

Federico Silva's Unending Quest

Víctor Vizzuett*

Federico Silva, painter, sculptor and prospector, with boundless good humor, has found self-realization in art. With clear, firm beliefs, his language is based on personal truths that he has transcended until they became universal. Each of his works possesses a cryptic language that only with time can be seen by the viewer, who is then the sole person responsible for his/her personal understanding and enjoyment.

Last November, Federico Silva opened the doors of his studio and its vast grounds covered with monumental sculpture to us for a few hours to talk off the cuff about his ideas, passions and memories. We discovered in them the basis of a legacy for contemporary and future artists constructed over the course of many years. This legacy goes far beyond the physical work, for it includes a way of being and interpreting Mexico's social, cultural and political life.





Mauricio Degollado

Art is a passionate, impossible quest. Real art is found in a constant search, and what you learn is that you will never find exactly what you're looking for.

To be heard, you must use silence and distance.

Federico Silva¹

What were the most important influences on you?
At first, Vasconcelos, Tolstoy, the authors I had within reach...and my contact with [David A.] Siqueiros. His compelling vision of art and his relationship

* Mexican writer and photographer.

with society, with large spaces. Above all, his conception of the participation of the viewer in his work. I was very young when I participated in the first exhibition organized by Siqueiros in the Fine Arts Palace, to protest against World War II as it was coming to an end. It was a very educational experience because I got the chance to meet many people involved in the fight against fascism like Pablo Neruda, people who participated very actively, very generously, in favor of the best causes in the world.

What has artistic creation given you?

Well, I don't really like the words "artistic creation." Instead, with time, you begin to understand about the processes of artistic creation. I have come to the conclusion—and I'm absolutely convinced of this—that the driving force that creates proposals and changes is work. Fantasies and inspiration, all of those things, don't exist.

Work has many virtues. In the first place it's where the artist achieves realization. Because the artist does not achieve self-realization through success, or through the sale of his or her work, much less through praise. When you're young, you're full of fantasies; you think that destiny and the way to reach your goals are in sight, that it's just a matter of waiting a little while or betting on good luck. But work teaches you that art is solitude enriched by the passion of finding something. Art is a passionate, impossible quest. That's why the creator perseveres in the quest and does not allow him or herself to be trapped by the sirens' call, or by fame or money,

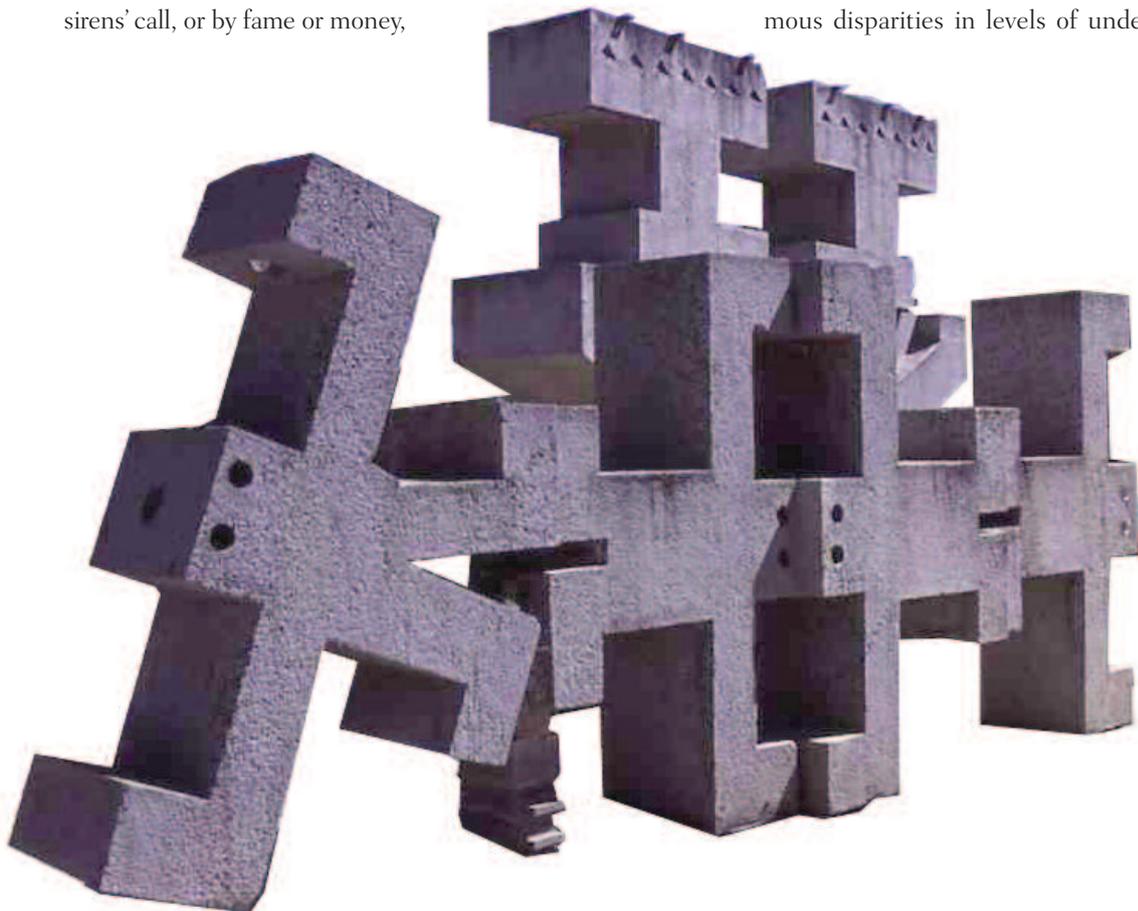
or by making the mistake of letting his or her efforts be commercialized. Real art is found in a constant search, and what you learn is that you will never find exactly what you're looking for.

