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Lucas Johnson

Drawings from the Underworld

Dibujos del bajomundo

"RETIRED TO THE PEACE OF THIS DESERT, WITH A COLLECTION AND BOOKS THAT ARE FEW AND WISE, I LIVE IN CONVERSATION WITH THE DEPARTED AND LISTEN TO THE DEAD WITH MY EYES."[1]

"WHEN THE EIGHTIES ARE OVER, THE NINETIES WILL MAKE THE SIXTIES LOOK LIKE THE FIFTIES."[2]

Thirty years ago, Lucas Johnson arrived in Mexico. Unlike so many U.S. expatriates who travel south of the border, he did not leave the United States in search of a different or new identity. In Johnson's case, the move to Mexico in 1964 came more naturally. His artwork already showed that his aesthetic home was there, as it shared the philosophical and social concerns of the *Nueva Presencia* group, which included Jose Luis Cuevas, Arnold Belkin, Francisco Icaza, Leonel Góngora, Artemio Sepúlveda and others.[3]

The members of this movement questioned how art might function as a social construct. They countered Mexico's own emerging brand of abstraction[4] by proposing an art of neo-realism as an alternative to the social realism that by 1961 had run its course.[5] In the first issue of *Nueva Presencia: El Hombre en el Arte de Nuestro Tiempo*, founding members Belkin and Icaza stated the movement's goal as: "To promote only the art which holds meaning for our contemporaries; art which does not separate man as an individual from man as an integral part of society. No one, especially the artist, has the right to be indifferent to the social order."[6] *Nueva Presencia*'s art was notable for its multilayered complexity. The collision of content-oriented, humanist art with social realism and abstraction was especially resonant in Mexico where cultural references historically have combined several contradictory traditions all at once in a unique, carnivalesque, multicultural avant-la-lettre.

When one places *Drawings from the Underworld/Dibujos del bajomundo* in the context of Johnson's thirty-year career as it was informed by these influences from the Mexico of the sixties, his concern for social themes and his effort to find a unifying thread among at times opposing historical and contemporary humanist ideas is immediately evident.

As is the case with his Mexican contemporaries, Johnson's ouevre also shows a pervasive return to or use of the human form. Furthermore, the *Drawings from the Underworld* remind us of the simultaneity of perspectives: nothing is ever just one thing, and there is never only one way to see the people, places and objects of this world.

In these drawings, corporeal parts function as architecture: towers, shelters, dwellings, ducts, tunnels, caves and paths that come and go. Similarly, architecture and landscape become bodyscape. Slate mountains and temples are winged figures of admonition or annunciation. Valleys float in and out of our perspective and resemble large cloaked figures who at times seem crucified. Urns and crevices hold bundle-shaped mummies. Creatures and other organic matter from this "underworld" commingle with their

human counterparts. In some drawings, arms and limbs stretch out to divide and open up dry rock cliffs in order for different lives to emerge. In other drawings, the "underworld" map reveals burial niches where saints as well as fossilized and reptilian life forms are either fixed or struggling to find their way out. In still other scenes, a tumultuous group of bodies or body parts seems trapped and forever enclosed.

The multi-layered construction of these drawings causes almost every element to acquire equal stature. The exception is the everpresent and prominent snake, at times phallic and at other times resembling an open mouth or vagina. The visual and symbolic importance and concentric forms of the snakes give the "underworld" an absorbing urgency. The snakes also evoke both Medusa and Quetzalcoatl, demonstrating Johnson's multi-layering of cultural sources. This work makes the point that Western and MesoAmerican culture need not be antagonistic or dialectically opposed, since both derive from the same human impulse. In fact, Johnson proposes a third perspective with new meaning and understanding of the world we live in.

The artist has long articulated this ethical and social stance in poetry and book illustrations, as well as in published interviews.[7] For Johnson, humanity, not in the abstract but specifically as people, remains central to his art. This philosophy is evident from the beginning. In Johnson's drawings from the early sixties, exhibited shortly after he arrived in Mexico, the artist portrayed characters found in the work of Franz Kafka, Albert Camus, and John-Paul Sartre side by side with characters from the work of Miguel Unamuno, Jorge Luis Borges, Juan Rulfo, or Octavio Paz. Scenes suggestive of moods from Southern writers Tennessee Williams or Truman Capote were combined with Native American poetry and sixties song lyrics. These earlier drawings demonstrate Johnson's innate ability to communicate, in an emotionally and intellectually compassionate way, his belief in the power of all people to overcome their otherwise tragic destinies.[8]

