

FAENZA, ITALY

Nicolás Leiva

Church of San Giuseppe, Palazzo della Esposizione

Like poet's prose, the sculptures of painters trigger an ineluctable caveat. Often they are awkward colonizations of three-dimensional space by images whose natural habitat is the pictorial mind. This is not the case with Nicolás Leiva's ceramic sculptures, in which a new dialogue emerges between the painted beings, patterns, and symbols and the formally conceived space on which they take life. Born in Tucumán in northern Argentina, at the foot of the Andes, in 1958, Leiva, who has lived in U.S. since 1990, divides his time between North Miami Beach and Faenza, Italy. His recent installation of 32 ceramic sculptures, *Il settimo giorno* (*The Seventh Day*), marked the culmination of 10 years in this medium.

The trope governing Leiva's imagination is metonymy, that migration of values and sensations that links origin and adjacency in a transformative circuit. As metonymy transfers associations and meanings across nearness, it alters the presence in mind of its two components. Say, a lady's portrait in a room filled with weapons—what we might associate with her, by virtue of her attire, expression, and body language, interacts with the connotations of weaponry. Both elements are transformed—elegance might acquire ferocity, the weapons might exude a sense of style. Tropes always mean something other than what they say, hence their ill-fitting citizenship in language. And the meanings are always shifting—the lady may be fearless, the weapons as obsolete as her fan and flowery hat.

Leiva, true to Latin American tradition, is a topological visual thinker. His paintings abound with beings that hybridize human, bird, and insect referents; they course through landscapes, vessels, and chambers



Nicolás Leiva, *Il settimo giorno*, 2006. Majolica, 32-piece installation, dimensions variable.

whose chants are uttered in pools, roots, crowns, tridents, flora, imaginary scripts, chalices, tempests—the list scrolls and, like lace, the components mingle into knots. Leiva's capacity for thaumaturgical invention seems boundless. Metonymy harmonizes the habitat in which these incongruous elements interact, and it is a harmony that outpaces the logic of time and the algebra of causality. Leiva's paintings translate into bi-dimensional space not just the content, but also the anatomy, the grammar, of oneiric thought. Which means, of course, that these dynamics of form and space cannot be transposed simply into a sculptural idiom in the way, for example, that Fernando Botero's bronze mesomorphs are extracted from the mise en scène of his paintings.

Maria Vescovo, applying the theories of Alois Riegl, deftly approaches Leiva's ceramic sculptures, and their unabashed embrace of ornamentation, as affirmations of the aesthetic impulse to resist nature and death. Indeed, Leiva's coalescing of symbols and referents—tree-vulva-star-

sperm—obeys that impulse to defy with creative force what will overtake us: time. And a dense fusion it is, but in the sculptures the form itself has morphological presence. The resulting density of visual habitation presents itself at one level as ornamentation, and on another as an attempt to increase the velocity of apprehension.

Most sculptors seek the opposite effect—to slow the grasping of image. Sculpture requires a contemplative pause for it exists in the physical world much more radically than any painting. Even kinetic sculpture engages this temporal bubble, as do almost all installations. But Leiva has always been fascinated with the speed of the mind. It is significant that his transition to ceramics was preceded in the early '90s by the painterly intervention of automobiles, motorcycles, and surf boards—functional objects associated with speed. If metaphor is the trope of simultaneity, metonymy is the trope of movement.

The forms of Leiva's sculptures are born from his transformative imagi-

nation. Seed, chalice, minaret, jellyfish come together in symphonic dice-throws. In his series of "Trees," the ritual lamp and the web of organs emerge like etymologies sparked by a pun. Molten organic forms gel into golden permanence, ritual vessels are at once sacred and profane. There is no wine that the hand cannot turn to stone. Nippled forms congeal the drop's entry into a pool. Even the archetypal sphere beckons to be rolled on the palm of the mind, the patterns of its hemispheres locked in mutual defiance. Color is sucked into the vortex of Leiva's formal invention to announce the outer reaches of subversion, so that panic may copulate with prayer, Eros with meditation. Leiva has advanced the Latin American topological imagination by discovering metonymy's power to alter the clockwork of aesthetic perception.

—Ricardo Pau-Llosa

VENICE

Lucio Fontana

Peggy Guggenheim Collection

"Lucio Fontana: Venice/New York," curated by Luca Massimo Barbero and on view at the Guggenheim Museum in New York through January 21, 2007, was one of the most insightful groupings of work I have seen by this exemplary Argentine-born, Italian artist. By concentrating on Fontana's evolution from the perspective of his life in these two cities, the exhibition offered astute glimpses into how place and time may have influenced his direction. For the duration of his mature career, Fontana was devoted to something called *spazio concreto*—literally "concrete space"—a postwar European aesthetic that never really translated into North America. Here, in the New York School, especially during the '50s, advanced art was generally about Abstract Expressionism and artists were unable to grasp much of anything else. In Europe (and in countries like Uruguay and