

Shaping the transience: The dark nights of the soul, of Cristian Pineda

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The pictorial career of Cristian Pineda arises and evolves through questions relating to forms of artistic expression. Throughout his career, each series brings forward reflections about the meaning of art and the connection of the latter with the processes of self-knowledge. His search has led him to decant archetypes of visual thought, which represent the interior world and human passions.

As a curator and critic, I have seldom encountered an artist who deals with such distinct aspects in his work. For me, the challenge has been facing a work of art that was completely unknown to me and trying to find a meaning from the questions that arose from seeing the paintings that make up the series *The dark nights of the soul*.

Within the conversations that I had had with the artist, I tried to unravel the ambiguity that the different series posed. Pineda is a creator who works obsessively for months with an idea. He tries to sketch out a fuzzy idea, to make it visible, even tangible. *The dark nights of the soul* has taken up all of his attention for two years.

At 36 years old, Cristian Pineda is a prolific creator who has tackled many techniques and themes, and has always done so with mastery and honesty. What at first appeared as a figurative and symbolist work of art, became more complex as I tried to grasp the origins of this series, which came from a long time ago, when he consciously decided to avoid (in his paintings) the allusion to local references to his place of birth – Juchitan.

For Pineda, the beginning of all series is drawing. It may be that readings or contact with reality, including dealing with people, offer you keys and themes. However, the beginning will always be a drawing and more importantly, as he says, line, rayon, scribble, which guide his intuition. Cristian will always start and finish a work of art by drawing.

His evident fidelity to drawing raises the first question: How to distinguish the theme of each series, if in all of them the stroke is fundamental for its development and conclusion? For me, the question has been: What is the substance of his work, the continent or the content? The fact that the series are separated by time and by formal elements tells me that the subject must be important, perhaps as important for the work as the drawing itself.

Although Cristian Pineda has ventured into contemporary digital media, video, digital photography, with other aesthetic goals in mind, the resource of painting, and specifically drawing, carries with it a return to the primitive. A return that can be understood as a search for abstraction, through the simplification of the figure to its most essential elements.

I will try to describe the context in which this artist begins to explain or propose some relevant questions about the series that make up the artist's recent production.

Juchitán is the city where Cristian Pineda was born and produced his first works of art. We know that the Juchitec artistic tradition arises from the oral narrative or fables, where animals, landscapes and inert objects are animated to tell an anecdote through painting and drawing. The latter is a tool commonly used by Oaxacan artists. They use it in a figurative way, achieving a high degree of visual synthesis.

Since the beginning of his career, Cristian Pineda has consciously fought to distance himself from the figure, in the mimetic or illustrative sense, which is present in the Oaxacan school. In many ways, he has succeeded in establishing his own reputation through a work of art that is not a narrative, and, despite using figuration, is not based on symbolism and the parable, unlike the works of many of his contemporaries. Pineda has managed to break away from this heritage by discovering ways of saying his farewells to the cultural traditions of his small country.

The result of this artistic flight has endowed his work with a very subjective quality, which is why it is difficult to translate it into words, concepts or contextual explanations.

It is clear that his paintings possess poetic dyes, that they are an autonomous field far from the representation or the explanation of its content. Therefore, we must appeal to intuition, the senses and perception, to find the keys to reading it.

The mysteries surrounding his sculpting and modelling bring forward an unknown, a question about the essence of the pictorial; about the imagination that guides the hand and the gaze through a kaleidoscope of shapes and colors. But above all, the question for his creation should answer to the set of artworks of this series, which does not have individual titles for each painting. This forces us to see the set as facets of the process of one sole idea.

In contrast, the previous series that the painter made shortly before, Vipassana, offers a gateway to the interpretation. The title of this 2015 series is a reference to a type of Buddhist meditation practice, whose objective is to learn how to "see things as they are" through contemplation.

In one of the talks that we had, Cristian revealed to me that his modus operandi was to draw in order to show what you feel inside (to express implies to externalize what is pressing from the inside). I noticed that the Vipassana meditation is the goal of his artistic work, but not necessarily its content.

You cannot explain poetry, you can only read it or write it; Its goal is flowing with it to try to get to things as they are in their essence. My first attempt at an explanation has been to understand the work of Cristian by perceiving it from the interiority and transience that characterizes his creations. Each box contains its own experience, emotion, essence.

