

Santuarios

You were submerged by the oppressive night and were blinded by the light of the Three Kings and the Four Elements. Dazzled and bewildered, you embraced the world with an indefinable and delicious sense of horror. But any sadness surrendered in the face of the ardent remains and the mass of waves. Through the senses you freed yourself from cowardly hopes, from shadow and weight. You awoke on the other bank, more at one with yourself, deciphering yourself.

Luis Cardoza y Aragón *Dibujos de Ciego*

We are sat at one of the seafood stalls at the Mercado de Medellín in Mexico City, having travelled to the Colonia Roma area of the city in order to see the mural that Cristian Pineda installed up on one of the market's façades a few months ago (see p. 37-38), and conversation turns to this multicultural market where beers and Colombian coffee can be found alongside traditional delicacies from the regions of Yucatan and Oaxaca.

Much of Cristian's work deals with this mixture of origins and cultures in today's world. Given that migration is one of his central themes, he inevitably passes comment on those new hybrid communities that are formed in both countries of destination and countries of origin.

It's all about interaction today, as we listen to different radio stations compete and overlap in the Mercado de Medellín, like the sound of an old rock song by Queen blurred into some bolero songs coming from a taco stand.

Cristian tells me about how he got on with the stall owners, and with the market itself, while he was painting high up on the market façade.

His Belgian wife and mother-in-law finish their seafood cocktail and start on some octopus, and the sound of different languages can also be heard around our table.

But, having seen his *Santuarios* series a few days ago, I think that Cristian has reached a new stage in his art. For years he has sought this breakthrough, where everything that he had previously been working on has converged within this collection of paintings, a part of which has now been exhibited.

Cristian Pineda's personal journey has seen him constantly play the role of cultural promoter and activist, while simultaneously maturing as a professional artist.

For many years now he has produced work in support of migrants, especially those who cross our country having arrived from Central or South America. Yet he has dealt more broadly with this theme, expressly dealing with the rights and realities of our countrymen who cross north of the border, and this work has led him to organise art workshops in Europe featuring both migrants and those displaced by wars or political conflicts in their homelands. He has always been able to condemn realities through the use of his art and through other means of expression. He has walked the migratory routes alongside those Central or South Americans who cross our country and, in addition to documenting these journeys in various ways, he has created ephemeral works and spontaneous installations made up of the materials left behind by this pilgrimage of thousands: from ropes, bottles, food wrappers and shoes, to pieces of a telephone or a radio. Many artists have contributed works to denounce migrant realities, to raise funds at exhibitions or to frame the debates at seminars or academic events organised by Pineda through his artistic platform *Migrantes Frontera Sur*. I recall when in 2011 he invited Alejandro Santiago to exhibit his *Familias Migrantes* series on the terrace shared by the Memory and Tolerance Museum and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, an event linked to World Refugee Day and organised by the UNHCR in Mexico and the Federal District Government. A year earlier, in 2010, I had seen him make a speech for a *Migrantes Frontera Sur* exhibition at the Casa Lamm Cultural Centre in support of the work carried out by Padre Solalinde

and his migrant shelter in Ixtepec, Oaxaca. It was in his hometown of Juchitán, close to Ixtepec, that Cristian's bond with migration was first formed. Together with Demián Flores, he initiated a series of activities aimed not only at developing a dedicated space of cultural expression and rest for those passing through the Salalinde refuge, but also at stimulating the use of art to denounce realities and raise funds for the project. Cristian has come a long way, and the journey is reflected in many of his own creations and series, both graphic and pictorial, ephemeral and traditional.

However, Cristian has also committed himself to setting up artistic residencies, to producing publications and to organising workshops through his *Bacaanda* cultural centre. This dedication has resulted in the arrival of over 150 artists to his community, many of them nationally renowned such as the photographer Antonio Turok.

