

# Capturing Jazz and Zen in paint

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While artists Alberto Bellon and Barry Wolfryd concede that there is a clear separation between their work – something that makes it easy to identify who painted what in their current joint exhibition at the Galería Talento Mexicano – Bellon notes that they do have something in common.

"People mention that Barry and I have nothing in common, but for the astute observer we have a lot in common – satire, black humor and risk taking, although on the surface there is not much affinity".

The most obvious contrast between the work of the two painters is style; the 18 oil paintings comprising "Viajes y Virajes" by Bellon concentrating on geometric form and color and the 15 oils of Wolfryd incorporating popular culture icons which serve to dramatize the close cultural relationship between Mexico and the United States.

For Bellon, the current exhibition with its canvases filled with geometric forms represents something of an adventure. "Geometry is a novelty for me because I've been a realist all my life. I spent many years painting with acrylics which are opaque when dry. But since I was looking for luminosity, transparency and brilliance I chose oils."

Although working in an abstract style dominated by clearly delineated areas of color, Bellon's work bears a distinct difference from Cubist predecessors according to Wolfryd.

"Alberto has more contrast than the Cubists whose colors were more muted. His colors have a lot of folkloric rhythm and the yellows, reds and blues form interesting contrasts."

For his part, Wolfryd employs a more "peaceful" approach, his use of color identifying him with the Mexican School of Painting formed by Rivera, Orozco and Siquieros in the opinion of Bellon.

"His work has always grabbed my attention for the use of color, because Mexican painters have become very grey and uncolorful ... but Barry feels color strongly and expresses it very well."

This may seem a strange thing to say about a painter originally from Los Angeles but Wolfryd, who came to live in Mexico 23 years ago, says it is this immigrant status that best explains his "Mexicanness".

"People born here are exploring things from the outside, European

the 'Itchy and Scratchy' cartoons featured in *The Simpsons*.

"Itchy is there in place of Mickey Mouse because he (Mickey) has had his day as an international icon. Mickey Mouse is a Disney icon and Itchy is the symbol of another kind of culture."

The appearance of such figures in Mexican landscapes is evidence of how images from one culture reach people via another. In this case, images from US popular culture reach an American in Mexico and in another language.

One of the more marked similarities between the two artists is the note of humor injected into their work. Bellon, for one, is convinced that in this world of horrific images and stories, laughter is the best medicine.

"My work serves to relax the viewer and offer an escape from images of violence, hunger and tragedy. It is in effect a defense mechanism for mental health."

Wolfryd sees his own work along similar lines with the artist, like a good comedian, "liberating us from polemic and allowing us to breathe."

The ludic effect in Bellon's paintings also requires an effort on the part of the viewer. "There is a painting executed in green in this exhibition entitled *Cuando las vacas pastoreaban tranquilamente* (When the cows peacefully grazed) and the one who grazes there is the viewer. People look for a cow but don't realize it is they who are grazing."

This game is employed by Bellon in order to promote feelings of peace and tranquility in the contemplation of his painting, while in others there is a charge of adrenalin. An example of the latter is *Gira taurina* which features a large bull that seems as though it is ready to burst from the painting. As Bellon notes, "some like it and others reject its force."

This troubled relationship with the public is something shared by both artists, Bellon for the lack of spectators able to capture what he is doing due to the "difficulty" of his work, and Wolfryd for the difficulty of neatly placing him in a box.

"I live on both sides of the border and when I am invited to participate in exhibitions of Mexican art organizers say 'oh, but he was born in Los Angeles'. When I am invited to form part of an exhibition of US artists they say 'but he lives in Mexico'. The trouble is they don't want to see you as a painter who lives in a certain place, they want to slot you into a niche."



schools or Western movements, while people who come to live here adapt to their new home .... This is true of all immigrants."

The artists' contrasting styles also reflect the current absence of coherent artistic movements in both Mexico and the rest of the world. This results from a reexamination of the past, together with a reinterpretation of its forms and techniques, and reflects the information age which, says Wolfryd, "affects all art forms."

Bellon supports this view, noting that "in all art forms it is the same, there is no uniform or dominant theory."

Another of the similarities shared by the artists is their approach to the canvas with neither planning what the finished work will look like.

Bellon, for instance, employs an approach similar to that of his beloved jazz musicians by improvising on a theme. "I'm not a painter who paints with his head or heart, but with my guts. I'm completely visceral and never know how a painting will end up."

Wolfryd, for his part, often has an idea of what he wants to paint but this only takes shape on the canvas. In contrast to Bellon, who always paints to music, be it jazz, classical, Brazilian or Frank Zappa, Wolfryd can paint with the TV on, while listening to "internal music" or in complete silence.

"Once, in Avandaro, I was painting in complete silence and could hear the brush strokes. It was like Zen."

Despite this silent contemplation of the canvas, the paintings of Wolfryd are open to the noise of modern society, and in particular the media. Whether from the TV, cinema, the internet or magazines, we are surrounded by images and these often find their way into his paintings.

Such is the case with *Celestial Shopping* which includes Itchy from

As Bellon notes, while art is out there in the world, people still need to label it so as to understand what you are talking about. In the case of Mexico, what is identifiably "Mexican" in the rest of the world at the moment is the Oaxacan School of painting with its magical realism, a prestige derived from it having an identifiable "look".

For Wolfryd neither his work nor Bellon's conforms to this image which is essentially a "marketing concept" designed to sell paintings abroad.

This point was recently made by British art critic Kevin Power who teaches at the Alicante University in Spain. Noting that while globalization helps African, Caribbean and Latin American artists come to the notice of art centers in Europe and the US, the use of existing criteria often lead to a form of neocolonialism which excludes that which is not easily labeled.

At present, both artists are interested in continuing their experimentation. Wolfryd is currently taking a course in computerized graphics which allows him the chance to experiment with his own images in a concentrated space. But rather than a change in form and technique, this allows him to see how a series of paintings would appear and he insists that "I'm going to paint these images with a brush."

For his part, Bellon intends to take a rest, unsure whether he will continue with abstract forms or return to realism. Meanwhile, he hopes to record an album of self-penned jazz songs with his group Ya Son 4.

The band, which features Bellon on guitar along with a violinist, drummer and bassist, will be playing at the Galería Talento Mexicano, where his paintings currently hang, on Wednesday, August 26 at 19:00.

The exhibitions "Viajes y Virajes" by Alberto Bellon and "Paisajes y bodegones locochones" by Barry Wolfryd can both be seen at the Galería Talento Mexicano (Colima 160, Colonia Roma, tel: 514-6909/0457).