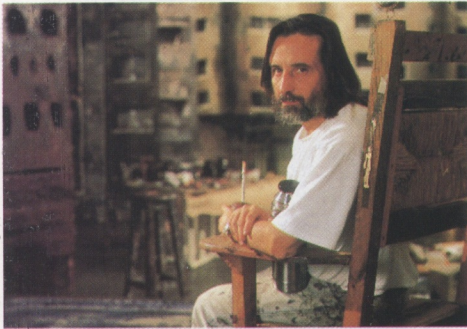


The Irreal World of Ignacio Iturria



Iturria in his Montevideo studio.

OPPOSITE—An armoire doubles as architecture and existential emblem in the 1993 painting Furniture with giraffe.

B y E d w a r d M G o m e z

Inspired by his homeland's earthy palette, the

Art is born of study, tradition, and technique. And, as this century's modernist achievements have demonstrated, art is sometimes born of accident, audacity, and artifice, too. Whatever the origins of works of art, just as they may reflect a range of values—social, cultural, political—linked to their creators' points of view, they usually capture something of the spirit of

Uruguayan artist creates quirky dioramas that

the times and, often, of the places in which they are produced. So it is that the paintings and sculptures of Ignacio Iturria—with their dreamy air of whimsy and free-floating melancholy, and their good-natured philosophical weight—are emblematic products of Montevideo, the sleepy capital of Uruguay, where the artist was born and has long lived and worked.

explore the vulnerable nature of human existence.





Iturria's installation for last year's Venice Biennale included Sofa elefante (Elephant couch) in the foreground, Mi paseo en willow (My stroll among the willows) behind, and Ellos, vosotros y yo (They, you, and I) to the far right. Below: detail of Mi arbol floreció (My tree has grown, 1995).

In fact, Iturria's art mirrors the search for national identity and the cultural tug of war that still pulse through the societies of both Uruguay and neighboring Argentina. A visitor can detect that pulse in everything from casual conversations to the stylistically varied architecture of Montevideo and Buenos Aires, the little/big, provincial/cosmopolitan pair of cities on either side of the wide Río de la Plata that are the commercial and cultural hubs of the continent's south-eastern region.

Iturria is one of South America's most important living painters. He is also one of the most original artists of a generation that came of age during the 1960s, developed its ideas in an increasingly global, media-monitored art world a decade later, and matured creatively during the '80s, but remained quite apart from that era's hype-driven market centers in North America and Europe. "I don't like to travel; I really don't even like to drive," the reserved but amiable Iturria admits. "The truth is, I'm happiest when I'm in the studio, painting."

Iturria's workspace is in a separate building only a few minutes' walk from the modest brick townhouse where he lives with his wife and four children in a quiet Montevideo



suburb. Iturria's studio is his laboratory, playpen, and refuge; it is filled with found or cast-off objects—old wires, a rusty metal strainer, rocks, scraps of wood—that the artist has transformed with a few daubs of paint into animated creatures with beady little eyes, or into imaginary vessels carrying squirming loads of tiny, ant-like passengers. Here, Iturria likes to lean his paintings, sometimes four or five deep, against the walls for storage and for easy reference while he is developing new works.

Iturria, now 47, exhibits his work in galleries in the U.S., Europe, and South America. He has had museum shows in recent years in Washington, D.C., and Mexico City, and a survey of his art, including many new pieces, can be seen through the end of December at the North Dakota Museum of

Art in Grand Forks; this past summer, a smaller selection was on view as part of an international group show at the California Center for the Arts Museum in Escondido. Last year, he filled Uruguay's national pavilion at the Venice Biennale with "Looking at Ourselves with Empathy," a group of moody tableaux, sculptures of papier-mâché and cardboard, and paint-transformed found objects that was one of the highlights

Lovers cuddle and cavort on the oversized

of the centennial of Europe's best-known international art showcase.

There, a Biennale jury awarded Iturria a special acquisition prize. Among the sprawling fair's uneven offerings of cheerless installations and conceptual art long on polemics but short on memorable ideas, the Uruguayan painter captivated audiences with his art's warm spirit and the freshness of his poetic, playfully pensive imagination. From its welcoming title to its rich, earthy tones of brown and gray, Iturria's Venice show, like all of his art, could be seen and felt as a declaration that the tonic of humanism—one part compassion, one part wonder, one part stubborn curiosity about what makes us tick—has not evaporated, even in these stress-choked, angst-driven times.