Alongside all of this activity to encourage social participation in its various guises, Cristian continued to produce his own graphic and pictorial art. While he continued to hone his craft in these fields, his force of expression was most keenly felt through etchings and serigraphs, in which he best managed to marry his ideas to his artistic approach. Then along came *Santuarios*, whose canvases constitute a significant leap forward, the discovery of a force and creative direction through which the "searching" quality of his works is left behind and replaced by more forceful images. The reason for this sudden change seems to be twofold. Firstly, a specific technical decision was taken: Cristian stopped working with sketched outlines that spread over his canvas and formed the basis of his pictorial compositions. Over many years he had developed an artistic method, one with many contemporary aspects but one that was also embedded in the centuries-old tradition of drawing machines, consisting of a drawn image that is in some way projected onto the canvas and used as the conceptual and compositive axis around which the painting will develop. However, when it came to *Santuarios*, Cristian moved away from the method that he had so

faithfully developed over the years and instead opted for more spontaneous works, in which he sketched directly onto the canvas. This blind confidence in his improvisation and decision-making simultaneously affords the artist freedom and security, his linear imagination and image construction creating a definitive and forceful catharsis. The lines thus paraphrase Cardoza's *The Lines on Her Hand*, the very heartbeat of life being translated into a drawing. The decision to position the works in this way is of much significance. On the other hand, the second decision taken results from his art not being tied down to any specific social or political process, to any circumstance or theme linked to his role as a cultural promoter or artistic activist. The focus is instead on a personal and intimate search, a forceful out spilling of the subconscious onto the canvas like one long, deferred dream. This is not to say, of course, that certain elements of strong libertarian criticism do not emerge, like for example *Imperio* (see p. 39), which features the dark face of power.

Bacaanda, meaning "dream" in the Zapotec language, is the name of the cultural project that Cristian ran in Juchitán and that included the publication of a magazine, the organisation of artistic residencies in the Istmo de Tehuantepec region, the creation of a cinema club and the formation of different workshops on printing and painting techniques. But, creatively speaking, I believe the true dream to have been realised in this collection in which the mind is directly linked to the drawing, where the canvas is firstly smeared with paint, producing drips and forming pictorial elements that are both random and arbitrary, suggesting the birth and growth of the drawing, the unrestricted evolution of lines that spontaneously seek poetry and that live and are born in an instant. In his book *Correo Dadá*, Raul Hausmann states that: "What sets Dadá apart from a thinker or a philosopher is that he never despairs over the meaning of changing values, even those which shift from one minute to the next; on the contrary, he could not live like this as he would become immobile, and this ambiguity between what is static and what is dynamic is, for him, the elemental notion of life." Although Pineda's work

does not entirely fit into the bracket of Dadaism and has more in common with surrealist pieces, this definition nevertheless encapsulates the forward leap the artist has made. He has evolved from a desire to symbolically reflect “realities” and produce meaningful works, to a desire to create works that, without denying the worlds and issues that he had confronted before, now locate them within a wider universe, free from preconceived plans, in which aesthetic ambition outweighs discourse and the image’s heartbeat is created by the path of a brush or charcoal over the canvas.

When I saw the exhibition alongside the artist himself at the beautiful Casa Frissac in the centre of Tlalpan, where half of the series was on display, Cristian started to talk to me about a return to the four classical elements: water, fire, wind and earth. But not as symbols, but rather sensations that held their own specific memories, such as the wind and water on the beach at Huave de San Mateo del Mar, or the fire, earth and wind in a crop field of roaring flames during the slash and burn season. Images of his hometown, clouds, blue cracks in the sky, the light of Juchitán. All of this manages to seep naturally through into the succession of works: the compositions – whose titles translate as “Bodies of Wind” (see p.), “Sweet Water”(see p..) or “Bodies of Earth”(see p.) – demonstrate that memories return to Cristian like a gust of wind or a wave. These memories flow instinctively onto the paint-smearred canvas, then a drawing emerges and weaves its course before the colour again starts to block out areas of this drawing, to obscure certain shapes and lines, to swallow them up in areas of pure colour that form an atmosphere which, despite having its own borders, creates the sensation of a fluent construct that interconnects and becomes at one with the other works.

