Santiago García Sáenz: Inner Life

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Santiago García Sáenz was one of the most outstanding painters of his generation. Nonetheless, his work's place in the history of Argentine art of the nineteen-nineties is uncomfortable. During that decade when the queer and contemporary image emerged in the country's aesthetics, García Sáenz produced painting with social and religious content. While his art was sometimes seen as anachronistic, its distance from the contemporary was the very basis for a stance at once spiritual and aesthetic.

And that distance was not happenstance. Art produced in Buenos Aires in the nineteen-nineties was governed by a secular logic that, though longstanding in the twentieth century, was, in the nineties in Argentina, a response to two specific circumstances: neoliberal modernization, which dismissed religion as irrelevant and unproductive; and the experience of dictatorship (1976–1983) that led a generation to eschew dogmas and hierarchical institutions. In that atmosphere, artwork for which Catholicism was a deep conviction, not a visual resource, was hard to process—though that was not the case in other Latin American countries or regions: in Brazil and Central America, for instance, religiosity, especially vernacular religion, played a central role in the construction of contemporary art.[1] To understand Santiago García Sáenz's work, we must understand his life; we must grasp what stimulated him, what almost always existential questions impelled him.

That going against the grain had direct consequences for the reception of his work. The agenda of the nineteen-nineties art scene clustered around the Centro Cultural Rojas was readily identifiable: bring a minority sensibility previously disdained in culture and politics into the terrain of artistic production.[2] With his representational painting, religious iconography, and ties to the vernacular cultures of the Americas, García Sáenz did not fit in, which meant that he did not enjoy the recognition later bestowed on the art of that decade. The voices that legitimized his work corresponded to an earlier moment in the country's art and its institutions. Their judgments, though rigorous, were not part of the renovation of the artistic field underway in Buenos Aires at the time. Tellingly, Jorge Gumier Maier, curator of the Galería del Rojas and pivotal figure in the art scene of the nineties, did not include García Sáenz in his 1995 text on artists living with HIV/AIDS. That omission evidences the silence surrounding HIV/AIDS beyond certain circuits. Like the Rojas artists' and others involved in

[1] Notable examples include José Leonilson (Fortaleza, 1957–São Pablo, 1993), who lived with AIDS, and Belkis Ayón (Havana, 1967–1999). Their approaches to religious references diverged: Leonilson incorporated Christian symbology in a subtle and conceptual fashion, while Ayón's work built a repertoire of themes both universal and very much his own on the basis of the beliefs of the Abakuá brotherhood.

[2] Under the direction of Jorge Gumier Maier from 1989 to 1996, the Galería del Centro Cultural Ricardo Rojas of the Universidad de Buenos Aires was one of the most influential centers of Argentine art of the nineteen-nineties. The tendency associated with camp and gay culture that that venue championed was in open opposition to the conceptual and neo-expressionist languages prevalent at the time.

that artistic renovation, García Sáenz's life was profoundly affected by the virus. He too experienced the effervescence of Buenos Aires after the return to democracy, and he was a member of the same generation. What they did not have in common was a language. Another omission, this one arguably more glaring, is in *Artistas argentinos de los 90* (1999). Published by the Fondo Nacional de las Artes, that volume, with reproductions of works by the artists who defined the period, is the most encompassing book to date on that decade. It makes no mention of García Sáenz.

In this text, I will describe the artist's life not only to shed light on his production but also to broaden the representation of the period in question. An overview of García Sáenz's biography and work is also a revision of what has been left out of the canon of the nineties. At the core of that revision are questions related to HIV/AIDS as well as how images allowed him to convey what he could not say by other means.

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Santiago García Sáenz was born in 1955 in Buenos Aires, the city where he would die in 2006, one day before turning fifty-one. Mostly produced between the mid-nineteen-eighties and the early aughts, his highly narrative and symbolic work is characterized by intense exploration of spirituality.

In his images, scenes of mystical revelation mingle with masculine figures and devotional tales, some from the Gospel and others pagan. The sacred and the ordinary come together in a single experience. García Sáenz's journey as an artist was not linear. It was, rather, a slow and sometimes contradictory process where two forces—awareness of his finiteness pursuant to his diagnosis and his growing Catholicism—were intermingled. It is in that arc of tension that his imaginary began to take shape.

