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De Cisneros' paintings express a heightened, ecstatic agony. Emotions are always naked, bruised, dramatic. His utter sincerity, in person and on the canvas, is undeniably affecting.

By Bonnie Grossman

MANUEL DE CISNEROS, 34, considers himself a vampire painter. Like many struggling artists, de Cisneros holds down a day job. It is the wee small hours that are his time. When everyone else is sleeping, even his wife, de Cisneros is busily painting, putting his own darkest thoughts down on canvas. The graveyard shift is bearing fruit, both artistically and, at last, critically. De Cisneros, a native of Oaxaca, is making a name for himself. He looks set to follow a rich tradition of Oaxaqueno painters.

But de Cisneros diverges stylistically from his native forebears, painters he freely admits as influences, yet refuses to mimic or emulate. His paintings are deeply personal, inverted works, with little direct reference to the evocative, external Oaxacan landscape. His themes are not at all wilting in their message. An early series, *Los Azules* (The Blues), is a surrealist collection that explores stark emotional terrains, the pain of death and religion. De Cisneros uses blue shades extensively in the series, calling on all the moods, music and connections the color brings to mind. In this early series, his target is the hypocrisy of the clergy, a subject which has confounded most intellectually active Mexicans down the years, most famously Benito Juarez.

De Cisneros was raised as a young child to believe that a person could not, and should not, live without organized religion. But his faith was challenged by the observation that clergyman appeared more interested in material gain than in promoting spiritual growth. Observation became contention and anger in de Cisneros. It precipitated a religious self-examination, which in turn sparked paintings such as that in which a young man kneels, begging forgiveness from inside a prison cell. By his side, two haunting, faceless men carry a pole, a cross. High above on a prison wall is an open window: escape, just out of reach. According to de Cisneros, *The Blues* mostly "show bodies in a sacrificial position. The men are martyrs, suffering below a crucifix."

The portrait of his older brother, at the time just dead from cancer, is unique in the series insofar as the painting does not share the others' theme of crucifixion. His brother's death left de Cisneros, then 24, confronted, at an extremely personal level, with the sometimes extreme brevity of life. His frequent smile fades, his stare intensifies when he points to the lonely image of a young man standing on a chair, with three candles around him; two lit, one extinguished. Again, blue is the pervasive color.

"I live with the pain of losing my brother," says de Cisneros. "The drawings and paintings I did at this time were a message I expressed, not therapy."

All de Cisneros' paintings express a heightened, ecstatic agony. Emotions are always



LA GULA. Lápiz sobre papel, 50 x 40. 2003

naked, bruised, dramatic. His utter sincerity, in person and on the canvas, is undeniably affecting—these works are, as the title indicates, a blues as opposed to an opera.

De Cisneros says he does not wish his work to overwhelm, just to ask questions. One of his strongest pieces, "Sunday Afternoon," shows a man on the ground with his hands tied behind him. His face lays close to a bowl of food, yet he cannot reach it. A chair in the background hints at traditional Sunday leisure. The portrait is successful in the chord it strikes for lonely, bored Sundays. There is the real, everyday blues of de Cisneros' work.

"I want people to feel each piece," says De Cisneros. "My paintings are like a small space which people can identify with in a cold, impersonal room."

Although de Cisneros was always good at drawing, he did not grow up wanting to be a painter. When he finished high school, he was not set on a career path, and decided to take several art-related classes. His professor, impressed by his talent, encouraged him to apply to the prestigious art school Taller Rufino Tamayo. De Cisneros was accepted. He now looks back at the pictures he showed during his interview and laughs.

De Cisneros accepted a job in a computer company in Mexico City on graduating from Rufino Tamayo. But he tired of the life and returned to Oaxaca, where two more years went by until he painted again "It was very difficult for me to return to painting," says de Cisneros. "I suffered from a loss of self-confidence in my work, and had to relearn much of my technique. I literally had to force myself draw each day."

De Cisneros got his career of the ground by renting studio space with a friend to show off his work. He sold his first piece in 2002 at an informal gathering in his home. It was his later pieces, "Retratos de Familia" (Family Portraits) that gained him recognition when the Galeria Rodolfo Morales went



LA ABARRICA. Lápiz sobre papel, 50 x 40. 2003

ahead and exhibited them. Most of these pictures are faces of people he knows well. Others are people whom de Cisneros observed from a distance. In all of them he focuses on the "essence" of the individual, and the abstract manifestation of that, rather than strictly adhering to accurate portraiture.

One of the faces is de Cisneros' father. His father distanced himself from the rest of the family during De Cisneros' childhood. The ambivalence it inspired in the young de Cisneros has given way, he says, to the knowledge of his father's suffering, and a more benevolent attitude. De Cisneros paints his own knowledge, as he acquires it. In the painting, blood, that most virulent manifestation of family ties, comes from his father's mouth.

De Cisneros flatly rejects the supposition that he is a manic depressive, or a particularly anguished individual. "I am no more depressed than the average person," he says. Perhaps it's just the nighttime, the wee, small hours in which he channels his muse, that inspire such a searching self-examination.

You can admire Manuel de Cisneros paintings for the exhibition "The Seven Capital Sins", and other works from him, at "Galeria Quetzalli" (Constitución 104) and at "Bodega Quetzalli" Murguía 400). Phone: 514 2606, 514 6268.