The human anatomy is also central to these paintings, many of the compositions featuring skeletons or bodies that show muscles, stretch marks or flesh beneath the skin, just like in anatomic studies or diagrams. It would

appear that in these compositions, in which the artist penetrates the human body, he seeks to show us that he is swimming deep below the levels that define us in order to reach, as the Argentine poet Oliverio Girondo would say, the *masmedula*, a neologism that leads us into the innermost corners of the creative being. Cristian plunges into this environment, and this interconnection between the creative process, the anatomy and the four elements seems to scream: "This is me. This is what is inside me. I am made up of many worlds, many plants, many others". This is what becomes externalised when he paints. One poetically suggestive work reflecting these aspects would be *Baile de la Consciencia* (see p.). In this painting we can make out four characters, defined by areas of lively colours, which seem to be personified maps, human territories dancing between skeletal legs. This is a dance of what we believe to be consciousness, dancing at life's limits, men and women between stars, this immense universe that surrounds us and sets our limits of knowledge and consciousness but that, at the same time, shouts out that the only way man has of reaching this immensity is through poetry and art, through music and dance. When man creates, he can reach the stars and juggle with them. If James Joyce associates the city with the human anatomy in modern literature, Cristian dissects the anatomy so that it may be reintegrated into the natural and cosmic space. In *Cuerpos de Viento* the characters are defined by lines that seem deformed or traced out by gusts of air, the trembling silhouettes seem ready to fray away, the profiles of both objects and creatures ripple as if they were flags being blown by a tornado. What we can see, therefore, is that there is a dialogue between the artist and the materials that emerges almost automatically during the creative process. It is a position closely tied to surrealism, of immersion into the imagination and deep thought, of following what the smears of paint say and allowing the next shape to be born out of what is found. As I have already mentioned, after the drawing comes a process of layering with colours. It is the drawing itself that informs the choice of tones for this process: a theme emerges and the brushstrokes apply a colour scheme that is prompted by the drawing. If the work is aquatic in nature, for example, blues and greens dominate.

What then is the sanctuary, or sanctuaries, that Cristian Pineda has reached? I believe that there is a complex of very personal Sanctuaries that represent cultural origins, a spiritual awakening, a relationship with nature, a political stance, eroticism, the essence of life and, therefore, the four elements, alongside a contemplation of such things as the home and a sense of belonging to a place. Finally, there is the sanctuary of the body – not superficially, but rather a Sanctuary that can only be reached through the insides and bones, like a plant through its roots and even inside rocks. It is a revision of one's own being and of one's personal history along sensitive and sensorial lines, a type of building in which each room acts as an encounter with another facet of the self or with another defining personal moment. This could manifest itself as a rapprochement with pre-Hispanic cultures, a bond with animals or plants, or contemplations about death and the spiritual side of life. Yet there is one overriding sanctuary, I believe, and it is where all the other sanctuaries meet, a sanctuary greater even than the body and the mind in whose ideas and feelings all others are kept. I speak of the sanctuary of painting and drawing. It is this sanctuary of art that Cristian builds and reaches by managing to collect in this one series all of his previous searches: treks through the desert making circles with the migrants' objects (see p.45), folders of etchings, pictorial collections, everything converges here as his formative experiences evolve into these ninety paintings, each one of which is a door into the complex tower of liberal concepts and techniques with which Cristian confronts each canvas.

There are precedents that were already pointing in this direction, in the form of thousands of drawings, but in particular his *Dibujos Territoriales* that were made on paper napkins. Then the *Maderas Corpus Terra* (see p.) series, produced on plywood sheets from carrying cases and on which he restricted

himself to drawings which followed not only the wood grain, but also the stickers, printed words, stripes, stains, marks and stamps. In the case of the *Dibujos Territoriales*, the ink expands on the paper napkin in such a way as to determine the course of the sketch and even create new, previously unplanned shapes. The *Maderas Corpus Terra* series, for its part, finds hidden beings in the knots and grains of the wood in an entirely surrealist manner. Those words on the “fragile contents” stickers or the import/export stamps later became the origins of many of the letters, phrases and terms included in *Santuarios*. I insist that from that moment, those packages and napkins gave rise to the surrealist positioning of his art, such as the wooden sheets to which drawings are added by burning or singeing them, shapes randomly appearing or being suggested by the natural grain of a severed trunk or by the whims of the shading. They would delight Paalen and Max Ernst, to mention just two inescapable names from the world of surrealist experimentation.

