

Julio Galán

Painting as Diary

Isabel Morales Quezada*



Piano without a Pianist, 130 cm x 190 cm, 2000, private collection (oil on canvas).

*I see myself for a moment in a mirror.
I have several, and one of them screams as soon
as I stand in front of it.
The storm gets angrier. A coffer full
(emeralds, diamonds, rubies... more diamonds).
Can it be mine?
JULIO GALÁN*

Julio Galán once said “painting is writing in my diary.” Yes, Galán wrote by painting; he created a universe for himself and had no hesitations about showing it on his canvases. Contrasts are an integral part of that universe; the artist seems to open himself up completely to the eyes of the viewer, but he is so frank that most of the time it is incomprehensible. His works reflect his private world to such a

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Everything brings us back to him. There is no escape... one after another, his works show us the painter's passions and obsessions, to the point of chaos: a thousand different faces, disguised, masked. But they are all him! The viewer encounters a personality that advertises itself through art. This is the overriding fact of the series of paintings and videos in the exhibition "Thinking of You," on display from July to November 2008 at Mexico City's Old San Ildefonso College.

Polemics and authenticity are two central characteristics of Galán's work. Although it seems disguised, transformed, in almost all his paintings, the constant but also different repetition of his face, his body and even a particular expression, like the gaze that can be guessed at behind the expressive eyes of a horse, is at bottom the expression of his thinking. Galán's words invade each of his works and echo there:

Sometimes I try to please people so they'll stop asking me silly questions, but I'm tired of them saying that I am always disguising myself and posturing. I'm just the same when I'm alone; at night sometimes I disguise myself a hundred times, and then I do fashion shows for my dolls...I even seem complicated to myself. I create labyrinths, jumbles, clues and obstacles with my clothing and my painting. I know that I don't



Untitled (*Death*), 190 cm x 130 cm, 2003, private collection (oil on canvas).

look the same from one portrait to another, from one day to another, from one moment to another, from one way of painting to another, but ever since I was five years old, I've always been this way to survive. And finally, I don't want people to be able to pin me down: I like that mystery.



Portrait of *María Elisa-Romo* 130.2 cm x 188.9 cm, 2001, Mauricio Jasso Collection (oil, acrylic and mixed techniques on canvas).

The labyrinths, obstacles and jumbles Galán is referring to are also transmitted to the viewer. He appears on the scene most of the time; we know he is the protagonist of the story; and yet, little by little, the details of the canvas reveal a combination of dissimilar, contrasting elements that force us to stop and penetrate a labyrinthine, confused, enigmatic space.

It is his life that is the enigma, both its stages and the feelings that always went with him. In Galán's case, childhood, youth and maturity overlap; they do not seem to follow each other chronologically, but rather to live together freely, and this shows in his work. His paintings are a kind of tiny Aleph, as Borges described him in his

story, where it is not the universe and the world where we all live that is portrayed, but the world Galán lived in. This is why before trying to describe his work, perhaps I should say, like Borges in his story, “What my eyes saw was simultaneous: what I transcribed, was successive, because language is like that. However, I will be able to pick up some of it.”

Galán is aware of the world around him and he adapts it for himself. Although his creations revolve around his personality and image, he never stops including references to the culture where he developed, particularly religious culture. With these references that could be considered alien to the space he inhabited —the space of his dolls, disguises and make-up— he appears, and paints himself or adds symbols of his personality to appropriate some images. Carlos Monsiváis uses the figure of Narcissus to explain Galán’s tendency to find himself in other images:

Galán... is a passionate devotee of self-portraits, those *ad lib* modifications of Narcissus’s pool. He (Narcissus) ceaselessly

looks at his own face to see if his reflection has arrived, not so much because he is in love with himself —which perhaps he is— but because he wants to capture his alternate image and recompose it, decorate it and make it suffer or force it to adore the original. To innovate the reflection: subvert the origin.

The artist recreates the image of the Last Supper including himself in it, painting in a Christ child with his own face peeking out from the childish features, painting the adult Jesus Christ but dressing him in clothing like Galán’s. The artist’s face transformed in other images reveals his proximity to Catholicism and at the same time the distance he puts between that and his own doctrine.

