

José Antonio DÁVILA

Illusion, Appearance and Reality

October - November 2012



The seduction of still life is lost in the vast history of art, as is the heated debate triggered by this genre of painting. It's a never-ending topic, just like subjugation. Given that the process of thinking about art refuses to obey rules other than its own, it often tends to lag behind the leaps and bounds of creative development. While art advances ahead of existing prejudices, pride often blinds reason and emotions.

Still life paintings document the history of culture. They are testimonies to changes in mindsets and ways of thinking and acting. The objects that are selected within the genre belong to specific semantic fields, such as private or family scenarios, pleasure, leisure or decoration. But they also relate to moments of contemplation such as *vanitas*, *momento mortis*, the passage of time and death.

Latin American art has tended to overlook the genre and only a few visionaries considered it to be an inexhaustible type art. These visionaries included Diego Rivera (Mexico); Claudio Bravo's bundles of objects (Chile); the boxes and mirrors painted by Santiago Cárdenas (Colombia); Amelia Peláez's laid tables and Julio Larraz's pared-down images (Cuba). In Venezuela there are two key proponents: Marcos Castillo and José Antonio Dávila. Castillo (Caracas, 1897-1966) studied the Cézannian theme in depth and ultimately pared down his border-less compositions using such thin layers of paint that his works resembled watercolors. I will only refer to the works I consider most important in this text, for thence come the followers, and finally the plagiarists, who are under the arrogant misconception that they have some kind of gift. On the contrary, their premise should be humility and their focus should be on content and technique, for these are the key aspects of the genre of still life.

In José Antonio Dávila's work (New York, 1935), the work of Sánchez Cotán is brought to mind, as could also be the case with Cézanne. However, while using these two artists as his starting point, Dávila creates a different dimension to his work that does not follow universal laws.

It is impossible to walk by one of Dávila's works without being affected by their mystery. They reveal metaphors of an insightful vision of reality in which conscious and subconscious needs merge with social experiences. Colors and forms come together to create harmony and balance, but a secret tension also comes into play.