How would you define an artist?

An artist is a prospector. I find it hard to use the word "artist" because it's very confusing. But, who defines it? How is it discovered? Where's the dividing line? I think that in this instance, the only thing that can answer your question is time.

What is Federico Silva's definition of art?

I think that art is an expression suspended in a permanent question. Art does not provide answers; in any case, it asks questions. It probably occurs in the extraordinary moment of communication between the work and the viewer. Because the object itself is never an artistic object as such; it only is when it is looked at by the viewer. But this process is very difficult because there are enormous disparities in levels of under-



Elsie Montiel



Mauricio Degollado

guage. Because in art, it doesn't matter what you say, but how you say it.

How does Federico Silva perceive himself, given the solitude of artistic endeavor?

During the effort of artistic creation, your greatest companion is solitude because that is where the internal dialogue of things is taking place. In this kind of work, there are no schedules; you work all the time; you work when you're asleep; you work during the night. It is a constant obsession. But something very curious takes place: a young artist works with music. Some even have their favorite composers who they identify with. They even follow the color of the music. They listen to Mahler all the time, very loud. They can't create their art without music as an eternal companion. But when you've been doing this for many years, you end up not needing anything. You don't need music anymore. You're not lonely. You're immersed in the conflict of creation, in the enjoyment of it. That's the part that compensates for the next stages of artistic work. Because later you face failure; finished works fall apart; their defects show up; the illusion of having achieved something fades away and you are left with no alternative but to persevere in your quest. That is the philosophical touchstone. Perhaps my will to live longer is because I continue to persevere in the quest.

How has your work changed?

In a great many ways. It cannot be static because you don't live in a test tube. Everything that happens around you affects you, even though people say that artists are ahead of other people. I don't think we are ahead of anything. Rather, what happens is that the mechanics of your work lets you express almost immediately what other kinds of thinkers, scientists, sociologists take longer to decipher.

What influence has the history of Mexico and the world had on your work?

It's an endless game. Naturally, there have been key moments that have influenced my work. The 1968 movement was a break and a fundamental change for artists in Mexico. What they say hap-

standing, in sensibilities, and in viewers' cultural background when they stand before a work.

For example, sculpture and painting are arts that are very difficult to capture. Nevertheless, people think they capture them in an instant. They often go to openings, look at the exhibit, drink a cocktail and end up thinking they "saw." But the reality is that they didn't see anything at all. Not even by standing a few minutes in front of a single canvas or a sculpture do they manage to see it, because their internal language is cryptic, full of hidden signs that are difficult to decipher for someone who doesn't have the keys, and these are only revealed very slowly, going back to the piece time and again, at different moments.

How is your person manifested in your work?

What remains of you in your work?

