

# *Juan Soriano*

The More You Contemplate,  
The Freer You Are  
(1920-2006)

Jaime Moreno Villarreal\*



*Dove*, 70 x 60 x 60 cm, 1991 (bronze).



Lupe Marín, 236 x 70 cm, 1962 (oil on canvas)  
(Oaxaca Museum Collection).

I was looking at Juan Soriano's hands. As he talked, sitting in a straight-backed armchair, Juan rested them on his legs in an alert pose. Now that I look closely at a small bronze sculpture from the *Dafne* series (1997 and 2005), I am surprised at how his hand has modeled and smoothed each millimeter. *Dafne* represents a delicate woman-tree, whose head and arms are twisted like a single branch that ends in her breasts covered in front modestly by her hands. Juan would laugh at this description; he would wave his hands saying that that is what I see and that that's fine. Juan used to tell me that his hands were clumsy. I didn't believe him. Perhaps he was referring to a certain way he handled materials, that constant refining that discovers for us more the artist's feeling than his touch. Some of his most intimate works, like *Portrait of Diego de Mesa* (1948) or *Portrait of Marek* in ink (1977), reveal touches that are small strokes taken much further than the technical solution: they are paintings done with caresses.

One day I asked Juan about how his hands behaved when he was working.

"My hands work on their own. I don't even notice that there's a lapse between what I see, what I think and what I do. By contrast, there are times that it is very difficult for me to achieve a form and I might work on it ten times, a thousand times; do it, redo it, remake it, take it another way, until I get it the way I want it. But I can't tell you how I want it until it comes out of the material. Other times I work very fast; it almost frightens me, as though my hand were doing the thinking and not my head."

"Can you work with somebody watching you?"

"If someone is watching me, I have to grab my hand because it shakes and I can't control myself. And when I'm making a form and I hesitate, the tool falls to the floor. It happens to me all the time; I hesitate and hesitate, and when I am finally about to create the form, I break the brush or I break the pencil!"

\* \* \*

Juan had the privilege of changing without needing to let himself be influenced. The changes of skin in his pictorial work are almost always notable as a sign of rebirth. He knew how to leave himself behind, once, twice, five times and radically. For example, his work from the 1950s, after his 1954 trip to Crete, which confirmed his modern quest of burning his ships behind him, is one of the most influential moments in Mexican twentieth century easel painting with works like *The Return to France* (1954), *Apollo and the Muses*

---

\* Art critic.





*The Return to France*, 92 x 135 cm, 1954 (oil on canvas) (Modern Art Museum Collection).

He was a painter who opened up new terrain. From his early youth he had declined to join the avant gardes, much less their followers. He was very aware that copying an international style led to parody.



*The Memory*, 80 x 45 x 26 cm, 1981 (bronze) (Juan Soriano and Marek Keller Foundation Collection).

"My hands work on their own. I don't even notice that there's a lapse between what I see, what I think and what I do. By contrast, there are times that it is very difficult for me to achieve a form, but I can't tell how I want it until it comes out of the material."



*The Bull*, 120 x 175 x 167 cm, 1987 (bronze) (Alfonso Pasquel Collection).



(1955) and the crowning glory of that period, *Portraits of Lupe Marín* (1961 and 1962). He was a painter who opened up new terrain. From his early youth he had declined to join the avant gardes, much less their followers. He was very aware that copying an international style led to parody.

“For me, art had no *before*. Everything was the present. Even today I have never gotten excited about something because its supposedly yesterday’s invention or the latest thing.”

“Well, Juan, I thought it was noteworthy that Rodolfo Nieto allowed himself to be influenced by your painting when he was very young. I mean how he soon took that influence into a different, fertile terrain. It’s an example of how influences do not have to necessarily be negative.”

“Yes, I had followers in another time, but not for very long. Now I have no followers or imitators. I’m glad they don’t follow me because they’d get lost (laughs). When somebody follows an artist, he prostitutes himself. Look, they followed Tamayo a lot, even in Italy, and these weren’t mediocre artists following him. But the things they did following Tamayo were horrible! Once Tamayo asked me, ‘And you, why haven’t you ever let yourself be influenced by me?’ And I answered him, ‘Because I respect you too much.’ How was I going to paint Tamayos? I always say that every day I get up in the morning to paint a Velázquez, but I can’t get it right.”

