

CONVERSATIONS WITH OSCAR BENTO

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Slim, walking leisurely, thoughtful, quiet, friendly and with a serene expression. His face almost always relaxed and softly spoken; Oscar Bento today is a man at peace with himself... and the world, despite disagreeing with many of the things that govern it. There was a time when the euphoria of youth fuelled concerns in as many places as possible after the longed for freedom. From those days, there remains the invaluable deposit of experience and certain idealism in harmony with his knowledge of life. Beyond any border, past the halfway point of a long career in painting, Oscar Bento is moving steadily towards his fruitful maturity. This is a happy time in essential matters, among other things because as he says, he has achieved some of his most cherished dreams, both personally and professionally.

Oscar, you were born in Argentina, and you spent your youth in several Latin American countries. What remains in your memory of that period? Does that memory of your mother country appear in your painting or does the painting itself shine out regardless of its roots?

Yes, I was born in Punta Alta, Buenos Aires on December 5th. Due to my father's work I lived in this town for my first five years. Then we moved to José Mármol y Adrogué in Buenos Aires, where I studied at primary and secondary school. Wonderful years! I enjoyed my studies as I had a certain gift. My college life was spent around the Exact Sciences, especially in the Federal Capital. My memories

of that period are really good, those happy days with my family and friends. Chess, movies, barbecues, billiards, football, girls, coffee, chat, music... In 1976, however, the new political power installed in the country was against free thought and words, against modern mathematics, etc... That and my sense of adventure and wishing to achieve life experiences in different social environments encouraged me to travel alone around several Latin American countries. My first drawings were basically geometric and coloured. I think my years in Latin America greatly contributed to my pictorial work, enjoying the pleasure of experimentation, self-discipline and the ability to consider different

alternatives. My relationship with the world of culture did not suggest that, in the near future, I would become an artist.

To put this in terms of artistic generations and if I'm not wrong, regarding your age you are part of la movida (the move) generation, in the late 70s and early 80s. In those years of creative effervescence, all at once there emerged several artistic groups such as the Catalan lyrical abstract group called Plot (Rubio, Teixidor, Tena, Broto...) from Barcelona; in Madrid the neo-figuratives around Perez Villalta, Campano, Chema Cobo, Navarro Baldeweg..., the neo-expressionists and new wild artists such as Barceló and Sicila,

and the pure conceptualists from Nacho Criado to Garcia Sevilla. Would you have linked yourself with any of them or have you always stayed on the edge?

I arrived in Madrid on May 1st 1980, at the height of the move. I think it would have been very interesting to belong to such a group. However my circumstances at the time were not conducive to it. Anyway I enjoyed it very much as an art onlooker during those years interested in appreciating the secrets of the works of renowned artists, and both discarding or adopting mechanisms, themes, languages or working criteria. Among the artists you named, the ones that have particularly interested me are Teixidor and Sicilia.

By vocation, you're a self-taught artist and yet, in your painting, there is in the best sense, a touch of disciplinary order, almost academic. Would you agree?

I am a self-taught artist, independently educated and not only in the arts. All this continuous tasting of what life has to offer means that, for me, learning has no limits. Certainly there are times when I approach, or agree with, the academic quasi-disciplinary order that you just mentioned.

For some time now, you have been devoted to experimental photography. Do you think that photographic images have some effect in your painting?

Also, what do your latest series of digital images owe to your painted landscapes?

My contact with black and white photography started in the late 60s, as a way of financing my university studies. In those days, I learned to develop in colour too. From those years, photography has always been present along my path, as part of my environment and also as a working tool. The technological advances of the last 40 years have done much to change the world of photography. The photographic view has certainly influenced my painting, and my painting in my photography. They are two different languages, two forms of expression that can actually coexist in a work of art. Sometimes a photograph reminds me of some vivid sensations that I endeavour to transform into a painting on canvas. My recent digital images try to share a personal view of places and moments full of beauty. I don't consider myself a photographer but an artist who expresses himself through photography. The way of viewing the natural environment is the same. I photograph what I see through my eyes, I manipulate pigments to turn my sensations into a painting.

You've always been very fond of music and especially jazz. Does the music share characteristics or manners with your painting activities or is it only a source of inspiration? How much does

music affect the structure of your latest abstract paintings?

Music always accompanied me whilst studying and then, afterwards, while painting. It is a key element, which intervenes and creates the right environment to attempt new challenges. Early in the morning the Bach cello solo, then some piano and violin, afterwards new age music, ethnic, folk, meditation, nature music and at night electro-tango, jazz, fusion. While working, I change music themes as needed; more spirit or more tempo depending on the moment, from electronic music to Satie. Playing my saxophone is my unfinished subject. The music I listened to, while painting the last series of abstracts, arose in the search for calm and balance.

The development of your painting seems in a certain way, to have experienced a back and forward process, in the 90s you departed from non-representational work towards a simplified representation and then back to abstract again. Do you believe in the idea that innovative art should be abstract, or is this rather reductive concept simply a mistaken legacy of the historical avant-garde?

