

INFLUENCE OF SILENCE

Raimundo Figueroa

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Interview with Raimundo Figueroa

Laura Roulet: You were born in San Juan, grew up in Puerto Rico, moved to the United States to study music, began showing your paintings there, and then moved back here. Why?

Raimundo Figueroa: When I returned to Puerto Rico, I was trying to get away from the main scene in New York. Thinking that I would be able to somehow look deeply into my own emotions and my stepping and try to evolve from there.

LR: What didn't you like about working in New York?

RF: New York was very trendy. I wanted to be more in contact with nature rather than the art critics and the scene.

LR: What do you gain from living here?

RF: Basically the pleasure of being in contact with nature. Being in the beach, the water, the weather. Professionally speaking it's been very difficult here, because I have a Spanish name, Raimundo Figueroa. So when I first came here in '83, probably people were expecting to see another Latin artist, another Spanish artist. My work is not related aesthetically to the pure Latin American images. Although there are some emotions in my work that are related to Latin American work – the romantic subjects or the political observations.

LR: You have problems because you don't fit the stereotypes. Do you feel hostility from the Puerto Rican audience or incomprehension?

RF: I wouldn't call it hostility. There is a political thing, that this sort of painting is being related to the New York School. It's like

abstraction comes from the U.S. with some exceptions. There are a handful of people who understand that this is a universal style.

LR: What about the artists here who are working in abstraction? Do you relate to their work?

RF: Well, I sort of live in isolation. I decided many years ago, I'm just going to do my work. That was the reason I came back here.

There are some artists like Carlos Davila, Julio Suarez. My work is not related to these artists, but they have struggled the same as me in the sense of trying to bring their work to the attention of the public. I would say the younger painters, like Edwin Velazquez, Fernando Colon; these are the ones who are leaving the island. Wilfredo Cheisa is in Boston. There is a woman whose work I like a lot: Dhara Rivera. I always admired the work of Julio Rosado del Valle.

LR: How does your work fit into the Caribbean context?

RF: I would say there are a lot of Caribbean matters in it: fishes, flowers, turtles, colors. But they're not in the traditional way of the Caribbean as you call it. They're not the stereotype Caribbean. I think I'm very influenced by the colors here, the brilliancy of light in this area of the world. When I was in New York and Washington, my work was very dark. At some point I've done painting that has to do with subjects here, such as flamboyant tree. But actually you couldn't see a tree there. There were just orange colors in the painting.

LR: An impression of a flamboyant.

RF: Right, of the cock fighting paintings that have no birds, no people, just the motion of the painting. So I would say there is a Caribbean in my painting, and the influence of Puerto Rico. Although I always thought there was a difference in being Puerto Rican or American or German. The mind creates these cultural barriers. Painting is as universal as music.

LR: What are your artistic roots from childhood?

RF: I remember that I was very aware of nature. I have a couple of stories that I like to remember. I would draw huge animals on the pavement, like huge elephants or birds or crickets. I'd blow them up very big, and then I would go up-on the roof of the house and watch them. This is when I started drawing.

LR: Six years old? Seven?

RF: Probably earlier. That's one of the good memories I have. And the other one is picking up insects from the field. I was very curious. For a while these things appeared in my painting. They still appear sometimes – a scribble of a little cricket.

Later on, when I was twelve years old, I met a psychiatrist. And these questions of assistance evolved in the conversations with this psychiatrist. I see that it's been very painful to grow up, the process of education, and all this. And the most difficult subjects to confront are death, the loss of something that you want or someone, and understanding those feelings. Although it appears in my painting very frequently, it's still difficult to deal with the emotion of loss.

LR: Are your paintings an expression of those emotions or a way of working through them?

RF: First they are an aesthetical matter that carries those emotions. That's why the titles are very emotional, like *Everything I Touch Becomes Love*. That's the story of King Midas in reverse.

I am very involved in the psychological process of growing up. I cannot get away from that in my paintings, because paintings are a reflection of everyday life. I'd say these emotions must be resolved first, or they would interfere with the process of creativity.

For me, creativity is like a process of meditation. When I go into the studio, I first go into a state of meditation. It's not like meditation with a mantra. It's not a religious thing. It's more like a state of observation, like when you sit down and you watch a tree. This tree has all this life. It was just a tree, and then you see a bird feeding on the tree, and insects, all this activity. It becomes a microcosm.

That's how I paint. I go the studio, and try to have this attitude of observation, and the painting becomes a microcosm. At one point, people said: "They look very simple." They look simple at the beginning, but if you keep observing, there is so much evolving there, so much emotion.

LR: The *Secret Dialogue* series has a lot of activity, which becomes apparent the more you look at them. How does this description fit with the *Influence of Silence* series – the large abstracts?

RF: I am a very eclectic person. I could enjoy something very simple like a Gregorian chant or very complicated like a Mahler symphony. So these paintings evolved from that idea – the *White Paintings*. One of them is called *It's My Heart You're Holding, Not My Watch*. When I did that painting, I was thinking of the need of being aware of your feelings. Knowing that feelings are part of your mind, of your brain, and that you can analyze those feelings. We live in a society that is completely asleep. We don't want to get involved in these feelings. Especially when these feelings could make you aware that it's your child part that is suffering and it is not necessary to suffer. I'm a child when I paint, but as an adult I can also use my mind and analyze things.

