

with the images and discussions of its contemporary art. In 1953, The São Paulo Biennial presented Picasso's *Guernica*, and every two years, it has brought the São Paulo audience closer to the artistic movements of its time. A biennial is a temporary museum that especially benefits the vast majority of people who cannot travel to the art centers. A biennial builds a visual repertoire in time, a collection of memories that are the artistic patrimony of the community where it is inscribed.

17. Educating/Learning. A biennial can try to transcend the triad of interpretation-mediation-service that characterizes the pedagogical work in museums, instead evolving the idea of education from its own curatorial formulation. Museums always try to mediate between art and audience, attempting to facilitate this relation by proposing mechanisms that help to understand what is being presented. But art is in itself an instance of knowledge that does always go through the rational: it is also learned through the senses. Occasionally, an image is worth a thousand words; a sound, a thousand images; and a smell, a thousand sounds. We don't know which will be the device that will unleash the processes of knowledge.

18. Emergency. At the office of Diane Karp, director of the Santa Fe Art Institute, I saw a sign stating that, "There are no artistic emergencies." Art, no matter how important we think it is, does not save lives (or maybe it does, but in a metaphoric way). There are successful exhibitions whose result makes us forget that the process was complete torture. This is wrong: in art as well, the end does not justify the means. To do an exhibition can end up being a distressing, frustrating or painful situation.

19. Responsibility. Curatorship is not signed because of vanity, but just as you would sign a blank check: once it goes public, anyone can cash it, and the curator must be there to answer.

20. Community. Exhibitions are made to create memorable life experiences. I understand curatorship as the creation of a temporary community. Artists and curators enter a dialogue that happens due to a prolonged coexistence and a more or less common goal. I consider successful those exhibitions where I ended up making life-long friends. It is not that I aspire for a biennial to be a marriage agency, but it should doubtless be a moment of empathy. Working with friends is rare and art can provide that opportunity.

The Vision of the Ultimate Man The Apocalyptic Path of the Works of David Alfaro Siqueiros

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1. David Alfaro Siqueiros (1898-1974) was, among his contemporaries, a modern man. An apologist of both technology and science, his political convictions led him to imagine a future of progress and social justice that would be brought about by Communist Revolution. He and his generation of painters, though living through two devastating world wars, held onto their idealistic visions of a bright future.

The architects of the mid-twentieth century were starting to imagine the future of the city and it was Siqueiros, above all, who was able to portray their visions. By the 1950's Siqueiros had had the opportunity to witness several cities from the air. In his urban paintings of the period his vanishing points evolved to give the perspective of something like hyper-cities, as cities as seen from the air. "I believe that men living in the age of the airplane cannot have, in terms of travel, the same lyrical sensitivity or the same romanticism as those men had who lived in ages before the skies had been conquered," Siqueiros wrote. For him, putting into perspective the stratospheric curve of the Earth was a way to pinpoint his perception of our planet as a "universal platform of man." This aerial view, as well as a developing cosmic consciousness, is perhaps one of Siqueiros' most original artistic visions. It is little known that Siqueiros was interested in Science Fiction, and yet in the mural of San Miguel Allende (1948), which includes a large motor running along the ceiling, he uses the convex dome of the roof to suggest a rocket in launch. In 1956 Siqueiros also painted the "Atomic Ship" which could have been what inspired Kubrick to imagine his own artistic odyssey into space.

But the famous Mexican muralist was also disturbed by what the future held in store, and thus tried to imagine what the present heralded in his paintings. Through his works he shaped images of catastrophe as intense visions of the biblical Apocalypse.

Siqueiros sketched his most intensely destructive scenes, which also happened to be key moments of technical self-discovery, while living in New York (1935-36)

and just before leaving to fight in the Spanish Civil War. It was in this period when he formed his *Experimental Workshop* which was also, significantly, attended by Jackson Pollock. Artists in the workshop primarily dedicated themselves to making artworks for the American Communist Party. Siqueiros also spent these years in intensive experimentation with industrial painting substances, discovering, for example, the effects of gun cotton, which would end up becoming one of his most consistently used painting materials. The mixing and absorption-levels of paint and synthetic solvents slathered or sprayed on the panels served to stimulate his creative imagination. More than painting, Siqueiros saw himself as invoking the effervescent biology of the very origin of life. In a moment of lucidity, Siqueiros wrote to the beautiful María Asúnsolo: “It’s about the use of chance in painting. The absorption of one colour into another reveals the fantasy and magic that human brains imagine. It is something like the geologic creation of the Earth, like the polychrome and multiform betas of mountains or the integration of cells. It’s this organization that surges mysteriously from who knows what dreadful law, from what profundity... And above all this tumultuous dynamism, this tempestuousness, this physical and social revolution that drives fear into us.”

