

Paintings express the things Gonzalez can't say

Completed work shouts at him

By LIS BENSLEY

In a recent video of the artist at work in his studio outside San Jose, Costa Rica, Leonel Gonzalez was captured for a moment all smiles, laughing, breaking into a dance.

"You want to see me dance," he said in his stiff English, laughing at the interviewer. "OK, I dance." A few quick steps, then the laughter ebbed and his face grew serious. Time to talk about the work.

Huge canvases adorned the walls of his spacious studio, examples of two highly diverse and rich periods of his painting career — his earlier *Westfalia* series, stark and primitive black figure silhouettes against a formal linear background and his most recent *Palimpsests*, haunting historical allegories carved out of superimposed imagery that plays appearance against reality.

Outside, the sun lay a sparkling blanket over the rich green fauna as the incessant trilling of birds broke the silence of Gonzalez's concentration.

"Painting is a way of expression," he said at one point. "Paintings say things you can't say."

Throughout his prolific, though short, career, Gonzalez has produced highly expressionistic work that has ranged from colorful renditions of Caribbean blacks to haunting monochromatic figures who seem to hover above the surface to magical paintings layered in homage to history and the resurrection of the human spirit.

A selection of work from Gonzalez's *Westfalia* and *Palimpsests* series goes on view today at Meredith-Kelly Latin American Fine Art, opening with an artist's reception from 5 to 7 p.m.

Gonzalez, whose work has been shown in South America, Europe and the United States, spent two years studying at the Academy of Arts Zurich in Moscow. When asked why, he said quite matter-of-factly, "The academy there is one of the strongest in the world."

His strong traditional European training is evident in much of the work, which plays heavily on interaction of opposites — light against dark, life and death, ancient and contemporary, and the spirit against the mundane.



'Apocalipsis,' acrylic on canvas by Leonel Gonzalez

DETAILS

WHO/WHAT:
Leonel Gonzalez/
Paintings

WHEN:
Opening reception
5-7 p.m. today, Sept. 20

WHERE:
Meredith-Kelly
Latin American Fine Art,
135 Palace

INFO:
Through Oct. 17

"When I look at these canvases, I see myself as a prototype of Latin American identity from a European perspective," he said in an artist's statement.

"During my first trip to Europe at the age of 19, I learned that I belonged to the 'Land of Vines,' the 'Land of Monkeys,' the 'Land of Bananas.' After all, Christopher Columbus didn't arrive in the 'New World' as it is proclaimed in history; he arrived to 'The Indies.'"

"These anonymous figures, dark and poor, tell me about myself, not about the child I knew, but about the young man who looked at himself in the European mirror, trying to see himself the same way he was being seen, and not the way he actually was."

Speaking by phone from his home in San Jose, Gonzalez

talked briefly about the genesis of the *Westfalia* series, a group of paintings that stand in almost disturbing contrast to his more colorful and imaginative work.

"I came to these figures from the paintings I did before of Caribbean people from the Atlantic (side of Costa Rica)," he said. "I was very interested in the anatomy of black people, different from the classical Greek in the West, so typical of the models we worked with in Russia."

"I did several pieces of these Caribbean people. Then I took off the color," he said, referring to this work that arose from his fascination of light against dark, form against negative space, the almost casual marks that feel poised to pounce, or dance, or fly off the canvas.

"Leonel Gonzalez has condensed the figure with his black brush marks, he has flirted with representation and has finally reduced it to sign," wrote Carlos Espinosa in a catalog on Gonzalez's work. "It is as if at the moment at which the evidence of the image fragments, the reshaping of the marks could serve as a metaphor for the human figure."

"This gesture implies a supremacy that enables life's inscription movement and death presence, and legitimates the interdiction of the figurative space."

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