

JOSÉ LUIS CUEVAS



Foto Héctor García

Rebellion and Liberty

By Gregorio Luke

Now that we take a retrospective look at Mexican art of the 20th Century, the unique figure of José Luis Cuevas acquires even more importance. Mexico's art would not be what it is today without Cuevas. He is one of those truly indispensable figures.

Mexico's art in the 1950's was completely dominated by the so-called Mexican School, represented by muralists Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros. The muralists had transformed Mexican art and given it a social and political meaning. But what had once been a rejuvenating force had become so powerful

that it inhibited the emergence of different artistic pursuits.

It was hard to challenge the muralists, because they were also political icons that represented an art identified with the political struggle of the people.

To challenge the muralists meant to also challenge the political values they stood for. This is why artistic dissidents were often labeled as sympathizers of imperialism, as traitors. All doors remained closed for them.

José Luis Cuevas

In his early twenties, Cuevas defied the muralists in his seminal essay, “The Cactus Curtain”, clearing the path for other artists to find new ways of artistic expression. It has been said that art often anticipates the great social transformation. In Mexico, Cuevas’ rebellious essay and the artistic movement it inspired, known as “La Ruptura,” anticipated the great student movement of 1968 and the current struggles to build a more open and democratic society.

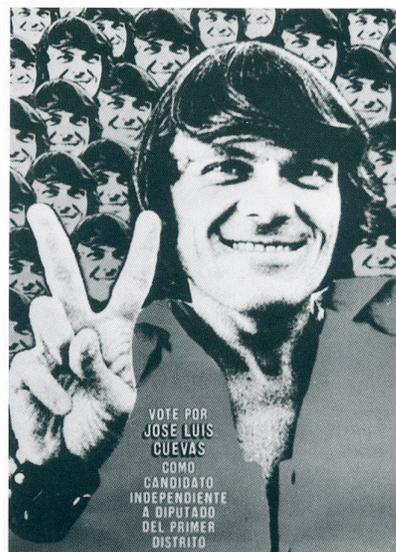
The confrontation with the Mexican School of painting was only the first chapter in a battle against rigidity and intolerance that Cuevas has fought all his life. Like a modern Saint George, Cuevas has battled against all the “dragons” of Mexican society: authoritarianism, solemnity, corruption, opportunism, and silence.

In his effort to shake Mexican society from conformity, Cuevas has used not only his art but also his words. There is total congruity between Cuevas as a public figure and Cuevas as a visual artist. For example, at the same time he was challenging the Mexican artistic status quo with essays and speeches, he was creating an ephemeral mural and drawings that obliterated the aesthetic of nationalistic clichés. Instead of being paternalistic and didactic about social injustice, he was actually drawing the voiceless, the desperate, the mad, and the prostituted.

In his articles, as in his self-portraits, Cuevas has submitted himself to ruthless self-examination; he has peered into his own inner abyss. Cuevas has captured humanity’s dark side, the evil that inhabits us. Cuevas’ struggle has been concerned not only with art and politics but also with personal freedom and self-expression.

What irritates so many about Cuevas is his apparent exhibitionism, his uninhibited discussion of himself, including his erotic life, his fears, and obsessions. In Mexico, this is particularly offensive, because traditionally Mexican society values conformity and passivity.

Like Socrates’ “gadfly,” Cuevas has challenged, provoked and seduced society during the past fifty years. His work and his example have enlarged the spaces of freedom for everyone. This is why Cuevas is always relevant. He is a symbol of rebellion and liberty.



Cartel de Campaña
Diseñado por Vicente Rojo