OFFERINGS CIII (103), 2011

Acrylic on canvas

70 x 70 cm

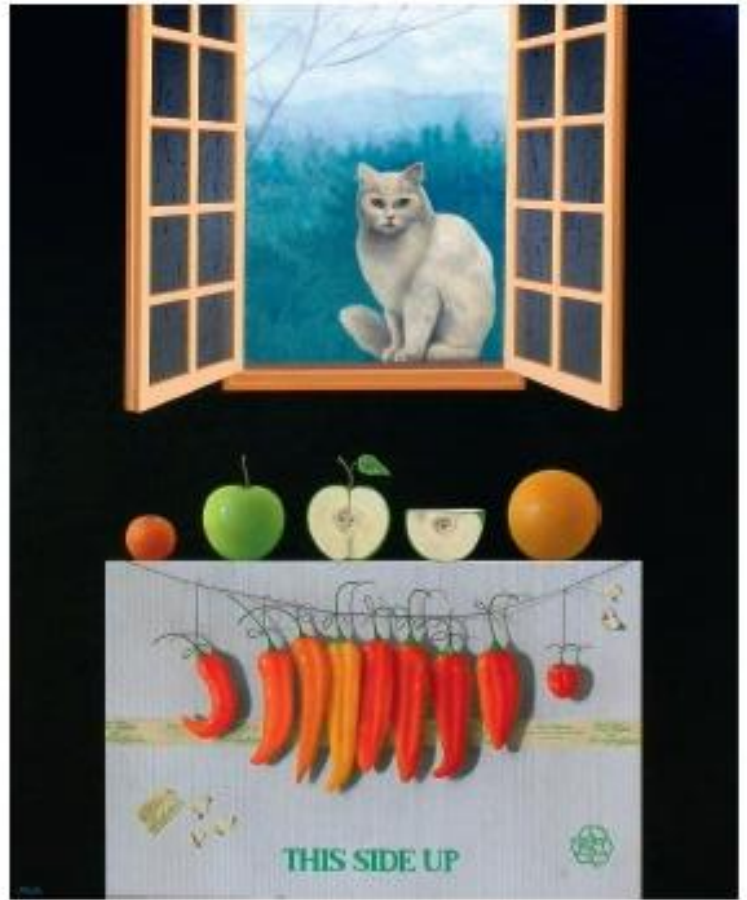


OFFERINGS XCVI (96), 2010
Acrylic on canvas
122 x 132 cm



OFFERINGS LXXXVI (86), 2008
Acrylic on canvas
122 x 132 cm

IN PRESENCE LXXX (80), 2012
Acrylic on canvas
170 x 142 cm



IN PRESENCE LXIV (64),
2008
Acrylic on canvas
142 x 170,6 cm





José Antonio Dávila was born in New York, United States of America, on January 13th 1935. At the age of six he moved to Venezuela. He began painting as a self-taught artist under the influence of Manuel Cabré's work. His teachers included Marcos Castillo, Juan Vicente Fabbiani, Rafael Ramón González, Armando Lira, Luis Alfredo López Méndez and Francisco Narváez. In 1951, at the tender age of sixteen, he had his first solo exhibition at the Centro Venezolano-Soviético and participated in the XII Salón Oficial Anual de Arte Venezolano in the Museo de Bellas Artes de Caracas. He worked in Gabriel Bracho's and Luis Lusick's studios.

