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EXHIBITIONS: PAUL FONTAINE

by José Luís Meza-Inda

On entering and at a glance taking in upper and lower floors of this city's Torres Bodet Municipal Gallery, both filled to the rafters with works of a North American painter named Paul Fontaine, whose obsessive theme seems to be a spotlight made of pure color, one could lightly come to the conclusion that he is in for one more exhibition like so many others, where artists mired in the muddy multinational quicksand of abstract art serve up, as novel or original, copies, pastiches and tedious repetitions of a pictorial genre engaged in - like a kind of Esperanto - by thousands upon thousands of so-called artists the world over, whose paintings, however, fall far short of projecting any emotion whatever and are unworthy of so much as a passing glance or a disdainful dismissal, but, like so many worst possible imitations, are rather annoying and irritating.

However, once Fontaine's plastic art has been examined with care in a promenade along the works shown, one verifies that his paintings are not the kind that draw high flown esthetic raptures or teeth-chattering chills by their originality. Rather they are the kind that make the artist's voice heard within the Babel Tower of unconventionality thanks, above all, to a vigorous imagination and an excellent technical skill - a skill often found in foreign painters shown here and only rarely in the Mexican or otherwise resident artists among us - as well as a virtuosity which betokens not only mastery of the craft, professionalism and depth of know-how, but also a decent regard for the visiting public - a regard that should be required of any exhibitor, which lacking, he ought not be allowed to show his works in the galleries of Guadalajara.

But let me get to the point. The assembled works shown are apparently the fruit of Fontaine's sojourn in our country. While in the majority of the paintings he has not attempted - as he says - "the literary interpretation of forms, though Mexico is prodigious in themes and a veritable source of rustic life", it is undeniable that his vision has been enriched by the lights and tints peculiar to these gloomy tropics, and that there is a merging of experience acquired in our environment with that imaginative strain already noted in him, so that his palette, accustomed to the subdued surroundings of Old Europe - where he lived for thirty years - now breaks out here in color that is clean, vibrant and aggressive.

In some of his pictures, stains of color run freely over the surface of fabric or paper. The colors, whether vinyl, acrylic or sharp inks, are combined in a modulation of anticipated musical scales or in violent contrasts, making up compositions where the reds, blues, greens, violets, browns, yellows or ochres are released from all formal allusions, yet have lyrical resonance, vitality and unexpected hints. Other paintings are constructs of identifiable geometric forms overlapping in plane after plane or unfolding with no pattern or rule to follow other than a harmonious rhythm all their own. And there are pictures in which the painter has not risen above the temptation of using objective frames of reference, but he has structured them into manlike figures, vegetable or natural forms, yet removing them from any possible illustrative intention and using them as mere pretexts for accelerating the expressive power not only of his vigorous line, but also of his heightened color.

Be his formula what you will, there abides in each painting the painstaking technique of something planned and carefully carried out, of a plastic virtuosity and of a comely execution in which every chromatic note, every space left untouched, is exactly in place, so that the balance of the composition is not destroyed, but endowed with its precise creative measure and, above all, its obvious decorative projection.-