



Luis Cruz Azaceta

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Johnson County Community College • Gallery of Art

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An unspoken assumption about self-portraits is that they tell us something about the life of the artist. When we see a painting by Picasso, for instance, with the artist standing before an easel with a model, we naturally assume that the scene is based on the life of the artist in his studio. Likewise, when we see a self-portrait in an obviously invented situation, we often interpret the scene as an allegorical representation of the artist's state of mind. Such has been the case with the work of Luis Cruz Azaceta, an artist who has painted hundreds of self-portraits, portraying himself as a cockroach, a dog, a gunman, a coke head, a person with AIDS, a *balsero*, Mickey Mouse, a homeless person and a host of other figures.

Azaceta's works have often been interpreted as allegories of the artist's emotional response to his exile from Cuba in 1960 at the age of 18. Yet Azaceta's self-portraits do more than explore his own life or demonstrate his ability to identify with others; they deconstruct the very notion of identity. He creates a public "self," but it is not *himself*. Looking at his paintings is not like having a face-to-face encounter.

It's more like meeting on the Internet – you never really know who's on the other end.

The tendency to interpret works of art as allegories of personal experience is particularly prevalent in writing about works by artists of color, especially if they are known to be exiles or immigrants or to have lived through violent political events. But when the telling of an artist's life story becomes a substitute for exploring the aesthetic dimensions of the work, its structures of representation and its meanings, the work's social significance becomes neutralized. As critic Thomas Lawson has pointed out, when the distance between reality and representation is collapsed, the result is a denial of history, and art is mistakenly seen as "the acting-out of impulse, rather than the reflexive discipline of the imagination."¹

Azaceta's charged subject matter, fluid brushstroke and distortion of color and form have been associated with expressionism and, by extension, the search for a visual language with which to convey an "authentic self." Yet, however Azaceta's works might appear to fit into an expressionist model, the paintings do not originate from the psychic stimulation of the inner world

in search of a sensory equivalent on canvas. They come from the artist's critical response to the conditions of the material world, the political forces that undergird them and the search for a visual vocabulary with which to communicate. Azaceta uses self-portraiture to incisively analyze and critique social structures that dehumanize people and reduce them to abstractions, statistics or, worse, threaten their lives. He uses his own image to continually re-examine the relationship of the individual to society, bearing witness to the AIDS epidemic, racism and xenophobia and the experience of living in a social system that increasingly disregards basic human needs. To interpret Azaceta's paintings as images of the artist's own existential despair would be to deny their ability to affect consciousness, to educate and to participate in history.²

In *S.O.S. Tanker II* (1992), a ship is set against an irregular patchwork grid that looks like an aerial view of an agricultural landscape. Red lines traverse the canvas like borders on a Rand McNally map. Black discs, some containing numbers, hover on the surface of the picture. At the bottom of the painting is a small blue circle containing a figure (the artist) who signals to the large ship



AIDS Carrier, 1989, acrylic on canvas, 77½" x 144", courtesy Frumkin/Adams Gallery, New York

with outstretched arms. The painting's subject, a life or death confrontation between the tiny swimmer and the huge cargo ship, refers to the many *balseros*, or Cuban refugees, who have been rescued at sea by tankers. The tiny figure signals to the ship, but he also signals to us, the viewers of the painting, compelling us to pay attention to the situation of refugees just off the shores of the United States, a situation created in part by the policies of the U.S. government. The use of multiple perspectives – the frontal view of the ship, the aerial view of the figure and the circular forms that pull our eye to the surface of the canvas – compels us to experience the painting on multiple levels. Our eye traverses the canvas, focusing on one spatial plane, then another, each one sparking a series of associations while resolutely denying a "safe harbor." The artist is not recounting a scene from his own life (in fact, Azaceta flew directly from Havana to New York shortly before this air route was closed). Instead, he serves as a messenger.

