

## At the Threshold of Something Different

Throughout the 20th century fine arts in Venezuela have stood out in the Latin American scene because of their great variety and their unquestionable quality. In recent years this diversity has increased and of course all the manifestations that go beyond painting and sculpture have been present. However, there is a long list of artists that keep painting, drawing, engraving and making sculptures in the traditional methods. And there is no doubt that in both groups, that of experimental artists and that of those who make old-age crafts, quality has remained unscathed, at least in most cases.

Though its great interest in radical changes and in the most unusual novelties, one of the most evident tendencies of present-day art is recreation based on art history. In an exhibition such as "Art in the Mirror", part of the Venice Biennale of 1984, fifty-four artists from different generations, nationalities and styles gathered. It included some of the most outstanding names in modern art, such as Picasso, Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, Giorgio di Chirico, Rauschemberg, Lichtenstein and Warhol, among others.

Venezuelan art has also had part in this inclination as was widely seen in the exhibition Art from the past in Venezuelan contemporary art showed in the MACCSI in 1993, which included thirty artists with very different styles that were divided into four groups: Humoristic desacralisation, The Concept as Sustenance, The Exploration of the Means, Painting Reflects about Itself. Together with Jacobo Borges, Darío Lunar, Julio Pacheco Rivas, Glenn Sujo, Adonay Duque, Luis Enrique Carbonell, Jes\_s Guerrero and Jorge Stever, we found the name of Francisco Bugallo. Adolfo Wilson wrote in the catalog for this show that Bugallo "...like no other Venezuelan artist has oriented his art around a paraphrase about the old master's art..." He was right then and he is right today. There isn't any other artist in Venezuela that has been as constant in the recreation of works of art as this Valencia-based painter. Throughout his work, since he was a student, Bugallo has made a great number of paintings starting from the works of famous masters from the Renaissance to the 20th century. His main interest is not to paint physical reality (landscapes, natural or man-made objects, human figures) but to paint images from canvas painted by important artists from the old times. His work has been a constant making of an altered reproduction of the history of painting. But just as the best painters of landscape, still-lives, portraits, nudes, etc always reflect their personal view of this themes, Bugallo recreates the works of art and gives his own interpretation of the

famous paintings. His oil *The Maids of Honor*, according to Velazquez is very different from the original, painted in the 17th century, and has nothing to do with the more than forty variations made by Picasso in 1957. The beautiful severity of the tempera *Dead Christ* by Mantegna is transformed and dramatically abbreviated in the oil Bugallo painted at the beginning of the 90s.

The themes are the excuses to paint. This idea has prevailed in modern art and the undoubtedly most famous quotation of Maurice Denis: "A painting is not a battle horse, nor a nude woman, but the relationship of some colors on a surface", has been systematically put into practice by the best painters of the century. In Bugallo's paintings mentioned above we can easily recognize some of the characters of Velazquez's most famous canvas, as well as the foreshortened Christ figure of the painter from the Quattrocento. These figures are part of the themes and are a key element of the realism dominated by the visual power of the Spanish painter's oil and presided by the tactile value in Mantegna's tempera. In the case of Bugallo's paintings the motifs are subjugated by the formal elaboration. In the first, a nearly monochromatic composition, with a few bleached figures, with transparencies and drippings, as in *Dead Christ*, according to Mantegna, by disguising the sculpted body in a huge screen subdued by darkness and where the reclining character is barely hinted.

Evidently, Bugallo loves the great art from the past but works like a modern artist and he is in touch with what is going on in art in our century. Federica Palomero, when referring to his works in the Museum of Fine Arts, in 1990, in a show called *Francisco Bugallo*. From painting itself explains clearly how Painting –with a capital P- is the only theme in this artist's work and how in his creative process he reveals its existence "...with plastic resources learned from abstract expressionism and particularly from Mark Rothko: the size, that covers the spectator's whole field of vision and wraps him up in a virtual space that transcends the field of the canvas; the density of the layers of colors with their transparency effects; the clash of surfaces"<sup>2</sup>. Later, in the huge black paintings based on religious paintings from the Renaissance that were shown in the MACCSI in 1993, the influence from Ad Reinhardt is clear: black on black; the negation of time; the creation of a transcending object.

