

A creative flux and the fragility of existence: some thoughts on the visual poetics of Álvarez Frugoni

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Se escribió este texto originalmente para el catálogo que acompaña las exposiciones de las pinturas de Álvarez Frugoni que se celebran en el Centro Cultural de Florida en Agosto de este año 2014, y otra que tendrá lugar en el Museo Nacional de Artes Visuales de Montevideo el año que viene. Dado que los catálogos de exposiciones no suelen tener una difusión muy extensa, mientras que las pinturas de este pintor uruguayo, que son escasamente conocidas, merecen ser presentadas a un público más amplio y sobre todo con amplios valores críticos y perceptivos, hemos decidido dar vida paralela a este texto y publicarlo aquí. Desde los años setenta la obra de Álvarez Frugoni ha sido representada en exposiciones en diversos países del mundo, del norte y el sur; durante su largo trayecto, este artista ha desarrollado una pintura que explora las posibilidades y límites plásticos de figura, forma y abstracción, y con ello la vitalidad del poder poético de la pintura. Lamentablemente, no ha sido posible acompañar este texto con reproducciones en color, pero esperamos que además de las ideas que se presentan aquí en palabras las sombras de los cuadros, en blanco de negro, inspiren a ir a verlos en carne y hueso, o mejor dicho tela y pigmento, en una de las próximas exposiciones.

The significance of the title of this exhibition of recent work by Álvarez Frugoni demands a brief pause for thought. A brief consideration of what we might understand by a *camino* offers a point of departure for a deeper engagement with the paintings on display. Needless to say, one thing that none of these paintings are is a depiction of a path; neither in the sense of a forest path upon which we may glimpse the demise of some Actaeon or an equally ill-fated nymph; nor are they conceptual engagements with the notion of following a “path” such as has been explored by artists such as Richard Long’s rural and wilderness walks or in urban settings by Janet Cardiff for example. Instead they offer vistas of mental *caminos* that the artist has travelled along; every painting is in some sense a journey through imaginary spaces and aesthetic experiences, which are traversed with a series of brushstrokes, gestures and a succession of gazes. Undoubtedly, as Álvarez Frugoni made his way along these *caminos* entwined memories of his past, in Uruguay, Venezuela, Switzerland and Mallorca, as well as perhaps deeper and more visceral, inner experiences illuminated his painterly progress with those lightning bolt-like glimpses of the past that the visual memory grants us at the most unexpected, yet opportune moments. Later in this catalogue Catherine Plessart discusses the variety of experiences that are interwoven into Álvarez Frugoni’s artistic practice, as well as his singular vision of both art and the world. Little need be added to Plessart’s incisive analysis, but to both preface and complement her lucid insights into the work of Álvarez Frugoni I want to focus on his paintings in their own right; after the final brush stroke is made a painting stands alone, the painter departs and in his absence the work takes on its own solitary life. It is in this solitude that they now stand before you. Even if the painter himself stands beside you while you look at his work they have become much more than just his work, they exist in time, acquire a history and their significance changes over time, above all as they confront their purpose: to be looked at, contemplated and thought about. However, I would not go as far as to say be understood, instead his paintings offer a way of seeking to understand the world, albeit in terms of what may be termed as a visual poetics.

Viewed in their solitary state Álvarez Frugoni’s paintings stand before us as *caminos* that we must now make our own way into and along, wherever they may lead. Our notions of the painter, however truthful, poetic or fanciful encourage us to make the first faltering “steps”, and we also delight, marvel at and become absorbed by the wealth of drawing revealed in these works, which in turn contrasts with their play of colour across their richly textured depths and painted surfaces. As we allow the images to dissolve into their artistic matter we sense the making of these works, the artist’s confrontation of paint, image and idea, but then the paintings themselves assert themselves once more and awaken us from this aesthetic reverie. These paintings are much more than essays in formalism, a critical dialogue between abstract and figurative painting, line and colour, pictorial depth and the materiality of the picture plane. Indeed, they

insist that we relinquish the artist as our guide to these paintings and instead look into them and observe them with a mode of looking that is less learned, one that looks to engage with this poetics of painting that Álvarez Frugoni has made a central feature of his work.

Álvarez Frugoni has created a mute poetry of imaginary spaces, seas and skies peopled with figures and beasts; he “lived” this poetry through the act of painting; and the challenge that he and his paintings now lay down for the spectator is to create this poetry anew with the gaze. The *caminos* that stand before you are above all poetic journeys. However, just as the painted spaces of these works are boundless and unlimited, a macrocosm enfolded in a microcosm, so too is their poetic force. The purpose of this text is not to provide a reading of these paintings, nor an exegesis of their poetic significance. Such distractions are not called for! Instead my concern is to highlight the main facets of the visual poetics which underlies the aesthetic experience of Álvarez Frugoni’s paintings.