Many of Azaceta's works incorporate grids, a compositional device that can sometimes be used to convey stability, but which in Azaceta's case suggests just the opposite. In *No Exit* (1987-88), the grid threatens to trap the figure. In *Ark* (1994) and *The Immigrant* (1994), Azaceta uses gesso, a paint primer, to create a white on white geometric armature, an almost invisible structuring device that suggests the absence of solid ground. In these and other works one thing transmutes into another. In *The Immigrant*, hands become tiny wheels suspended from wire-like arms. In *Ark* and *Homeless: Blind Can Collector* (1991) the figures' arms are transformed into tools of survival: one arm becomes an oar, another an instrument for collecting discarded cans.

Each painting results from a complex process of working and reworking the canvas. Such metamorphoses also occur in Azaceta's overall methodology. He tends to work in series, exhausting a style or technique before moving on to the next. In the 1970s he painted pictures of tough New York City life in a graffiti-like style that drew on the visual language of pop art. His palette was colorful, his forms hard-edged and his



The Aliens: Refugee Count II, 1989, acrylic on canvas, 120" x 96", courtesy Frumkin/Adams Gallery, New York

sensibility sardonic. Scenes of limbs severed by subway doors and bloody stabbings set against surrealistic cityscapes captured the energy and absurdity of a city depicted as if it were the most dangerous place in the world. In the 1980s Azaceta began to paint with a looser brushstroke, and soon his all-over compositions gave way to more centrally composed canvases, often featuring a single, brightly colored, confrontational figure acting out a role. In the late '80s, abstraction and language became major features in his work, as in *No Exit*, one of Azaceta's most graphically arresting paintings. In many of his recent works, such as *AIDS Carrier* (1989) or *Refugee Count II* (1989), Azaceta generates fields of

numbers with a feverish compulsiveness, scrawling figure upon figure to create visual death tolls.

In the early 1990s, Azaceta started incorporating photographs. His first works in this series featured street signs that highlighted the pervasiveness of voices of social control. The street sign in *Park* (1995), for instance, admonishes visitors to keep their dogs leashed. But Azaceta soon realized that his vision was best served not through the use of actual photographs, but by collaging found images within the plastic frames of Polaroid pictures. This method allowed him to retain a consistency in size and format while incorporating a wider range of imagery. In *Ark*, pictures of hubcaps, sharks, a raft and a crouching



No Exit, 1987-88, acrylic on canvas, 121½" x 228", courtesy Frumkin/Adams Gallery, New York

self-portrait, suggest fragments of a *balsero's* treacherous journey. In *The Immigrant*, pictures of a food processor and a blender ironically suggest both the materialism of The American Dream and the mixing of cultures that inevitably accompanies the movement of people across borders. The Polaroids are "tethered" by painted cords, as if they were hanging in "real space" on the canvas. The difference in scale between the monumentally painted images and the tiny collaged photographs provokes viewers to approach and retreat, creating alternately a sense of intimacy and distance. Far from being visual traces of the physical world, these "photographs," like the other elements in Azaceta's work, are consciously constructed.

As Stuart Hall has written, identity is a concept always in formation: "[Our] relationship to the past is quite a complex one, we can't pluck it up out of where it was and simply restore it to ourselves."³ To the extent that Azaceta's works present a "self," it is a multiple self, always in flux. Like the reconstructed figure in *Broken Man* (1993), it is always in the process of becoming.

– Susan Cahan
art historian and deputy director,
The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York

¹ Thomas Lawson, "Last Exit: Painting," in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis. (Boston and New York: David R. Godine Publisher and The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), pp. 154-155.

² See essays by Susana Torruella Leval and Philip Yenawine in *Luis Cruz Azaceta: The AIDS Epidemic Series* exhibition catalog published by the Queens Museum of Art, New York, 1990.

³ Stuart Hall, "Ethnicity: Identity and Difference," *Radical America*, Vol. 23, No. 4, June 1991, p. 19.



Park, 1995, acrylic, Polaroids and shellac on canvas, 96½" x 83½", courtesy Frumkin/Adams Gallery, New York. Photo: Will Drescher

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– Bruce Hartman
director, JCCC Gallery of Art

Cover: *Ark*, 1994, acrylic, charcoal, Polaroids and shellac on canvas, 110½" x 119½", courtesy Frumkin/Adams Gallery, New York.
Photo: Will Drescher

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