

Returns

Recoleta Cultural Center.

Buenos Aires, Argentina. October, 1998.

By Julio Sanchez

I

Zen Buddhism teaches us that emptiness is not empty. In a likewise manner Laura

Murlender's paintings seem to tell us that chaos has an order. Great surfaces of color, textures and materials half hidden by paint are the letter of presentation of her work. An attentive eye can detect various layers of paint that insinuate and allow their predecessors to be seen. As we go over the surface of the canvas we can find narrative landmarks that remit us to small scale metallurgy, such as the head of a screw; more extended anecdotes, such as a perforated tin sheet; or more epical, such as the photograph of a man holding a sacrificed animal. What seems at first to be a purely pictorial territory, is unveiled by the eye as a map showing a rough and uneven terrain full of presences and metaphors.

Color is strongly manifested, modulating, integrating and disintegrating itself. But not everything is contingency and chance. Subtle vertical and horizontal lines seem to remind us unequal and changing, to remind us that everything has an order. In the same way that the universe, unequal and changing, mutates according to cyclical laws. In Murlender's works there are echoes of her aesthetic family: admiration for the non-figuration of Mondrian and Malevich - both searchers of the essential; but also for Jasper Johns, who would stain the canvas without ever losing from sight abstract entities such as numbers or maps, and for Robert Rauschenberg, when he incorporated all sorts of materials into his paintings. These are the aesthetic nutrients of the artists, but there are many more: basically, her own experiences before the world.

Her paintings are like palimpsests, those ancient manuscripts that were scraped so that they could be written over again; as what is underneath never disappears, historians were able to rescue valuable documents. Likewise, in Murlender's painting the first layers of paint - soft but still present - are the testimonies of a time already past. Indeed, each work functions as the diary of a journey where the different overlapping sensations of the places visited, whether real or simply state of the

soul, have been written down. Each layer of paint is the record of a memory that an archeologist must excavate in order to discover the past.

II

Mankind's ancient civilizations built constructions of heroic dimensions to be able to communicate and establish links (in Spanish "religar", from here the real sense of the word religion) with their gods.

In the Middle East and Middle America, Laura Murlender was able to witness the greatness of these constructions. Do the thick stones of the Aztec pyramids or those of the Western Wall represent the echoes of the vertical and horizontal lines in the artist's paintings? It is possible. But both directions are also the basic symbolic axis: the feminine horizontal line, receptive and fecundated; and the masculine vertical line, as the active and fecundating rain. In this crossing of the above and the underneath, the sky and the earth, is where Man is situated. This is the structure that sustains Murlender's paintings. And on it rises a third ingredient: time. Over this structure (that transcends the millenarian stones to reach a sacred geometry) the layers of paint expand as a moment, an instant and a part of life.

Murlender was born in Argentina. She later emigrated and lived in Israel, France and Mexico. This is her first individual exhibition since her definite return to the country. The exception to this took place in 1984, while she was living in France, when she came to Buenos Aires to inaugurate the San Martin Cultural Center Space. The artist has decided to call this exhibition Retornos (to return, returns, going back, return trip). But this name goes far beyond a return to her country. Basically, it is about a return to her origins, to the place where she was born, where her family is. It is also about so many other returns that she alone can recognize within her intimate self. But in her paintings there is reference to a return that transcends the biographical fact and this is precisely the reason why it is art.

III

Chaos and order are not contradictory, is what Murlender's painting seems to tell us. Behind the anecdotes, as diverse and colorful as they may be there is always a structure that sustains them. This

structure is the origin, the place where we come from, which is not just a country. The return to our origins is the return to a primordial time. Among the Returns of Laura Murlender there is one (perhaps the one that sustains the rest) that points towards the essential. From her work she seems to tell us that it doesn't matter how many things have happened, how many layers of paint have circulated, how many years have passed, or how much disorder has taken place. All things counted, a return to the essential is always possible.

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