

Painted Stories

Uwe Gellner

Paintings by Alicia Paz such as *Noche*, from the series *Monsters and Artists*, seem amusing and garish. The painting's title, the Spanish word for "night," reminds us that the painter, who now lives in London, was born in Mexico City. This biographical note seems to contribute this linguistic accent to other paintings by Alicia Paz as well. Surrounded by black, a purple female frog occupies the picture plane and gazes at us fixedly from out of her actress face. Genuine colored buttons on the canvas decorate the squatting figure's smooth body; her hands and feet are, however, chaotically colorful, as if she had crawled over a painter's palette or as if some whim of her existence had prevented all decisions about color. From close up *Noche* is waving to us with her small right hand; she was expecting us. On the left, in the black to the side behind her, we can make out numerous brushstrokes that have left behind the impression of a coniferous tree, while a weak beam of light from the suggestion of a landscape far in the background expands the depth of the picture into the indefinable expanses of night. In this way a trace of Romanticism grazes the strange fate of the figure on the canvas, who has crawled forward to the edge of the painting beneath a starry sky, approaching us almost physically, but can go no further because the image ends here. In art, melancholy is always speechless and usually feminine. Here, colorfully decorated and spleeny, she steps into our path as if out of a dream or a trauma.

"Monsters" or "artists"? All of the other paintings from this group of works also have just one figure each, always a female figure. Something that in words amounts to a list or juxtaposition reveals itself in images to be an open question in the mirror-image back and forth of the same figure in different roles. The artist allows this ambiguity to slip into the motif of her own image, but in essence it always characterizes Alicia Paz's work: all of her paintings are about painting. Even after the painter has finished working on it, when we are looking at her pictures, they enable us to participate in the process of painting. The paintings invite us to experience their production as a pictorial narrative, and they do so in two ways at once: with the aid of the methods employed when applying painting and with the aid of the motifs. As if every part of the image contributed its own story, comparable to the principle of collage, the paintings sum up and intertwine a selection of borrowings and fragments. The style of the application of paint in *Noche* ranges from Art Informel to Pop; it points back to historical landscape painting; it plays with trompe l'œil and imitates black-and-white photography. The cool drawing and the miserable pose; the serious gaze of a beautiful woman, calling to mind the self-portraits of Frida Kahlo; and a proximity that permits us no escape, *Noche* is engagingly sensual as well as stifflingly immediate, but precisely inexplicable. Because Alicia Paz does not employ just one style, she avoids the accustomed space for all of them and leads them into a terrain of painterly visions. The large hands and feet, for example, touch on the Expressionist gesture of art history. On the other hand, they are both unfinished and yet capable of anything, and with their amorphous content they illustrate the end and the beginning of all forms. It is completely absurd that this female alien with the photographic face is linked by the state of her limbs to such an anarchic level of painting, which can mean that the drawing cleverly cast

in doubt the logic of the visible on the canvas and hence all the rules traditional associated with painting.

Alicia Paz is quite clearly alluding to her own role as an artist. The dualism in the basic idea of the *Monsters and Artists* series already makes us think of such relationships and intersections. Whether monster, artist, or a combination of the two, the image ignores the different. It enables the figure depicted to change sides in any direction, to see with other eyes, and to choose an identity. It results in a pendulum movement, since each role is self-reflexively linked to the other. The figures in Alicia Paz's paintings do not deny the influence of other paintings on her how image, which confirms they have a multiple essence. *Noche* is caught up in such a strange combination of styles and fragments of motifs, forming a mixture of cluelessness and ingenuity and sounding like a contradiction, but also offering an opportunity to reveal the contradictory. As if only the noise made the silence audible, the impression of subtle reflection of inwardness seems to assert itself between the exotic and somehow exaggerated superficialities of its existence.

And out of the ground made the LORD God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. (Gen. 2:9).