Santiago García Sáenz was born to an upper-class Catholic family. In that milieu, creative practice was in not eschewed, but rather affirmed as a premise, and that marked his childhood and youth. By the time he was five, he was taking art classes at the Instituto Santa Ana de Bellas Artes in Buenos Aires. That was where he came into contact with the work of Maurice Denis, a symbolist painter crucial to the renovation of religious art.[3] García Sáenz's grandmother, María Susana Bosch, who had studied in Paris, introduced him to the art world and gave him a sense of the intellectual bohemia of the first half of the twentieth century. That early contact with art expanded through studies in architecture and classes with painters like David Heynemann and surrealist artist José Luis Moraña, both of whom were active on the Buenos Aires scene of the time. While his choices may have strayed from the norms of his family, his family was also what made his art education possible. Further, they provided him with the social skills needed to form ties with influential people.

Starting in the late seventies and through the early eighties, Santiago García Sáenz produced a series of drawings in notebooks and on worksheets (Villanueva, 2017). Steeped in humor, these drawings with surrealist sensibility combine court

[3] Maurice Denis was the author of Histoire de l'art religieux (1939). See Cuello, 2021, pp. 148–161.

scenes and ordinary situations. At play is an immediate gesture as the artist tests out images, narratives, and obsessions that would appear, transformed, in his later work.

During those years, the artist's social life revolved around the galleries, charming streets, and dance clubs of the Barrio Norte section of Buenos Aires. In 1977, at the tender age of twenty-two, he showed at Galería Lirolay. While no longer the avant-garde venue it had been in the nineteen-sixties, that gallery was beginning to show emerging artists like Guillermo Kuitca and Alejandro Kuropatwa. In the following years, García Sáenz exhibited at Christel K, a small gallery owned by Christel Küker—a fellow student of Moraña's—in the Recoleta neighborhood. Jorge Gumier Maier also showed plaster sculptures inspired by his lovers at that gallery. A diverse group of young people was beginning to forge a path for itself in Buenos Aires despite an ongoing dictatorship that often led artists to withdraw to their studios and show exclusively at commercial galleries.

In 1982, Santiago García Sáenz started working at Ruth Benzacar's gallery, located in her home, which had previously belonged to her grandmother, also in Barrio Norte. While Santiago García Sáenz's art remained at the margins of mainstream Argentine art and its narratives—be they tied to the themes of Argentine painting, modernism, or contemporary art—the fact that he worked at a paradigmatic venue like the Ruth Benzacar Gallery connected him to the model of a serious artist dedicated to his work and career.

It was, for a twenty-something artist like García Sáenz, a learning experience to have direct contact with the artists represented by the gallery, artists who, in the early eighties, were beginning to appear in texts on art history and to circulate on the art market. It was only natural that he came into contact with art critics and figures that had been central to the country's museums in the seventies and eighties, individuals like Samy Oliver, Samuel Paz, and Guillermo Whitelow. Their generous and rigorous perspective on García Sáenz's work was formed from a place no longer at the center of innovation in art. Friends like fellow artists Clorindo Testa, Nicolás García Uriburu, and Josefina Robirosa were important interlocutors as his painting developed.

Thanks to biographical research by Bárbara Golubicki (2021), we know that Santiago García Sáenz frequented Buenos Aires dance clubs like Experiment and New York City as well as an exclusive gay discotheque called Too much. That said, he was extremely reserved about his sexuality. What we know about that aspect of his life is fragmentary and its presence in his work oblique. It was in the uproarious nineteen-eighties in the wake of the dictatorship that the artist became an ardent Catholic. As he himself recalls, an existential crisis in 1986, product of addiction, led him to pray and, then, to give up the nightlife for good. Prayer was a mantra that would give him peace, and the Gospel according to Saint John a teaching that would abide by him his entire life and provide him with spiritual salvation.