This stance was very much in the spirit of the sixties. *Nueva Presencia* emphasized individual alienation and the general malaise of the Cold War, which was rooted in what appeared to be man's never ending capacity for self-destruction. Against a backdrop of nihilism, the movement worked to change society, to create a "new man"[9] and, most importantly, to use art and culture to address and remedy social injustice. Developing a contemporary mythology around Prometheus and Quetzalcoatl,[10] *Nueva Presencia* announced that a reborn world and a reborn man would emerge. This hopeful, romantic belief had some foundation in the political events of that time. The overthrow of the Batista regime by the Cuban people clearly indicated that society could be changed. Change was on everyone's agenda, and civil rights and human rights groups, politically or mystically informed, sprouted all over the Americas.

The sixties were a decade in which the sheer number of revolutionary ideas was overwhelming. Sometimes a position or philosophy would come to include apparently implausible contradictions, such as equating sexual liberation and drugs with joining Castro's Cuba. It was as though everyone had bought a ticket on a runaway train of experimentation—in belief, human behavior, science and politics. Life and art were fused, every activity became a laboratory experiment, and eventually a legacy of outstanding creative accomplishments was built.

Arriving in Mexico at twenty-four, Johnson was definitely a young man cognizant of the times. His formative influences during the postwar period of the fifties were similar to those of his Mexican artist friends and included existentialism, Beat poetry, the Korean War, anti-establishment actions, and the ban-the-bomb movement, all of which would become part of the emerging New Left in the United States. Johnson thus carried with him, and contributed to the Mexican cultural scene, not only a first-hand understanding of the political and philosophical climate of the United States, but also ideas about how this affected and was part of the rest of the Americas. Given the nature of nationalism, especially in Mexico, it is not difficult to comprehend how the opposites of rejection and acceptance might seemingly exist in harmony.[11]

Mexico, unlike most Latin American nations, extended to foreign artists and intellectuals like Johnson a twofold reception: an initial welcome invitation to join the "inside," blended later with an acute suspicion of his/her "outside" cultural background. This complex dualism echoed the larger insider/outsider position of Latin America in general. The European structure of Latin America's societies after the conquest largely prevented any inclusion or participation of indigenous cultures in artistic or political life. Simultaneously, these countries were forced to accept a Third World status in relation to their colonial dependence on the United States. In cultural terms, this gave artists intensely varied resources and non-linear strategies within which to work and interact. Now known to us as magic realism, this approach embraced an inclusive art, one that included the inside/outside perspective.

Significantly, *Nueva Presencia* took many of its ideas from Colin Wilson's *The Outsiders* and Selden Rodman's *The Insiders*, both of which appeared in the early sixties. In these books, bits of psychology and philosophy were mixed with science fiction, shamanism and various mystical sources, providing inspiration to the artist interested in undefined but purposeful social causes. In light of recent historical developments and new work in cultural studies, it is evident that the "inside/outside" position can be a very loaded concept, one of decidedly "mixed blessings."[12] And, in fact, fissures were already forming in *Nueva Presencia* when Johnson appeared on the scene in 1964. At that time, the group had begun to disband, some of its members blaming Belkin and Icaza[13] for deliberately using the group to promote their own careers and ideas. Others were leaving to pursue new alliances with the "outside" and "inside" forces of other anti-muralist forums.

Therefore, Johnson, like so many other artists, ended up understanding that by being "inside" you can be equally on the "outside". Viewed from one perspective, inside/outside can be seen as a metaphor for uncertain philosophies and distance from cultural traditions, a problem not unique to Mexico, or any other country for that matter. This is clearly demonstrated in Johnson's work, specifically in *Drawings from the Underworld*. These works address the precarious condition of being simultaneously inside/outside as

they draw on the art of Johnson's predecessors. They are almost memento mori, a celebration of the imagery surrounding life and death, as seen in William Blake, Francisco Goya, Jose Clemente Orozco or Jose Guadalupe Posada.

But there is also much more in these new works. A parallel narrative points out the metaphorical side of more pressing events: the inevitability of death; the destruction of the environment in which we live; the threat of total annihilation that surrounds everyone and everything and the continual eroding of the value of life in general, as evidenced in both U.S. and Third World inner cities and in tribal warfare far-away or at home.

This world does not make a pretty picture. But in his *Drawings from the Underworld*, Johnson invites us to reflect on the stories and actions that the concept of our inhabiting a shared "underworld" implies. After all, we are not alone in this endeavor. Admirable survivors from the "underworld" abound. In American indigenous mythology, for instance, Coyote puts to practice a unique diplomacy that involves coming and going to and from the "underworld." In his dialogue with the forces of human and natural folly, passion and hate, demons and devils, Coyote shows us the wisdom to be gained from changing perspectives, from looking inside/outside and all around.