In the words of Genesis it remains unclear whether the tree of knowledge and the tree of life in paradise are two different trees or one and the same tree standing in the middle of paradise. Depictions of it show both two separated and two intertwined trees; interestingly, there are depictions with just one tree in the ambiguity of being tree of life and tree of knowledge at the same time. To indicate this, its branches contain not only the fruit of knowledge—usually apples or figs—but also allegorical attributes of life and death, like hosts and skulls. We do not assume that Alicia Paz's series of paintings titled *Trees* is an attempt to illustrate old texts; and like the passage cited from the Bible, her *Trees* are likewise rooted in the even older pictorial tradition of the epiphany of gods in the form of trees or also in the motif of the tree of life, which can be found in many cultures. The series of interpretations and meanings in relation to single trees or types of trees is numerous in cultural in general and continues to branch out even in the present. Depictions of trees do not speak of nature but rather make use of the properties of trees, such as their impressive morphology, their transformation with the seasons, or their anchoring in time. The depiction of a tree is clearly an appropriate paradigm to interpret human values or symbolize social rules and moral judgments. The tree provides a place and hence a foothold for such tasks. Such cultural experiences continue to work as indirect memory storage when creating images based on the motif of the tree; they continue to have an effect too when viewing these images. In a painting of a tree by Alicia Paz titled *Chiaro Oscuro*, too, the fruit are not all of the kind, since from the tangle of its tendrils sprout not only many painted flowers, but also several women's faces cut out of printed materials, children TV heroes and several aggressive male faces. With its graphic structure placed against back lighting, the tree is drawn over the picture plane like a veil. In this mixture of beautiful flowers and dubious fruits, a gloomy magic or destructive undertone forces its way into the image. Its circles could be balls, targets, or black holes; this

“obscure” flora oscillates into the trivial and expresses a hybrid quality of painting in the experiences of our media society. The consequences of biblical knowledge remain irrevocable, and we search in vain for solid moral footing in the center of today’s paintings.

In the history of art, reflection on painting has repeatedly led to drawing the viewer into the work, making him or her an accomplice. Alicia Paz lures us into the branches of the trees to search for discoveries between distant and close-up views, and trees are well suited to driving this game into all ramifications into space. Moreover, the paintings adopt communicative aids from everyday popular culture, run riot in countless details, all of which begin to speak, talk over one another, causing the whole tree to vibrate and sweeping along the colors on the canvas. The trees teem even more the closer one approaches; everything has a figurative essence, even the colors that make up the paintings. And nothing is final; everything is still in motion. In their presence we arrive quite immediately back in the visual experience of children, that is, in our own past, when fairy tales and comic books could still follow the imagination even into sleep, because we did not yet live in the abstract rationalism of the adult world. That is not just an amusing trick to win over our impartiality but also a quality of self-irony that is not often found in art. Each of the stylistic means illustrates itself. In *Chiaro Oscuro*, the tree is surreally graphic in its form and equally impenetrable in its meaning; in *Black Dawn*, it is viscous and garish in the manner of Pop Art; and the emotional tragedy in *Weeping Medusa* results from streams of colors as in Abstract Expressionism.

The *Trees* exemplify the allegorical quality of all of Alicia Paz’s paintings. The related painting techniques demonstrate that the use of disparate stylistic means is not a question of style but one of the means to develop the narrative of her painting, such as the combination of all kinds of ciphers and images simultaneously on the same canvas is a means to the same end. It makes the canvas a space where improbable images can occur. It is about constructing pictures from pictures that somehow come together into figures. We can experience how these figures are taken up with painting themselves and the painting. That means that what we can see is only a momentary appearance, which can be obsolete in the following moment. Captured as a fleeting event, the figures operate within the visual practice of today’s everyday culture. The material for these images comes together loosely into glittering scenes about painting and is dramatized as if on a stage. The assembled ciphers and images are actors in the same play, yet they remain foreign to one another and perform autonomously. Adopted by paradoxes and illusory worlds, the paintings develop visions that cannot be kept secret, which explains the slightly neurotic state of some of the figures.

Alicia Paz describes everything in a charmingly chatty tone. The illustrative decors of her constructed narratives, with all of their details and uncertain outcomes, result in persuading our era to share its pleasure in the creation and the viewer of images. It works because a cheerful lightheartedness seduces us in these canvases, addressing the creative process of painting while at the same time representing it.

Translation from German by Steven Lindberg.

Chiaro Oscuro, 2006