In these years, Santiago García Sáenz started work on his series *Te estoy buscando América* [I Am Looking for You, America] (1986–1992). While the theme of his work was beginning to come into focus, he had yet to grow into a language of his own. Like many artists working in Buenos Aires at the time, he drew on neo-expressionism, the dominant strain. In paintings in oil and enamel, an idea that would be with him until the end emerged: the search for a lost world—or perhaps a

new world—where individuals, nature, the ancestral, and religion commune. In his highly expressive, large-format compositions in vibrant colors from these years, the Indigenous and the local Hispanic tradition come together on a single plane. García Sáenz would eventually turn away from neo-expressionism in favor of a more simple painting grounded in the vernacular.

This turn in the artist's painting coincided with an event that would alter the course of his life. While we cannot say for sure, everything seems to indicate that he learned he was HIV positive in 1988. At that time, there was no cure for AIDS. The diagnosis, which amounted to a death sentence, deeply affected young people in Argentina who, after the military dictatorship, were beginning to lead freer lives. While the first cases of HIV/AIDS in Argentina date back to 1982,[4] awareness of the virus did not become widespread until 1988. That was when Miguel Abuelo, leader of the band Los Abuelos de la Nada, and Federico Moura, leader of the band Virus, died of AIDS-related complications. Also in 1988, the World Health Organization declared December 1 World AIDS Day, and in Argentina the Ministry of Health launched the campaign "For life, against AIDS" (López Perea, 2022). The virus was an ominous presence, especially for gay people. It worsened discrimination in unthinkable ways.

That same year, Santiago García Sáenz began venturing outside the city to find peace. At the recommendation of artist Líbero Badíi, he traveled to northern Argentina and Bolivia. While there, he met up with artist Liliana Maresca, who had also been diagnosed with HIV/AIDS just a few months earlier. They continued their journey together and became close friends. It was at this juncture that the two forces I mentioned earlier—awareness of finiteness and strength drawn from Catholic faith in the face of death—converged.

In 1990, García Sáenz and Maresca showed together at Centoira gallery in Buenos Aires. That exhibition would prove important to understanding the transformations underway in García Sáenz's work. The expressive gesture and large format were nowhere to be found in these works, and the furious reds were replaced by a meticulous use of color that evidences his admiration for Renaissance masters. From this point on, his surfaces were dreamlike, muddled and murky. The medium-format paintings also from the *Te estoy buscando América* series in the show depict Marian revelations, Nativity scenes, landscapes, and villages. Groups of small figures are placed before the vastness of creation, and the divine embodied in, among other things, nature.

Over the course of the nineteen-nineties, his connection to religion deepened. His health was fragile at times. The loneliness of an afflicted figure in prayer became a constant in his images.

[4] According to the archive of the Fundación Huésped—a foundation founded in response to the AIDS crisis that advocates for providing vulnerable populations with access to health care—the first cases of HIV/AIDS in Argentina were identified at the Hospital Juan Fernández in Buenos Aires.

In addition to the aforementioned trips to towns in northern Argentina, Santiago García Sáenz returned to his family estate, Namuncurá, on many occasions. Another important trip in 1990 was to Paraguay, where he showed at the Museo del Barro in Asunción and visited the Tupäsy-María Benedictine Monastery, a silent religious residence in vernacular architecture. Located in Santiago de Apóstol, Misiones province, Argentina, the monastery is visited by pilgrims from around the world.

In Paraguay, he became friends with Carlos Colombino, an artist whose work joined formal experimentation with a critical vision of history and identity. Colombino was the founder of the Museo del Barro and an advocate of vernacular and Indigenous arts. His broad understanding of art exercised an undeniable influence on García Sáenz. The artist's trips to the outlying provinces of Paraguay, especially the zone that borders on Argentina and Brazil, were another turning point in his production. He spoke of "coming to know God à la Paraguay" (García Sáenz, 2005, p. 73)—a God with Jesuit, Franciscan, and Benedictine roots.

