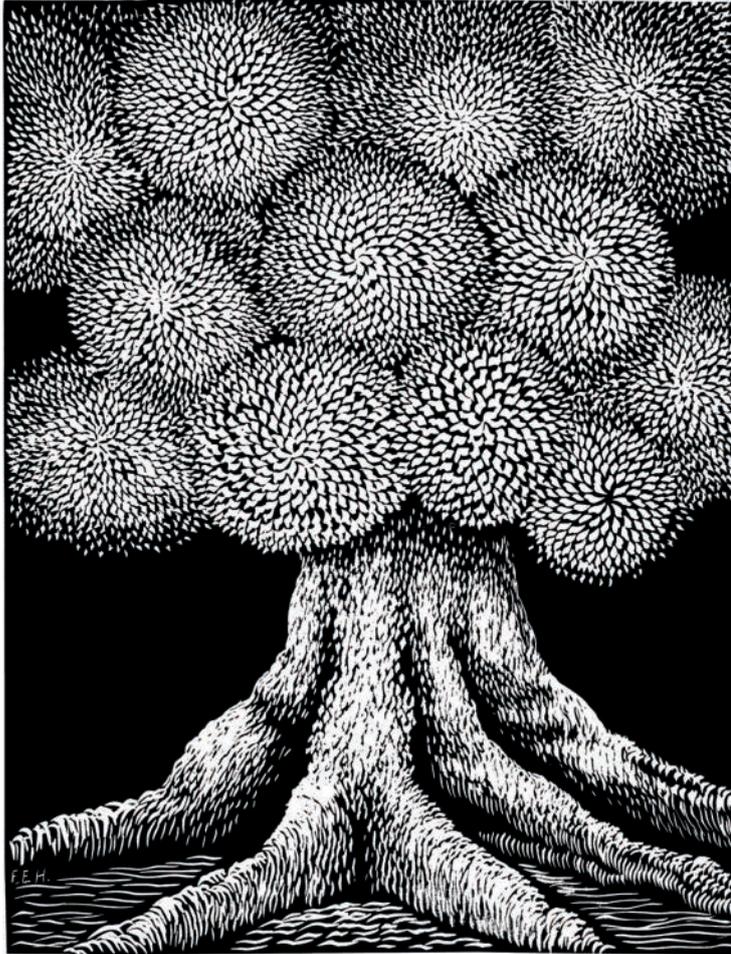


Férido Castillo Landscape Engraver

Roberto Ponce*



Champa, 70 x 50 cm, 1999 (mixed technique).



The Silk-Cotton Tree, 30 x 39 cm, n.d. (linoleum print).

His engravings are vibrant prints of the Tabasco jungle. Multi-hued nature carved in black and white by his hands. A jungle that, unfortunately, is doomed to disappear. Tabasco-born engraver Férido Castillo charged, “The landscape of my homeland has always disquieted me, and today more than ever, when the exuberant jungle that I saw as a boy is disappearing.”¹ Convinced that “the most important thing is to do your art” instead of being

“a social critic who resolves nothing,” his work “presented the Tabasco jungle even though it is disappearing.”

Born in 1942 in Cacaos, in the Tabasco municipality of Jalapa, to a peasant family, Castillo did many different kinds of jobs and finally came to consider himself an engraver-in-training. Indifferent to those who considered him old-fashioned, he was proud of living modestly in Villahermosa. “I wouldn’t change my house. I have never been able to leave Tabasco and I’m not sorry. To be an artist you don’t have to go to a sophisticated school. I have affection for this place and the enthusiasm I need to dedicate my life to art here.”

In his last engravings, he emphasized urban growth “devouring” the natural areas and their inhabitants. “When I arrived in Villahermosa, downtown was another world. On Madero Street a car would barely go by every five minutes.” Construction worker, carpenter, newspaper vendor, baker’s helper, dishwasher, market stall salesman, Férido said, “The artist sensitizes the masses. Social themes interest me, but I think that the most important thing is to do your work, not so much get involved in social issues.”

