

MANUEL LOPEZ OLIVA: THE CODES IN THE DIALOGUE

By Arelys Hernandez Plasencia *

Cuban plastic arts are a rich mosaic of individualities. One of the most outstanding artists due to his suggestive and original work is Manuel Lopez Oliva (Manzanillo, 1947).

He graduated from the Havana's National Arts College at the end of the 60s, and carried out a double labor in that field of the cultural life: along with his profession as a painter, he also excelled for his constant exercise as an art critic.

In the first phase of his pictorial creation, which unfolded during the 70s, he produced visions with characters and symbols of history, similar in the formal aspect to American Pop Art and European New Figuration.

Later, he mixed visual poetry and eroticism in images that in a certain way had to do with the exuberance of the island's nature and the cultural codes implicit in the human archetypes and the buildings of Old Havana.

A sort of theme with variations based on the recreation of Havana's Cathedral (built during the colonial period only a few steps from his atelier) extended in his works up to the beginning of the 90s.

In 1992, the course of expression that he is currently developing was opened: works that started from a relation between theatrical scenes and the human existence. Theater as a metaphor of life, masks that recall carnivals from the eastern region of the island (where he spent his childhood); figures that bind a singular expressionism with ornaments which seem to rise from stage designs and scenery, integrate a varied plastic repertoire provided by a strict craft, deep thoughts and renovating solutions.

The following questions and the answers given by the artist are part of a dialogue born from the daily communication I have maintained with him:

AHP: The current panorama of plastic arts seems overflowed by a huge diversity of styles, ratiocinations and poetics. In which of them can we place your artistic modality?

MLO: Almost every professional work of art, except those located within so-called "raw art", depart from all previous manifestations. So, preceding styles and languages historically become subjects of the form, and sometimes symbolic contents of the new artistic practices. Today, when the artistic accumulation achieved by humanity is so vast and even impossible to be wholly grasped, a cultured and informed artist, with deep comprehension of universality, could not constrain himself to attain one single modality or tendency from those accumulated in the last ages. It was no

accident that Postmodernism enclosed in the same expression signals by different authors and ages at the end of the 20 th Century. It seemed that the last century would end with a kind of combinatory position, the only one possible in order to open a space for the new perspectives appearing in this 19 th Century. According to this, everything has become heritage or source; and, then, contemporary art acquires the same meaning as the artistic manifestations of previous centuries. Since my recent work emerged at the end of the last decade of the previous century, it was logically marked with this vocation for diversity, understandable not only because I sustain some conscious coincidences with the postmodernist ways of creating, but also because my perception and intellectual condition gave way to a hybrid visual conception, to the use of inter-texts, and a peculiar mix of artistic elements originated from many cultures and ages. In my work, besides the specifically plastic influences of design and craftsmanship are present, mostly those with methods of artisan production and gender -such as the scenery, the stage design, and the ornament of costumes- that belong to the theater. But equally there is a conscious assimilation of elements originated in photography and cinema images. My compositions have a lot of the photographic disposition, most of all the characteristic framework of cinema: hence the presence of general and medium plots, close-up and fixed camera effects, etc, in my paintings. Finally, I would say that all the art I have known –and it has been plenty- is implicit in my work, but only in an indirect form, digested and transformed.

AHP: From a generational point of view in the classification of current Cuban art: in which of the generations should we place you?

MLO : Taking advantage of the usual Cuban sense of humor, I would say I am a “degenerated,” meaning not belonging explicitly to any of the artistic generations which nowadays coexist in the country. My understanding of a generation in aesthetics is open. I don't believe in generational theories used to rigidly fix the boundaries of styles in art. I reject the mental narrowness of those who organize collections, and rig up supposed “curatorial” works starting from a puerile placement of the artist within the momentum they emerged as an integral part of a determined generation. Not always the most finished work, which best identifies a man, is the one done at the beginning of his professional life. There are some expressions that could only be defined and consummated in maturity, which could be the ones that really express the complex

sense of a generational belonging of historical type. I believe that the world-view characteristic of the 60s, which in a great proportion conformed my way of feeling and thinking, is the one revealing the coordinates of the historical and cultural generation to which -ideally- I still belong. But that generational world-view has been defined and also synthesized, in my case, in the artistic language that erupted at the beginning of the 90s and is still unfolding presently.

AHP: Do you include American art among the influences you acknowledge within your artistic evolution?

MLO: To me, one of the main movements within the plastic culture of the last century was Pop Art. It not only meant a stylistic tendency, but it represented a true revolution in the sensibility, the perception and the projection of the aesthetic. The pop-artists placed visual art within the coordinates of modern society of their time, concerning design and the communicative requirements placed over the table by the development of public information media. Since my first contact with painting was in a workshop devoted to decoration and commercial advertising, which belonged to my father (in the city where I was born), the encounter with Pop in my youth was something normal: it was the necessary complement for developing a personal vision, since the poster's appropriation, the window decoration and the rest of the promotional aspects artistically assumed by Pop, were easily connected with the points of view I brought with me when I arrived at Havana's National Arts College to study painting. A professor -draftsman and painter Adigio Benitez- suggested I should study Pop Art, because he understood there were formal and syntactical resources which adjusted to my personality. So, American Pop, along with the French and Spanish New Figuration, were the most defined and constant impressions from my student period and in my first years of professional work. But, I must mention that there were also, besides Pop, some other lessons of American art which I made mine. During my student period I admired and also tried to understand the gestures and works with great coloured spots of an artist like De Kooning, who played an important role among renowned Americans, for whom I have felt a special predilection. The others are: Andy Warhol, Raushenberg, Jasper Johns, Wensselman, Oldenburg, Rothko, Indiana, Stella and Chuck Close. Along with the Paris School and the so called Mexican School, American art closed the triangle of main influences on Cuban painting of the 20 th Century. I must add that such sense of figuration nurtured in American paintings of the 60s, still continues implicit in my artistic work... In that combination of loose spots and ordered space by defined zones and

outlines, exists what I once assumed from the abstract expressionists and Pop painters from the United States.

*** Curator and Art Historian**

Translated by: Marilola Castro Moure

(Cubanow. October / 2005)