



Illustration

PONCIANO CÁRDENAS
(CONTEMPORARY BOLIVIAN PLASTIC ARTIST)

Ponciano Cárdenas is a goldsmith with a lifetime mission. His legacy is a constant proclamation for the Latin American people not to lie forgotten by the dominations and permanent attempts that have wanted to take away their true nature. Even in his work the struggle continues, between the invading bull and the condor [Cover picture], symbol of a legitimate race of these Andean lands of aboriginal America. He was born in Cochabamba “*the area of the lakes*”, on August 25, 1927.

There was no possibility of indecision for the plastic artist he carried from his origin. When he was seven years old, he used to climb the wall near the edge of the meadow, on the outskirts of the city where they lived. From there he would watch the neighboring fighting bulls from the adjoining field that he later modeled with the clay he collected in the Rocha River. From that mud with which his mother transcended, beyond the valley they inhabited, to alleviate the skin ailments of the people who consulted her for her shamanic abilities. Those mud bulls were his first plastic works. They represented one of his indelible seals. Paintings and sculptures scattered those bulls early in the artist’s art as a symbol of the Spanish domination, but also as the evaluation of the animal strength, of an imposing and strained presence. Ponciano Cárdenas never failed to appreciate this combative position of the animal, to which man also incited him, exacerbating that instinctive will never to be dominated.

Present from his earliest childhood, Ponciano finds in the bull a symbol of his art. The master clarifies: “*I found in the bulls plastic forms not only of how he attacks or how he moves, but of the inner strength that encourages him.*” He also expresses the struggle between the bull and the condor according to the prevailing custom in the Altiplano. The condor clings to the back of the bull. The claws and beak of the bird end up killing the quadruped. The artist goes beyond the rite and since then the bull, symbol of foreign occupation, deals with the condor custodian of the Andean heights. This custom from the man of the Altiplano is repeated in an annual festivity in which the bull tries to free itself from the bird attached to its back.

“*The reality of art is always to be oneself.*” This is the motto in Ponciano Cárdenas’ road. In him we find an American identity consistent with his origin. The defense of the people that had erected a civilization before the sword of the conqueror advanced through this virgin land. That still resists with its rites and its art.



Figure 1. “*Struggle between races*”
Acrylic, 100 x 70 cm, 2013

One of them is Ponciano, the one that imposes to his students the mandate of “*always doing*”. The one that continues to make the condor and the sons of Atahualpa struggle against the symbol of the bull under those immense suns of South American energy.

Human beings at some point of their lives often run away from the mirrors that reflect them. Unfulfilled dreams are those that frighten with dreamlike images that whirl wildly just like birds do when they wake up. In the heights they fly in perfect circles, men huddle in the privacy of the earth. All go through those experiences of finding excuses to escape from realities, which are dismissed from the mind with any pretext. Ponciano Cárdenas has built his personality with a few words that he invariably repeats: “*I came with the dream fulfilled.*” He does not need to escape from the mirror that reflects

his size as an artist. In this sentence that has the force of a dictum is based his legacy when he claims that *"the most important thing of an artist is his identity"*. In Ponciano this phrase was never a declamation. It became a fortress that allowed him to travel through a period of Latin American art that left the cultists of its defense isolated. It is true that art has no borders, but they also exist in the concept that Latin America has to defend positions of enormous value in its culture, in order not to lose what Ponciano Cárdenas claims: identity. That which is foreign-centered made the whole movement of Latin American plastic arts go back, that not only had to preserve, but also to unearth a pre-Hispanic culture. In that conviction, Ponciano remained unscathed. He never ceased to bring the *"fulfilled dream"* to his suns, bulls, condors and native men, those who preserved not only the essence of their original history, but that beauty that distills the harmony of colors and forms.