Surveying Siqueiros’ work in the 1930’s, one sees the beginnings of a lavish apocalyptic vision. Considering the multiple catastrophes already having taken place in the the twentieth century, we can understand these violent visions as a simple response to his time. The first painting that he completed in this spirit was “The Birth of Fascism” (1936) where the Statue of Liberty is sinking in a storm at sea. In another work, “The End of the World” (1936) we see a single survivor rising up amidst the ruins of a battle. And then in “Chaos and Disaster” (1936) in the midst of a powerful explosion, we see nothing left standing and no remaining signs of life at all. Siqueiros painted numerous explosions in this period, the most spectacular being “Explosion in the City” (probably begun in 1936 but not completed until 1945). These multiple images of explosion might be seen as a sort of premonition of the coming atomic explosion. His imagery of catastrophe continued in works such as “Black Foreshortening” (1936) in which we see a single figure lying in a puddle. In this work Siqueiros also included iron and screws on the canvas, deliberately, one might consider, contaminating the surface. In “Echo of a Cry” (1937) we see the solitary figure of a child amidst the ruins of a war. The child seems to be swallowing an image of his own anguished self.

In painting these works, Siqueiros was indeed influenced by images of events taking place in Europe, but he was also greatly inspired by the caustic lyricism he was discovering in the basic chemical effects and reactions he witnessed in his experiments with piroxilina. Culminating this stage of his career, he put his revolutionary

theories into practice by traveling to Spain in 1937 and taking orders with the Republican Army. From the fighting on the front he sent back letters to his wife, Angélica Arena. “I write to you after my first armed confrontation. I had a splendid morning in the midst of artillery fire and under the trembling of airplanes bombing our columns on the march. This is a marvellous historical moment, as much a spectacle as a problem. And from this close, you can see that fighting is a human thing, with none of the lyricism we like to bestow on it when watching from a distance.”

In the battlefields of Civil War Spain, Siqueiros was named Colonel for his bravery. Here he witnessed with his own eyes what a battle was, felt the vibrations of a machine gun and walked on bomb-scorched fields. Carlos Contreras, a fellow soldier, wrote of Siqueiros: “He held things together during battles. He once had to run two kilometres under artillery fire with bombs raining from the sky. Those were in the stormy days of the Battle of Pingarrón. I remember watching Siqueiros in the last days of the battle walking out of that inferno.”

2. Skipping ahead to the sixties, between the years 1960 and 1964 Siqueiros served his longest prison sentence, which took both a physical and a moral toll on the painter. “I’m an imprisoned man,” he said, “I can’t take it anymore,” as cited by journalist Julio Scherer writing about Siqueiros in his book, *Skin and Entrails*. Scherer regularly visited and recorded thoughts of Siqueiros while he was in prison. These sessions with the reporter served as an escape of the present, giving opportunities, which Siqueiros didn’t miss, to drive in what he saw as his own heroic character. At the same time, however, Scherer also reported on the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of the painter in these dark days of his: “He rubs his eyes and then puts on his round crystal glasses, whose frame was missing one of its arms, all of which gave him the appearance of an old and miserable man. This is how the painter looked, old and exhausted, with his prison duds, his sad gestures, and his humble hat held between his legs.”

In prison the only way by which Siqueiros could continue painting was by accustoming himself to much smaller formats. Most of his work while in prison wasn’t bigger than 12 square inches, and he even delved into miniature work (or as Raquel Tibol expressed it, *prison painting*) painting on both jewels and cigarette lighters. In these years he completed somewhere around 200 small paintings. For a man who was used to working on high scaffoldings with an air brush, he had to get used to a scale more emotional than polyangular. This later period of his career is when he started giving more liberty to action and subjective painting. He returned to techniques such as “wiping” and the controlled accidents that he practiced in

the company of Jackson Pollock during those glory days in New York. His brushwork loosened up and he began turning to more figurative representations, testing the limits of abstraction and working with gestural suggestions rather than the meticulous realism he strove for in his early work. Some of these fantasy-laden representations even resemble the works of a surrealist.

