

Cecilia de Torres interview with Inés Bancalari

[The following are edited excerpts from the text that appears in the catalogue: Inés Bancalari – Paintings and Collages, 2002]

One winter morning while visiting Inés Bancalari, I was struck by a painting of great gravity, richness and complexity. At first, I thought Poliakoff? No, the texture was thicker and the colors darker. Then, Inés told me she had painted it. The austerity and refinement of her oils and collages, as well as the ease and fluency of her drawings, captured me. I wanted to know more about the creative process that produced such an original conjunction of geometry and lyricism.

Inés has such a solitary working procedure and obsessive sense of dedication, that the various sources that contribute to her oeuvre's genesis acquire fundamental importance. Sensitive to her environment, both the natural world and the world of poetry and music, she uses poetic imagery and literary references in her artistic language and manner of expression.

In her studio there is a fragment of a poem by Odysseus Elytis, Song to the Brave: "The perfume of an anemone is enough to poison Hell's air." In her paintings of that period shadows also predominate, but there is room for hope. Small light areas or pure primary colors illuminate great dark surfaces.

Another important element is the intertwining relationships in the history of modern Argentine painting, of her teachers and the other Argentine artists whose friendship helped to enrich her work.

Her allusion to life's forsaken condition in the modern city, which Clement Greenberg –when referring to Pollock's painting– had described as "a solitary jungle of human sensations and impulses," explains how the artist has come to express it in her work, despite shutting herself off in her studio and seemingly turning her back on Man's dispossession.

The diverse visual experiences accumulated in the course of her life –the splendor of Chartres Cathedral's stained glasses, the predominance of reds and greens in her old Victoria studio, the color of the River Plate and of the harbor cranes she sees from her window, the "atonal palette" of the Andean textiles her parents collected– have all combined to give birth to this Argentine artist's highly idiosyncratic character.

Would you tell me about your beginnings, about New York and your studies in the Art Students League?

At the Art Students League I painted and drew from life. I found that my drawing was terribly clumsy and I remember someone who really loved me asking, "Do you think it's worthwhile to keep trying?" I felt like a fish that on having discovered water is asked if it would like to go on living there. "I may not swim well, but I swim; I have found my element," I answered. With painting it was just the other way around. When I started painting, the professor asked me if I had painted before, and when I answered that it was my first experience, he said: "You are a true artist."

I need the model. There are beings that are full of mystery. The model is the trigger. It was in New York where I realized I had never experienced anything in such depth as what I felt in relation to art and light. It was there where I began to study and to really go deep into things. I said to myself: If there is something I have been born for, that something is painting.

When you returned to Buenos Aires, what did you do?

Soon after I got back I enrolled in Kenneth Kemble's art classes. I objected to his mischievous attitude; he played all the time, particularly in his collages. I thought art had to do with mystery and helplessness. Yet now that I do collages I realize that Kemble showed me the playful possibility art has. When I stick, cut and tear paper I enjoy myself so much that I sometimes wonder if I am doing something in earnest, and then I feel I have to go back to the rigors of painting.

At the same time, I entered the Fine Arts School and there met Aurelio Macchi, a great sculptor, a disciple of Zadkine, and the first person who spoke to me about structure. I studied drawing with him for six years, though he was more than an art master: his lessons were about life.

Where does the Expressionist trend in your painting come from?

If we think we have a conscious and an unconscious level, in my painting the first corresponds to the series of portraits, still lifes and landscapes from my beginnings up to 1982. The empirical data corrected by reason and filtered by emotion. The second period comes into its own in 1982, when Jaime Kogan invited me to draw during his rehearsals for Chekhov's Ivanov at the Payró Theater. It was as if the gates of the subconscious were opened. From that experience distorted forms arose, the background changed, dimensions turned arbitrary, emotional.

When do you begin your paintings related to the Chartres stained-glass windows?

Definitely in 1984. On my first trip to Europe, in 1965, I visited Chartres Cathedral. My live contact with this art was a revealing experience that moved me to tears: the light of the stained glass, the conjunction of stone and light, the contraposition of matter and spirit. Those opposites revealed to me something that lives on still. They are the origin, years later, of the paintings having to do with the unconscious at its most profound level.

Another experience that changed my life was the great Torres-García exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts. It transformed me. I knew several Uruguayan artists living in Buenos Aires. They all pressed me towards abstraction, but I held fast to my bastion: figuration. Yet those talks started convincing me little by little.

Another revelation was the great pre-Columbian ceramics show at the Recoleta Cultural Center. The black ceramics particularly impressed me, and that brought about the radical change in my palette ever since 1984. I was struck by their opaqueness, the brilliance, the warm and cold grays, the textures, the geometric incisions.

You create a very thick texture. How do you obtain it?

I went about creating that texture with the help of my restorer friends. I begin with a thin layer of paint, discharging energy, trying at that first stage to cast reason to the wind.

There is no previous plan, then?

No, I do not use sketches. After that first layer I begin to construct, and then I work with a spatula, building up texture areas. It's a slow process. One has to let the paint dry, because I work with oils. So I get to a point and stop there. I work on several paintings at the same time. Sometimes months go by before I go back to one in particular, and it can take me years to decide that a painting is finished.

Why don't you tell me about your interest in South American and particularly in Argentine autochthonous art?

I spent a lot of time with Alejandro Puente looking at South American Andean textiles. It was a real delight. Despite the fact that, like most people in Buenos Aires, my roots are European, having been born on this soil relates me to all those indigenous influences. I have no Indian racial link, but Indian art moves me to the core. I feel likewise attracted to Russian Constructivism, to its celebration of light and color, akin to my nature.

Do you like teaching painting?

A lot. I taught for fifteen years, in a most beautiful spiritual atmosphere. I used to give my students a long interview before we started, in order to see if I really was the right person to teach them, or if he or she was looking for a teacher like me. My proposal was to show them a series of permanent principles and rules in art, which are to be found anywhere, at the Dordogne caves, or in Iran, or in the art of the Eskimos or the Mayas. That was what I was going to try and teach them, what we were going to discover together. You can't imagine to what extent my students enriched me. They used to bring books, catalogues, travel stories, experiences.

You keep yourself somewhat secluded from the art world, though you exhibit from time to time. Is that a way of protecting yourself?

Yes, to me painting is the essential thing. Studio time is very important. I need a lot of time to paint. I spend long hours at the studio gathering strength, first ordering, touching up this or that, until I finally begin to produce. An exhibition interrupts this process. There is a wonderful sentence in the Bhagavad-Gita: "See to the righteous fulfillment of an action, and not to the reward that might be derived from it." Painting is the great pleasure. The inner effervescence, the explosion of vitality and joy in the act of painting has no comparison. I used to exhibit often when I was younger, but then came a moment –I think after I painted the portrait of Juan– when I calmed down. I felt I had captured something in that portrait.

That is the marvel of painting, when all of a sudden one can forget everything one has learnt, and an inner bubbling, hard to explain, replaces every rational activity. It is at such infrequent moments that the possibility of going beyond limits arises - of attaining that region where words do not reach. Something makes a new order of truth burst out in the canvas. Those moments of revelation justify all failures.