\* \* \*

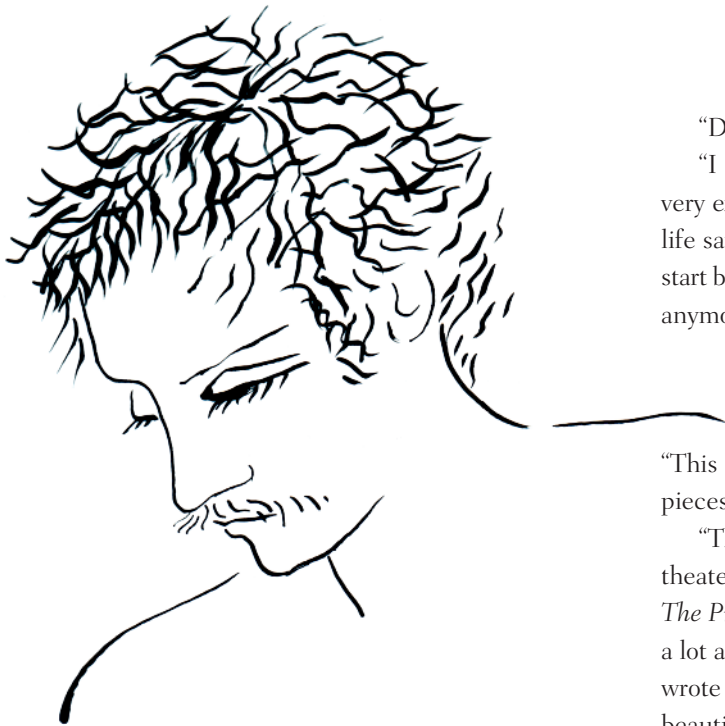
A while back I heard someone say that Juan Soriano was an improvised sculptor. I stared at him in surprise and he felt intimidated. Why is this wrong impression out there? Many people believe that Juan began sculpting when he was almost an old man. The reason is very simple: he did not begin to do monumental sculpture until the 1980s. Usually, the public only identifies large-scale pieces in plazas and buildings with the name Soriano. But Juan has been sculpting since he was very young.

“I did sculpture in terra-cotta and lots of ceramics, but I didn’t cast it in bronze because it was too expensive. The first work I did in bronze must have been when I was already about 50. And it wasn’t until I was 60-something that my first public work was accepted in Tabasco, *The Bull* (1987). Then came *The Dove* (1989) for the MARCO museum in Monterrey. If I hadn’t lived to be 70, all the large-scale sculpture that I’ve done would have remained sketches. What luck! Not everybody lives to be 70! For example, there’s *Head of María Luisa* (1962). I always wanted to do it in a large format, but I couldn’t even dream of paying to have it cast. Besides, I had a tiny studio. Where was it going to fit? It was only recently that I was able to make it large in bronze.”



*Lupe Marín*, 170.3 x 75.3 cm, 1962 (oil on canvas)  
(Andres Blaisten Collection).

The changes of skin in his pictorial work are almost always notable as a sign of rebirth. He knew how to leave himself behind, once, twice, five times and radically.



*Marek*, 33.5 x 25 cm, 1977 (ink on paper)  
(Juan Soriano and Marek Keller Foundation Collection).

“Did you decide you were going to make money?”

“I never had the desire to tire myself out making money. It is very expensive to be a painter and sculptor. You spend your whole life saving to buy paints. You spend your whole life, and when you start being successful, you don't care anymore. You don't need money anymore except to pay doctors' bills!”

\* \* \*

“This sculpture is very strange, Juan. It's different from your other pieces. What's it called?”

“That one's called *The Memory* (1981). I have always liked the theater and this piece comes out of a play by Agustín Lazo called *The Print*, a play about the Revolution in which the characters talk a lot about the print a hand leaves. Lazo was a great painter and he wrote really good plays. The play starred María Douglas, a very beautiful actress. A long time after I saw the play I thought of doing the sculpture. The hand is the hole in the piece and it has something like a fan. I don't remember now what else it was about, just that the heroine had something to do with her hand print.”

Some of his most intimate works, like the *Portrait of Marek* in ink, reveal touches that are small strokes taken much further than the technical solution: they are paintings done with caresses.



*Head of María Luisa*, 105 x 96 x 68 cm, 1994 (bronze) (Andres Blaisten Collection).





*Portrait of Lupe Marín*, 87 x 107 cm, 1962 (oil on canvas) (Horazio Fontanot Collection).



*Dafne 1*, 180 x 132 x 80 cm, 1995 (Juan Soriano and Marek Keller Foundation Collection).

