

“Art Is a Life Project”

Salvador Díaz | Interview by Rocío Cárdenas Pacheco | Vida Universitaria, Visual Arts section (Flama), October 1, 2004, pp. 6-7

The young Mexico City native living in Monterrey is a notable member of the current generation of Mexican artists with strong prospects for establishing himself and gaining international recognition. Devoted to recovering his own biography with doses of humor, Salvador is convinced of the value of painting as a means of expression at a time when unconventional media prevail among his contemporaries. With a personal education that includes workshops at the Faculty of Visual Arts, he is a romantic among his peers, certain that an artist “is not made by a single exhibition, no matter how successful it is; art can give meaning to your own life.”

Salvador Díaz is a young artist who has lived in Monterrey for almost two decades. He was born in Mexico City in 1977. His family moved after the 1985 earthquake and settled in the capital of Nuevo León; Salvador has made a successful entrance into the contemporary art market. His work is promoted by Galería Arte Actual Mexicano. His artistic expression is grounded in painting and drawing, with a marked influence of hyperrealism that evolves into fiction and representation drawn from family settings and everyday surroundings.

Looking at Salvador’s canvases, one can see smooth, highly detailed surfaces contrasted with blurred and altered spaces that emphasize mysterious narratives. Díaz has an impeccable career trajectory; among his teachers are the Mexican painter Arturo Rivera and the Chilean painter Ximena Subercaseaux. His personality is patient and calm, and his measured, serene way of speaking often contrasts with the confrontation he achieves through his work. It is imbued with a force that transports us to different universes in which the viewer becomes the protagonist—or simply the pretext for finding an answer to the visual labyrinths he evokes.

How long have you been painting?

I had my first solo exhibition when I was 16. So you could say I have been pursuing this career for 11 years. Painting has given me an identity. Since I was a child, I liked expressing myself through painting; it was something I always developed alongside my school activities. When I was in high school, I became interested in painting professionally and began taking painting and drawing courses in the extension workshops of the Faculty of Visual Arts. Through other life experiences, I realized that one has to devote oneself to what one loves most, and in my particular case that was painting. That is how painting gradually took up more space in my life and became my vocation.

What events led you to devote your life to painting?

After the 1985 earthquake, my parents, who are from Monterrey, decided to return there. I had just turned eight. We lived in the Tlatelolco housing complex, and the experience of the earthquake marked a turning point in my family life because it was such a drastic change. Fragments of memory remain from those early years, and in a way, exploring my early childhood in Mexico City gave substance to my work beginning in 1997, when I started working with the family photo album. Having experienced losing everything created in me a need to recover my own memories and my past.

What was your artistic training like?

I am self-taught, but my need to learn more about art led me to regularly attend exhibitions at the Museo de Monterrey and MARCO. When I was 14, I used to go paint at Plaza Hidalgo, in the Jardín del Arte; that was my first formal encounter with painting. One Sunday, while I was painting, Sonia Garza Rapport saw my work and awarded me a scholarship through the Casa de la Cultura de Nuevo León. I joined the Experimental Visual Arts Workshop, where my teacher was Esteban Ramos. Later, at 18, I joined Ximena Subercaseaux's workshop. I then took a drawing course with Arturo Rivera at the Casa de la Cultura, a course with the Cuban teacher José Montalvo, and a workshop on materials and techniques with the conservator Horacio Cantú.

Your work has developed quite independently of other artists of your generation. How do you see this?

When I had my first solo exhibition in 2000, "Soy como un país lejano" [I Am Like a Distant Country], I did consider myself very much a loner, because at the time I felt quite isolated from what other young artists were doing. But over the past four years circumstances have changed, and I have had much more contact with members of my generation.

What circumstances changed?

I have always been open to discovering and acknowledging any form of artistic expression: my belief in painting is not based on rejecting everything else. My closest circle of friends includes other artists—Arturo Marty, Silvia Ordóñez and Ignacio Salazar—whom I see as part of a generation generous enough to share its knowledge.

What is your working relationship with artists of your generation like?

In April 2002, I participated in the group exhibition "Lecturas domésticas" [Domestic Readings] with Pilar de la Fuente, Manuel Mathar and Gerardo Monsiváis at the Centro de las Artes de Nuevo León. This experience was an initial encounter among us, and in a way, although we did not know one another, talking made us realize that we had things in common, such as black humor emphasizing the routines of everyday and family life, even though we all came from different backgrounds and our ways of working were very different.

What is your position on arguments that painting has been exhausted as a means of artistic expression?

I believe painting continues to stand up for itself. I think my position is that of a young creator who uses an expressive medium with an already well-established history. For my most recent solo exhibition, "Miedo de mí" [Afraid of Myself], I wrote a text in which I mentioned that those who disdain painting are those who have no interest in developing it or getting to know it. I believe the possibilities painting offers—as discourse, as influence and as a force affecting the viewer—continue to be a primary point of entry into art and its history.

How have you been incorporating new themes into your work?

Each exhibition, in a way, marks the conclusion of a body of work and at the same time the beginning of new stages. In "Miedo de mí," I wanted to make clear how diverse my work had become, through pieces such as "El flautista de Hamelín" [The Pied Piper of Hamelin] and "El mármol Segal" [Segal Marble], in which a marble family appears against a red background—a reference that remains relevant through the concept of transformation. False identity and representation are other recurring themes, as is my reinterpretation of painting subjects considered classics or of certain masterpieces from art history.

Do you think Monterrey remains an important platform for developing your work?

Monterrey remains one of Mexico's most important centers of art production. It continues to be a springboard for emerging artists, and it will remain my home throughout my life.

What are your upcoming projects?

I have plans for exhibitions in Madrid and Houston, as well as art fairs. One thing you learn is that you do not become an artist with a single exhibition, no matter how successful you are, how many sales you make, how many people visit the show or how many interviews you give. You realize that making art is a life project, and you have to sustain it over time to keep your work relevant and give it a reason for being.

English translation of the complete interview on pages 6-7 of the original publication. Artwork titles are retained in Spanish, with explanatory English translations in brackets.