But Iturria's portraits of human exis-



tence—of people alone on big sofas in cell-like rooms; tucked in, side-by-side, in gigantic metal beds; or staring plaintively, like anonymous Edward Hopper figures, from their windows—are never sentimental or sweet. Instead, with their air of reverie, the murkiness of Iturria's palette, and his straightforward, unfussy brushstrokes (or sometimes non-strokes that he squeezes straight out of the paint tube), the images evoke a unique sensibility that finds affinities somewhere between the bitter-sweet nostalgia of Federico Fellini's memory films and the gritty, soul-baring candor of the paintings of Francis Bacon.

Something about Iturria's work is visceral, too. "It's in his colors, it's in the texture of his paint," observes the Uruguayan poet and writer Hugo Achugar, the shy artist's close friend and one of the few people who regularly visits the normally off-limits inner sanctum of his studio. "Ignacio uses a brown like the one you see in the water of the Río de la Plata." Viewed from the air or from the promenades (*las ramblas*) that snake along the waterway's sandy riverbank beaches, it's a muddy hue streaked with the white of the river's gently rolling waves.

Iturria washes variations of a brown like this one over many a canvas; they are his luscious, signature colors. Sometimes he lays them on thick, as in the series of paintings on canvas or cardboard called "¡Que Viva la Vida!" ("Long Live Life!"), in which squirts of oil paint right out of the tube form faces and bodies groping, swimming, and drowning in vaguely nocturnal, oddly primordial scenes. Here, for example, in a recurring Iturrian motif, worm-like

tables, beds, and couches in Iturria's spooky-funny world.



Left to right: *Sofa chakra* (Farm couch); *Lo femenino* (The feminine); and *Apocalipsis* (Apocalypse). Above: *Algún día haremos un viaje* (Someday we will make a journey).

"With its colors, its melancholy, its concern for

heads or bodies flow like water from a spigot that is also an uncertain animal's head, and pairs of lovers cuddle and cavort on the oversized tables, beds, and couches that are the centerpieces of their spooky-funny world.

If Iturria finds inspiration in the local landscape, he finds it in certain boyish passions too—for *fútbol* (soccer), toy soldiers, and the goofy bric-a-brac that he collects, like bowling pins and little masks—and in the moods and manners of his countrymen and their neighbors across the river. For, like no other part of the European-settled Americas, the Río de la Plata region evokes the ambiance and attitudes of the Old World.



independence from European mother countries gave painters of the new nations of the Americas the freedom—and perhaps an obligation—to experiment with techniques and subject matter. For, as they were forging locally rooted styles and home-grown aesthetics that reflect their societies' values and aspirations, they helped to shape emerging notions of national identity.

"With its colors, its melancholy, its concern for



Dinner may start at 10 P.M. or later, as in Madrid. A certain stylishness prevails in everyday sights and gestures, from the domes and façades of still-grand turn-of-the-century apartment buildings to the simple serving of café con leche with *medialunes* (literally "half moons," or croissants) in the ubiquitous cafés lining Parisian-like boulevards. Local residents cite the late Argentine writer Jorge Luís Borges's keen observation that Montevideo remains oddly time-warped, an enduring reminder of what Buenos Aires looked and felt like 40 years ago. Indeed, with its boxy buses, tidy shops, and pedestrians strolling down the Avenue of the 18th of July sipping strong *yerba mate* tea through metal straws stuck in hand-carved gourds, the Uruguayan capital appears frozen somewhere between the late 1940s and the pre-Beatles '60s.