From the start, he wanted to be a painter. “In 1963 I was caught up in Valeriano Maldonado’s and Jorge Corona’s Cuña Group workshop. In the short time they were here, they did murals and gave a workshop. I wanted to paint like Cézanne or Van Gogh, but they pushed me to develop my own style. So, I got rid of books; I have none at all now. I want everything that comes out of me to be natural, with no influence from anyone....I did my first engraving, a little landscape under Michoacán-born teacher Efraín Vargas. I took it to him and when he saw it, he

Engravings and paintings taken from *Férido Castillo: Surco a la luz* (Villahermosa: Universidad Juárez Autónoma de Tabasco, 2003). Reproduced by permission of the Juárez Autonomous University of Tabasco.

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asked me to give him the first print. That made me very happy. It was a very important moment for me.”

Then came exhibitions, good reviews, prizes. In 1979, he made a decision: “I was good at engraving and, since this technique was practically unknown in Tabasco, I said to myself that I was going to continue learning and teach it.”

When asked whether he had ever felt the need to include the colors of the tropics in his work, he answered, “I haven’t needed the luminosity of color. I have tried to add it to my engravings, but I didn’t like the results. Those are works I will never show.”

Very close to Villahermosa’s Pino Suárez Market, Férido Castillo’s house was always open to purchasers of the soft drinks and popsicles that he sold with his wife, Carmen Pantoja. The big living room that gave onto the street was a place of movement that doubled as a studio as his children and innumerable visitors trooped through. There, he explained to me, “My father’s name was Lucio Castillo; he was a peasant. Consuelo Hernández, my mother, was a housewife. We lived in Cacaos, a very old town, in one of those clay houses covered in *jahuacté*, with a hallway and an earth floor.”

His art burst forth from a childhood enchantment, since as a boy he experienced the legend of the Vernete River: people swore that the siren who dominated it kidnapped a man one night with the help of a lizard. The women prayed for him, and when he returned, he told them of the amazing sights he had witnessed under the water. Castillo told me, “When the lizards make sounds at midnight, people say that it is the man from Vernete who has returned. When I was a boy, I heard that story and, one morning about seven, I

went there to draw. There was a very thick mist. I heard that loud noise and right there and then I decided I would reproduce the flora and swamps of Tabasco. The thousands of forms of nature in which I found the strength to express myself: the rattan, the parasitical plants, the very pretty red tree called *palo mulato*, that is like a great god of the jungle.”

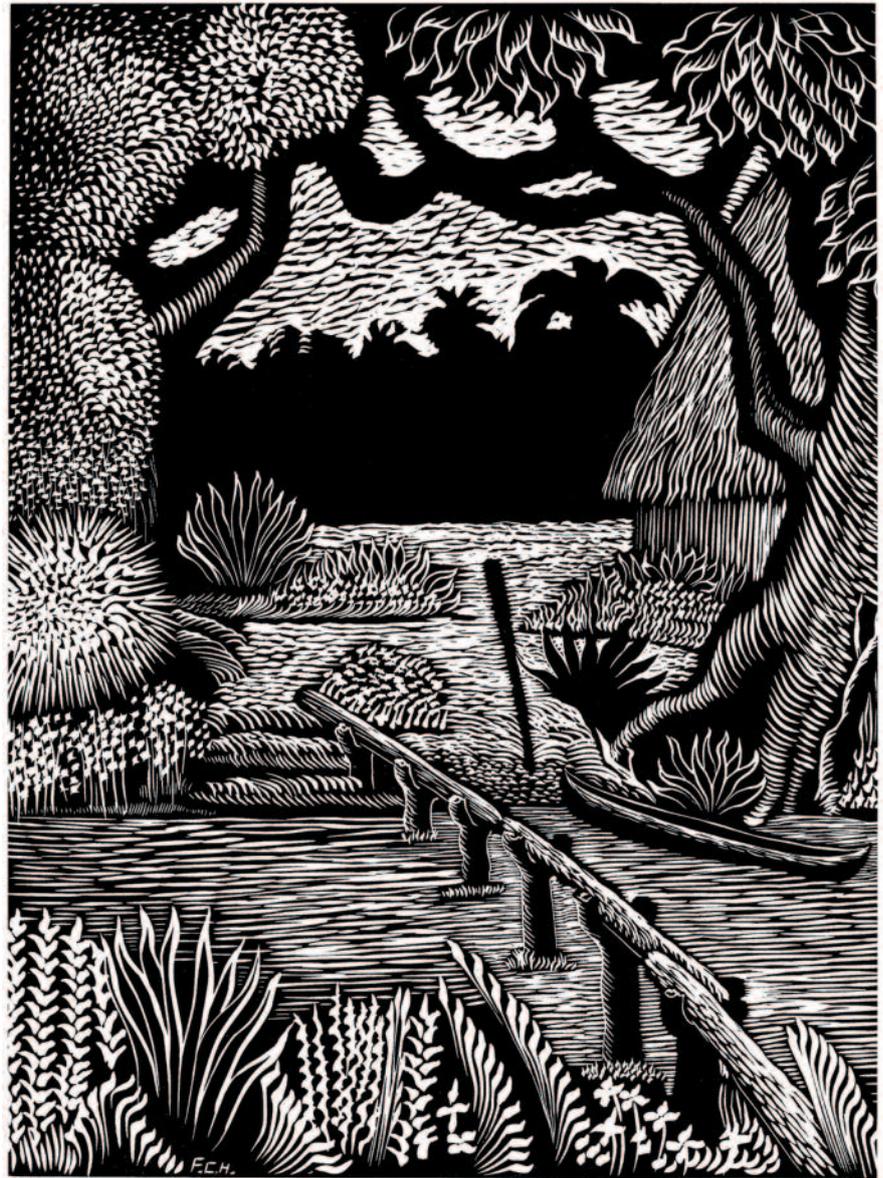
“Sometimes,” he said, “the rays of the sun filtering through the vegetation land on the *palo mulato* and illuminate the bend in the branches, and the bark looks like an incandescent green-blue ball of fire in the middle of the jungle. There were still plenty of fish; birds