A defining element of this poetics is that it operates at the juncture between form and formlessness, on the nebulous frontier of what can be grasped with vision and what all but escapes us as fleeting sensations that then we pursue, all too futilely; their inevitable absence leaves a desiring after a lost knowledge that can only be articulated in poetic terms. Wherever we look in Álvarez Frugoni’s paintings order collapses, but it is this very disintegration of the known, this disturbance that creates a space for new meanings. Thereby, these works challenge us to look beyond a rational mode of vision, which seeks only clearly defined knowledge, and instead consider what lies beyond the apparently visible, and look towards what is to be seen along and beyond the borders of vision, experience and the imagination.

The evident poetic force of Álvarez Frugoni’s paintings is the result of an intense engagement between the evolving canvas and the artist’s gaze, his handling of the medium and of course his creative mind and vision. In the absence of their “artifex” these paintings reciprocate this challenge for you, the spectator. However, the challenge is now focused on the creativity of your gaze. Prior to any movement, as it were, along these *caminos*, these paintings demand that perception itself become poetic. Perspective, space, even the most basic coordinates of up and down are creative elements in these scenes, and they and their protagonists reinvent the rules of art and vision. For example *En el trópico* flicks between a topography of some chaotic animal migration and some insane act of creation, occurring before space even exists, a flurrying shower of life that flies or flees from a burst of light, creation as both a blessing and a curse. Meanwhile the two figures in *Intimidad bajo la lámpara* seem oblivious of the immense beasts that hang above them, are they mere prey or are they unaware to the scale of events around them, simply a part of them. The primal (dis)order of these *caminos* is what reveals the way into them, but it also means that they bifurcate and double back, but in winding your way along these visual pathways the gaze

becomes poetic and the rich significance of these paintings reveals itself.

Some of these *caminos* may appear more like confrontations and here I refer to a number of works such as *De la serie "Paternidades" díptico*, *Paternidades Tríptico*, *Paternidad CH* and *Tres Paternidades*. However, with a subject such as paternity, with all its potential for Saturn-like taboo as well as Lear-like tragedy, it is fitting that they should seem like sentries. Yet these towering lycanthropes with their offspring are not mere representations of notions of the mystery or natural order of fatherhood, and much less are they a patriarchal revelry. In contrast this group of paintings highlights how meaning is elusive sprite-like and even a motive for caution. The monumentality of these figures, evocative of the aspirations of Paternity, proves to be ephemeral and as we look on it is effaced, sundered and even inverted; what is this paternity? Nonetheless, we must look on.

In addition to the shifting states of figures' presence and dissolution depictions of beasts, whether in hordes or skulking in solitude, recur in these works, and they often echo the menacing confrontation of the *Paternidades*; something between a boar and wolf launches itself into *Chirviche* while Iguana's offer their "kiss" as well as hold nocturnal festivities of a seemingly calamitous nature in *La Noche de la Iguana*, elsewhere they are accompanied by an array of other animals. The variety of these "species" reflects the multitudes of the natural world, but their forms suggest new and impossible species. However, there is no concern to document these animals' characteristics as a bestiary might do, but rather Álvarez Frugoni seeks to capture the essence of their being, their vitality. It is in this sense that these animals play a key role in terms of the meaning of these paintings, not only do they interact with the figures, who are both their equals and prey, they also offer metaphorical and allegorical associations as has been seen already. Yet what is perhaps most significant about the haunting presence of these beasts in these paintings is that they present a trope of a further significance of the Álvarez Frugoni's poetic art; akin to these animals his work offers sights of beauty laced with dread; images of ideas that appeal, draw us on, but always elude our advance; and above all images of a world where the natural order is a state of violent flux, one which both creates life and devours it. Álvarez Frugoni's paintings evoke a fatal and time worn appeal of beauty, the elusive nature of knowledge about the world and even ourselves, and above all the violent force of the flux that is life and the fragility of existence implicit in it. His visual poetics is interwoven around these three concerns and perhaps above all this final fundamental aspect of existence, which imbues the atmosphere of his paintings.

Little more need be said, let the paintings reveal themselves so you can see for yourself. However, before you make your way along these *caminos* it seems fitting to echo the customary advice of fairy tales, and which H.G. Wells wisely projected into the future, don't stray off the *camino*: who knows what effect the Iguana's kiss might have?



