

*SANTUARIOS AND THE FIGUARTIVE AND ABSTRACT ART OF CRISTIAN PINEDA:*  
BETWEEN TRADITION AND EXPERIMENTATION

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From around the turn of the twentieth century, the emergence of the notion of the avant-garde led to a general obsession with the concept of artistic originality. The latter can be understood as a property of those works that deconstruct their previous reference points to such an extent that something entirely new is created, apparently unprecedented and untouched by tradition. According to the discourse of the day, original works were supposedly pure, not having been derived from anything else already in existence. From this moment on, artistic recognition within the market and the official world of art would become dependent on a dominant system of values that prioritised innovation over tradition. Under this system of values, artists received recognition and appreciation through producing supposedly abnormal and atypical work, rather than through their ability to follow artistic traditions<sup>2</sup>. However, in addition to being an essentially masculine notion that marginalised female artists, this discourse on avant-garde originality was imposed from the centre of the art world outwards. As a result, non-western artists were condemned to belatedly imitating European avant-garde movements. This regime was first challenged by the feminist movement. Due to the emergence of multicultural policies and the intense movement

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<sup>2</sup>For a discussion on the myth of originality since modernism and the avant-garde, see Rosalind E. Krauss, *The originality of the avant-garde and other modern myths*, MIT Press, 1986.

and reproduction of images via digital technologies, these notions of originality, authenticity and the avant-garde have latterly plunged into crisis.

In today's world, although it is accepted that any given work may possess an identifiable personal style, we also know that no work is conjured out of nothing and that all cultural output has conceptual and visual precedents. All artists work from a certain political perspective and against a certain backdrop of space and time. In other words, their works are the product of a social and personal history, and of a vast range of cultural experiences and worlds. Once distributed and circulated, a work takes on a life of its own. Each work may generate thousands of different meanings, unique to each individual person who views it. However, for works that have been decontextualised by the dominant discourses and practices of exhibiting, purely formalist interpretations are necessarily weak and restrictive because they do not take into account the context in which the work was produced, any original intentions or its emotional links to its creator or a certain social environment.

Nowadays, the artist also has to deal with the fragmented nature of the artistic landscape, featuring no one overriding trend, current or style. The art world is nevertheless still dominated by a system of values that rewards individuality and that extends to the furthest margins of artistic production. In this way, the artists are freed from the myth of avant-garde originality. Yet they are perpetually obliged, consciously or unconsciously, to experiment with form in order to develop a personal style or unique visual language. When such artistic individuality is attained and acknowledged, that visual language becomes an immediately recognisable calling card for the artist. The artist therefore spends the creative process on an endless search, conceiving and developing ideas until a unique visual language emerges, a visual form that lends consistency to

the artistic output and allows him/her to communicate and emotionally connect with the other, with us, with the spectator. In other words, the successful construction of a visual language can be illustrated by the creation of a formal external structure by which the artist defines his/her work, and which also facilitates the viewers' appreciation of it and the attribution of new meanings that are influenced by their own personal experiences.

There are thousands of ways to build a unique visual language and to identify a formal structure that lends consistency to artistic output. But successful examples of the above always seem to be the result of personal experiences. These experiences are shaped by a social, cultural and artistic context and evolve thanks to a vast range of visual concepts and images that do not belong only to the field of art. Today's artists work in a world saturated with images where, quite often, no distinction is made between works designed for a mass audience and those which are more independent.

The case of Cristian Pineda is that of an artist who has built a very personal language around a formal structure by incorporating two apparently contradictory pairs of elements. Firstly, he successfully balances tradition with innovation; secondly, the figurative with the abstract. The resulting synthesis, aspired to by many of today's artists, is demonstrated in his work *Santuarios* ("Sanctuaries").