Some of his works are inspired in *ex-votos*, or tin devotional folk paintings, done to thank the Virgin Mary or some saint for a miracle that saved the life of the painter or cured some disease as had been fervently prayed for, and that generally describe in a drawing or painting the scene of the miracle. Once again, the mischievous child Galán uses some

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Portrait of Elizabeth, 190 cm x 260 cm, 2000, private collection (oil and collage on canvas).



I Want to Die, 132 cm x 187 cm, 1985, private collection (oil on canvas).

of these elements to create his own “miracles”: the bright, contrasting colors and even the wear on the tin that they are painted on, which he depicts by scratching the paint on the canvas.

Although apparently the priority is the need to communicate his interior life, Galán also seeks to establish his connections to Mexico. His *I Want to Die* depicts the Mexican flag and the national crest behind his arm; then, the crest is replaced by his initials (JG) in other works. The colors of the flag remain, but Galán reaffirms his individuality by preferring his name: he is his own homeland.

Animals are also a recurring motif, almost always caricatured or included as though they were only disguises behind which the painter can hide or peek over. In one of his canvases, Galán appears as an adult accompanied by a bear similar to the one we would find in any children’s story, and in another, he is hidden under a gorilla suit, betrayed only by his eyes. The birds that top his head in some of his paintings decorate him but are also the bearers of his feelings—one of them is weeping—and the words that accompany him allude to immortality: “Death will die when it goes on to eternal life.”

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Galán’s personality is reaffirmed in every painting and the photographs gathered for the San Ildefonso show complete our attempt to understand the artist by introducing us to the experience that his work inevitably brings us. The use of certain materials stuck on the canvases as a collage, like costume jewelry stones, colored feathers, ribbons and belts, allude to the fantasy of his own taste in clothing, shown in the photographs of him wearing the same outfits he is wearing in his paintings.

The photographs, the painter’s words, the videos and the testimonies from people who knew him, reveal the indissoluble link between Galán’s personal life and his painting. His great friend Guillermo Sepúlveda wrote:

His world, saturated with objects that continually moved from place to place created stage-like environments with extrava-

gant mixtures of European antiques, porcelain, crystal, mirrors, furniture, Mexican objects and traditionally outfitted cowboy *charros*, fake pre-Columbian fragments, plastic toys, stuffed, mounted animals, religious items; stamps, different representations of Christ and the Christ child, saints, and, as a centerpiece, an enormous collection of hundreds of dolls, each with its own name; these were really the legitimate inhabitants of the house.

This is the description of the artist's home and studio, but it could well be the description of one of his works, or at least a list of items depicted in one of them. Galán also represents a world of contrasts: fantasy and reality, angst and serenity, childhood and maturity, the interior universe and the external world. He transmits all this to his viewers, sometimes simultaneously, though in a fragmented, difficult-to-understand way.

Francesco Pellizzi, another of Galán's friends and a critic of his work, explains: "What we have before us are traces



Untitled (*Vase*), 190 cm x 130 cm, 2003, private collection (oil on canvas).



Untitled (*Mexican Charro Cowboy*), 2001, private collection (oil on canvas).

of barely communicable 'states of being.'" The artist expresses himself, but it is not his intention to build logical or comprehensible accounts for the viewer. He does not seem to be interested in being understood, either in his life or in his work as an artist. There are no explanations in his painting, and yet, there are constants that make it possible to get a glimpse at the complexity he embodied.

Subversion prevails, both in the composition of his canvases and in the materials he uses, and, above all, in the way in which this relates to a personality completely without shame. The religious elements and the presence of a childhood governed by a sense of play mixed with love for his parents, particularly for his mother, exist side-by-side with the feelings of anxiety and happiness—almost euphoria—that always existed inside him.

The viewer will always find in Galán an artist who has no hesitation about showing his contradictions, his origins and his memories, his manias and obsessions: his way of life. The mysteries found along the way are not always decipherable but are proof of the freedom of expression he never renounced. **MM**