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17th Street and Constitution Avenue, NW Washington, D.C. 20006

AUDIO - VISUAL PROGRAM

SET 193 ETCHINGS BY JOSE LUIS CUEVAS

In December, 1981, José Luis Cuevas was awarded the prestigious National Prize of Fine Arts of Mexico. Previous recipients include Diego Rivera, Rufino Tamayo and David Alfaro Siqueiros. The ten untitled etchings executed at Barcelona by Cuevas in 1981 represent the artist's most recent graphic production. These etchings demonstrate the creative genius of this master draftsman and printmaker who held his first one man show in the OAS gallery almost thirty years ago.

Cuevas' first interest is in perfecting his chosen medium of expression: line. The message or theme and composition are subordinated to purely linear values. There is a rich vibration of pen strokes across the paper, characteristic of assurance and seriousness.

Cuevas distorts figures to the point of uniqueness. These figures represent the solitude of man, his inability to communicate. The characters live in isolation; they come together only to show themselves to the public and, at the end, to wreak vengeance on those who make fun of them. For every deformity, there is a point of departure, a model. Cuevas' world is based on truth, each archetype corresponds to a living being. Degenerate people appear constantly in Cuevas' drawings. These images offend the good taste of the middle class, who usually tend to identify the artist with his models. It is precisely the wonder and amazement these people inspire in him that prompts Cuevas to take them on as subjects without feeling the least affinity with them. It is difficult to find anyone more obsessively distant from vice than José Luis Cuevas.

Death, disease and prostitution in the underworld are other themes that he is mysteriously attracted to, although he is a passionate observer of the misfortunes of others, paradoxically he is frightened at the sight of human defects and signs of illness. A confirmed and confessed hypochondriac, he is incapable of maintaining even the slightest contact with the models of the world with which he is obsessed.

Cuevas openly seeks notoriety, fame and success for his own image, and he will make almost any personal concession to obtain it except to change even a single line in his drawings to satisfy anyone. He does not follow the frivolous trends of fashions in the arts. He persists in the esteem of people of understanding. He remains a great draftsman concerned with quality, ever attached to the best tradition, both national and international. He turns to pre-Hispanic sculpture in search of forms and inner meanings. A tracing of the ancient idols would have been a task of a museum copyist. Cuevas extracted the essential expression of those idols and transformed it, being a truly creative, genuinely Mexican artist. Probing the feeling without copying the way in which others have depicted it - this is the way in which Cuevas has



won his place in the art world of today.

Between the years of ten and eleven, José Luis came down with rheumatic fever. This meant long months in bed and he found an escape in reading. Cuevas discovered Dostoevski, whose work opened up a world of passion and violence; he gave him a new perception of his surroundings; he taught him to extract and analyze the basest aspects of human nature. Another author who influenced Cuevas was Kafka. Kafka awakened his imagination leading him to transform reality into fantasy, into dreams.

Cuevas' work transcends illustration, never subordinating artistic purity to literary values. The narrative power is intrinsic in the strokes of his pen. In dealing with Kafka's hallucinatory characters and situations, Cuevas did not aim to produce illustrations in the usual sense. The fragments of Kafka's work remain as they are in a dream world interplay of reality and the absurd, while the ideas behind them are triumphantly interpreted in graphic compositions with a life of their own.

Sources:

- Gomez-Sicre, Jose. A Backward Glance at Cuevas.
Museum of Modern Art of Latin America, Washington, D.C.
Tasende, Jose M. "The Image and Specter" José Luis Cuevas: Letters.
Collection of Art Gallery of Windsor, Ontario, Canada.
Tasende Gallery, La Jolla, California.