In The Dark Nights of the Soul series, I realised a series of blows, which manifested themselves between open lines and closed forms, or starting from flashing colors and dark tones. The reversed process of painting, flashing lines over dark backgrounds, used by Pineda offers us a striking vision that speaks of a refulgent interiority. This procedure is similar to that in which one sees a bright object and then closes the eyes; A figure of

the object in its complementary tones is produced in the mind. This was the principle of complementarity, which influenced the color of the works of post-impressionist painters and Nabi group artists, both of whom resorted to deformation and strong lighting contrast.

However, things are not so simple: I could not say, categorically, that paintings of this diverse set are the sole result of an optical illusion described from the 19th century. I am only explaining the context of the artistic imagination. I am aware that the subject still lies there within the pictures, deeply below the pictorial surface.

To go beyond the facade of these works, it is necessary to analyze what other relationships exist between a painting showing "things such as" (Vipassana) and another type of painting that is framed by feelings and dark emotions. This leads me to think that the production of Cristian Pineda comes from an inner dualism, light-dark, emotional-rational. The perception of the swarm of forms is achieved by the contrast between light and darkness. What we call contour of the object does not exist in reality; The dark line that separates my arm from the wall in the background is just an illusion formed when the edge of the arm is folded over itself and moves away from the eye that sees it; There is an effect of the concentration of shadow that looks like a line, but physically it's a curved plane. Things are not as the eye sees them but how the mind interprets them.

The paintings that make up each of the series are autonomous drawings, and could have a relationship with something personal or contextual. The Dark Nights of the Soul series attempts at something more personal and intimate, with an expressionistic drawing. It is very lyrical, full of movement and color, going beyond the world's appearance and of the senses.

Given that *The Dark Night* refers to a temporary state, without linking to any territory or geography, the phrase proposes a metaphor of a temperamental, romantic condition, related to the state of the soul or the conscience. The internal experience trying to take on an external form in the paintings through calligraphic drawing (not too distant 80s

graffiti) with stained and notched color, shows a duality of chromatic fields, clean and well defined interactions between exaggerated contour lines and flat surfaces.

The ditirambic ritual in painting

What paintings offer us is a sense of presence. They don't try to define or describe something or chance a how and when. Cristian Pineda makes us partake in a Dionysian rite, through the archaic ritual of painting, in which the individual frenzy of the painter becomes a collective embrace, uniting history, mythology and destiny.

The Dionysian wisdom of Greek dramaturgical art stated that all suffering comes from the individualization of consciousness, so the collective rituals dedicated to Dionysus are an artistic and dramatic way of leaving I and merging into Us. If we adopt Friedrich Nietzsche's sense of classical tragedy, Cristian's artwork act as totems within a dramaturgic ritual. They are located between *us* and the world, creating a bridge between the senses and the perception of a deeper reality. Elaborating further on this idea, we can say that the paintings are equivalent to the role of the "chorus" ritual in the tragedy: It is the dithyrambic poetry related to the Dionysian ritual, which involves stripping the ego and subject-object dualism in the representation of our passions. The dithyrambic ritual places us face to face with the primordial emotion prior to sensible knowledge, where intellectualization and rationality are temporarily suspended.

The possibility of a ritual painting came to my mind after Pineda confessed during a conversation that in drawing he wants to clarify an emotion. This requires visibilizing its structures, giving shape to what can only be designated with mimetic logic from visual resemblance. This same experience is what occurs between us and the world through the union between the image and the word. We see the forms of the world by naming them. So it is no coincidence, and I want to think that it is entirely intentional, that the artist adds words or draws letters within the pictorial screen that separates the subject and reality. What Pineda does can also be read as a visual, hieroglyphic writing, which, when

composing cartridges of signs, creates a chain of signifiers. This is how art emerges as an experience of a presence, which evokes ritual.

The dark nights of the soul is a set of atmospheres, as opposed to the paintings of the *Vipasana* series that are more linked to the use of signs superimposed on hieratic compositions. Being atmospheric, the paintings are far from describing concrete territories of the experience. The symbols create a game of opposites, similar to the painting I call *Black Sun*. In the latter work, the lower right quarter shows a woman's profile accompanied by zoomorphic figures while in the upper left quarter there is a male's profile, adorned with a garland of leaves, characteristic of several of his paintings, making a reference to botany and fauna.

The drawings made on paper with oil crayons show similarity to the works of the Oaxacan painter Rodolfo Nieto (1936-1985), who developed his career in Paris and possessed a great eloquence for drawing beasts in sedentary attitudes. These animals sometimes represent a nahual, that is, an alter ego. A companion, who shares characteristics of temperament or character of an animal to which it is related to. But it can also be an invocation of the energy that confines these animals, always agile and evocative.

