

Let it Rain, Let it Rain... The Search for Atmosphere in Santiago García Sáenz

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After one too many, we left the bar in Buenos Aires where so many artists and agents in the contemporary art scene gather. We went in the wrong direction—instead of ending up in Plaza San Martín, we found ourselves in Plaza Roma. Without realizing it, we had ventured down Leandro N. Alem Avenue. Farther along, the dense downtown gives way to the extravagant grandeur of Puerto Madero. Someone had told me about that plaza and that avenue—I know, it was in response to my questions about Santiago García Sáenz. He must have passed by lots of times—all the Buenos Aires night owls did, they told me, on their way to a hookup, on the trail of some pleasure or disappointment. But things were different back then. At the corner of Alem and Córdoba today is the construction site of what promises to be a spectacular skyscraper designed by Foster + Partners. Expected date of completion, according to the internet: 2028. But do you really think so? With everything that is happening in the world, in Argentina, in Buenos Aires?

There was a time when heading down to the warehouses of Dársena Sur at night, when delving into that dimly lit zone and stumbling into pockets that appeared out of nowhere meant venturing into a place without much surveillance in a country where surveillance and repression were component parts of everyday life. It was in 1991 that the transformation of that territory began in a stunning operation of gentrification that would wipe away that area's productive and social past to install luxury buildings. The champions of so-called progress were fairly euphoric. But since then there has been crisis after crisis: the emptying out of the downtown office buildings in 2020 in the pandemic; vertiginous swings in the exchange rate; one administration, and then another, and now this one... It is not uncommon in this region of the world to pay a high price for that sort of euphoria.

On a single corner, a palimpsest of a people's times, of their desires, dreams, and frustrations. Maybe I should change the opening of this text I am writing about García Sáenz's work. Yes—I should probably say that what we see in the images of the urban spaces in his paintings is precisely that layering of memories and fates. A layering of the desires of the people and the desires of García Sáenz himself as they might have come before him back when Puerto Madero was experienced and then destroyed as opaque haven and as they come before us today.

What happened in that interval? Francisco Lemus's text in this publication successfully contextualizes the historical revision of García Sáenz underway in recent years. The other cornerstone of that revision was the exhibition of his work curated by Pablo León de la Barra and Santiago Villanueva and held at the Colección AMALITA, Fundación Amalia Lacroze de Fortabat in Buenos Aires from July to November, 2021—the first institutional and anthological exhibition of Santiago García Sáenz (Buenos Aires, 1955–2006) after his death.

In any case, his work's Catholic iconography and titles no longer convince anyone that the themes and meaning of his art are exclusively religious. It is understood that those symbols are also allegorical stand-ins for more earthly and personal feelings tied to the carnality, sexuality, mortality, hope, and stigmatization of someone steeped in the hedonism of Argentina's gay scene, someone who chose to keep his sexuality a secret and who lived for many years under the debilitating effects of HIV. Likewise, no one should be fooled by the apparent pictorial simplicity of his works—there is nothing superficial about them. Loose brushstrokes, clusters of like colors—some pastel, some brownish, others yellowish—simple and easily identifiable figuration, intuitive perspective: none of that reflects a reduced repertoire or poor technique, but rather the conscious pursuit of a deeply empathetic language, a language recognizable to diverse audiences, an emotional and suggestive language with none of the overly codified operations of an experimental avant-garde.

García Sáenz wanted to communicate his emotions directly. Allegory was the filter he chose for his biography. What a contradiction—or maybe not. The writing and the drawing in the diaries and notebooks published in this book for the first time are dazzling. They are also an important gateway to understanding how the apparent contradiction at play in his work was also a motor for his creativity. His anguish before his HIV status, combined with his faith, enabled him to further, with hope, his constant pursuit of immanence and belonging. And that implied endless displacement and visits to multiple landscapes. At the same time, that faith provided him with metaphors to keep up his commitment to the safety and care of all those who have lived or live subject to stigma or persecution, who have endured massacre or silencing. People like him, but many others as well—hegemonic power always finds reasons to justify hate. And he did so while turning idealized landscapes and nighttime city scenes into atmospheres floating outside the time of daily life—something that was only possible by spreading pigment with long, loose, and gentle brushstrokes, with vulnerable brushstrokes.