LA IRA. Lápiz sobre papel, 50 x 40. 2003

NEWS

Join in the Grito

By Bonnie Grossman

SHORTLY BEFORE dawn on September 16, 1810, Father Miguel Hidalgo was informed by the young army officer Ignacio Allende of his imminent arrest by the Spanish. Instead of running, Hidalgo stood his ground and called on the indigenous and mestizo peoples to fight the Spanish rule. Hidalgo rang the bells of his parish church in Dolores, hollered "Mexicanos, Viva Mexico!" from the steps and urged the gathering mob to reclaim the lands stolen from their ancestors.

Hidalgo's appeal to the masses began a bloody war that eventually resulted in Mexico's independence from Spain five years later. The banner of Guadalupe became the symbol of the revolutionary forces, huge but unruly under the command of Hidalgo, as they marched on Mexico City. Hidalgo was executed in 1811, a year after he had issued the famous el grito, the patriotic call to arms that precipitated the real fight for independence and which is celebrated as a rousing call-and-response on every zocalo in the country on September 16.

The baton was passed to Jose Maria Morelos, who abolished slavery, took control of the regions and was executed like Hidalgo before independence finally came. But Hidalgo is known as the Father of Mexican independence and it is his fierce cry that resounds every year.

This September 16 falls on a Tuesday, which means an extra-long weekend for many. Following payday Friday, people will head home to villages to visit family, into the big towns for the bombast, and to the coast for beach-getaways. The biggest, brightest and loudest Independence Day celebrations are in the capital, Mexico City. There President Vicente Fox delivers el grito and the original bell rung by Hidalgo is placed on top of the National Palace to toll.

In the city of Oaxaca, a big fiesta takes place late on the night of September 15 on



PHOTO BY Marco Antonio Cruz.

the zocalo. Ms. America parades through town on a float, arriving at the zocalo for 11pm, in time for the grito. At this time, Governor José Murat opens a window of the Government Palace and hollers the names of the heroes of the war of independence. Upon shouting out the name of each hero, the gathered throng cheers 'Viva Mexico!' three times. A bell then rings and la Señorita sings the National Anthem.

Fireworks explode and children stamp and scream and generally make as much noise as possible with plastic trumpets and other noisemakers. The zocalo is filled for the duration of the independence holidays with stalls selling candy, antojitos (finger foods) and ponche (punch made from guayaba, sugar cane and other fruits). People dance traditional dances to a live orchestra until dawn. "The best place to be on the night of the 15th is on the balcony of a second floor restaurant facing the zocalo," says a local taxi driver who goes by the nickname, el Flaco.

Going to the zocalo is a family affair. After the ceremony, young people go to local clubs and house parties. Others return home with the family for all-night partying-to drink and eat traditional dishes such as mole poblano, pozole, and chiles en nogada. Many arrive from nearby towns to the grander festivities in Oaxaca and, due to the lack of public transport come the small hours, find they must walk the long miles home after the celebrations.

On the morning after the merriment of September 15, there is a parade, which comprises school children, the armed forces, men dressed as charros and women in traditional indigenous dress.

La Casa De La Abuela (Ave. Hidalgo #616, Tel. (951) 5163544) and El Asador Vasco (Portal De Flores #10A, Tel. (951) 5144755) do excellent, fixed-price traditional Oaxacan meals, with the former offering excellent views of the celebrations from a second floor balcony, over-looking the zocalo. It is worth calling well in advance to ensure seating on the night. Como Agua Pa' (Hidalgo #612, Tel. (951) 5162917) also offer balcony views of proceedings and a special Independence Day menu. Call for information. The Hotel Victoria (Lomas Del Fortin #1, Tel. (951) 515 2633 or 2411) offers a fixed-price meal with live music, fireworks and a wonderful view over the city.

HISTORY

Benito Juarez

"Respect for the rights of others is peace". ...

By , Jeremy Lange

Benito Juárez was born on March 21, 1806, in the Oaxaca village of San Pablo Gueletao to a purely Zapotec family of farmers. His parents died when he very young and after being taken care of by several family members, Juarez's thirst for education caused him to walk the long road to Oaxaca City, where his sister was working. The family took young Benito in as well and after a family friend recognized his desire and aptitude for learning, they started him in his studies of Spanish language and grammar, for at the time he only spoke his native Zapotec tongue.

Juarez continued his education at the Franciscan seminary school and planned on being a priest, but as his studies progressed, he believed that his interests dictated a

career in law as opposed to religion. After graduation from the Franciscan school, Juarez went to the Institute of Science and Art, where his studies of philosophy led him to abandon his Catholic beliefs for those of a more secular nature and he graduated with a law degree in 1834.

Throughout his studies, his eyes continually turned towards politics, so after graduation, Juarez served as a city councilman for Oaxaca. Around this same period, he married Margarita Maza, the daughter of the man who first allowed him access to school and a world outside of his Zapotec upbringing. He continued to pursue his political yearnings with positions as a judge, a federal deputy and finally as the governor of the state of Oaxaca from 1847 to 1852.

In 1853, Benito Juarez was exiled from Mexico at the behest of the new dictator Antonio López de Santa Anna. He took up residence in New Orleans and supported himself working in a cigarette factory. Margarita, his wife, stayed on in Mexico, constantly harried by the brewing political troubles and her husband's role in them. In New Orleans, Benito and a couple of other exiles, such as Melchor Ocampo, were raising funds and support for an attempt at overthrowing the Santa Anna dictatorship.

General Juan Alvarez brought a popular resistance to Mexico in March of 1854.

Juarez and many of the other exiles returned from the US to join in the overthrow of Santa Anna, who fled the country. But the victory was short lived. In 1861 the French invaded Mexico and put an Austrian prince Maximilian into the head office of the Mexican government.