

Sign in New York 3, 75 x 52 cm, 1969 (lithograph).

VICENTE ROJO

Work Fashioned of Mystery

*Angélica Abelleira**

CAN ORDER BE EMOTIONAL?

Many might answer in the negative. But Vicente Rojo, the maker of orders and emotions that he then shuffles, answers, “Yes,” with his work, marked by the counterpoint of rigorousness and creative madness, method and perturbation.

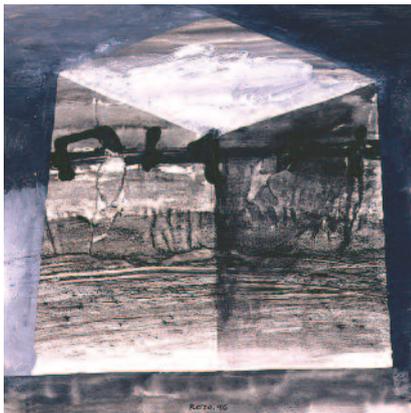
* Free lance cultural journalist.

Photos reprinted courtesy of Vicente Rojo.

“Creating doubts, uncertain elements and areas of mystery and shadow is what gives art meaning,” he says with absolute conviction.¹ And that is what he has been doing for the half century since he came to Mexico to be reunited with his father, who had fled political persecution in his native Spain. It was here, “the promised land,” where Vicente, “fascinated by the air and the light,” would build a wide ranging

pictorial body of work that expressed itself in graphic design, sculpture and publishing and has enriched Mexico’s main cultural enterprises.

Rojo was born in Barcelona in 1932, where his father Francisco was an activist of the Catalanian Communist Party and his uncle Vicente was chief of staff of the Republican Army. For these reasons, Francoist repression took its toll on his family



Scenario P9, 23 x 23 cm, 1996
(mixed technique/paper).



Scenario P22, 23 x 23 cm, 1996
(mixed technique/paper).



Stela 7, 130 x 77 x 56 cm, 1995 (bronze).

that had to flee to the south of France for safety. Four months later the family returned to Barcelona without Francisco Rojo, who decided to emigrate to Mexico.

From the time he was a little boy, Vicente used his hands to relate to the world. During the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), before he knew how to read, he used colored pencils, scissors, glue and paper to make representations of what he saw out the window: people shouting in the streets carrying arms and flags.

He drew constantly, but the pressing economic situation of his mother and his brothers and sisters made it necessary for him to work as an apprentice in the

ceramics workshop of the Elementary Trades School where he was enrolled. He graduated as a sculptor/carver and learned to decorate, glaze and fire ceramics in wood kilns, although he did not learn to sculpt wood because in the postwar period materials were scarce and expensive.

He lived in Catalonia, but even as a young man he established ties to Mexico, not only because he missed his father, but also because he listened to *Bésame mucho*, by Consuelo Velázquez, and saw movies by Emilio *El Indio* Fernández and Gabriel Figueroa. Their work made him “intuitively feel that Mexico was a marvelous island where one day I wanted to

live,” as he wrote in his acceptance speech upon entering the National College five years ago.²

BOOKS: A CELEBRATION OF LIFE

He arrived to his “Mexican island” in 1949 when he was 17, and his desire to paint grew. Teachers Agustín Lazo and Arturo Souto gave him his first elements for understanding painting and from that time on, he stained, erased and recreated pictorial surfaces with secret scenes and landscapes full of rain. But 1950 was the year that marked him profoundly



Negation B, 58 x 58 cm, 1975 (silk screen).

when he met typographer Miguel Prieto from La Mancha, Spain, and joined his life inextricably to the universe of graphic design. Also a painter, Prieto was in charge of the publishing department of the National Institute of Fine Arts (INBA). He soon invited Rojo to work as his assistant in the cultural supplement of the *Novedades* newspaper, *México en la Cultura* (Mexico in the World of Culture), directed by Fernando Benítez. The work trained him to lay out a page and select type, vignettes and illustrations for the essays and novels published in the supplement. But his vocation for design also brought him into close proximity to

another universe that became his passion: the universe of books, “a permanent box of surprises, a reflection of the world and celebration of life. I love them not only because of the marvels they hold, but also as precious objects in themselves that you must know how to care for and preserve.”³

