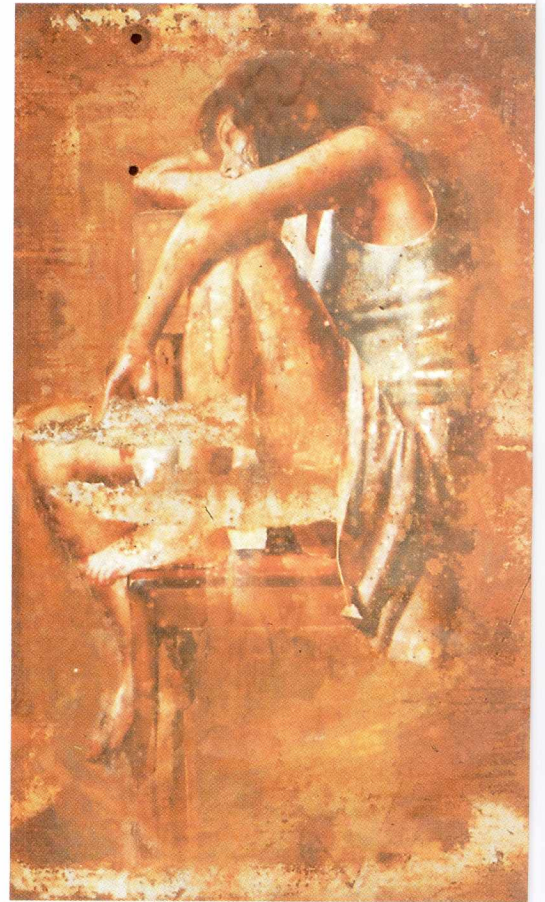
VM: *It was an alternative...*

RC: Not really. If you had a certain talent for the plastic arts, they suggested you go into architecture. In my family there were two architects who should have been painters. They were excellent sketchers and painters but they became architects. I was going to be the third victim of architecture when I realized I didn't want to be an architect. About that time the industrial design major was instituted at the Iberoamericana University as a relatively new option

that my brothers hadn't had. I studied industrial design, but not because I had a vocation for design. Actually, I was never a good student and I never did a piece of design work. The closest I ever got were illustrations, comic strips and caricatures, which had nothing whatsoever to do with design.

When you do an illustration it is judged by a graphic designer. I didn't even make the decisions like putting lettering on the designs because I didn't have a designer's sense; I never have. Though they might resemble each other a great deal, there is an enormous difference between a painter and a designer. Some designers may be painters or some painters may have the talents of a designer, but I didn't and I still don't.

There was a misconception at work. People thought that if you drew well you could be a good architect because an architect has to translate his things into a drawing. So does a designer, but the talents needed for one are unrelated to those needed for the other, like in my case. I first began my career with drawing, doing caricatures, publicity illustrations for book covers and comic books, all things apparently unre-



Seated Woman, 1994
(oil and rust on metal).

“Far from having a problem of what to paint, my problem is all the things I’m not painting.”



Story in the Caboose, 1993 (oil and acrylic on canvas).

lated to painting. In the long run it was not a waste of time because it came into my work years later.

VM: *What Mexican and foreign painters do you feel have influenced your painting?*

RC: I can remember the first influences very easily. Siqueiros, as a Mexican, in the 1960s. I admired his painting, his personality and his leadership ability. I met him personally; he was my hero. My first paintings are charged with Siqueiros's spirit. Also Michelangelo and Rubens; in fact, they all share an ethical sense that is very important for an adolescent. In that period you want to be very strong, very vital, very robust; those painters were all those things.

Now, obviously, I don't even see a trace of those painters. My work went other ways and later not only any work of art, but anything which deeply impressed me in life would become part of my painting. But I no longer identify them so clearly. I think there are hundreds of canvases, painters and experiences which have been added, but they are too brutally dissolved in the milieu for me to be able to say now that there was one that impressed me and this is the one.