My attitude to life, my self-training painting skills and the challenge of living from my art, being an immigrant after all, with four fantastic children, this has turned me into a juggler in these last thirty years. My first coloured drawings

were pastels, watercolours, oils, until the late 80s; then a short material period appeared in a geometric - abstract manner, and in 1992, I'm back with a fresh approach to landscape, back to its essence. Almost twenty years of reflecting feelings of my wonderful natural surroundings onto a canvas, the exceptions being the conceptual still life series, my abstract series about the music I listen to, the short erotic series, the Liebe Kultur series inspired by our Berlin adventure. For two years, I have been immersed in an investigation, in an abstract way, of my inner sensations and my natural environment. Innovative art is today defined by new technologies, and abstract art is no longer representing innovation on its own.

Once you completely devoted yourself to painting, landscape practically takes up all your attention. Do you consider yourself a conventional landscape painter? Where does the genre finish and where does Oscar Bento's artistic search begin?

My landscape approach can, in some aspects, comply with conventional parameters. But I believe I have a contemporary look, and an inclination towards the monochrome, the minimalism, and a search for the essence of sensations that landscape brings to me. Being a restless, self-taught artist, I can't believe that I have completed the learning process.

The absence of human figures in your paintings could reflect a lack of interest in other genres like classical or some narrative portrait painting, but also the emptiness of no pictorial content in the open spaces, be they real or imagined. A voluntary option, which certainly confirms the canvas character as the aim of painting. Is there something else behind this choice?

I have drawn with a model. I have painted my children occasionally and also friends' children as commissions. I produced a short erotic series. Several times I have thought of making a series of self-portraits, perhaps in the future. Personalized narrative painting is among the possible future projects: I have some ideas that attract me. My painted landscape sensations have enough content.

However, the titles with which you label your works are full of symbolic and poetical references to life and surroundings. They allude to deep human feelings and sentiments caused by everyday things, but also to unattainable but highly humanized values ... I'm not sure if I am right, or could it be a personal perception.

Titles exist to highlight in the most poetical manner, the feelings, the shared moments, the constructive spirit full of beauty. Your perception is spot on.

Reality/Dream; Reason/Emotion; Order/Chaos; Shape/Colour;

Emptiness/Fullness; Beauty/Ugliness... Your language is full of contrasts - Why?

My reality, my dreams, my reason, my emotions, my order, denying chaos, yes to shape and colour, neither empty nor full, with content, much beauty and little ugliness. My language moves around the synthesis, of the encounter, of sharing values, and building a future.

Would it be fair to say that the pursuit of beauty is also a longing for perfection in your painting? ...To continue the Hegelian dialectic: Idealization or Realism?

My search for beauty is embodied in the wish for perfection. The path has doses of realism and idealization. A magical point, unknown to me, the synthesis gives meaning to my existence.

Linking with the previous question, Matisse and Picasso are the parents of twentieth century painting and yet have always been considered opposite figures in fundamental matters. Whom would you choose from a standpoint of creative empathy?

I believe that with Matisse, I could chat at a table in a café in Paris or Buenos and a more ephemeral chat with Picasso at a bar in Madrid or Malaga.

You'd agree with me that art is a form of communication, but mostly it is an inevitable reflection of oneself. For some

contemporary artists, beauty is at odds with expression because it undermines or at least gives a skewed idea of the true human being in all of us. I would be interested in your opinion.

I even think that the artists who draw and paint monsters tend to make them beautiful, and attractive. It may be difficult to agree on the beauty in a work of art, and to manage the amount of beauty within us, and our ability to reflect it in our work. When visiting a museum, the vast majority of the collections are works full of beauty. The true human being within us cannot be easily hidden.

We haven't yet talked about your sculptures, nor the last great monochrome abstract compositions that you group together in excellent series like Calm & Balance I and II, Spring Melody, etc. I think, in both cases, the artistic challenge of these recent years has been extremely important. The excellent aesthetic results are visible and show more than ever not only your great value as an artist but above all your enormous capacity to evolve without losing your identity, or your soul. Tell us roughly what led you here and what are your immediate plans for the future?

Last year I presented the first collection of sculptures. It was a project which I was developing and studying, until I took the decision to cast them in bronze and in steel, and helped by the advice of

the Capa Foundry. I am satisfied with the series of couples, which I hope to continue developing soon. I continue working with abstract monochrome compositions inspired by the calm and balance between man and nature. My project for 2014 is to assemble an interesting collection of the latter work, showing them in large and suitable spaces where they can be enjoyed, felt and contemplated.

Oscar, an essential question. What is art for you?

I consider myself an artist more for my way of living than for my artistic work; for daring to raise my four children with this profession, so full of difficulties, and ups and downs. I am very independent person, disconnected from religious or political groups. So art for me is a way of demonstrating oneself in life. The pursuit of beauty through all the means available to human beings coincides with the name of Fine Arts.

And finally, in your opinion, what should be changed and what should remain, in today's art?

The artists and their contradictions. Current art requires a certain amount of transparency and self-criticism, especially from the business side. Artists, as representatives of culture, of thought, of words, of reflection and sensitivity, cannot be happily waiting for customers who have earned their money in an unorthodox way. Grants and

funding should reach those who really need them. The projects of artists with high purchasing power, and foundations with sufficient resources do not need financial aid. I think we should study a new subject concerning the aesthetics of our environment and the allocation of financial support in all areas, and how it can be implemented in a safe and balanced way. A social balance is within our reach.

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