The Road, 28 x 35.5 cm, n.d. (linoleum print).

called 'seven preys' came to eat their little sardines; white and black herons....I have a lively image of my childhood and I remember that the trees were so big that their branches intertwined and crossed from one side of the river to the other. You don't see that anymore because much of the vegetation has been destroyed and you can only see pastures. There are no longer as many exotic birds and you can no longer hear the song of the *tutupana*, the *chachalaca*, the iguana or the *garrobo* lizard. Gone, too, are the sounds of the tiger or the serpents that left a lasting impression on me as a child."

When he began to paint he was not environmentally aware. "This business of thinking about the fact that without the jungle there simply would be no life was not something conscious. I was seeking form and the contrast that you find from time to time between light and shadow. Because in engraving I seek high contrast, and where I achieve it the most is in immediate nature, the jungle that I have lived in since childhood." Just before he died, in January 2002, he said, "In the jungle, I find the thousands of forms that I can interpret in my engraving and also the necessary strength that I seek to present my work. The jungle does nothing but help me; it is a tremendous source of inspiration. Before people started talking about ecology, it was already my favorite theme."



Railing 1, 29 x 38.5 cm, n.d. (linoleum print).



Fronde III, 29 x 38.5 cm, n.d. (linoleum print).

Until the end of his life in January 2002, Férido survived on the 7,000 pesos that he earned teaching at the Juárez Autonomous University of Tabasco and his wife's earnings from the little neighborhood store. Since his engravings were not backed by state promotional funds or auctioned in galleries, "Fero" printed t-shirts with Tabasco motifs from his work. They did not interest state cultural or tourism officials either, and so he could only place them in shops around the Villahermosa market. Some tourist may well have bought them, finding traces of Dürer, Doré or the French impressionists in his tigers, Olmec heads or exotic plants.

A man with hands worn by work in the countryside and a robust *guayabera* shirt, Férido Castillo was generous with his gouge and to his friends. He died of a stroke at 59 in Reynosa, Tamaulipas. During his lifetime, no cultural authority organized a retrospective of his work or proposed a catalogue of the 500 works he created in black and white, with visions of a sober vastness of vegetation, that were exhibited in New York, San Luis Potosí, Chiapas, Yucatán, Veracruz and Mexico City. **MM**

NOTES

¹ All quotes are taken from two articles by the author published in *Proceso* weekly magazine, issues 593 (14 March 1988), p. 27, and 1316 (20 January 2002), p. 58.