This love, together with the “visual democracy” that he learned from Prieto that made him give equal importance to lettering, colors, paper and images in the design of anything in print, led Rojo to work widely in Ediciones del INBA, the UNAM Cultural Dissemination Department, the Casa del Lago and the print

shop of the Madero Bookstore in the 1950s and the 1960s. He also designed *Artes de México* (Arts of Mexico), *Revista de la Universidad de México* (University of Mexico Magazine), *Plural* and *Vuelta*, among others. In addition, since 1960, he has been key to the Ediciones Era publishing house, and as its artistic director and a member of its editorial board, he designed books that have been key to our cultural universe: *Cien años de soledad* (One Hundred Years of Solitude), by Gabriel García Márquez; *Aura* (Gentle Breeze) by Carlos Fuentes; *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* (Not Until I See You, My Jesus), by Elena Poniatowska; and *Días*



Large Primitive Scenario (polptych), 300 x 720 cm, 1996 (mixed technique/masonite).

de guardar (Days to Observe) by Carlos Monsiviáis.

PAINTING TO DISTURB

Together with design, which he sees as an act of creation, painting has been his main vehicle not for “saying,” but for “disturbing.” Together with José Luis Cuevas, Enrique Echeverría, Roger von Gunten, Fernando García Ponce and Alberto Giromella, Rojo founded “Rupture,” a group that in the 1950s and 1960s, when the muralists predominated in Mexican art, sought to open painting up. So, faced with the nationalism of the Mexican school, these young artists pushed for cre-

ativity and rebellion in profoundly personal ways, without a stylistic or ideological “line.”

Eight years after venturing into design, then, Rojo presented his first individual exhibition at the Proteo Gallery with the theme war and peace. “It was terrible. I realized that I should have eliminated things, taken elements out. I was caught in the trap of an excess of color, forms, rhythm, everything. That’s when I began a process of elimination.”⁴

This process signalled his entry into abstraction and a search for textures on the pictorial surface in *Premonitions*, a series of canvases he presented at his second exhibition in 1959. This would be the beginning of his mania for painting in

series and doing 10 to 15 canvases at a time: *Signals* (1965-1970), *Negations* (1971-1975), *Memories* (1976-1980), *Mexico in the Rain* (1981-1989) and *Scenarios* (1990 until today).

While his first work seems figurative, over the years, Rojo maintained his central concern with synthesis and order. On canvas, he expresses his signals, geometric marks and a visual alphabet that he reconstructs as volcanoes, pyramids, mirrors and codices on reticular surfaces, taking on the task of destroying one order to construct time and again his universe crammed with negations, scenarios and memories.

As a rigorous artist, however, he does welcome all the imperfections and unex-



pected elements that enrich his creative efforts, all with a well-developed sense of humor, as art critic Lelia Driben has noted.⁵ But, in addition to humor, his play with forms and color, his great love of poetry and his profound sense of friendship have motivated him to ample collaboration with poets, giving rise to object-books. José Emilio Pacheco, David Huerta, Alvaro Mutis, José Miguel Ullán and Alberto Blanco are a few names on the list of authors who have shared with Rojo the fashioning of these object-books, offering us kingdoms governed by surprise and amazement.

Rojo's contributions have been recognized with the National Art and Mexico in Design Awards (both in 1991); the

Fine Arts Medallion of Merit, from the Spanish government (1994); and his admittance to the National College (1994) and an honorary doctorate by the National Autonomous University of Mexico (1998).

"Where is Vicente Rojo's painting going that with such desperate intensity it searches for painting as such?" asked Juan García Ponce 20 years ago. And he answers the question himself, "Nowhere. That nowhere [that] is the natural place for painting as a work of art, as a creation of the spirit that seeks nothing more than itself and desires nothing more than its own reality."⁶

Vicente Rojo ratifies this intent in each and every one of his paintings, sculptures and designs, to the enrichment of our eyes and hearts. **MM**

NOTES

¹ *La Jornada* (Mexico City), 18 February 1999.

² "Los sueños compartidos," *La Jornada* (Mexico City), 17 November 1994.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Margarita García Flores, *Cartas marcadas* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1979).

⁵ Lelia Driben, *Vicente Rojo, el arte de las variaciones sutiles*, Círculo de Arte Collection (Mexico City: CNCA, 1996).

⁶ Juan García Ponce, *Las formas de la imaginación* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1992).