Contributor: Gustavo Larach

**Peñalba, Rodrigo**

Born: 1908 – León, Nicaragua. Died: 1979 – San Pedro Sula, Honduras.

The Central American artist and art educator Rodrigo Peñalba played a key role in the development of modern painting in his native Nicaragua. In 1926 he left his country to pursue studies in Chicago, then Mexico City, Madrid and Rome. Steeped in European visual languages, particularly Post-Impressionism, Fauvism and Cubism, he returned in 1948 to Nicaragua, where he sought to capture in drawings, watercolors and oils the elements he deemed to embody his nation. Upon his return, he assumed the direction of the Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes in Managua. As head of the school, Peñalba did not seek to instill the observance of academic norms in his students. Rather, he prompted them towards experimentation and a freer use of painting materials and techniques. He exhorted artists to paint the Nicaraguan landscape as a way of constructing identity. His art, as well as that of his students, branched into a variety of genres: portraits, still-lifes and religious and indigenous themes. Peñalba helped modernize Nicaraguan pictorial practices by introducing the use of simple planes for his compositions, and bringing the image to rest more on the pictorial surface rather than evoking deep space.

Peñalba became familiar with the pictorial strategies in the work of Paul Cézanne, whose work was collected in Italy as early as late 19th century and his dialogue with the work of European artist is evident in many of Penãlba’s early canvases, developed when the Nicaraguan modernist was a student in and around Rome during the early 1940s. In a work from 1940, *Paisaje de Anticoli* (oil on wood, 119x72cm, private collection), Peñalba structured space mainly through color, using intense tints of ochre and sienna for the frontal planes of buildings and sloping road, diverse shades of green for the surrounding vegetation, and cold, gloomy grays for a cloudy sky. His gesture of depicting the architectural volumes of this picturesque Roman province, lying on a steep sloping hill, is reminiscent of similar works by Cézanne. A blunt portrait of a farmer, *Campesino de Anticoli* (1943, oil on canvas, 74x54cm, private collection), evokes early Cézanne portraits by way of its thick impasto, its stark contrasts of light and dark, simplified composition, and unarticulated black background.

In Nicaragua, Peñalba painted the land and cityscape with bright colors, using often an impressionistic palette, which María Dolores Torres has interpreted as connoting an emotional attachment to his native country (1995: 34). In other themes, however, he used less saturated colors. *El descendimiento* (1953, oil on canvas, 91x67cm, private collection) presents a somber palette: grays and blacks plus accents of ash white. Large obscure masses press against the pictorial plane: the robes of (presumably) the Virgin Mary and two other figures. These dark areas engulf the distorted body of Christ, which contrasts dramatically against them. Tangible brushstrokes modulate the forms of figures, clothes and the reduced landscape, and the dense impastos on the surface are used sculpturally. A somber, dark palette characterizes also a work made ten years later: *El mendigo* (1963, oil on wood, 119x72cm, private collection). Here the figure has been composed of abstracted and simplified elements, tightly confined inside the picture plane. This cubist re-composition of rather discrete elements incorporates also textural contrasts, a further modernist device introduced by Peñalba into Nicaraguan pictorial practices.

The artists of the Praxis Group (active 1963–1972) would soon take up this expressive accumulation of matter on the pictorial surface to great discursive effect. Praxis was a cooperative studio and exhibition space for modernist art, which gathered the Managua-based group of painters of the same name. While it is unclear whether Peñalba held direct links with the group, many of its members were former students of his and their work is connected with Peñalba stylistically: simplified compositions, use of non-traditional materials in their canvases, ludic explorations of form and space, and expressive accumulation of matter on the pictorial surface. The founders of the **Praxis Group** were **Alejandro Aróstegui** (b 1935) and **César Izquierdo** (b 1937). It also included **Arnoldo Guillén** (b 1941), **Omar De León** (b 1929), **Genaro Lugo** (1946-2010), **Efrén Medina** (b 1949), **Roger Pérez de la Rocha** (b 1949), **Leoncio Sáenz** (1936-2008), **Orlando Sobalvarro** (1943-2009), **Luis Urbina Rivas** (b 1937) and **Leonel Vanegas** (1942-?).



Rodrigo Peñalba, Untitled (1945) oil on cardboard. Collection Art Museum of the Americas

http://www.artmuseumoftheamericas.org/collection/cpg15x/displayimage.php?album=search&cat=0&pid=160#top\_display\_media

Nicaraguan poet Ernesto Cardenal has stated that, for Peñalba, painting was a way of discovering all the Nicaraguan things he himself embodied (Ibid.). Cardenal considers Peñalba’s depictions of Nicaraguan landscape and recreations as part of the national patrimony. For the poet, the portraits Peñalba made of agro-industrial barons, poets, presidents, and bank executives, among other sitters, represented their subjects with a thorough psychological exposure, often “accusing the sitter” as it were. Cardenal laments that, as director of the National School of the Fine Arts in Managua, Peñalba worked with a measly budget and under the indifference of the Somoza regime, which was hostile to artists yet sought to impose its standards on them. Nonetheless, Peñalba’s work is today part of a solid Nicaraguan cultural tradition and played in its time a liberating role. Many prominent artists from Nicaragua and the Isthmus were his pupils: Armando Morales (Granada, Nicaragua, 1927-2011), who played a prominent role in subsequent developments of Latin American abstraction andPictorialism, and the founders of the Praxis Group during the 1960s, Alejandro Aróstegui (Bluefields, Nicaragua, 1935- ) and César Izquierdo (Santa Cruz del Quiché, Guatemala, 1937- ), whose practices involve a strong sense of commitment.

**Further Reading:**

Cardenal, Ernesto (1987), 'Rodrigo Peñalba', *Bildende Kunst,* 35 (4), 154-55.

Craven, David 'Peñalba, Rodrigo', *Grove Art Online. Oxford Art Online*. <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T066151%3E, accessed April 8, 2014.

Kupfer, Monica E. (1996), 'Central America', in Edward J. Sullivan (ed.), *Latin American Art in the Twentieth Century* (London: Phaidon Press).

Torres, María Dolores (1995), *La modernidad en la pintura nicaragüense, 1948-1990* ([Managua]: Banco Nicaragüense) 27-39.

**List of Works:**

Rodrigo Peñalba, *Paisaje de Anticoli (A view of Anticoli),* 1940, oil on wood, 119x72cm, private collection.

Rodrigo Peñalba, *Campesino de Anticoli (Anticoli Peasant),* 1943, oil on canvas, 74x54cm, private collection.

Rodrigo Peñalba, *El descendimiento (Descent),* 1953, oil on canvas, 91x67cm, private collection.

Rodrigo Peñalba*, El mendigo (Beggar)*, 1963, oil on wood, 119x72cm, private collection.