"Just as our population in the Río de la Plata region was made up of Italian, Spanish, French, British, and other immigrants," explains the Buenos Aires-based art critic and educator Alberto Collazo, "our artists inherited the traditions of Italian, Spanish, and French academic painting. Europe's influences have been powerful." At the same time, though, Collazo and other Latin American art experts point out, geographic distance and



Clockwise from left: Iturria's tiny, oil-on-cardboard figure sketches rest atop a stretcher frame in his studio; Table with spoons (1991); detail of the 1995 painting *Fears*.

society, Iturria's art speaks to us directly," says Angel Kalenberg, a distinguished art historian and director of the National Museum of Visual Arts in Montevideo, who explains that Uruguayans are a close-knit people. But, he adds, Iturria's art also "touches upon fundamental themes about human nature and transcends its origins in this specific locale and offers a universal appeal." Kalenberg has followed the evolution of Iturria's art over many years and served as the commissioner-curator of his installation at last year's Venice Biennale.

A historic link exists, Kalenberg suggests, between Iturria's art and that of the pioneering Uruguayan painter Pedro Figari (1861–1938) whose work, like that of Juan Manuel Blanes (1830–1901), helped give visible expression early in this century to the sense of national identity

that arose in the maturing Uruguayan state established by patriots in 1828 after struggles against Spanish, then Portuguese, colonists. Figari worked

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*Iturria's collection of
bric-a-brac treasures, from
which he derives motifs for
his art, includes antique
toy soldiers religious
icons, and old photographs.*

Edward M. Gomez



from memory painting with sly humor thickly impastoed images of colonial-era people and events, including medallion-framed portraits of grandparents, weddings, and gatherings in public squares. Figari showed his countrymen where Uruguayans had come from.

As it is in Figari's work, memory is a powerful force in Iturria's art. But as a thoroughly post-colonial artist, Iturria's vision, without any trace of nostalgia, is grounded in a sense of the eternal present that his images seem to convey. It's a self-conscious sense of memory that appears to waft through his work, calling forth the uniformed schoolchildren, soccer players, gauchos and horses, farm fields, furnishings, and porcelain platters that are the stock figures and props that fill the still, silent, stage-set scenes he depicts. In paintings like *Fears* (1995), inanimate objects are zoomorphized: a faucet doubles as a horse's head, or a sofa acquires an elephant's bulk—and feet. In pictures and sculptures like *My Tree Has Grown* (1995), furniture becomes architecture, as highboys or bookshelves transform into skyscrapers—and existential emblems—whose occupants lean or stare out from their “balconies” or “windows” as if to declare, with silent cries, “We, too, exist!” In other works, a washbasin or a pan is at the same time a lagoon full of human bathers or a watering hole for horses. And often the floor of a plain Iturrian interior containing a table or a bed is also a country landscape, complete with roads and farm buildings and trees set against a broad, beckoning horizon. Typically, Iturria portrays everything with a few simple, economical strokes.

Many of Iturria's large works begin as small sketches on scraps of cardboard the size of playing cards. That his images often pack visual puns comes as no surprise, for Iturria began his art career studying advertising design. He also sets many

of his scenes in box-like spaces whose formats recall predella paintings, which usually depicted stories of the saints. Iturria began developing his own image-enclosing forms during the decade that he lived in Cadaqués on Spain's sun-washed Catalan coast. “My paintings were all white and Mediterranean blue then,” he recalls. “I'd place human figures in empty rooms. Those pictures reflected my environment; they were all light and transparency.” Iturria had reluctantly left for Spain (his father was a Spanish Basque) with his family after military forces seized control of Uruguay in the early 1970s. He returned to Montevideo in 1986, and thereafter his palette changed as his mature style evolved.

“I needed to get back to this environment, to the colors of this earth,” he says. “A sense of consideration for other people and a sense of community, of nation-family, that are so much a part of Uruguay and, I believe, the central themes of my art—I needed to be back here to be in touch with this spirit, with these forces.” Iturria also speaks of a personal sense of responsibility, as a visual artist, to continue contributing to Uruguayan cultural life.

Relatively isolated (happily so) and undistracted by art-world politics and follies, Iturria lives to paint. But because the unreal world he creates on paper, cardboard, and canvas says so much, so unaffectedly, with gentle, sometimes quirky humor, his imagination has stirred an international audience. And that's no accident. For, in the muddy textures of his art, Iturria is really painting the universal ties that bind us all in our fumbling, sputtering, shivering, bleeding, and vulnerable family of humankind. And maybe his beloved Río de la Plata homeland is actually our own backyard, just as his nameless figures and unlikely beasts are the messengers of an art that laughs with us at our foibles and trembles at our fears. □