Along these surrealist lines that are progressively developed throughout this large collection, the works structurally became a sort of stained-glass window and the beings or characters became hybrids. We see plants organically growing with the body of a human or animal, mouths with insect antennae, compositions that are submerged beneath the surface but that let us see the roots between minerals and rocks, plants with fingers, dragonflies with female legs, oesophagi, visors, veins that seem to become stems or plant outlines that seem to have a plumage, bodies that have become beasts. It is a din of shapes and colours, as if there were no difference between things and beings, as if we were not individual but rather one continuous whole, joined in different ways, a network of networks in which we can all influence each other like in the scientific theory of the Butterfly Effect, which says that the flap of a butterfly's wings can influence the climate on the other side of an ocean due to the chain of events that follow it, from pollination to the reproduction of its own species. Some of the structures among those which

emerge from under the surface remind me of certain works by Wilfredo Lam, but of course the treatment of colours and the presence of words completely change the meaning of the paintings and move them closer to José Bedia, a more modern Cuban artist.

I understand the inclusion of words or phrases to play an almost foundational or mythical role, participating in the creation of the art. It is like when a supernatural being, a god or a mythological creature renames the world, and the world is thus reinvented. Cristian instils the same effect in the pictorial aspect and the sentences therefore have a grandiloquent tone: “Lift your head, even if for now you cannot see the light” (see p.). I personally consider this pictorial Sanctuary to be a true moment of enlightenment on Cristian’s journey, the moment that he has been shown the path onto which his previous searches converge.

Curiously, at a first glance the atmospheres on which the images in these works seem to float appear fragmented. But then, after observing and taking in the different works, we realise that we are witnessing a chain of links and fusions, a network of lives, organic objects, natural elements, characters, creatures both fantastical and real, vegetation and clouds. In this way, the concept imprinted on the majority of the paintings is also enshrined in the way the works have been put together. Of course, there are works that do all they can to challenge this harmony, that once more condemn migrant realities, as can be seen in canvases such as *Implosión* (see p. 29), whose dismembered and severed bodies create a message of violence and desperation. This horrific image would appear to refer to our country’s current plight: despite such a long and rich cultural history and the human qualities of her people, Mexico is caught in such a whirlpool of violence and corruption that the nation-state is unable to guarantee its citizens the basic right to life. The image developed by Cristian is one of a country that has imploded and now lies helplessly unravelled in full view of a shocked international community. The artist has been able to observe this harsh

reality throughout his various first-hand experiences with the Central Americans who are persecuted, raped, robbed, humiliated, enslaved, mutilated and killed in Mexico. Cristian has chosen to use art to draw attention to their affinity with their planet and their fellow man. For this reason, the core of this collection is evidently the light and colourful piece entitled *Mi mundo es un santuario* (see p.), where plant leaves can be made out alongside an image of birth that could represent the birth of the artist himself, as well as shapes that ambiguously oscillate between bodily organs and plants to create a sensation of fertility. This painting also features, like so many others, a constant alternation between figurative and abstract shapes that leaves the overall work open to interpretation – for example, many areas of this composition suggest waves but, at the same time, they are actually no more than a succession of drawn green loops and curves. In the same way, the presence of a cross could propose many underlying symbolic meanings but chooses not to impose a definitive reading, be it a Christian cross or any other. The author's apparent stance of ambiguity is linked to the conviction communicated through another piece, entitled *No hay Triunfo* (see p.), that nothing is certain in the world since what some people consider to be a victory may for others represent the most shameful defeat. For example, for many people the idea of becoming one of the richest men in the world would seem to be an obvious triumph yet, for a Buddhist monk whose doctrine teaches that illumination and peace can only be reached in the complete absence of material goods, earning thousands of dollars every day would represent little short of an abyss into which his aspirations and understanding of the world could fall. The piece seems rather to tackle the absurd battles for power that humans occasionally wage against those to whom we are closest.

A subtle manner of reinforcing the cultural origins of Mexicans, for example through references to the Olmecas and the Aztecs, is progressively revealed throughout the different works. More delicately, in a work entitled *Planta Sacra* (see p.), a vegetal shape becomes the knot or bond between the

painting's three main characters. If we consider the role played by corn in Mexico, it becomes apparent that certain vegetables can be inextricably linked to the history and development of a people or culture. With this piece, Cristian takes the overriding, positive charge of this collection to an extreme, this idea of a world of obvious and subtle links, the idea that we are all part of a cosmic whole and not merely isolated grains of sand in the middle of the desert.

Fernando Gálvez de Aguinaga