Juan had no teacher and was never really anyone's disciple. His childhood was not a happy one. He was educated among magazines and books, among useless and exquisite objects.



*Portrait of Don Diego de Mesa with Dog*, 124 x 163 cm, 1948 (oil on canvas)  
(Juan Soriano and Marek Keller Foundation Collection).



“And why is it called *The Memory*?”

“It’s very simple. Even though I don’t remember much about it, it’s my memory of the play.”

\* \* \*

Juan confesses that his childhood was not a happy one and that he became involved in morally ambiguous situations from the age of nine, when his sister Martha began to introduce him to an adult world full of “bohemians.” Perhaps because of this rather brutal initiation, the idea of being an artist was repellent, the worst possible thing he could do.

Once I asked him how old he was when he sold his first painting. About ten, he answered, when he began to sell to Chucho Reyes.

“Did he buy your work to collect it?”

“No way! It was business.”

He was part of a group of young boys who made triptychs and devotional folk paintings for Chucho Reyes who sold them as pieces of colonial and nineteenth-century painting. They did them on tin and the most pretentious on copper sheeting. The young counterfeiters turned old images of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, which were very plentiful in those days, into paintings of New Spain gentlemen. Chucho bought moth-eaten wood that the boys “perfected” by shooting it with a shotgun, covered with white lead paint and then painted with “virgins of the Sienese school.” The gang of counterfeiters met together in Chucho’s patio to urinate together in a pool where they then put the paintings to age them.”

“What did you get out of all of that?”

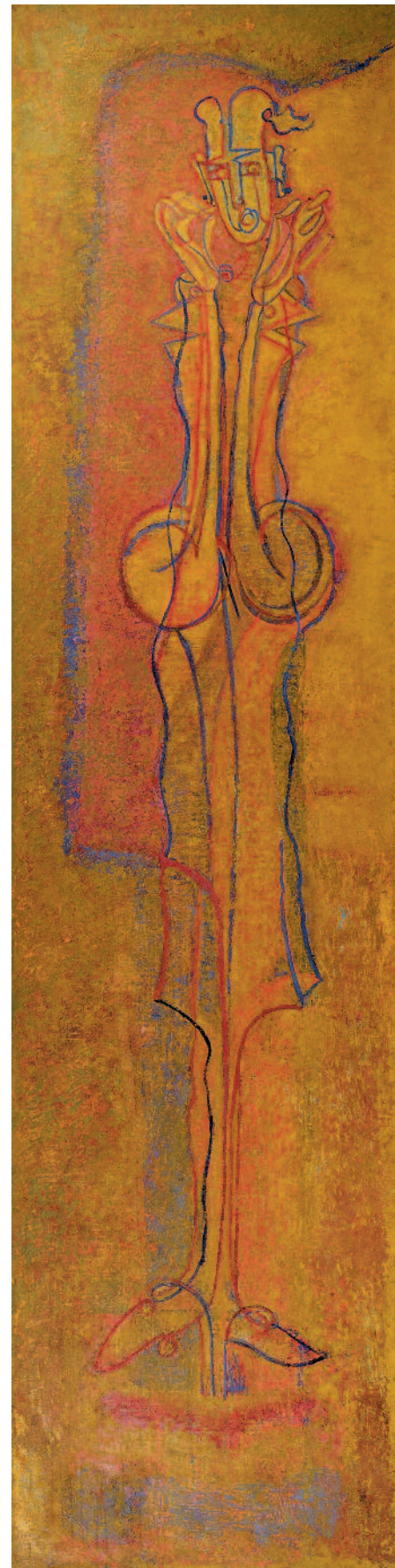
“You have to reinvent all the techniques,” he said, laughing. “If you can’t reinvent techniques, your things will be like what they call ‘academic’.”

Juan had no teacher and was never really anyone’s disciple. He was born into bad company. In Chucho Reyes’s house he was educated among magazines and books, among useless and exquisite objects. There he met Luis Barragán, he became a painter and prepared his first exhibition. Every artistic discipline has its counterfeiters who, in the blink of an eye, become a sun peeping through the pupils. The artist springs forth from the worst possible thing he could do.

\* \* \*

“You’ve seen a lot, Juan,” I said.

“The more you contemplate, the freer you are.” **NMM**



Lupe Marín, 355 x 88.5 cm, 1962 (oil on canvas)  
(Carlos García Ponce Collection).