In recent years, Bugallo devoted himself to his most ambitious project: the pictorial installation *Image and Resemblance* now showing in this museum. Again with an artistic recreation as the theme, the painter planned

this enormous work that, as opposed to most installations, built with ready-made objects, is characterized by the fact that all its parts have been painted by the artist. We don't think that Bugallo has made this type of work tempted by the latest trends (in fact, installations have been done for quite a long time now), but rather because, after making paintings in really big sizes, he felt the need to express himself freely in real space by placing this group of paintings based on Gericault's Raft of the Medusa and Holbein's Dead Christ that constitute as a whole a great staging in which the two famous paintings individually acquire new possibilities of interpretations and in their interaction, multiple readings. Although Image and Resemblance is an open work- proposed for rather free explanations-, that poses many questions and is, at the same time, an easily accessible work because its images are rooted in the secular tradition and its representation system sticks to the rules of modern art started in the Renaissance, even if Gericault's painting has three fragmented versions and in one of them the parts are dispersed at random. Bugallo's installation is not whimsical or abstruse and, due to that, it is not difficult to understand that the artist's objective was to create a metaphor of the chaos, the despair and the human loss of hope, according to his own statement, although maybe we could add that, in spite of it all, there is still a chance of something different left.

Le radeau de la Méduse –Raft of the Medusa or Shipwreck of the Medusa– is one of the most poignant paintings of the 19th. As it is known, it presents us with a depiction from Gericault's imagination of a historical event that took place near Africa when a frigate sank and the survivors, a total of one hundred and fifty people made a makeshift raft that was adrift for many days. At the end only fifteen people survived. The huge canvas shows the moment in which the shipwrecked men glimpsed the ship that will rescue them and those who still have some strength left try to be seen by waving some rags. In the foreground, dead bodies and dying people; towards the center, some despairing figures. According to Julio Payró: "The general harmony in the painting, in deep green, ochre and blackish dun, has a great dramatic power. And the violent effects of light and dark shadows stress the gloomy impression. The first Romantic because of the tumultuous rapture of his composition, Gericault was also the first realistic painter, both because of the current importance of the issue and his conscientious study of sick people and dead bodies in hospitals and morgues in order to transcribe the scene with most irrefutable truthfulness"<sup>3</sup>.

For the first of the two areas of the installation, Bugallo painted this painting four times. One on an impressive size canvas (491 x 717

centimeters), more or less the size of Picasso's *Guernica*, and three in twelve boards with rugged edges and of different length and width each. In the two first he establishes two compositions, a horizontal and a vertical one; and in the third –the artist considers these independent works- he selects different fragments of the Raft. The version on canvas lacks colors and it is an austere representation in a light foreground of irregular edges outlined on a dark background. The image avoids the details, puts emphasis on the sail of the raft and concentrates on the previous black pictures in which the absence of color has emblematic value, according to Adolfo Wilson, and might mean "the defunct, nothingness, the void, death."<sup>4</sup>

The horizontal and the vertical versions set up most of the great composition of Gericault's hopeless characters, and on the wood grain they enhance the expressiveness of the anguished and crazed bodies. Obviously, the boards –made by the artist out of a tree trunk they had to cut down-painted with big brush-strokes and with predominance of white and gray, allude to the logs of the raft. (This is emphasized by the arbitrary and changing position of the pieces of wood.) The version of the aleatory pieces of timber only show scraps of the characters: An arm waving a cloth, a fragment of the resigned figure, the legs of a dead man, etc. The arrangement of these pieces of wood is, of course, totally free; it has many alternatives, including being scattered on the floor like the remains of a shipwreck. It is not unnecessary to add that in all the versions the figures have the same size as those of the 19th century painting.

The repetition of the images of the Raft of the Medusa arises from the need to repeat some tormented characters in order to increase the idea of bewilderment. That is also the purpose of the fragmentation and finally of the aleatory pieces. The metaphor of destruction and chaos is clear.