Because García Sáenz understood the importance of mixture, he was able to capture cultural dynamics beyond the confines of the nation state—an experience furthered by trips to Mexico and Ecuador in 1992. In those countries, he came into contact with mother cultures and ancestral worldviews. García Sáenz visited Xalapa—once the land of the Olmecs—Oaxaca, and Cuernavaca as well as a number of regions of Ecuador. Gods, divinities, symbols, and nature coexist in a mutable syncretic balance completely alien to a univocal and rigid idea of Catholicism that was, at times, more bourgeois than Christian. García Sáenz brought back to Buenos Aires those images and that syncretism. That said, the territory closest to him, the one most pressing for him at that time, was in Buenos Aires.

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That territory was Hospital de Clínicas, the public hospital where Santiago García Sáenz and Liliana Maresca started volunteering in 1990. They would accompany patients, vulnerable people who often received no emotional, let alone financial, support from their families or anyone else. García Sáenz and Maresca were living with HIV; they knew how to help others, how to listen to them and soothe their pain at moments of uncertainty. Indeed, the suffering endured by individuals was, in the work of both artists, almost always presented in the framework of historical and collective traumas. For Maresca and García Sáenz, illness was not an occasion for victimization, but an opportunity to bring to the fore, in their art, social and political questions.

Each artist's response to that common experience was very different. Maresca took on the political body in her work, rendering her own image, which she exposed unabashedly, an act of resistance. García Sáenz, meanwhile, displaced that experience on to the figure of Christ—an afflicted body, but one mediated by tradition, by faith, and by the distance implicit to the symbol. That difference between the two was not only formal. At stake was how to make visible what society preferred not to see. But that is not the only thing at play: Maresca was able to tackle those common topics head-on because she had broken the silence; García Sáenz had not. And in that difference lies

something that goes beyond the aesthetic, something illuminated by the development of each one's art.

It was in this context that García Sáenz began work on one of his longest series, *Cristo en los enfermos* [Christ in the Sick] (1990-2003). The multiple Christ figures are reclining, each in his own hospital bed, surrounded by Jesuit ruins in lands that had witnessed wars and grave injustices. This is a collective Christ, victim of indifference and disease, of power struggles and political corruption. Exhibited for the first time at the Centro Cultural Recoleta in Buenos Aires in 1997 and later at the Centro Cultural de la Rivera in Asunción, the series is a powerful—and metaphorical—image of what the nineteen-nineties would be: a decade marked by the neoliberal splendor of Carlos Menem's administration in Argentina, the AIDS epidemic, and the impoverishment of the society as a whole.

While in these years Santiago García Sáenz's painting was, overall, more placid, the contrasts in the atmospheres—the religious and the mundane, the countryside and the city, the mythical and the modern—grew more intense. Unresolved dichotomies organized the greatest challenges tackled in his painting. At the same time, a sense of hope tied to his religious faith was palpable. As he put it, "pain must not be in vain; it must serve to build" (García Sáenz, 2005, p. 77).

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That conviction was put to the test on July 18, 1994, when a car bomb exploded at the entrance to the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA), a Jewish cultural center located in the also historically Jewish Once neighborhood of Buenos Aires. That terrorist attack, the most deadly in Argentina's history, left eighty-five dead and three hundred wounded. Santiago García Sáenz's studio, a gathering place for artists, was located at 562 Uriburu Street, just a few blocks from the AMIA.[5] If the artist's disease occasioned self-awareness and led him to embrace religion and to travel throughout Latin America to come into contact with its cultural wealth, the AMIA attack affirmed his commitment to the abiding power of faith and art in the face of violence.

The AMIA attack led to another group of paintings, this one titled *Sufriendo la intolerancia* [Enduring Intolerance] (1994 –1998). The title of the series's closing work is the date of the terrorist incident. On one side of the image we see the artist alone in the intimacy of his studio, painting an image of a moribund Christ. On the other, the exploding building, stunned people desperately trying to escape, a Star of David, and a menorah. Here, the gentle and slightly incandescent light with thin gold base characteristic of García Sáenz's painting is tinged with gray smoke. On one side is a Christ figure, seated and dejected, almost anonymous, and above him the phrase "conceived without sin." This small image within the painting does not represent a guarantee of redemption, but faith put to the test. The artist would return time and again to this idea of a forsaken Christ amongst us, in the city, humanized in his sorrow.