Schere comments: “The green eyes of Siqueiros are bloodshot. He says that it’s because he works all night with nothing but a gas lamp to see by. The prison officials don’t permit him electric light at night, but he insists on continuing. He won’t stop work on a painting when he feels an inner clarity, which is what some call inspiration. . . .” In his small cell he mixed the gun cotton with other extremely potent chemicals. It’s probably not too much to speculate that by inhaling some of these chemicals he reached and altered state of mind. I wonder though, if because of these chemicals he ever reached the point of hallucination or delirium. On the reverse of a work completed in his cell in 1961 Siqueiros noted: “A strange (for me) optical phenomenon, after hours of working in complete darkness. The stains and paintings on the walls of the cells illuminated and started to move, to move torturously. But why?” On the reverse of another painting the artist wrote: “The Gesturer [La Gestosa]: a gigantic thistle, fifty times taller than a man. It is said that it is born and lives for millennia in the dry and empty estuaries where the rotten plants and fish once fertilized the muck and mire which has by now been dried for centuries.” His visions and fantasies seemed to have overtaken his mind.

In trying to understand the way Siqueiros was painting in this period we might look to Salvador Dalí, who called a similar process “Critical Paranoia.” Dalí describes this method as “Representing an object without the slightest figurative or anatomical manipulation while at the same time representing another object completely distinct from the first. The completion of this superimposed object is possible thanks only to the violence of paranoid thought, which with cunning and skill manages the many unnoticed coincidences, etc. Drawing on the second image, in this case, takes the place of the obsessive idea.”

In this period, the practice of frenetic sketching led Siqueiros to develop, out of his chaos, a singular universe: a vertigo / vortex of his imagined horrors and landscapes. Dark clouds, for example, began to resemble ghosts of war, incandescent lights hovering over a “Tree on a Sad Night” and the light of a volcano or forest fires are reminiscent of an atomic bomb. His use of luminous reds calls to mind war, blood, passion and death. All of this creative energy is like a sermon of the coming dystopic future. If the catastrophes painted by Siqueiros from the 30’s to the 50’s could be seen as reactions to actual battles, in the catastrophes of the 60’s and 70’s we see

the painter turn more lyric, more dramatic, and more universal than historic. There have been very few studies of the late work of Siqueiros. It seems that his millennial pronouncements provoked a certain rejection among critics. Specialists consider this stage of his career as decadent. My impression, however, is that in the Black Palace of Lecumberri, our revolutionary and progressive artist turned into a feverish prophet, his paintings starting to proclaim the final end: *Apocalypse Now*.

The vision of total destruction would be the most beautiful vision of all, Siqueiros once claimed in nearly complete messianic exaltation, except that there would be nobody around to appreciate it. It was this with which Siqueiros became obsessed: the gaze of the Ultimate, or Last Man. In January of 1960 Siqueiros wrote on the back of a painting: “Scenography project for the play, “Live Ember” (Act II, after the Atomic War, what?)”. He also wrote: “The earth was completely scorched—a new dead star—its infinite beauty. . . . But there is nobody to witness it. Absolutely nobody!” The painter also wrote a script for this play, or what might be called an audiovisual drama, in which the forces of nature overtake the ancient Greek gods amidst an effervescent luminescence. On the reverse of another painting from 1962, set to be part of the design of the Chapultepec mural, he noted: “Life of beings and things will dry up.” On the back of yet another: “Warning: a dead fire will cover the earth.”