If anything remains, the most important thing would be passion, also expressed in cryptic lan-



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Mauricio Degollado

“In 1945... it occurred to me to publish a magazine with contributions from renowned artists. But the magazine wasn’t about art; it was about politics... a magazine by artists in defense of Mexico’s sovereignty and progress.”

pens—and they even announce to the four winds as though it were a commercial product: “The Break”, which they chalk up to one poet and painter or another—is a very vain idea because they think they changed the world. But the break was a great social break with the past, the accumulation of a series of circumstances in Mexico and the world that caused a big shake-up in Mexican society. We all changed. That social break showed us other horizons and how to re-learn the surroundings of our lives, our horizons, where we were situated and that we were part of the world of Mexican society. That made us explore once more, to learn the new signs. For me, it was an enormous shake-up and naturally, I abandoned the things I had believed in before. I did not abandon my ideology. I continue to think in the same way. But, I stopped doing the same things because they no longer made sense; their function was an anachronism; it was

repeating a language and persevering in a stubborn, senseless way. The idea is to become part of a great crusade for things to change, improve, be different, and so that there can be room for understanding things.

What is the key to Federico Silva always looking for something new?

Not being satisfied and life, because the best way of living is to have a reason, to fight and trust, to be optimistic in doing what you’re doing.

What attracted you to politics?

I thought that the function of art was political. I believed that firmly. Art should serve to strengthen and contribute to social change. After the first nuclear explosions, after the Cold War, a new stage of struggle for peace began. I really believed that we were on the brink of nuclear war. I didn’t do it to

go out and campaign for somebody to win a seat in Congress; it was really a sense of fear and responsibility. I joined that struggle and I said to myself, "It makes no sense to paint things against the war if what matters is that people gain awareness, sign petitions, take part in demonstrations." My love of Mexico includes the pain of its losses. I am one of those Mexicans who still grieve for the loss of our territory, something almost nobody dares say anymore. If we look at it like that, how could I not be interested in getting into politics, not as an activist, not at all, but you can take a stance and if there's a need to express something clearly, well, you do it.

How did you develop your conception of social consciousness?

I was lucky enough to be in contact with long-time fighters for social justice, some of whom had been members of the Communist Party at a time when the party was very sectarian, when they were expelled. But they were very well known. I was very

young and wanted to be like them, have the same adventures, go out into the streets and put up posters, do all that street activism, because that's where you learn about solidarity, man's greatest virtue. I understood the sacrifice of people on all levels. Social consciousness is a very complex thing, linked to two things: ideology and practice. Without social practice, there is no consciousness.

What is your relationship to the UNAM?

My years at the UNAM have been definitive. I have fewer links than I would like, but I feel that there have been changes for the better. And I continue to think that it is perhaps the country's only beacon of light. I hope it is preserved because, given the country's current political situation, I fear that movements like we had in the past, reactionary, fascist-type movements are going to filter in and become strong in the university. It is not hard to believe that that could happen, turning the university into a Catholic university like in the eighteenth century.



Elsie Montiel

What does the sculptural space represent for you, seen from a distance?

I think it was the detonator of all Mexican sculpture. Before the existence of the sculptural space, Mexico's presence in this field was low key. This work put wind in its sails because it was based on a broad, generous, collective conception, practically without the name of any particular originator. The people who participated came to the sculptural space without the preconceived idea that it belonged to this artist or the other; they were also attracted by a certain dramatic, religious connotation because this space is a ceremonial space that did not come about by chance, but because of a convergence of ideas and circumstances.

What does the sculptural space trigger in the visitor?

I think many sensitive people perceive a ritual halo when they're there. It is not the contempla-

tion of beauty; it is not surprise at perfection or at a work of art, but the presence of a collective spirit that reminds you of the great ceremonial spaces. In that sense it is the continuity of a historical awareness; that is the UNAM's contribution.

What is your opinion of Federico Silva?

I see myself as someone who fosters change in all causes. Someone who finds realization in his work and always tries to keep a sense of reality, without believing in false praise, because it is just a dead weight that instead of giving you strength, clouds your vision.

What does universality mean to you?

I had a formula for defining the concept that I think continues to be valid: the universal is always born of the local. There can be nothing universal that is disconnected from its own character. No one can conceive of making universal art; that would be madness. But, if someone is able to perceive and disseminate the essence of what is his own, and expresses it with truth and force, it becomes a universal value. There are powerful universal values like human solidarity, which produce acts that move you regardless of the country they are from. I associate this idea with art. **MM**



NOTES

¹ Federico Silva, *México por Tacuba, Pasajes autobiográficos* (Mexico City: Conaculta, 2000), p. 125.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 105-106.



Victor Vizzuett

Federico Silva keeps himself firmly anchored in this world. His art continues to express a passion for unfinished work. Incorporating the teachings of the different periods that have molded him, changed his path and the path of the world, he refuses to abandon his quest, thus putting within our reach an unfinished body of artistic work, whose translation is the responsibility of those whose presence gives his art the opportunity of emerging and being revealed.