VM: *What do you feel when you face an empty canvas?*

RC: Look, I don't have that problem that many painters or writers are always describing. I feel that my work has been a process in

which, fortunately, one painting leads to others, to a series of paintings which, sometimes, I haven't even been able to finish completely. At least 80 percent of my projects stay on my palette. Far from having a problem of what to paint, my problem is all the things I'm not painting. I would like to have much more time; my day is over very quickly.

VM: *What is your relationship with painting? How do you experience it? Is it something painful, something beautiful, an intersection of yourself? How does it make you feel?*

RC: It's a kind of negotiation. I will speak in the first person. What I do is imagine something and try to carry it out: "I'd like to see that; it doesn't exist and I wonder what it would look like." I'm a kind of voyeur with the poss-

win and the painting has to give ground. It's finished when you come to a good agreement between what you want and what the canvas wants.

VM: *Your painting is characterized by your use of many different materials. Why did you choose this type of painting?*

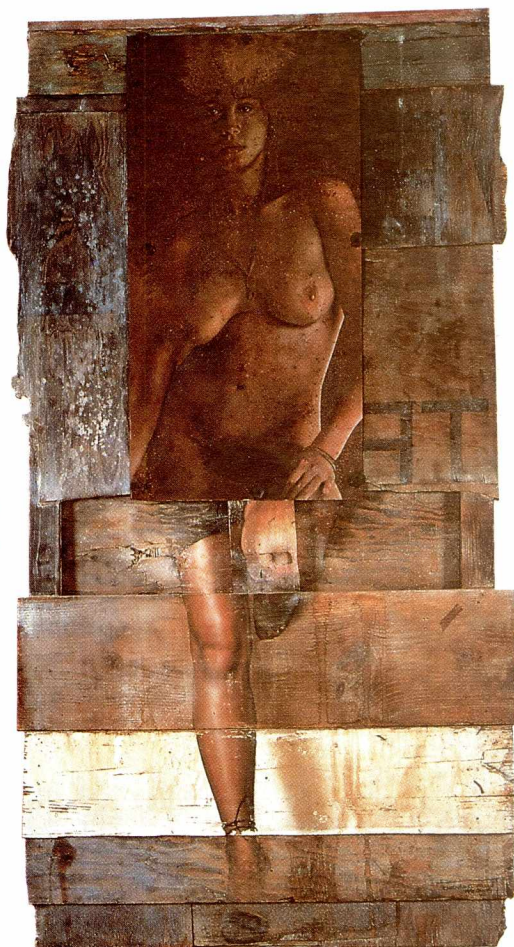
RC: This is related to the answer to the last question. The materials themselves create a kind of language of their own. The technique itself, the materials themselves, have a special procedure that produces special results. A technique has its own will and expressions, language and accidents. As a painter, you must respect them. At the moment in which you give all credit to the material, you're going to go further with the technique. The bad thing is when you always want to win the battle: "I want to do this, and it's going to be done with this technique."

If you try to paint an oil painting like an acrylic or an acrylic like oils, you can't. Oils have an oxidation period which makes them take a very long time to dry. Acrylic isn't the same. Acrylic paint dehydrates. It dries almost instantaneously; it doesn't give you the chance to mix on the canvas. You have to

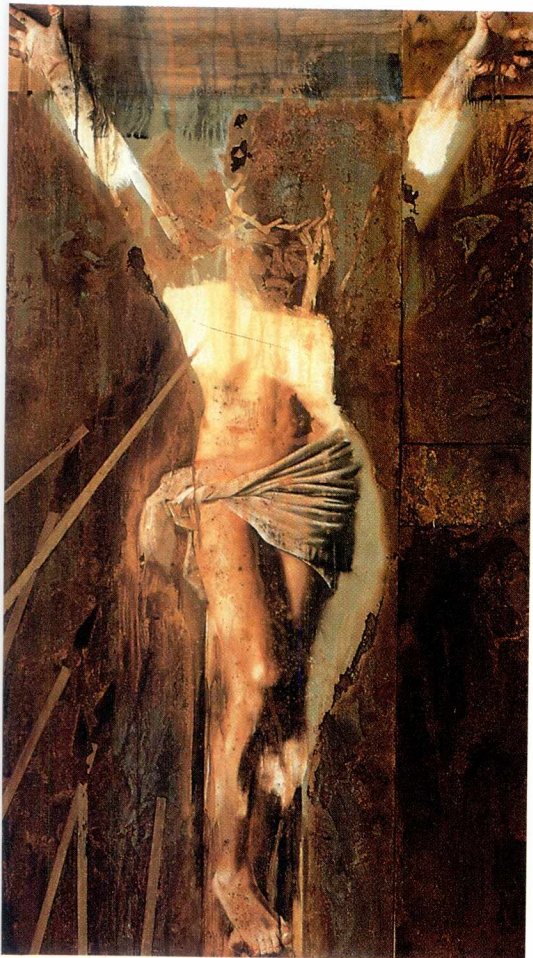
"The struggle begins between what you want and what the paint gives you; sometimes you win and sometimes the painting wins."