Let's take a closer look at one case. García Sáenz began his best-known series, *Cristo en los enfermos* [Christ in the Sick] in the early nineteen-nineties, after he and artist Liliana Maresca started working on a volunteer basis with seriously ill patients at Hospital de Clínicas, a public hospital in Buenos Aires. The origin of the first canvas in the series lies in the story of confinement and pain that a truck driver in the urology ward told the painter, who immediately brought it to canvas. That work was acquired by artist Carlos Colombino, founder of the Museo del Barro in Paraguay, an institution where García Sáenz showed on several occasions.

There are two clear references in this series. The first is the War of the Triple Alliance, which became a recurring theme in García Sáenz's work once he began traveling to Asunción. The second is the HIV/AIDS crisis, which took the lives of many of García Sáenz's friends, some of them artists, over the years; the artist himself was HIV positive. The spaces where his Christ figures appear vary widely, from lonely rooms to makeshift tents in the outdoors. The vision in this series is tied to both the drawn-out suffering of the dying and a combat wound inflicted suddenly.

Many of the elements in this series reverberate in *Deseando misericordia* [Craving for Mercy] (2001), now part of the Centre Pompidou's collection in Paris. Two rows of hospital beds run through an ethereal and monumental space; the outlines of

bodies under the white sheets suggest lost presences or shrouds. On the right-hand side is a prostrate nude figure, most likely the one craving mercy. Christ emerges in ambiguous fashion in the upper portion of the canvas. It might be an icon that is part of the building itself or it might be a religious vision. No less ambiguous is the cross at the end of the central passageway. Unique here is how this scene of melancholy and finiteness is painted. A personal approach to pictorial techniques held in little esteem by the avant-gardes and post-avant-gardes is at play in the rendering of an atmosphere, a field of color and light no less relevant to the perception of the work than its figures and symbols.

This is just one example of many. García Sáenz was a prolific artist, and his creative project well defined, even if he did not spell out all of its parameters. His poetic project is at once personal and collective, which is why he is one of the many artists now widely recognized for work at the intersection of questions sociopolitical, intimate, and sexual in nature: Liliana Maresca herself and Sergio De Loof in Argentina, Leonilson and Hudinilson Jr. in Brazil, Mónica Mayer in Mexico, and Carlos Leppe in Chile.

But because he strove to become a palpable and enduring light, García Sáenz's path was different. It was not bound by conceptualisms or the spoken word, and—mostly—it shifted focus away from the body and its image. In his work, the body is a sign of presence fated to dissolve into the atmosphere. His pictorial operation was, in essence, the pursuit of a state of immanence that, in the Catholic lexicon, is linked to the divine and the elements of nature.

We might look in the Bible, in 1 Kings (1 Kings 19: 11–12), to the passage Mira Schendel chose for her installation *Still Waves of Probability* (1969): “Go forth and stand upon the mount before the Lord. And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice.”

We might then look in this book for the page of the notebook where García Sáenz writes “LET IT RAIN... LET IT RAIN...” under a very watery watercolor of an atmospheric space in colors that range from light blue to lilac and gray. Then we might close our eyes. Imagine if all that rain—named but indiscernible amidst so many blotches of color—fell before the body or inside of it, if it fell on the landscape or on history.

The rain no longer falls over the Buenos Aires nights of cruising after the dictatorship. Nor does it fog over the dream of economic growth behind the hiring of Norman Foster and his army of architects. It falls, rather, between things, in that intermediate zone between memory and silencing, between desire and repression. That rain is a prayer—a prayer that is Catholic, but much more as well.