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1 Octavio Paz, *The Other Voice: Essays on Modern Poetry* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991), p 111.

2. Dennis Hopper in the film *Flashback* (1989).

3. Other members included Francisco Corzas, Rafael Coronel, José Muñoz Medina, Emilio Ortiz and Gaston Gonzalez; several other artists including Benito Messeguer, Hector Xavier, Francisco Moreno Capdevila, José Hernandez Delgadillo, Nacho Lopez and Antonio Rodriguez Luna showed occasionally with the group.

4. As indicated by the rediscovery of Rufino Tamayo in 1953 and the International Biennals held in 1958 and 1960 in Mexico City, abstraction clearly was being promoted as the valid avant-garde response to the decadence of the mural movement. See Mathias Goeritz, "El Sueno de Los Hartos," in *El surrealismo y el arte fantástico de Mexico*, edited by Ida P. Rodriguez (Mexico City: U.N.A.M., 1969) and Marta Traba, *Dos décadas vulnerables en las artes plásticas latinoamericanas, 1950-1970* (Mexico City: Ed. Siglo Veintiuno, Mexico, 1973).

5. The decline of social realism and the mural movement in Mexico began around 1958: Jos é Clemente Orozco had died, Diego Rivera had died and David Alfaro Siqueiros would be jailed for his political involvement with the union movement in 1960. Hostile criticism of muralism from within Mexico and the rest of the Americas, in addition to social and political changes in Mexico, contributed further to this decline. See Luis Cardoza y Aragon, *Pintura Contemporánea de Mexico* (Mexico City: Ed. Era, 1974).

6. *Nueva Presencia: El Hombre en el Arte de Nuestro Tiempo (New Presence: Man & Art in Our Time)* No.1, August 1961 (translation is mine). Although the three central figures of the movement were initially Cuevas, Belkin and Icaza, only Belkin and Icaza edited *Nueva Presencia*'s broadside newspaper, inviting other contributors including Selden Rodman and Rico Lebrun.

7. Margarita Nelken, "Colectiva en May Brooks," *Excelsior*, August 1, 1961; Carla Stellweg, "Lucas Johnson Prepara las Ilustraciones para Kafka; Jovenes de EU y las Drogas," *Diorama de la Cultura, Excelsior*, April 19, 1967; Toby Joysmith, "Lucas Johnson, Humanist," *The News*, January 15, 1967; (unsigned) "Plastica en Movimiento: Conversacion con Lucas," *Revista Mujeres*, Mexico, Jan. 1968.

8. The 1964 exhibition *Eight Draftsmen*, at May Brooks Gallery, Mexico, included *Nueva Presencia* artists Leonel Góngora, Artemio Sepúlveda, Arnold Belkin, Francisco Icaza and others.

9. Peter Selz, *New Images of Man* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1959).

10. Translated "Plumed Serpent," the name of this MesoAmerican Aztec deity is also the title of the first ever bilingual (Spanish/English) contemporary international poetry magazine to be published in Latin America. Founded in Mexico City by Sergio Mondragón and Margaret Randall, this magazine was influential among all *Nueva Presencia* members, and Johnson frequently met and worked with the editors after his arrival in Mexico.

11. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions* (New York: The Wisdom Library, 1957), p. 9-59; Carlos Fuentes, *La Muerte de Artemio Cruz* (Mexico: Ed. Joaquin Mortiz, 1962); Sergio Mondragón, *Yo Soy El Otro/I am the Other* (Mexico City: El Corno Emplumado/The Plumed Horn, 1965); Eduardo Galeano, *Las Venas Abiertas de America Latina* (Mexico City: Ediciones Samara, 1992); Roger Bartra, *La jaula de la Melancolia - Identidad y metamórfosis del mexicano* (Mexico City: Editorial Grijalbo, 1987); Jimmie Durham, *A Certain Lack of Coherence* (London: Kala Press, 1993), pp. 158-170.

12. Lucy Lippard, ed., *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America* (New York: Pantheon, 1990).

13. Icaza had already separated himself from the strict humanist premises as outlined by Belkin, seeking to work with more artistic independence from the confines of human figuration; he was also experiencing personal psychological problems (conversation with the author, September 1964, Mexico City). See also Shifra M. Goldman, *Contemporary Mexican Painting in a Time of Change* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977) pp. 64-66 and 88-104.