In terms of formal structure, the visual language of *Santuarios* is characterised by the prominence of lines throughout both the creative process and the final composition of the work. Pineda uses charcoal to sketch over areas already covered with acrylic. After applying various layers of paint, he spontaneously manipulates the sketched lines, which will in time define what he calls the central characters of each work. Some of these characters can easily be made out, but

others are impossible for either viewer or even artist to identify. Those characters that can be made out include human figures of both or neither sex; fragments of the human body such as limbs, faces, muscles, skeletons and skulls; animals and other real or mythical creatures; natural elements such as trees, roots, trunks, branches, leaves, water, air, skies and earth. Some of the most difficult figures to make out include imaginary cities, houses and organic figures which, although apparently meaningless, leave themselves open to viewer interpretation. There are also shapes which appeared spontaneously and were subsequently emphasised by the artist. These include trickles of paint which, after being accentuated with charcoal lines and layered with more paint, were transformed into marine skeletal structures, branches or roots.

The artist's control of spaces full of brilliant colours and apparently repetitive patterns, alongside the constantly shifting presence of all of these striking organic figures – be they human or non-human, natural or non-natural, appearing through mutation, transformation or metamorphosis –, is what lends the work its simultaneously figurative and abstract dimensions. The figurative element seems to have been intuitively introduced, whilst the abstract elements appeared as a result of accidents, surprises and discoveries. This successful marriage of the abstract and the figurative is the foundation on which the structural form of his work is based, since it provides consistency and a horizontal dimension that brings all the separate elements together without hierarchically organising them nor diluting them into a confused or meaningless whole. Quite to the contrary, we get the impression that in Pineda's works all the characters, objects, areas and coloured spaces are perfectly in their place. Nothing is out of place in the *Santuarios* compositions, precisely because there seem to be no internal hierarchies ordering their different elements.

It is important to point out that the viewer's eye, whether expert or not, always initially attempts to apply meaning to what is seen by establishing simple connections between the work as seen for the first time and other known works. On a superficial level, given Pineda's upbringing in the town of Juchitan in Mexico, it is easy to detect the shadow of Francisco Toledo through the presence and metamorphosis of human and animal figures in his work. The same could be said of the influence of Rufino Tamayo in the presence of abstract elements, or of the popular art of Oaxaca in the intensity of colour. However, the structural form of Pineda's work is in fact closer to the works of Jackson Pollock. This is something that the artist considers purely accidental, although he does acknowledge the connection. Rather than those Pollock creations that we all know and that were subject to the avant-garde judgements of art critic Clement Greenberg, we refer here to his transitional period works when he was situated artistically between figurativism and Mexican muralist influences, a long way from the "action painting" that would make him a reference point for abstract expressionism.

We must not therefore forget that Pineda's work, like any other, possesses a shape and appearance that we see from the outside but that, beyond the use of artistic techniques and shapes, there is also an internal dimension that cannot be seen at first glance as it is the result of a mental and emotional process. Although this dimension of his work can only be fully perceived by the artist himself, the viewer must try to distinguish and decipher it, as the collective meaning of the images and colours can only be fully revealed through this internal structure. It is always specific social surroundings, contexts, experiences and visual sources that give rise to the lines, images and colours, as well as to the many meanings that these visual aspects hold for the artist and that may also be communicated to the viewer. These multi-layered meanings give life to

Pineda's works, as they can be interpreted in so many different ways by viewers because they recognise themselves in his artistic output.

A quick overview of Cristian Pineda's background tells us that *Santuarios* takes inspiration from and is the product of five central, interwoven experiences and sources: a long process of experimentation and formal research; collaboration and dialogue with other artists who share similar aesthetic and social concerns; the development of a visual sensibility and, consequently, an appreciation of the aesthetic decisions that everybody takes in their daily life to order and apply colour to the objects around them; the reappropriation and recycling of images from both the indigenous Zapotec culture and the street art of Juchitán and Mexico City; and finally, an urgent and committed need to document and participate in the social realities around him, particularly with respect to the violence suffered by Central American immigrants who pass through our country.