| **1953** | Dávila moves to Barquisimeto and enrolls at the city's Escuela de Artes Plástica. He is awarded Third Prize in the I Salón de la Joven Pintura, Asociación Venezolana de Periodistas. | **1954** | He takes part in the XV Salón Oficial Anual de Arte Venezolano, Museo de Bellas Artes, Caracas, and is awarded an Honorable Mention in the Henrique Otero Vizcarrondo Prize for his work *En el patio (In the Patio)*. | **1955** | He lives in Paris and works in Jacobo Borges' studio. He participates in the Salón de Pintores Jóvenes del Colegio de Médicos del Distrito Federal, Caracas, where he receives the prize: Premio Honorífico Doctor Alejandro Rodríguez Delfino for his work *El médico del pueblo (The Town Doctor)*. | **1957** | He is awarded the prize: Premio Roma in the XVIII Salón Oficial Anual de Arte Venezolano, Museo de Bellas Artes, Caracas, for his oil painting *Tarde de fiesta en Sanare (Evening Party in Sanare)*. He takes part in the *Exposición internacional de jóvenes pintores*, Moscow. | **1958** | He is awarded the prize: Premio Armando Reverón in the IV Salón de Arte Julio T. Arze, Barquisimeto, Lara state. He is a guest artist in the I Bienal de Arte de México. | **1959** | He is awarded the prize: Premio Henrique Otero Vizcarrondo in the XX Salón Oficial Anual de Arte Venezolano, Museo de Bellas Artes, Caracas. He settles on Margarita Island, Nueva Esparta state. He is part of the team who founds the Escuela de Artes Plásticas de La Asunción, Nueva Esparta state. | **1961** | He receives second place in the Premio Nacional de Pintura for his work *La calera*, which also wins him the prize: Premio Federico Brandt. He wins the prize: Premio Oficial Julio T. Arze, Gold Medal and Diploma, at the VII Salón de Arte Julio T. Arze, Barquisimeto, Lara state. Fundación Eugenio Mendoza, Caracas, presents the exhibition *Tres Premios del Salón Oficial 1961: José Antonio Dávila, Juvenal Ravelo, Alirio Palacios*. | **1964** | He is awarded the Premio José Loreto Arismendi at the XXV Salón Oficial Anual de Arte Venezolano, Museo de Bellas Artes, Caracas, and the Premio Antonio Edmundo Monsanto at the XXI Salón Arturo Michelena, Ateneo de Valencia, Carabobo state. Solo exhibitions: La Galería El Muro, Caracas; Caracas Theatre Club; Círculo de Bellas Artes de Maracaibo, Zulia state. | **1965** | He is awarded the drawing prize: Premio Emil Friedman para Dibujo at the XXVI Salón Oficial de Arte Venezolano, Museo de Bellas Artes, Caracas. | **1966** | The Fundación Eugenio Mendoza presents an exhibition with Alirio Palacios, Manuel Espinoza and José Antonio Dávila entitled *José Antonio Dávila. Hombre-paisaje en función de humana transformación*. | **1967** | Together with other artists, Dávila is selected by the Press and Culture Council of the American Embassy and the INCIBA to take part in the Cultural Exchange Program in the United States. | **1968** | He participates in the XXIX Salón Oficial Anual del Arte Venezolano, Museo de Bellas Artes, Caracas, where he is awarded for a second time the prizes: Premio José Loreto Arismendi and the Premio de la Sociedad de Amigos del Museo de Bellas Artes. The group exhibition *10 Pintores de la nueva figuración: Mario Abreu, Jacobo Borges, José Antonio Dávila, Manuel Espinoza, Luis Guevara Moreno, Antonio Moya, Roberto Obregón, Alirio Palacios, Alirio Rodríguez, Régulo Pérez* is held at the Sala de Exposiciones Fundación Eugenio Mendoza, Caracas. | **1970** | The group *Presencia 70*, is created, which includes artists such as J. M. Cruxent, José Antonio Dávila, Luis Guevara Moreno, Régulo Pérez, Humberto Jaimes Sánchez, Víctor Valera and Oswaldo Vigas. The Ateneo de Caracas holds the exhibition *Presencia 70 2*, where Dávila exhibits the work *Construcción N.º 10 (Construction No. 10)*. | **1971** | The exhibition *Presencia 71* is organized at the Casa de la Cultura de Maracay, Aragua state, as well as *Presencia and Presencia 70 3* at the Museo de Bellas Artes de Caracas, where the show *El color en la pintura venezolana* is also held. Galería Buchholz in Bogota, Colombia, organizes the *Exposición Internacional de Artistas Contemporáneos*. Dávila moves to New York, where he lives for a year having received a grant from the Consejo Nacional de la Cultura. | **1972** | The painter exhibits in Mexico. Galería Aele, in Madrid, Spain, holds the exhibition *Arte latinoamericano*. Dávila takes part in the IV Bienal de Arte de Coltejer, Medellín, Colombia. The *Exposición Internacional de Artes Plásticas*, organized by the Instituto Italo-Latinoamericano de Roma, travels to the most important cities in Italy, Switzerland and Germany. Dávila travels to New York and signs an exclusive contract with Galería Arte Contacto. | **1973** | The Salón de Arte en el Centro Plaza de Caracas opens and Dávila exhibits the *José Antonio Dávila, encuentro con el hombre modular* at Galería Arte Contacto, Caracas. | **1974** | Galería Aele, Madrid, Spain, holds the exhibition *Ocho artistas venezolanos: Teresa Casanova, Doménico Casanova, José Antonio Dávila, Francisco Narváez, Mercedes Pardo, Max Pedemonte, Alirio Rodríguez, Oswaldo*