**DE LA SERIE
PATERNIDADES**

195 x 260 cm

Acrílico sobre tela/
técnica mixta

2013



**EL BESO DE LA
IGUANA**

80 x 100 cm

Acrílico sobre tela/
técnica mixta

2013



CHICHIRIVICHE

113 x 146 cm

Acrílico sobre tela/
técnica mixta

2013

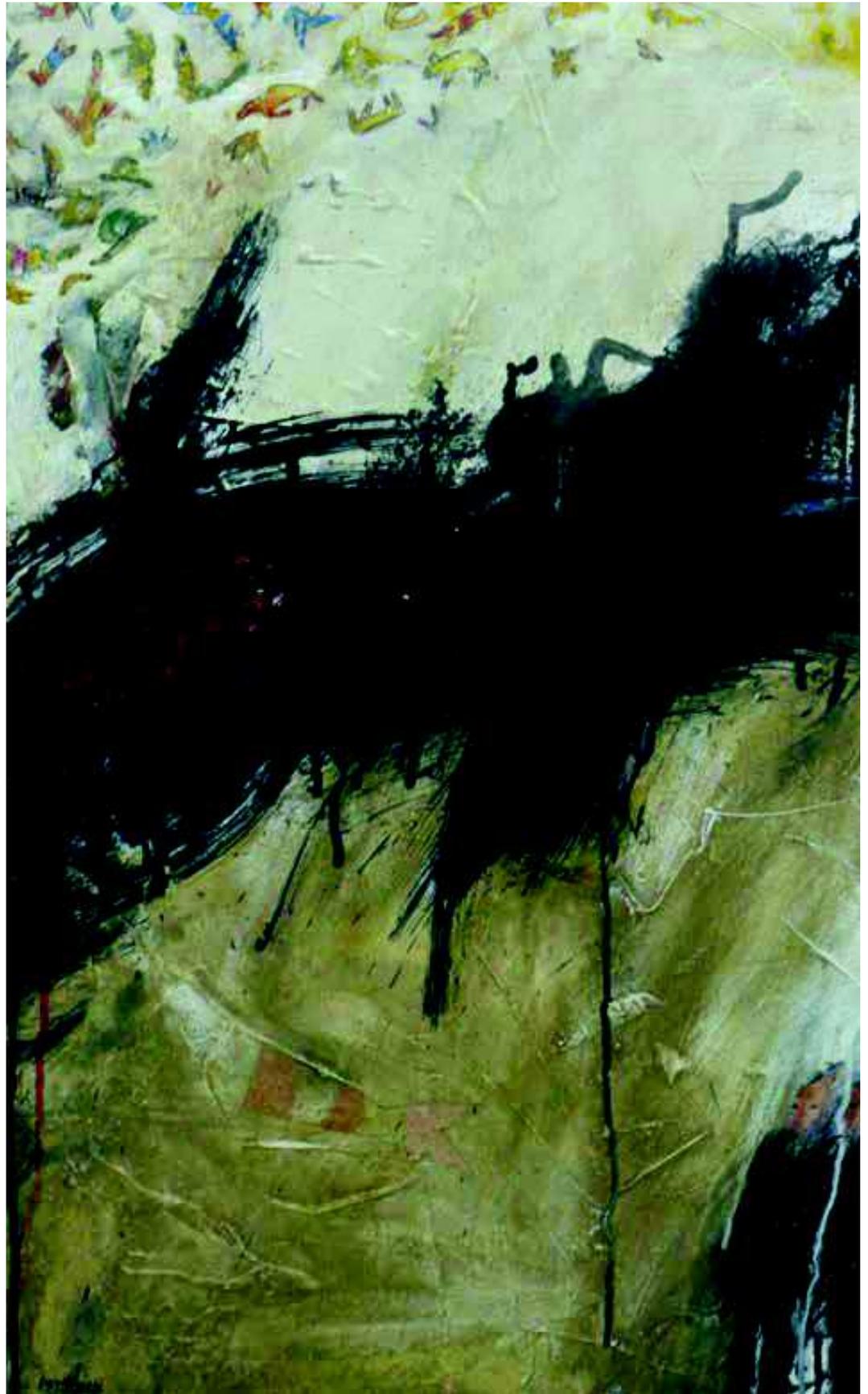


**LA NOCHE DE LA
IGUANA**

80 x 100cm

Acrílico sobre tela/
técnica mixta

2012





**INTIMIDAD BAJO
LA LÁMPARA**

80 x 100 cm

Acrílico sobre tela/
técnica mixta

2013