ibility of actually carrying out his imaginings as long as he dedicates himself to it. Obviously, one thing is what I want and another is what the painting becomes. That's where negotiation comes in: you propose what you want to the canvas and the canvas, the material itself, begins to contribute its own ideas. The struggle begins between what you want and what the paint gives you; sometimes you win and sometimes the painting wins; you're negotiating. When the painting starts to express itself, you have to have enough sensitivity to accept that it's beating you and that that's good. You have to take advantage of the victory of the intuition that operates by itself and not fight it. Sometimes you



Entering the Barracks, 1991 (oil and rust on metal and wood).



Recycled Christ (back part of a diptych), 1993 (oil and rust on metal).

apply a series of brush strokes of a single color or mix the colors on the palette. Since it will be dry within an hour after you brush it on the canvas, you have to apply the colors on top of each other, and obviously the results are going to be very different from the ones you get with oils. Besides that, acrylic gives you a whole range of colors, for example, from total matte to a bright, or very bright, paint. With oils you go from semi-bright to bright. They are different expressions and forms of application of the paint. Even if we could have the same brightness, the result would be very different. Each material has its own syntax and that lets you enrich your own language.

Each time I experiment with a new material or a new technique, I feel that it enormously enriches my whole pictorial language. It's an adventure I enjoy very much. It allows me to explore. It has opened up new horizons to me and I love it.

VM: *Why do you get interested in a topic? How do you pick it?*

RC: The topic is almost always a kind of excuse for trying to do something, an excuse that at the same time gives you something important: a concept. Though, in art, we have to recognize two major concepts. The intrinsic concept, how to paint, which doesn't mean so much the topic you have in mind, but rather how to do it. In the last analysis, this is the most important one.

At the same time, there's another concept you're also expressing. Art always says things; it is always talking about specific themes. I would call this concept secondary, even though it's far from insignificant. It has its own weight, and its importance lies in that it gives you a kind of pretext for doing something and how to do it. Let's take the theme of love as an example. If we judged it on the basis of the number of people who have expressed it, there would be nothing left to say. It has been pawed all over. The thing that's going to be different about this idea is how you're going to handle it. That's what's important, now, why you're choosing the theme of love is also relevant.

In my work, the themes have come by themselves. At one time I began painting a pre-Columbian death symbol, the *Tzompantli*; then, there were the Calvaries which were the experience of a European death symbol. Playing with both concepts at the same time nurtured my mixed essence as a Mexican much more than painting one or the other alone. Suddenly angels came into the picture, precisely because they are related to the topic of death; finally it was angels, calvaries, skulls and then a synthesis of all those themes.

In the series *José y otras calamidades* (Joseph and Other Calamities), there is a theme which remained to the end: that enormous disillusionment, that enormous sense of abandonment we are living with

now, which has filtered into my work. That is to say, it was not a theme I specifically thought up, but I did feel it. In the end, it is what brought together my latest exhibition that I recently presented at the Modern Art Museum.