Ponciano Cárdenas' painting is bold. It moves into that painful history of Latin America that power tries to forget. His characters are earthly Christs, present, betraying that innocence that the childhood of societies still has. That spiritual virginity that allowed the so-called conquering civilization to void them of their riches and attack their millenary culture. Ponciano then paints with the unmistakable risk of being marginalized by the conquest heirs. Thus his works are penetrating and sagacious, with an intensity that allows his characters to leave the flat canvases to acquire the volume of space. They are sheltered by the energy of the unmistakable suns that persecuted the artist from birth and that become a living flame in the color itself. Here they are before our eyes. They surround us with their rites and their dances. They are the ones who have loved this land above all its vicissitudes. The effect of Ponciano's works is capable of silencing any other artistic manifestation that opposes him. They enjoy a sublime magnetism. They radiate the luminosity of the genuine, of nature, of the existential. Before that look, every other vision seems to retreat, it becomes fatuous. In Cárdenas' work there is a bond to a power of attraction that subjugates when transmitting the ancestral American values that tried to be emptied from the beginning of the conquest. These elements of his painting are exalted between the leafy colors transferred to the cosmic energies and the contrast with the paleness of the characters who acquire the other wisdom of the earth. Then the audacity of the work becomes a captivating beauty.

- Ponciano, was your painting always so influenced by the blues?

- I believe the color scheme of blues is a resource that I used to give more vibration to the earth, because in reality my colors are earth. I used blue as a complementary, as I do with green. In fact, the color of my work revolves more through the warm, the earths and the orange span of colors. Blue is as an element of vibration. That too is a little, shall we say, unconscious. Now, however much blue or green colors I use, my painting always ends up being painful. Sometimes one is asked to paint with greens, blues, yellows, to give joy, and truly this is not bestowed with color, but in the work itself, that is, it is in

the content. I use yellows and yet, if you look in depth, it is not cheerful. The same happens with Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890). It is the man who is there, it is not the color. Art is also mystery. One makes his experiences, now if they are happy or sad they involve other issues. No art maker handles that part. You can handle the technique, the word, whatever; however, maybe a word or an image of joy ends up in tears because it is the content that decides in art.

-How do you see art in the future? Will the artist still be free or will he be conditioned by economy, politics or by other types of situations that do not apply to his true sensitivity but to external conditions, including those of survival?

After a pause his small voice became convincing. - I believe that the true artist, even in spite of himself, of the economic, religious or political situation, continues to reflect his inner world. That is, man can be conditioned by politics, by economy, by countless things, but this does not happen to the real artist, it does not enslave him, it would otherwise be his artistic suicide. Take Goya as an example. He painted the whole reign of Spain and yet at the last moment of his work he shows you the *"black era"*, what he really felt, that is, it puts in evidence what the artist is. Deep inside all the artists express themselves just as those of the cave of Altamira.

In this American land of wetland green its people still endure a silent battle of survival to breathe a story that the conqueror wanted to forget. You can still perceive the alert of the pre-Hispanic civilizations faced with the depredation without pause of the foreigner. The Mediterranean center of South America may be the last bastion of the defense of their dreams, their rites and the communion of man with the earth. Ponciano Cárdenas rescues the subject, that being thrown into existence, endowed with a greater awareness of nature. In his art he achieves the meeting of the entities that make up the cosmos together with the presence of consciousness. He deepens this concept to integrate his work where the subject is present in the deconstructive process of the cosmos, showing in the same space chaos/order, art/existence, figure/metaphysics. For this he works on what the *"man-being,"* from the most primitive times tried to give to his presence: harmony and beauty, perceptions that constitute the abstraction of his imagination and that allow him to overcome his existential fatigue. The search of Cárdenas becomes a refuge for the subject in this postmodern world, in which subjectivism has died. Then his art moves away from the instrumental reason, heritage of power, in order to incorporate the word, the affections, the diversity, in the space-time. And this constitutes a breath of encouragement because you cannot talk about circumstances without a subject and of this without taking into account the historical process that contains him. That is why his work contains the story of his chronicle, of the objects that appear and disappear in continuity, just as happens in each entity of nature with its own time.