As has already been mentioned, one of the main elements in Pineda's work is the pre-eminence of drawings and lines. Today, the first thing he does on rising each morning is to sketch on notebooks to give shape to new ideas or projects. However, in contrast to other artists who seek to locate the origins of their vocation by remembering or imagining themselves drawing as children, Pineda states that he found art almost by accident. When he was young, Pineda started working with a group of silver craftsmen in the city of Oaxaca. It was at this time that Pineda made first contact with the world of art, initially concentrating on photography. For a time he worked with black and white nudes and constructed images, but over the years the camera came to serve him mainly as a tool to record and recognise the aesthetic elements that make up our surroundings and that pass most of us by unnoticed. Thanks to this newly-developed aesthetic

sensitivity, Cristian learned to appreciate the everyday creative capacity of groups to order or “install” objects in their surroundings, fill their walls with colour and care for the items that decorate their private spaces.

His search for colour and urge to experiment led him to work with silkscreen photography and photogravure. One of his most ambitious graphic art projects was a collection of silkscreens and series of drawings inspired by the *Bidxáa*, which are phantom creatures belonging to the Zapotec tradition that metamorphose into animals to intimidate night owls or suck the blood of the newborn<sup>3</sup>. From childhood, these mythical beings always fascinated Pineda. However, it was a surprisingly oral tradition that lacked visual depictions. This made it an appealing subject for a new visual creation and also an ideal way to contemplate the world of metamorphosis, change and transformation, since these are the exact meanings of *guendaridxaa*, from which the word *bidxáa* is derived. This project led him to study mutation in I Ching, the classic Chinese “Book of Changes”, as well as Kafka’s works on metamorphosis, before he was granted an artistic residency at the Vermont Studio Center in the USA, where he produced a collection entitled *Bestiario* (“Bestiary”). The theme of change and the *bidxáa* also led him to produce two comics in which he reappropriated an industrial-scale cultural product that had made an impact on his generation: the Thundercats, the popular television characters that were the product of a metamorphosis between humans and felines.

In 2006, after his artistic residency in the USA and a stay in the Spanish city of Barcelona, Pineda returned to his birthplace of Juchitán, Oaxaca. After having lived for six years in Mexico City, Pineda installed his painting workshop in his grandparents’ central house.

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<sup>3</sup>Gabriel López Chinas. “*Bidxáa*.” In *Xhquichi ca bidxaa: Libro de los metamorfoseados*. Mexico City: Editorial Praxis, 2004 : 5-6.

Through this decision he intended to distance himself from the market dynamic that dominated artistic circles in both Oaxaca and the Mexican capital, but mainly in order to drive various artistic and cultural projects forwards in his region. In addition to forming a community cinema club promoting independent filmmakers, Pineda participated in the founding of a publishing house that started to produce a cultural magazine, bilingual books by local authors and exhibition catalogues. His main project was the creation of *Bacaanda*. The main focus of this contemporary art initiative was to organise residencies for national and international artists, with the aim of carrying out artistic projects that would engage with the region's social realities.

His commitment to engaging with his community's social realities became more urgent after a people's uprising against Oaxaca's governor, Ulises Ruiz, which took place in June 2006. Pineda took part in activities to support the movement from Juchitán, but the protests did not spread across the entire region. In January 2007, Cristian nevertheless participated in a graphic collection and exhibition organised by Francisco Toledo in order to raise funds and call for the liberation of those citizens, human rights militants and artists imprisoned as a result of the repression of the people's movement in Oaxaca<sup>4</sup>.

There followed a few months after the exhibition, in October 2007, an event that led Pineda to consider more seriously why he painted and to question his very work as an artist. It was an event that would also definitively leave its mark on his artistic development. In this year Pineda, like so many other residents of Oaxaca, was shocked by the news that a boat containing 26 undocumented immigrants had sunk, leaving only two survivors. According to the survivors,

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<sup>4</sup>Another 37 artists participated in this collection, in addition to Toledo, including Alejandro Santiago (recently deceased), Dr. Lakra, Gabriel Macotela, Demián Flores, Antonio Turok and Oscar de las Flores, artists with whom Cristian would later work on other projects.



their boat had set sail from Guatemala towards Mexico, where they were to be collected and transported illegally to the USA. The Mexican authorities were only able to locate 15 bodies, found on the beaches of Rancho Nuevo de la Cruz and San Francisco del Mar in Oaxaca. The photos published by the press, showing the rotting bodies of the victims, were truly shocking. But what appalled Pineda even more was that nobody had identified the bodies before they were buried, as the local dissection hall did not have the capacity to refrigerate them. This led him to think about the fragility of the human body, the importance of one's birthplace and homeland, the notion of "home" and its significance, as well as the reasons that people travel and his own experiences of moving between Oaxaca, Mexico City and abroad. Above all, he started to consider the reasons which forced these Central American migrants to leave their home country and the social and political conditions that led to their lives being ended in this way.