As it was said before, Bugallo made an installation because he needed a great setting to refer to a drifting world, a dislocated society, a confused and hopeless humanity desperately looking for salvation. As Bertrand Russell wrote: "In the last five-hundred years changes have taken place more often every time and finally they have become so dizzy that an old man can hardly understand the world he lives in. And it seems unlikely that a state of things so different from what it was, when the first living organisms appeared could go on without leading to a real darkening, a true and dangerous vertigo that will put an end to this demented frenzy in which heart and brain are more exhausted every time. Such fears are not irrational: the world conditions encourage them, and the contrast between the frantic present and the

peaceful past draw the attention of the watchful historian... human imagination gave shape to hell long ago, but only recently, with modern possibilities, men have been able to put into practice what they had dreamed..."<sup>5</sup>. Bugallo's work is titled *Image and Resemblance*. This name comes, no doubt, from the *History of God or Genesis of the Old Testament*. Evidently, the work of this Venezuelan artist does not remind us of the beautiful moment of the creation of man in the ceiling of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, but rather of *The Last Judgement* in the wall of the same room, a great fresco inspired in *The Apocalypse*, Dante's *Divine Comedy* and possibly in the medieval hymn *Dies irae, dies illa*. Gericault's *Raft* with its cluster of desperate figures resembles some convulsed crowds in Michelangelo's *Last Judgement*, and undoubtedly, Bugallo was fascinated by this iconography that openly shows confusion and helplessness. However, there is in the installation another darkened area in which one can only see, because it is hanging from the ceiling and well lit, a board of 80 x 400 cm with the representation, on a golden background, of the impressive *Dead Christ*, of 1521, by Hans Holbein the Younger, such a sad picture that when Prince Myshkin, one of the characters in *The Idiot* by Dostoyevski, sees it he exclaims: "This painting... this painting! Don't you know that by looking at it a believer can lose his faith?" And he is right: the skinny character seen sideways on a table covered with a white cloth and practically trapped in a space of 30 x 200 cm, a dead man, the eyes half-open looking into space, the swollen lips open, with a terrible wound in his side, with the huge mark of a nail in a visibly greenish hand. A pitiful dead Christ, really. In *The Art of Poetry*, Nietzsche wrote: Have you heard about the madman and that lit a lamp in broad daylight and ran to the marketplace crying out: Where is God? Where is God? Since most of the people there didn't believe in God, there was loud laughter. Did he get lost maybe? asked one. Did he run away like a child? asked another. Or maybe he is hiding. Is he scared of us? Did he get on board? Did he flee? There was uproar and laughter. The crazy man ran around and watched them. Where has God gone? exclaimed. I'll tell you. We have killed him...you and I! We are all murderers...Isn't it true that we are drifting in the middle of infinite nothingness? Is the void inspiring us? Isn't everything colder? Doesn't the night come upon us a little more, night after night? Don't we need lamps in the morning? Are still deaf to the sound of the sextons digging God's grave? Have we not smelled the stench of divine rotteness? Gods can rot, too. God has died! We killed him!..."<sup>6</sup> Bugallo's Christ follows closely Holbein's painting although its surface is covered with wide whitish brush-strokes. The changes are in that the character has no support underneath and seems to be floating and that it is surrounded in gold, placed on a wooden board full of incisions. Once again, we must

remember the title of the installation: Image and Resemblance. The conclusion seems clear: if Christ is dead, man can only think of his death, his being for nothingness.

But, is this what Bugallo is trying to say? The artist, understandably, refrains from answering and wants the public to draw their own conclusion –if they want, if they can-. However, as was said before, we may think that we are at the threshold of something different. Keeping in mind that the artist has only made dead Christs, never a resurrected one, his interest in this character, his eschatological concern, his determination to make this installation that invites us to reflect on humanity at the end of the century and about to start a new millennium. The fact that this work was so passionately planned for some years tells us that Bugallo –like many other young men- is interested in religion, thinks –and has doubts, too- about transcendence and wants his creation to arouse interest as well as stimulate new ideas and knowledge.

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1. Adolfo Wilson, *Memorias de la visión*, MACCSI, Caracas, 1993
  2. Federica Palomero, *Francisco Bugallo: Desde la pintura misma*, MBA, Caracas 1990
  3. Julio Payró, *Pintura moderna*, Editorial Nova, Buenos Aires 1957
  4. Adolfo Wilson, *Francisco Bugallo*, MACCSI, Caracas 1993
  5. Bertrand Rusell, *Ideas que hicieron nuestro tiempo*, Monte Ávila Editores, Caracas 1970
  6. Ronald Hayman, *Nietzsche*, Grupo Editorial Norma, Bogotá 1998