LR: So you have a Freudian approach to painting?

RF: Jungian. I believe in symbols. As you can see in some of the *Secret Dialogue* paintings, and we can go further, in the *Symbols of Growth*, there were already some of the symbols which became isolated in the new work.

LR: Such as?

RF: The oval, for instance.

LR: What is that a symbol of, for you?

RF: It symbolizes the totality of life, like the Tao. The Tao is everything, life, the total understanding of existence. It was already in the earlier paintings, but sort of hidden in the chaotic, emotional

situations. So somehow I have been able to conquer those chaotic situations. Then being able to go back to them too, that's a real thrill.

This symbol has started to evolve again. The work became simpler on the surface, although the application of pigments and colors was very chaotic. *Earth, Fire, Water* is full of textures and colors in the underground. What is red is actually not red. It has blues and yellows. Then I decided to cover it. It's completely attached to *Secret Dialogue on Solitude*, the lower panel.

I worked on the large abstracts for a year. I did probably 200 – 300 drawings. I didn't want to discuss it, because then it could become a collaborative work. That's the idea of the *Secret Dialogues*, because I include other people's comments on the paintings.

LR: But now you don't want other comments.

RF: No, I just want my own comments.

LR: Let's talk about some more of your symbols. What about the figure eight, is that a symbol of eternity?

RF: As a kid, I learned that was the symbol of totality too. You start at one point and get to that point, and you will have conquered the whole universe of one Jine. I think it was the most difficult figure for me to draw as a kid, because I never wanted to get back to the same place. I wanted to go further.

In this group of paintings that are more minimal, the symbols have grown. They have become the whole painting. They're more on the first plane whereas in the others they are hiding.

LR: Does that show your desire to make a stronger statement graphically or a simplification of your philosophy?

RF: You have to remember I come from the music field, and my favorite subject in music was form and analysis. Music and paintings, it's the same thing. One comes through your ears and the other-through your eyes.

We would analyze the compositions of early composers. One professor, Hector Tosar, would isolate one subject of a Beethoven symphony.

LR: One theme?

RF: One subject, not a theme, a rhythm pattern. Like the classical pattern of the Fifth Symphony: de de de da. We would take that and see where it was placed all over the composition, and how the composer used his genius to make a melody out of it in the second movement. No painter has talked to me like this.

LR: Although a painter like Kandinsky made an effort to use that concept of music. He created symbols that represented themes in his painting and composed them in an abstract form.

RF: I'm not trying to do that but coming from that background, it's always a concern for me. The balance of the form of the painting.

LR: By "form" do you mean composition?

RF: Yes, composition. It has to do a lot with my interest in Japanese art, Sumi painting. Start and finish without any doubt. You cannot go over it. So in these paintings, I decided to make the composition in one stroke.

LR: Like calligraphy.

RF: Like calligraphy painting. This has been in my work for a long time, but now it is more obvious.

LR: Are you interested in Zen?

RF: I'm interested in Zen. I'm an eclectic person. I'm interested in learning about things, and how they apply to my life.

LR: Earlier in your career, you concentrated on music, how did you make the shift to visual art?

RF: In 1969, I showed my first drawings. I won some prizes, but I felt I didn't like the business of painting – the gallery scene. I was studying the violin seriously, first with Kashiro Figueroa, then with Russian masters like Burl Senofsky. That requires a lot of discipline. In order to break away from that discipline, I would paint. I needed to create in a different way. As a musician, I was more of an interpreter. I was not a composer. So I started composing with the paintings, and that's how I made the transition.

I had my first professional show with Peter Max and Max Pappart. Each of us had a room in the gallery.

LR: Where was this show?

RF: In Washington, at the Arthur Charles Gallery. So slowly I started showing the work. I still play the violin every day, and I still have the discipline, but I don't need to support myself that way.

LR: How else does your musical training carry over?

RF: In my work, I always try to understand counterpoint and harmony. I think the masters of that are J.S. Bach and Gustav Mahler. In this particular work [*Earth, Fire, Water*]. It's like a symphony. It has three movements, and the colors are in counterpoint with the form of the painting. And there's harmony among them. The red is the focal point. That's something that's influenced me a lot – Matisse and Van Gogh, and how they work with the focal point.

LR: Where do you think your painting is going from here?

RF: I would like to work in a bigger size. It's just that institutions have less and less money to shelter these paintings. That's a concern. I've been very interested in doing public painting.

LR: Murals?

RF: Yeah, murals. But I don't want to follow a formula. I just want to keep exploring my emotions, and I think the paintings will evolve from

there. I've never been married. I want to get married. I think that will make a big change in my painting, or if I have a family.

LR: So as life evolves...

RF: So evolves the painting. I think it's marvelous not to deny the pleasure of growing up.

Interview conducted January 28, 1995, in the artist's home, Isla Verde, Puerto Rico.