Pineda knew from his own first-hand experience that Juchitán was invariably a stop-off on the migrant route – and not just for Central Americans – because his grandparents lived only three blocks from the train station. Pineda spent much time there as a child, and he would watch with intrigue as the immigrants passed by. He and his friends knew that they could not cross to the other side of the railway track at six o'clock in the evening because the train would be coming. He recalls that the local people showed the migrants the same solidarity that has brought fame to *Las Patronas de Veracruz*, a group of women who give food to immigrants passing through a south-east region of Mexico. Cristian remembers that "people would sit down and talk with the migrants passing through. They were very friendly with them. They would buy them a taco, have a chat. The children would ask where they had come from. There were Chinese and even Arab people among them. For us the migrants came not just from another country but

another world, distant places that fired our imaginations”<sup>5</sup>. These memories stand in stark contrast to what he found on returning from Mexico City, where the harsh realities facing the Central American migrants passing through our country was – and remains to this day – an issue unbeknown to the great majority of the population.

When the boat sank, most people in Juchitán were similarly unaware that their town was already a key base for the operations of the *coyotes*, who transported the undocumented Central American migrants who were on the way to the USA. Pineda immediately set about questioning and investigating, and the reality that he found was much harsher than he had expected. People knew that the lives of these migrants had always been blighted by separations from their families, dangers during their journeys, social rejections at their destinations, deportations and homecomings filled with the frustration of failure. For many years, the migrants had furthermore fallen victim to robbery, assault and extortion at the hands of Mexican citizens, human traffickers and even the police or migration authorities. But the main difference was that today the migrants – who secretly travel by foot, on public transport, on cargo trains or hidden on buses – experience much higher levels of violence, such as mass kidnappings, rape and murder, as was the case in San Francisco, Tamaulipas, on 23rd August, 2010. Following this massacre, which saw 72 migrants tortured and assassinated, the stark realities of migrant life went from being a marginal issue to one with an international reach. A new group of Mexican artists turned to their art in a bid to document, denounce and give visibility to these “unrepresentable” experiences of structural violence in Mexico.

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<sup>5</sup> Cristian Pineda shared his ideas and memories during various interviews for the purpose of this essay, carried out between December 2012 and November 2013 at his apartment, his new studio at Colonia Guerrero, cafes and restaurants in Mexico City, a conversation by Skype and a visit to the Albergue Hermanos refuge on the migrant route in Ixtepec, Oaxaca.

From then on, Cristian Pineda spent nearly three years following the migrant route and visiting some of the refuges where the migrants shelter, bathe, receive clothes, eat and relax while waiting for the next train to take them illegally to the US border. As is well known, at this point a desert lies in wait that must be crossed by foot. By 2008, this desert had already claimed the lives of more than four thousand people over a period of 12 years<sup>6</sup>. His experiences with both the migrants and those in charge of the refuges – particularly Father Alejandro Solalinde, founder of the *Hermanos en el Camino* solidarity movement – helped to cement his long-held convictions in defence of the right to human movement and the respect of cultural differences. This experience also gave rise to the *Migrantes Frontera Sur* project, a platform to bring artists and other organisations together to document, produce and exhibit works of art on the subject of migration. Meanwhile, the *Bacaanda* residency project focused on inviting artists who had already spent years working around this theme, such as Alejandro Santiago, Antonio Turok, Nicola Okin Frioli and Eniac Martínez.