[5] In 1991, Santiago García Sáenz, Marcelo Saint, and José Garófalo set up their studio in a space they themselves constructed on the ground floor of a building that belonged to the Catholic Church. Known as the "Rancho urbano" [Urban Cottage], the studio was a gathering place where artists such as Fabián Burgos, Manuel Esnoz, Magdalena Jitrik, Marcelo Zanelli, and Sergio Vila worked at one time or another.

Explicit references to homosexuality are few and far between in Santiago García Sáenz's work. Nonetheless, eroticism and an excessive masculinity signal something latent in his private life as well as the group of people that supported him, many of them killed by AIDS. The Christ figure in his paintings acts as a symbol for the brutal landscape of the nineteen-nineties and early aughts. Furthermore, an earlier homosexual experience underlies the figure of the Christian martyr, namely the loneliness and social hostility experienced by one who strays from the norm.

The martyr figure has been appropriated to dissident ends over the course of history, and the beautiful and youthful Saint Sebastian occupies a central place in that tradition. The image of his wounded body pierced by arrows joins pain, ecstasy, and desire. In the mostly small-formal works in the *Mártires* [Martyrs] series, which García Sáenz began in 1997, the religious element is displaced onto a gay ethos that is still not fully asserted on the plane of representation.

The fact of being gay and Catholic and living with AIDS is the personal backdrop for García Sáenz's martyrs paintings. They convey suffering and—indeed above all—the artist's inability to disclose his diagnosis, though over time his friends and, eventually, his family would find out and support him.[6]

Early in this essay, I mentioned the omission of the name Santiago García Sáenz in Jorge Gumier Maier's unpublished essay *Tres artistas con sida* (1995).[7] I am curious about the reasons for that omission beyond the obvious fact that García Sáenz did not exhibit at the Galería del Rojas. In his text, Gumier Maier speaks of the work of Alejandro Kuropatwa, Liliana Maresca, and Omar Schiliro. Though those three artists are quite different from one another, they have something primordial in common. Art was, for all three, a response to the impact that the virus had on their lives. At the time the essay was written, Kuropatwa was the only one of those artists still alive. Another artist left out of Gumier Maier's reflection was Feliciano Centurión, who died in 1996. Centurión was one of Gumier Maier's favorite artists, but he was not public about his HIV status. Indeed, upon closer look it becomes clear that all the artists included in Gumier Maier's essay were public about their experience with HIV.[8] The stigma associated with the disease, understood specifically as the symbolic violence endured in the public sphere by those subjects that violate the social norm or are not

[6] According to one of his brothers, the artist told his family about his HIV status sometime in 1994 or 1995—that is, almost eight years after getting the diagnosis. March 2026.

[7] Still unpublished, the essay is one of the texts by Jorge Gumier Maier that addresses the issue of the HIV emergency most explicitly. I had the opportunity to peruse the manuscript in the archive of writer María Moreno in Buenos Aires in 2018.

[8] Omar Schiliro made public his HIV status in a joint interview with Jorge Gumier Maier, Alfredo Londaibere, and Marcelo Pombo. See Hernán Ameijeiras, "La única posibilidad del arte es la evasión," *La Maga*, Wednesday, July 7, 1993, p. 40. Liliana Maresca spoke of her HIV status in *Vivir* (1994) directed by Pablo Reyero, the first documentary produced in Argentina on people with AIDS, asymptomatic people living with HIV, and relatives of those affected by the disease. Alejandro Kuropatwa constantly spoke in public about his experience of living with HIV, especially after 1996, when he exhibited the series *Cóctel* (1996) [Cocktail]. One year earlier, he had participated in the show *Faggots* (1995) curated by Bill Arning. Held at the Galería del Rojas, that show was a curatorial and activist project that condemned government indifference and public discrimination against HIV–positive people.

functional to it (Eribon, 2001), was not, in these artists' practices, paralyzing. They responded by confronting that stigma and working it through in their art.