In Pineda's paintings, animals are forms in a state of metamorphosis, which erase the distinction between drawing and painting. The strokes reflect an obvious manuality, a spontaneous treatment of the line, characterized by its absence of volume and **claroscuro**. The streaks of colors on the dark backgrounds also recall some surrealistic inheritances of creators like Wifredo Lam (1902-1982), with whom Pineda shares interest in nature and the signs used by the pantheistic and animist religions. Cristian Pineda work reaffirms the search for the immaterial, based on the sense of the Dionysian rite, where color has a more dithyrambic, intoxicating, record related to a ritual of liberation.

Most of the works have a spontaneous character that involve the simultaneous work of several of them in unison. This allows the artist to have the time necessary to regain

consciousness of the whole "painting as a board" where he plays a departure with himself. The quadrangular space in the painting lends itself to that area of the game that the painter requires in order to flood it with his "plays" with diverse resources of interlacing forms. Each figure expands or contracts in a spasm of jubilant color, leaving space for an exchange of contours and spots. All of these forms are flat, transgressing the idea of a three-dimensional perspective. They could be identified as expressive doodles, which synthesize different temperaments ranging from melancholic reverie to blood passion.

Throughout his work, drawing has been a tool that allows him to arrive spontaneously to approaches and questioning. It is the final drawing, not a sketch, that allows great pictorial freedom. The course of a fleeting thought is stronger than the realistic image, because it is guided by the spontaneity that results from the movement. The struggle of contours and visceral chromatic fields are the elements that make the impressions arise quickly in the mind.

The diptych that shows a landscape, dark and drawn with traces that remind one of _____ over chalk, is a representation of undulating forms that give rise to magical beings. The world is a space that is susceptible to magical influences and appearances, which require an alternate state of consciousness. The zoomorphic beings that populate those spaces end up being completely emancipated from reality and exist only in the painting because of the gestures.

The reference to the night also suggests an astronomical and astrological vision of the universe. Stars and constellations allow us to imagine mythical beings representing destiny or forms of life, through the simple linear connection between points of light. The darkness represents an infinite curtain where the star bodies are mimicked with earthly forms of myths, animals and divine fantastic beings: the Great Bear, the Orion Belt, the Castor and Pollux twins among others. The imaginary forms arising from the stellar constellations appear scattered in the celestial vault, like brilliant patterns and clusters of stars such as the Pleiades.

In the paintings pertaining to the series *The Dark Nights of the Soul*, the artist has recreated spacial vaults in which the eye, the gaze, is solated with the invention of creatures, movements, white spectra and translucent auroras, all of which give certain works the appearance of the Milky Way in constant expansion. These enigmatic paradises of infinity lead us to think of the astonishment that the human being experiences by contrasting his minuscule existence with the infinity of the univers. A questioning that the artist's work evokes.

Likewise, other interstellar phenomena, such as the eclipse or the ellipsoidal expansion of the nebulae, are glossed by the painter in his works. This is done to provoke interferences of bodies that project shadows or enigmatic light on to one another. Such encounters refer to the idea of a fantastic macrocosm, in which all of the archetypes that the imagination is capable of producing in its search for an interpretation of feelings are fused.

The vision of inner darkness occurs when we close our eyes and a set of light appear on the retina for a few moments. These forms have a certain similarity with those that Pineda creates in his work. Its about the perception of darkness, the emptiness and the absence that confront an individual with his solitude. From these experiences, we find examples in some of the pieces that suggest rays, boreal auroras, or figures made of gray clouds.

Artistic Nomadism

So far, I have discussed what defines the work of Cristian Pineda, his relationship with the materials, the pictorial surfaces and the possible empirical interpretations that populate his works. What remains is to analyze what his work does not possess or aspire to have. And I believe that being an artist born in a city with a particular idiosyncrasy like Juchitán, which for many would be an honor and a warm place with a great heritage, in the case of Cristian Pineda, there are no explicit references to the "Juchiteca soul."

Oaxaca's artistic manifestations - I refer to all the categories, not only the paintings or graphics that are well known, but also the textiles, the pottery, the basketry and the ironwork – all make up endless sources of expression, knowledge of materials and formal

solutions. However, in the case of Pineda, the formal conventions and craft techniques of his home state are not entirely present in his plastic vocabulary. When they occasionally appear, it is in an indirect way. Cristian Pineda has been an art nomad who has deliberately chosen places that have consciousness, where he wants to live and that are appropriate for his imagination.

In our conversation we touched that point. I was interested to find out how much he had identified with the juchiteca school of visual art. His answer was clear: To be the artist he wanted to become, he had to leave the place where he was born and grew up. His artistic formation began in the Oaxacan Isthmus, but it will solidify and grow outside of the lands of the Oaxacan Antequera.