Throughout the convulsing earth will proceed ragged crowds in a sordid diaspora. Reflecting on these mysterious migrations, Siqueiros wrote on the back of another canvas: “Natives and giant negroes who for years have been tortured by the government establishment have escaped and are now crossing deserts, jungles and rivers on their way to the coasts of this burning earth.” On the reverse of another work dedicated to Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, Siqueiros wrote: “Though somebody knows—they themselves—where do they go? Running without direction.” In the painting we see human beings dramatically possessed and making gestures downright Dantean. Are these, then, memories from the battlefields of Spain? Is Siqueiros reminiscing about visions of hell taught to him during his Christian upbringing? Or perhaps the visions are from his prison years when he was both fighting against himself and fighting against his fear of death. Though he was a man of passionate energy, in prison he faced the forced impotence of being confined and on those lonely nights he began to realize his own finitude.

His work while in prison was undoubtedly eschatological: screaming visions of burnt earth, migrations and exoduses, as well as violent sunsets with deep magentas along the horizon that could easily be mistaken for volcanic eruptions. These consistent apocalyptic shadowing is similarly described in the essay, “On a Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy”, by Jacques Derrida. In this work Derrida

analyses an essay of Immanuel Kant that describes how some philosophers adopted apocalyptic tones while announcing the death or end of philosophy (the end of history, the end of the subject, even the end of painting). These announced deaths are associated with the idea of a supernatural revelation: “A vision that provokes a mystic exaltation, or at least provokes the pose of a visionary.” This is the end of the end: “I will tell it to you.”

An apocalyptic tone is a way of speaking that presupposes an occult wisdom as well as its inevitable ostentations. The power of revealing what the majority of people ignore provokes undeniable pleasure in the prophet. Siqueiros adopted this role: a prophet announcing the end times. Derrida writes: the eschatological tendency in the human psyche is, in the end, based on a farce, on impossible knowledge confused with clear understanding: “An exalted vision promises more: it promises knowledge replacing the knowable object.” This replacement distorts the feeling of the sublime, this feeling which heralds extra-sensory knowledge. “The mystagogues create a scene and then, in trance-like state, enter into that scene. But when do they create mystery? Mystagogues are apart from the common man, and yet they have something in common with him: they speak in immediate and intuitive relation to what is mysterious.”

In prison Siqueiros painted like a mystagogue, presaging a plastic and threatening vision of hell on earth. The artist put fire to his tiny, rectangular easels with his visions of nature on the edge of catastrophe, shaken by its creator. Looking at notes written on the back of some of the paintings we see that Siqueiros seems to have lost his dialectic ideology and his secular communism, that he even started taking on tones of a religious millennialism: a mystic residing on the wavering horizon. In what he saw as the twilight of humanity, he began to literally make announcements about coming centuries of destruction and death: “The Broken Redeemer,” he wrote in September of 1963, “and his doctrine of ‘Peace on Earth’ has been buried in the blood and ashes of two thousand years of increasingly devastating wars.”

Siqueiros wanted to bring his dramatically chaotic view of the world to the walls of the city, and he finally got his chance with his last mural, “Humanity’s March to the Cosmos” on a wall of the Poliforum Cultural. The work seems to represent the biblical grand finale as the Apostle John saw it. During an interview with the artist in 1967, Raquel Tibol commented, “In ‘Humanity’s March’ there is lot of violence, including monsters assaulting human beings or humans suffering terrible anguish. There are sections that are oppressive and sections that eerily open up the human figures. Why did you choose to incorporate all of this violence into the mural?” Siqueiros responded: “It’s a reflection of my mental and political state. I’m living in

a world of violence, a world of tragedy, and yet this is only the beginning of the tragedy. It’s early still, and the culmination of the tragedy is yet to come.”

Throughout his career, Siqueiros cultivated his image of the future according to his ideals of justice and humanity, and yet the rhythm of events in his works shows that the utopian ideas of his time were failing under the triumph of capitalism and the machinations of war. His art thus reflected a path quite different than what he wanted or expected. His hours and hours of work in prison particularly came alive in his paintings. What then happened to the future he once desired, to the optimism he once brushed into his murals? By the end of his life an apocalyptic vision had completely overtaken his earlier odes to progress. Something had fundamentally changed in the tone of his paintings. Siqueiros was no longer speaking as a union leader or agitator of the masses, but as a prophet. His paintings addressed viewers with the angry tone of one who announces the Final Judgment. Visions of horror, the infinitely beautiful final destruction, took over the mind of a prisoner and in this state Siqueiros developed a new lyrical style, no longer painting landscapes based on external experience, but based upon his own interior horizons.