To continue with the theme of the angels, when I was about to paint the angel that stops the hand of Abraham from sacrificing his own son, I read—I practically devoured it in one night—Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. The book deals with Abraham from the point of view of a nineteenth century philosopher who believes in God. I studied with the Jesuits and I come from a very religious family. I was familiar with the topic but I realized that my vision of Abraham was no longer the same as the one I had as a young man. It was not Kierkegaard's vision either; so it had to be a third vision that was mine, in the 1990s, and which surely was similar to that of many others. However, the theme of faith does continue to be valid; perhaps not in the terms that Kierkegaard or Saint Paul spoke of—the faith in God—but in terms of the relationship between faith and power.

Perhaps it is a more cynical vision of the meaning of the Bible itself, a more 1990s vision, more naked, but in the end, it continues to be faith. No longer is it purely in God, but faith in anything, in a total meaning, that acts as a paradigm. Some belief that binds us together, that unifies us so we can

go forward as a civilization, as a society. I think that is the great thirst, the great hunger we suffer from today. These paintings really



Fantasy in the Bath, 1992 (acrylic on canvas).

had a very critical feeling, a feeling imbued with crisis, very painful. Something you obviously breathed in the atmosphere in Mexico and in the world.

I think we are the first disillusioned generation. All the promises they made to us about progress from the eighteenth century on have been broken. As a generation, we have had to pay the bill for that idea of progress. We did progress, but at what cost and what is this thing called “progress”? We

“Each time I experiment with a new technique, I feel that it enormously enriches my whole pictorial language.”



Tzompantli, *Masks and Angels*, 1995 (oil and acrylic on canvas).

are talking about a society that breathes lead in the totally polluted air; there's not a clean river in the whole world. We are paying too high a price for this "progress". We're not the Jetsons; we're not going to fly from house to house in the year 2000. We are also not going to eradicate poverty and all be happy. I think that the future—entering into the twenty-first century—looks very different from what we imagined as children. That's the vision of my last exhibition.

We are living through a crisis of values; we don't know where to go nor whether we should value faith. And I'm not talking about faith in God, but that faith that I had on the day I wanted to be a painter. That epiphany, as it was called; that day I knew I decided to be a painter, that it would go well for me, that this was my road. It is the same faith of Saint Louis that I'm talking about now and that I want to give shape to in those paintings. So, going back to the beginning, the concept is the same: how to paint. The second concept, the secondary one, would be Abraham, and Abraham obviously as a great symbol of faith.

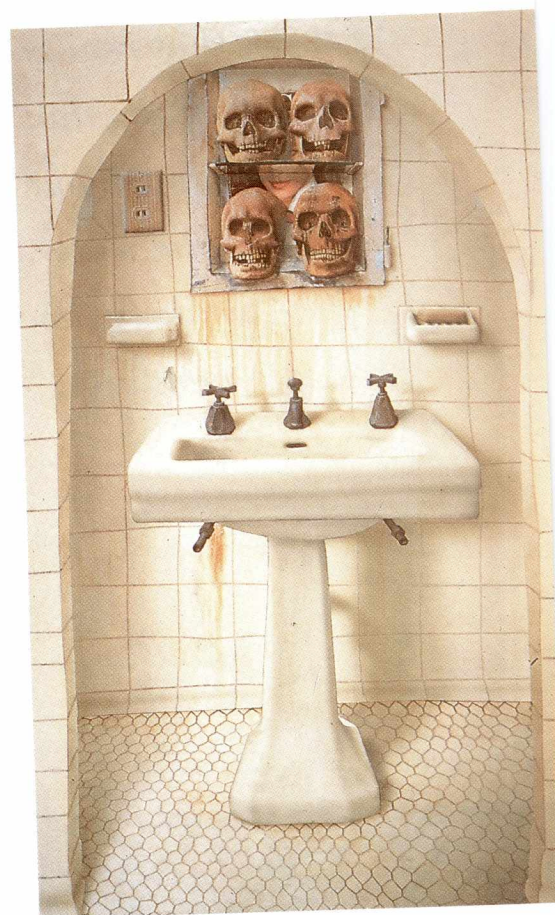
VM: *You once said that to do a new painting you have to commit suicide. What did you mean?*

RC: I was referring to moments when I have changed radically, when I have left behind a whole process and made a change that means risking a lot. Because you risk your work that is already going well and

you also risk your public. But you have no choice; you have to go ahead. You have to look for new ways of saying things. You have to find new roads, new techniques, new concepts, new ways of painting. When you make a change of this magnitude, it's a kind of suicide. That is, all this that is alive is thrown out and something new begins.