None of that holds true in the case of García Sáenz. The stigmatization was not expressed publicly—it operated within him. Even his autobiography *Ángel de la Guarda. 50 años de dulce compañía* is silent about his homosexuality and his HIV status. While his family and his Catholicism were social spaces and spaces of knowledge that guided him as an artist and enabled him to build an imaginary of his own, they also served to keep him in the closet (Kosofsky Sedgwick, 1990). The word stigma was once used to refer to something branded on the body—often the bodies of slaves and criminals—as a sign of disgrace. In Christianity, though, stigmas are Christ's wounds. That which marks exclusion is turned into a sign of holiness. The Christian martyr is precisely the one who bears witness to that exclusion in his body in a seminal semantic inversion: the mark of shame becomes the mark of glory.

And something of that semantic inversion is at play in the *Mártires* series. García Sáenz either could not or did not want his homosexuality or his HIV status to be known publicly. He did, however, bring it to bear on his painting. The bodies of his martyrs are not abstract allegories, but the image he found to speak of what, in his own life, he could not say by other means.

In *Returning to Reims* (2013), one of his most autobiographical books, Didier Eribon asserts that insult and shame are inscribed on the body before subjects have words to name themselves. In painting, García Sáenz found the words he could not say out loud. The *Mártires* series is, in that sense, a deferred coming out, a rendering on the canvas of what was inside the closet. The Christian martyr offered him a socially acceptable language capable of representing pain and desire without naming them directly. What Gumier Maier overlooked in 1995 was the singular nature of an experience of stigma that had not found its way into the public sphere. Unlike other artists, García Sáenz turned sickness and desire into a wound that a retrospective vision would eventually be able to read.

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In the years that followed, Santiago García Sáenz's life was put to the test by complications resulting from HIV. He came close to death while hospitalized for throat cancer at CEMIC hospital in Buenos Aires. Awareness of the vulnerability of a minority faced with an epidemic became widespread as the crisis worsened in the late nineties. At the threshold of death, the artist's did not withdraw from life but, on the contrary, lived more intensely thanks to the love and support of his friends and family. It was during this period that he produced some of his most impressive works, like *Intolerancia en Medio Oriente* [Intolerance in the Middle East] (1999), *Mártires del Ocean* [Martyrs of the Ocean] (2000), and *San Miguel en Buenos Aires* [Saint Michael in Buenos Aires] (2003). In those works, the visual richness of the compositions is in harmony with a narrative replete with historical and cultural references.

Of those paintings, *Intolerancia en Medio Oriente* (1999) is perhaps the one that best illustrates the breadth of his creativity. Here, there is no Christ to anchor suffering in the religious tradition, no identifiable scene that acts as historical document. Dominant on the surface of this work are nude male bodies amidst ruins and smoke. Some of them flee, others dance, and others are just there, their physical presence beyond allegory. Eroticism is more evident in this multitude of men in motion than it is in any other work by García Sáenz. Paradoxically, catastrophe here forges a territory of exception: surrounded by so much destruction, the bodies that in others series come before us as martyrs are, here, strikingly free.

In *Gratitudes*, a notebook of writings and drawings created from 1997 to 2004, the artist wrote the words "Hope that life not go away." In hard times, under the weight of his diagnosis, Santiago García Sáenz finally found an image of his own, one organized around his spirituality. The sacred and the ordinary together usher in an iconography that longs for an ideal world without losing sight of conflict. And that vision informed the path García Sáenz took, one in direct opposition to the global agenda being thrust on the art world of the period. With conviction but without ostentation, he turned painting into a placid experience; with mastery, he pursued an art human in its repertoire and commitment to everything, not only art.

The question of why García Sáenz is relevant today is not just historiographic. His work broached a conversation that Argentine art has yet to finish processing: how to link spirituality and dissidence, faith and the afflicted body, devotion and social critique, without one of those terms cancelling out the other. His work anticipated a sensibility that Latin America would come to understand as a fertile terrain very much its own, a place where religiosity and sexual dissidence are not mutually exclusive but, rather, mutually sustaining. Forms of an inner life that by no means withdraws into itself, but rather finds in others its reason for being.

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