

## Text: Public Practice | Private Lives

Terence Gower

In 1934 the building managers of New York City's Rockefeller Center ordered the destruction of Diego Rivera's mural *Man at the Crossroads*. The painter came into conflict with the building managers and the mural's patron John D. Rockefeller Jr. when he refused to remove an image of Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin. This story is a testament to the artist's unbending political convictions, and one can tour the murals at the National Palace or Bellas Artes with that opinion held largely intact. Though the politics of the three principal protagonists of muralism—Rivera, Siqueiros, and Orozco—vary significantly, each of their practices was established in the spirit of serving the memory of the Mexican revolution, and by extension, critiquing the international bourgeoisie. All found their radical political voice in the experience of the Mexican Revolution, while a few went on to create an interface with ideas imported from world communism.

I brought this impression of Mexican Art with me when I first came to Mexico from Canada in 1993. But my first visit to the Carrillo Gil museum collection was strangely jarring. While viewing its fine collection of paintings by the three central protagonists of muralism, I was struck by the fact that these were easel paintings created for a bourgeois clientele. They had clearly been painted at a manageable size, then elaborately framed, to be hung in a private, domestic setting. Yet here they were presented in the stark, high-functionalist setting of a public museum. It's a disjunction art viewers are used to in any museum, but it seemed particularly intense here due to the political narrative surrounding the careers of these artists.

This was my introduction to a more complex cultural reality than I was used to back in Canada. I learned that in Mexico a communist activist can paint portraits for the elite, and a bourgeois (such as Carrillo Gil) can become bohemian, pursuing his own painting career. That such fiercely political artists dabbled in the private sphere is particularly interesting for contemporary artists with political convictions of their own.

As I probably don't need to point out, explicitly political artwork doesn't easily find a place in the art market, unless it has gone through a lengthy integration and commodification process. How does one maintain a political voice but continue financing an art practice, faced with the mounting costs of production? These artists found the answer in practices which straddled the world of public

commissions and the private economy of the art market.

I have chosen the four artists featured in this current intervention in the collection of the Carrillo Gil Museum because each demonstrates a subtly different division of practice with regard to the private and public spheres.

## **Diego Rivera**

An intense sense of public engagement is found in Diego Rivera's work for the Mexican Communist Party in the 1920s. Though best known for his painting and graphic work done in the name of communism, it is his political writing and organizational work that really show his fierce dedication to the party. This is communicated here with an exhibit of some of the political ephemera generated by Rivera, generously selected and loaned by Ricardo Pérez Escamilla for this exhibition.

This exhibit of political documents is shown adjacent to a display of Rivera's "Cubist" paintings from 1915 and 1916. These paintings—done just after his return to Mexico from Europe—show the influence of the Parisian scene of the time, and date from before his intense political activity in Mexico. Later they were acquired by the entrepreneur Carrillo Gil and hung on the walls of his private villa.

## **David Alfaro Siqueiros**

My display of Siqueiros' painting *Intertrópico* (1946) presents the work as it might have been viewed on a private tour of Carrillo Gil's house. This work was acquired by the collector in 1947 and is part of a group of landscape and still-life easel paintings Siqueiros produced at the time. This was an unusual body of work for not being sketches or studies for murals. I have had Siqueiros' mural *Retrato de la burguesía* (Portrait of the Bourgeoisie) reproduced in greyscale on the wall directly behind. The mural, recreated here by Enrique Huerta, is found in the headquarters of the Mexican Electrical Workers Union. The institutional setting of the original mural is an atmosphere I

have decided to recreate here, and it is contrasted with the comfortable surroundings of the other Siqueiros work on display.

## **Gunther Gerzso**

Though well-known to art connoisseurs as a painter of geometric compositions and abstracted landscapes, Gunther Gerzso was known to a much larger public as the art director for nearly a hundred films. His film career started in 1943 and continued for almost twenty years, bringing him together with directors such as Alejandro Galindo, Luis Buñuel and Miguel Delgado. I have selected four films whose dates of production are evenly spaced over the span of Gerzso's film career. In Galindo's *Esquina Bajan!*, Gerzso has selected locations at the edges of the city. These scenes, shot in the new "fraccionamientos"—landscapes of empty lots and pristine streets awaiting houses—give the viewer a strong sense of the modernization and expansion of Mexico City in the late 1940's. The final film in this series, *El Analfabeto*, directed by Miguel Delgado and starring Cantinflas, was produced in the same period as the Gerzso paintings on show in the adjacent installation.

These paintings were created between 1959 and 1961 after a trip to Greece, as evidenced by their titles, which reference Greek geographic sites and mythological characters. It might be hard to find a connection between the films and the paintings, but I have "art directed" the installation to evoke an interior ready for a film shoot, while also alluding to the type of habitat Gerzso's paintings would have naturally resided in. This is, I believe, how a viewing of the work of Gerzso would have taken place in the private rooms of the art collector Carrillo Gil.

## **Alvar Carrillo Gil**

The last artist I have decided to include in this exhibition is the entrepreneur, art collector and painter Alvaro Carrillo Gil. In private, the collector was an avid painter, whose own works make up (...) percent of this collection. In his own times, the painter Carrillo Gil was dismissed as a dilettante and interloper, but I think his work merits some study, not so much due to the intentions of the artist, but more for what it expresses of the creative mindset of his times. I think the key to looking at Carrillo Gil's paintings is to consider the prints and reproductions he acquired of foreign artists.

His was a kind of processing practice, in which we see the forms and ideas of European masters like Klee and Picasso (of whom he collected hundreds of reproductions) digested and re-presented in his canvases. The work reads like a component of a larger processing machine for received ideas of Modernism. Most Mexican culture is, of course generated indigenously, but there is also a strain of mid-20th Century art—and architecture—in which European ideas were imported, melted down and reformed into a uniquely Mexican product. I think the private painting practice of Carrillo Gil expresses this quite neatly. I have chosen to show these paintings in a studio-like display to evoke a visit to the collector's own studio during a tour of his home.

The public face of Carrillo Gil is his project for the museum in which you now stand. Any viewer to this exhibition who has suspected a moral judgement in my contrast between the elite, private realm of Carrillo Gil and the great public and popular works of the painters discussed so far, will now see the collector redeem himself. For Carrillo Gil did a remarkable thing and turned his private collection into a public institution. Though the transfer of the collection wasn't as direct or altruistic as I just made it sound\*, the happy result has been the exposure of these private works to the general public. As I mentioned at the beginning of this text, the transfer of these paintings, originally intended for private display to the public realm, generates a slight sense of friction. One could read my intervention as an attempt to "retransition" these works to the museum by evoking their original habitat in Carrillo Gil's house, like a goldfish brought home from the pet store in a bag of water from its native tank.

\*The museum was originally conceived as a kind of private vanity project, which stalled several times during construction until the government stepped in to turn the museum into a public project.