More importantly for the development of his own work, he made around 300 drawings of human figures (see p.27-28) while exploring the migrant route. These sketches were made on notebooks or whatever else he had to hand, such as serviettes or petrol receipts. The drawing process served as a catharsis, helping him to take in the realities that he encountered on his travels. Those drawings later became, furthermore, an archive recording the inhumane conditions and vulnerability of migrants passing through Mexico. In his 300 drawings, Pineda did not

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<sup>6</sup> According to a report by the International Human Rights Federation published in 2008, “United States – Mexico Walls, Abuses and Deaths at the Borders: Flagrant Violations of the Rights of Undocumented Migrants on their Way to the United States”, this figure was 15 times greater than the number of those who died trying to cross the Berlin Wall throughout its 28 years of existence. According to more recent reports, 463 migrants died in 2012 alone, despite reports saying that migration levels have dropped to almost zero. For more details, see Fernanda Santos and Rebekah Zemansky, “Arizona Desert Swallows Migrants on Riskier Paths,” *New York Times*, 20th May, 2013.

choose to simply produce realistic or idealistic portraits of the migrants. Moved by the mass exodus and the high levels of vulnerability and violence experienced on the migrant route, Pineda included deformed, mutilated or fragmented figures of people among his drawings. To create these figures, Pineda made good use of his visual repertoire. Whether consciously or not, he returned to the images of beasts and creatures in the process of transformation or metamorphosis from the Zapotec culture that had already featured in his project inspired by the *Bidxáa* legends and dreams of mutation<sup>7</sup>. At any given moment during the creation of his 300 migrant images, Pineda would recall Francisco de Goya's etchings *Los desastres de la guerra* ("The Disasters of War") and the series *El sueño de la razón produce monstruos* ("The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters"). Goya once pointed out, as has Pineda, that situations of war alone could generate monsters<sup>8</sup>. Pineda has declared that, even for him, comprehending and accepting the 300 drawings produced during this journey was a difficult task because the human figures shaped by his own hands are somewhat grotesque. The migrants themselves have asked Pineda why he chose to depict them in such a way. Some have told him, for example, that what they see in the mirror is not that bad. However, in the 300 drawings, the migrants are far from romanticised and rather presented as the product of the violence they have experienced: beings that have been dehumanised and criminalised by the law, by the police, by the media and by the citizens that look down on them with distrust when they approach asking for food or some help. The artist argues that these iconographic characters were never intended to be viewed

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<sup>7</sup>Cristian reappropriated the *Porrazo*, another element from Zapotec culture, in his graphic collection on wrestling that featured in the Basel Biennial in Switzerland.

<sup>8</sup>See Edith Helman. *Trasmundo de Goya*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1993.

comfortably, but that they rather force the viewer to contemplate the right that all human beings have to movement and to a life in peace, free from violence.

These 300 figures have become part of the artist's visual repertoire and are inevitably at the origin of many of the characters that we see in *Santuarios*. However, in this series of paintings, the human figures and characters take on a radically different dimension: they are a celebration of the body and our links with nature. These works remind us that our origins are to be found in nature, that we are largely made from water, that we also put down roots, that we inhabit and that we are our own houses, that the body is our Sanctuary. In this way, *Santuarios* invites us to take a moment's refuge from the social surroundings in which we are forced to live, an environment that tries to impose upon us a belief that the only reality is one of avarice and commodification of body and mind. *Santuarios* invites us to imagine another world, one constructed out of hope and respect for our bodies and those of others. In this sense, his work is a message to all forms of violence: enough is enough. This is one of the reasons why the ninety pieces that make up the *Santuarios* series refer to the body as a duality composed of both physical fragments (skulls, arms, muscles) and a spiritual, internal dimension. In short, the *Santuarios* series reminds us how grotesque and fragile, but also how beautiful, the human body is.

For the artist, the body is a constantly changing physical and spiritual structure, fighting to transform its social and natural surroundings. Considered in this sense from the social environment in which we live, his work also expresses the contradictions and tensions that human beings must confront today, in a world that bears witness to intolerable levels of exploitation and violence, to the destruction of the environment and to the exhaustion of human

and natural resources because of the unrelenting drive for an unequal accumulation of wealth by depriving the majority to serve the minority.