VM: *When talking about your work, people have said you are part of realism and also that you're the expression of an alternative reality or a critical illusionism. How do you see it?*

RC: Terms like "realism" and "hyperrealism" come from a very specific current at a very particular time—very American—with a very defined concept and way of painting, which, in my opinion, have nothing to do with my work. This current tries to separate out emotions with very cold images which express no feeling, so the pictorial surface is not con-



Tzompantli in the Medicine Chest, 1994 (acrylic on canvas)

*“The future... looks very different
from what we imagined as children.
That’s the vision of my last exhibition.”*

taminated with your own emotions. I dislike the very design of the words and I don't understand them. "Hyperrealism": beyond reality. It's excessively dead, hyper-dead. "Realism" is a word that confuses me. I've never been able to understand it. I've only been

“I think that reality is something that drips through our fingers like water, while fiction endures.”



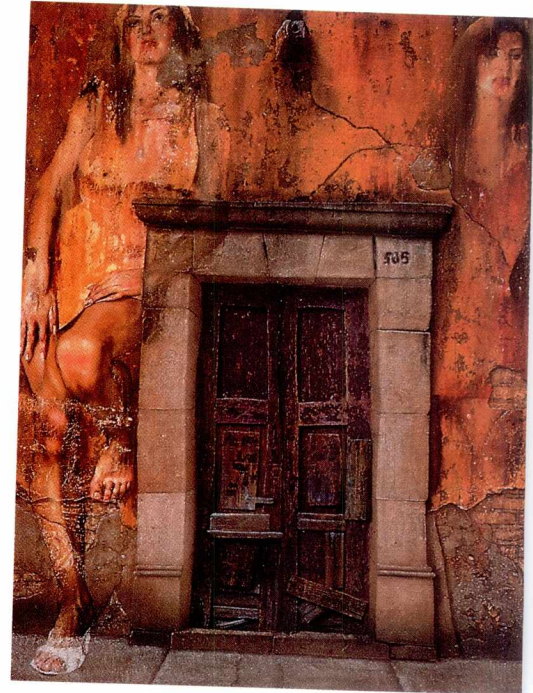
The artist.

able to capture its appearance, its epidermis.

However, I like the antonyms of the word more. “Illusion”, “fantasy”, “myth”, “magic” and “lie” are words that go with my work more. In fact, I think they are words that, in terms of all cultural production, are much more useful. Reality has never been of any use to us, much less truth. We have never even come to any agreement about their meaning. By contrast, in fiction we have found a place where we can understand better.

Culturally, we have never used facts as the foundation for a concept. We have always related more to fantasies, to myths. The Bible has been a source of impressive concepts, even though we cannot prove the existence of Abraham, much less Adam and Eve. Neither do we agree about who the real authors of many texts were, like the *Song of Songs* attributed to Solomon, although we know now that he didn’t write it.

I think that reality is something that drips through our fingers like water, while fiction endures. If I’m to speak of my concept of faith and beliefs, the case of Abraham is very useful. But that would not be the case of a friend of mine or of a real person like, for example...I don’t know, [Subcommander] Marcos or [ex-President] Salinas or [the painter] Rufino Tamayo. Because, what would happen? I make up a series of narrations and they can contradict me. They’ll say,



Old Havana # 1, 1995 (acrylic on canvas).

“You’re out of it. Things aren’t like that.”

By contrast, if we talk about Abraham, whatever the Bible says is it. Abraham was afraid because of his wife’s beauty, and he said she was his sister so they wouldn’t kill her. If it had been a news item, they might have denied it because it would mean presenting him as a coward. Perhaps they would have written that Abraham was very brave. But the power of myth, of fiction, of fantasy, is culturally much greater, and it is much more intelligent to pay attention to them and understand them as symbols, as codes, where we can come to an agreement. In the last analysis, we all know in a lie that it is a lie; but in reality or in the truth, we don’t. ❧