Vigas, and Galería Framauero in Caracas exhibits *José Antonio Dávila. Época de construcción 1960-1965*. Dávila exhibits at Arras Gallery, New York. | 1975 | Alongside Luis Guevara Moreno Dávila represents Venezuela at the XIII Bienal de São Paulo, Brazil. | 1976 | He takes part in the group shows: *Pintura venezolana*, Museo de Bellas Artes de Caracas; *Lines of Vision, Recent Latin American Drawings*, International Foundation of Washington, D.C.; *Taller 76*, Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Caracas, and *Actualidad gráfica*. Panorama 1975, Sala Internacional, Palacio de Bellas Artes, Méexico. Galería Gaudí in Maracaibo, Zulia state, holds the show *José Antonio Dávila. Obras recientes*, and Galería Arte Contacto in Caracas presents *José Antonio Dávila. Ámbitos, personas y ventanas*. | 1977 | Dávila participates in the *Exposición Internacional* organized by the Centro Cultural Niavaran de Teherán, Iran, Persia, to celebrate the center's inauguration. He exhibits alongside Casasanta and Soto at Galería Arte Contacto, Caracas. | 1978 | He is part of the Venezuelan Delegation at the Salón de Otoño, Paris. His solo exhibition *José Antonio Dávila. Pinturas*, opens at Galería Bonino L.T.D. in New York. He exhibits alongside Luis Guevara Moreno and Alirio Rodríguez at Galería Freites, Caracas. | 1979 | Dávila takes part in the I Bienal Italo-Latinoamericana de Técnicas Gráficas, Instituto Italo-Latino Americano, Rome, Italy. He takes part in the show *A Wide Scope of Realist Art*, The Art Contact, Miami. | 1981 | He participates in the IV Bienal de Arte de Medellín, Colombia, and the I Bienal Nacional de Artes Visuales (Homenaje a Pedro Ángel González), Museo de Bellas Artes de Caracas, as a guest artist. | 1985 | He presents his solo show *José Antonio Dávila: del encuentro a la revelación* at Galería Freites, Caracas. He is part of the Salón Bijoux Wiso, Caracas. | 1986 | Together with Jacobo Borges, Luis Guevara Moreno and Régulo Pérez, among other artists, he participates in the group show *De la nueva figuración a la nueva imagen: apuntes para una historia*, Galería de Arte Nacional, Caracas. His works are featured in the Latin American Art Auctions at Christie's and Sotheby's, New York. | 1990 | Dávila exhibits at *AGPA 1989-90. Artes gráficas latinoamericanas*, Museo de Bellas Artes, Caracas, and *Magic and Reality*, Galería Kent, New York. | 1992 | His works are featured in the Venezuelan pavilion at Expo Sevilla 92, Spain. | 1995 | He takes part in *Década prodigiosa. El arte venezolano de los años 60*, Museo de Bellas Artes, Caracas, and in *Hergestellt in Venezuela*, Universidad Konstanz, Galerie auf der Empore, Germany. | 1996 | He takes part in the Miami International Art Fair, MIA, represented by Galería de Arte Ascaso, Valencia, Carabobo state. The Mostings Hus Foundation, Copenhagen, Denmark, as part of the Copenhagen 96 Cultural Capital of Europe, presents *José Antonio Dávila. Obras recientes*. | 1997 | The exhibition *Iberoamérica, diferentes expresiones artísticas*, that includes works by Dávila, travels throughout Denmark, Spain, Portugal and several countries in Latin America. Galería de Arte Ascaso holds a solo show by the artist at its stand in Art Miami, Florida. | 2002 | He takes part in Art Miami represented by Galería de Arte Ascaso, Caracas. | 2004 | He attends Art Miami, Florida. He exhibits in Galería Bellarte, Seoul, Korea. He takes part in *Latin American Contemporary Art, 2004*. He receives the prize: Premio Armando Reverón awarded by the Asociación Venezolana de Artistas Plásticos, AVAP. Galería de Arte Ascaso presents the group show *Imagen y figuración*, that features works by Dávila. | 2005 | He is a guest artist at the *Segunda Megaexposición. Homenaje a Jesús Soto*, Galería de Arte Nacional. The book *José Antonio Dávila y su obra* by Antonio Arráiz, published by Armitano Editores, is presented at the book fair FILVEN, Caracas. The book is later launched at Galería de Arte Ascaso. | 2008 | Dávila exhibits works in the group show *Único y diverso* at Galería de Arte Ascaso, Caracas. The Feria Iberoamericana de Arte, FIA 2008 pays tribute to Dávila, who receives the prize: Premio Parnaso. He takes part in ArtBo 2008, Bogota. | 2009 | He receives the Medalla Pedro Ángel González, which is awarded by the homonymous Foundation. | 2010 | As part of the celebrations to mark the opening of the new Galería de Arte Nacional in Caracas, Dávila takes part in the group show *Arte venezolano*. | 2011 | Dávila's works are featured in a group show of works from the collection of the Museo de Bellas Artes de Caracas and in the show *Los rostros de Bolívar*, exhibiting works made in 1983, to celebrate the bicentenary of the birth of the Liberator at the head office of the Gobierno del Distrito Capital. His works are included in two different periods of the exhibition *Génesis de la identidad, una lectura histórica del arte nacional*, to commemorate the bicentenary celebrations of the July 5th 1811, Galería de Arte Nacional, Caracas. The Centro de Arte La Estancia Caracas presents the solo show *José Antonio Dávila. De las construcciones al hombre modular*, which features works made 1967 to 1975: constructions, cabins, passengers and modular men. PDVSA pays special tribute to Dávila by giving him a commemorative plaque. He takes part in the exhibition *El vuelo del color*, held at the Museo de la Estampa y del Diseño Carlos Cruz-Diez, Caracas. The Museo de Bellas Artes de Caracas presents the exhibition *Bestiario*, featuring works from the permanent collection, which includes a work by José Antonio Dávila. The Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Cultura awards him the distinction Maestros Honorarios por su trayectoria y carrera artística, UNEARTES, Caracas. | 2012 | The Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Cultura via the Fundación Casa del Artista awards Dávila its national culture prize, the Premio Nacional de Cultura 2010-2012, for the Fine Arts. Galería de Arte Ascaso presents the retrospective exhibition *José Antonio Dávila. Ilusión, apariencia y realidad*, March-May, Caracas.