Biography: José Luis Cuevas

- 1933 José Luis was born in Mexico City.
1943-1944 José Luis developed rheumatic fever.
1944 José Luis was accepted as a special student at the School of Painting and Sculpture.
1947 Cuevas had his first exhibit in Mexico City.
1954 Cuevas had a one man show at the OAS in Washington, D.C.
1959 Cuevas won the International Prize for Drawing at the Sao Paulo Biennial.
1961 Cuevas married Berta Riestra, his sweetheart of adolescent days. They have three daughters. He travelled to Europe to exhibit at the Galleria Obelisco in Rome.
World of Kafka and Cuevas, an album of graphics.
1962 Recollection of Childhood, an album of graphics.
1966 Cuevas-Charenton, an album of graphics.
1968 Crime by Cuevas, an album of graphics.
1969 Homage to Quevedo, an album of graphics.
1972 Cuevas' Comedies, an album of lithography.
1973 Cuevas has a recurrence of heart trouble from which he had suffered in his childhood.
1978 A Backward Glance at Cuevas, an exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art of Latin America.
1981 Cuevas was awarded the National Prize of Fine Arts of Mexico.



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17th Street and Constitution Avenue, NW Washington, D.C. 20006

Set 193 SLIDES **Untitled Etchings, 1981 by Jose Luis Cuevas.**

193 A Two men whose shadows give them weight float across a sepia and rose background. What appears to be a fountain balances the composition in the lower left corner. The surface is highly textured. **Plate dimensions: 25 x 17.**

193 B A man stands at an easel gazing at a woman with vivid orange flesh. In the lower left corner is the image of a boat. The background colors are orange, yellow and grey. **plate dimensions: 25 x 17 inches.**

193 C The picture is filled with contoured, modelled nudes. One clothed man has no face. Three busts engage the viewer's attention. A head in the top center of the picture gazes down like a god figure. This etching might represent a sculpture studio or an artist's sketchbook. **Plate dimensions 17 x 25 inches.**

193 D Three figures are lined up horizontally across the picture plane. The figure on the left balances on one foot, her upper body being densely textured. She stares directly at the viewer. The middle androgynous being faces sideways in a 3/4 view, yet the eyes rivet sideways to engage the viewer. The third figure is a nude rear view. Again Cuevas draws the head glancing over the shoulder capturing the viewer's attention. Subtle blue and rose coloring is reflected from her shoulder. The khaki green background creates a dark mood. **Plate dimensions 25 x 17 inches.**

193 E The densely textured central figure confronts the viewer. At the left, a partial figure rests its head on its arm focusing inward. The central horizontal contrasts in position and contour style from the other figures. The lower right figure averts his gaze. **Plate dimensions 17 x 25 inches.**

193 F A science fiction creature with a hooded square head carries a stick in the left. The central hermaphroditic figure is darkly textured and faces the viewer in a 3/4 position gazing out of beady little eyes. The eyes of the right hand figure eskew Picasso style focusing inwardly. A detached head peeks over the shoulder of the figure on the right. A "ghost" contour appears in the right background creating a mysterious dream world. **Plate dimensions 17 x 25 inches.**

193 G Two bald figures sit close to each other in an embrace. The negative space seems almost oriental. Orange with subtle green jowls color the face of one man. The second man has an orange face with subtle yellow jowls. **Plate dimensions 17 x 25 inches.**

193 H A hook descends in the upper left. The figures revolve around the center of the picture. They are varied in texture, density; two are contour figures. There is no communication between the figures. A dog peers up at the contour figure on the left. A blue shape in the



background unifies the scattered figures. **Plate dimensions 17 x 25 inches.**

193 I In the upper portion, a figure reclines fingering a parallelogram. The central bust sporting a hat with a flag stares beyond the viewer. In the lower right, a seated nude faces away from the viewer. **Plate dimensions 25 x 17 inches.**

193 J Busts are drawn in deformity. They are separate and scattered over the picture plane. The large central head looks into the distance. In the lower left, Cuevas created an optical illusion in a cube with faces on the interior and exterior of the cube. At the lower right, a head lays face down as in defeat. **Plate dimensions 25 x 17 inches.**

Text by Sharon Crockett.
Photographs by Angel Hurtado.

All of these etchings by Jose Luis Cuevas are in the Permanent Collection of the Museum of Modern Art of Latin America. (O.A.S.)

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