First he migrated to the Mexican capital and from there he began a wide tour around the different regions of the country, which took him from the coasts to the borders of the South and the North. The necessity to avoid grounding root in any definite place took him to France and later Catalonia, where he resided for more than a year. It was almost a decade later, in Eastern Europe, where he became aware of the isolation suffered by migrants. This realization came to Pineda when he was confronted by an environment that was completely foreign to him.

That experience showed him that he did not belong in that territory, there was no place for him. The limits and borders constrained him and that feeling pushed him to make the decision to return to Juchitán. The long journey back to his place of origin led him to wonder about his own origin. What was the purpose of the things he had known? What was the verge of his experience. He painted and the paint overflowed the edges of the frame, something he had been stopping for years. The world came crushing down on him all at once. These feelings, as well as his experience with the migrants that have become a painful reality in Oaxaca and Mexico and to which he has dedicated part of his work as an activist and an artist, both led him to ask himself about the nature of art.

From the return to Mexico, in 2015, the series of *Vipassana* paintings emerge and a search begins on the way things are represented in emptiness, where there is nothing that contains them, where objects are perceived as platonic ideas: reflections of light and shadows on the dark background of the cavern. An emotional catharsis rushed over him and appeared gradually in the painting. The result was an overwhelming plenitude and illumination, evidence of the expressive force and luminosity of his work. *Vipassana* was the beginning of the question about the human, beauty, the order and the synchrony of things, the symmetry between what happens up in the sky and down on earth. The center of this experience was the house, the home, which acted as a receptacle where the vast nomadic experience of its existence leaked.

Back in Juchitán, things were not as they had been. Regarding the migrant experience, the return may have been more difficult than the departure. The gaze of others is heavy, falling on one as a question about the recent past. Maybe not everyone is aware of it, but the experience of migration is an internal journey. The *Vipassana* series provoked a change in strategy, but to arrive there, he had to cross the night.

The Dark Nights of the Soul, A Path to Spirituality

There are two literary works that treat the theme of the dark night of the soul as an internal search, when faced with problems of life. The title of this series is associated with the poem by San Juan de la Cruz of a similar name. The intention of the Spanish mystic poet was to communicate the experience of spiritual growth and union with God, after a period of painful darkness in which Saint John of the Cross doubted the effectiveness of prayer as a way to get closer to divinity. This experience is not only common in believers of the Christian religion. In Buddhism, the practitioner of this philosophy must gain knowledge of suffering, which will lead to a mystical awakening; It is a process of purification sought by the individual himself through self-observation, until he arrives at the elimination of the ego and the attachment to destructive emotions. These experiences lead us to consider the darkness of the soul as a state of transition in life, in which the relationship between creativity and spirituality responds to emotional

crises. These are derived from the search for meaning and the inquiry of beauty existing in the dark territories of experience. At the end of that journey, which is undoubtedly the most difficult in life, one finds a reward. This is the key to knowing who I am, what is my essence and the center of human consciousness.

For Cristian Pineda, the first reference to the metaphor – the dark night of the soul – appeared after reading an eponymous book by Thomas Moore. This was a theologian and a psychotherapist who analyzes periods of sadness, mourning and failure that are often termed "dark nights", in which he sees an opportunity to discover the authentic personality.

Regarding the pictorial work of Pineda, the ideas of Thomas Moore decisively influenced it. Specifically, the consideration of archetypes and mythologies like paradigms of sensible knowledge. This is starting from the fact that beauty arises from the imitation of the way things flow and relate to each other within Nature. Cristian uses intuition as a tool to visualize the aesthetics of his own artistic world. The transit of his search is formulated as a journey through interior landscapes, defined as sanctuaries, in which the spirit is freed from physical forces and conceptual ties. In this way, one comes to question the fears and uncertainty caused by the transience of existence.

Understanding the recent pictorial production of Cristian Pineda is a task that requires analyzing how internal emotions translate into dramatic form and tone. It is not possible to affirm that emotions and visions are equal. On the contrary, as I have tried to demonstrate here, the intensity that causes the drawing activity in the author is connected with the sighting of visible, natural forms, accompanied by expressive graphics, a product of the imagination.

The vital enthusiasm produced in his paintings is a result of the disconcerting power of his paintings, which arises from the lack of refinement or concern to express particular contexts. Cristian Pineda gives us a reflection about the course of a nomadic life that is manifested through a representation of the transience of life in all its forms.