Dávila captures the spectator's attention with these pieces. Viewers tend to think they know what they want to look at and what they do not. To defend himself, the artist constantly presents surprising scenes where the viewer feels he is seeing things for the very first time. And as the viewer's gaze is always somewhat distracted, the artist sets up a trap for him.

In this sense, faced with "the eye's indolence" the artist administers the antidote of the *"trompe-l'oeil"*. He presents excessively detailed objects on thoroughly simple backdrops. Along with a dramatic play of unreal light and shadow, which disconcerts the viewer, and flat backgrounds. There are also some enigmas: blackboards, chalk, mathematical formulae and cats that watch us. A dream-like feel can be sensed in impossible planes and vegetables that, in some cases, appear to be levitating. These are not chance compositions. The human eye is used to everyday reality and is not suited to taking in inventive, surprising compositions. Dávila takes fruit from its habitual space and implants it in an unreal, mental space. He turns us into *"slaves of illusion"*. He disconcerts us and makes us think.

These works are captivating and seductive. Nobody would think of reflecting on an orange's sensuality or the fascination of a box that any normal person would throw out in the trash. The tensions between a butterfly that suggests the present and the fleetingness of time. Nobody would imagine the idea that we must vanquish the assault of consumerism by looking at urban detritus.

Dávila's work is also implicitly charged with humanistic protest. The artificiality of the outer world versus the genuine nature of the inner world. The imprint left by the objects that surround us. Memory on a blurry blackboard. The hope of the future in the chalk of knowledge. The fruit that hangs from a thread, like our chance-filled lives. The enduring quality of science and the arts. The terrifying solitude of man who takes refuge in himself. A drama that speaks of the silent theater of the mind.

All these factors combine to make us marvel at José Antonio Dávila's painting. Rather than painting, what we are faced with is soul. And it is the soul that makes us inquire, time and again, into the mystery of how, after so many centuries, still life is a topic that is never exhausted.

Beatriz Sogbe
June 2012



OFFERINGS CV (105), 2012
Acrylic on canvas
112 x 112 cm

AscasoGallery

IN PRESENCE LXXIX (79), 2011

Acrylic on canvas

150 x 190 cm

Antonio Ascaso | Director

Eliás Sultán | Operations Manager

Belarmina de la Torre | Administrative Assistant

Eugenio Moreno | Chief of Maintenance

Carmen Rodríguez | Maintenance

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OFFERINGS XCI (91), 2008

Acrylic on canvas

112 x 142 cm