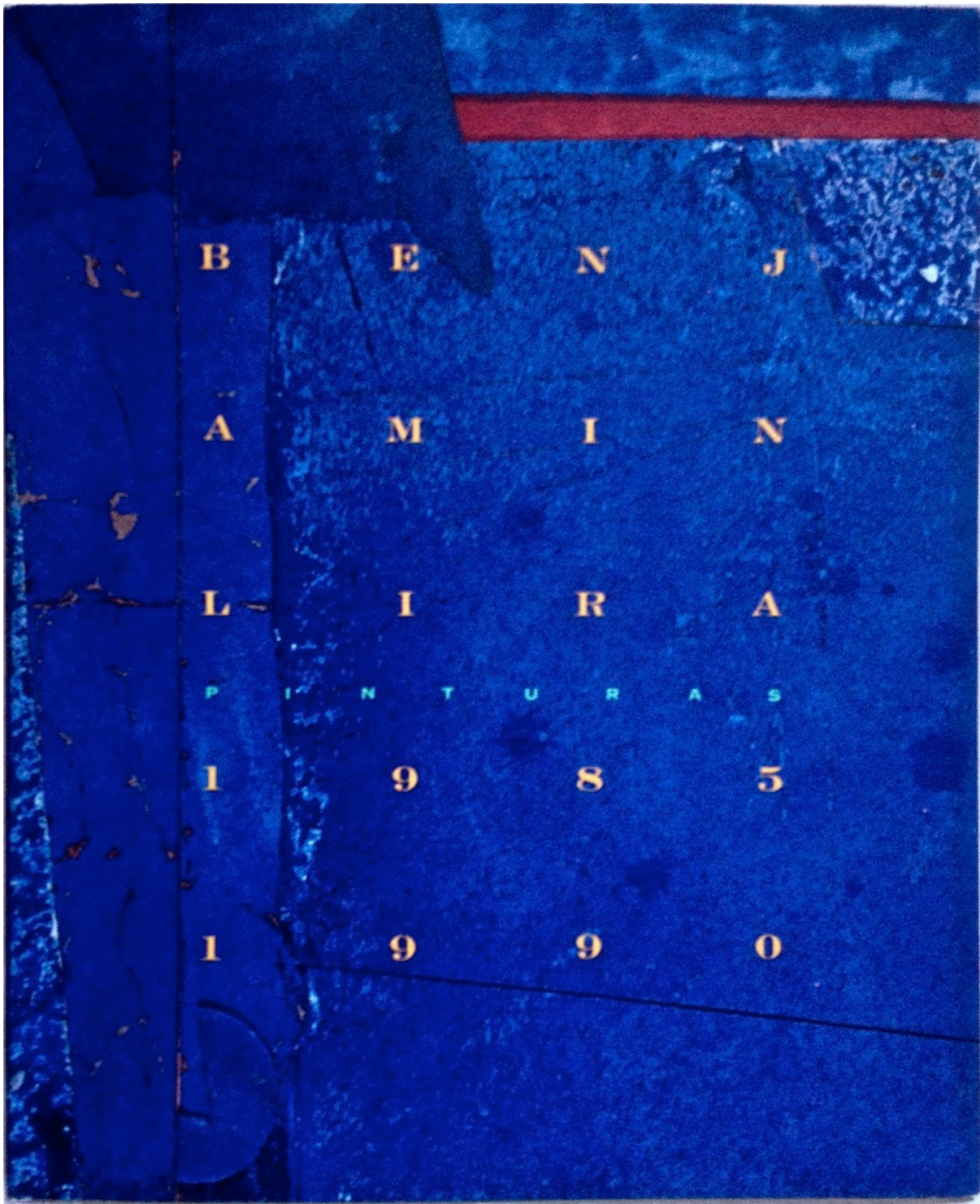




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BENJAMÍN LIRA
P A I N T I N G S 1 9 8 5 - 1 9 9 0

THE HUMAN FIGURE, IN ALL ITS VULNERABILITY, UNIQUENESS AND UNIVERSALITY, IS THE SUBSTANTIVE CORE OF THE PAINTINGS OF BENJAMÍN LIRA. FOR LIRA, THE FIGURE EMBODIES ALL THE ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS OF PAINTING; FORM, LINE, COLOR, TEXTURE AND HUMAN EMOTION. OVER THE YEARS, LIRA HAS APPROACHED THE FIGURE AS SUBJECT AND OBJECT; HE HAS STUDIED AND SEARCHED OUT ITS CONSTRUCTION, ITS INTERNAL ARCHITECTURE (AS HIS EARLY CAREER STUDY OF VESALIUS WOULD SUGGEST), AND THOROUGHLY RECOGNIZED AND ACKNOWLEDGED ITS ROLE AS THE PERPETRATOR AND CONDUIT OF ALL THINGS BOTH MIRACULOUS AND MALIGNANT.

LIRA'S PORTRAITS FROM 1985-86 ARE STUDIES OF AN ALMOST PAINFUL PERCEPTION, STRIPPING AWAY THE VEILS OF SURFACE EXPRESSION TO UNCOVER THE UNDERLYING CONSTRUCT OF THE SOUL. THE EYES AND FEATURES OF THESE FACES ARE IMPLACABLE, GUILTESS YET ARE QUITE SELF-POSSESSED, THEIR THOUGHTS A MYSTERY TO THE CASUAL VIEWER. THE NAKEDNESS OF THE FIGURES IN *FAMILIA* (1985) SERVES TO UNDERScore THEIR UNADORNED NATURALNESS, A FAMILY PORTRAIT REDUCED TO ITS ESSENTIALS. THE EFFECT OF THESE SINGULAR FIGURES, THEIR ERECT POSTURE AND SELF-ASSURANCE, IS LIKE THAT OF A GREEK KOUROS OR AN EGYPTIAN STATUE, AND SHARES WITH THESE ANCIENT ICONS A QUALITY OF TIMELESSNESS. IN FACT, THESE PAINTINGS ARE NOT MERELY PORTRAITS, SINCE PORTRAITURE IS A RENDERING OF THE SALIENT FEATURES OF AN INDIVIDUAL, BUT RATHER COMPOSITES, COMPILATIONS AND RECOLLECTIONS THAT FOR LIRA SERVE AS, OR FOR, THE SUMMATION OF HUMAN CHARACTER. LIRA'S FIGURES ARE NO LESS COMPELLING, THOUGH FAR LESS OVERTLY DRAMATIC, THAN THEIR CLASSICAL ANTECEDENTS, THE ATTIC VASE PAINTINGS OF THE ARCHAIC PERIOD, IN WHICH THE INTERIOR LIFE OF THE INDIVIDUAL IS REVEALED IN THE SUBTLE NUANCE OF FORM, COLOR AND PRECISE LINEAR CLARITY OF THE HUMAN PHYSIOGNOMY.

13

LIRA'S DISTINCTLY IMPERSONAL GAZE, THE DETACHED YET INCISIVE OBSERVATION OF THE HUMAN FORM, AND ITS RESOLUTE INTEGRATION WITHIN THE PICTORIAL SPACE, IS TRACEABLE TO THE INFLUENCE OF THE WORK OF PIERO DELLA FRANCESCA. BERNARD BERENSON OBSERVED THAT PIERO'S IMPASSIVE VISION OF HUMAN HISTORY IS ALL THE MORE REVEALING IN ITS UNDERSTATEMENT OF (VISIBLE) EMOTION OR EMOTIVE STATES. THE STRENGTH OF HIS WORK COMES NOT FROM WRITHING BODIES OR GRIMACING FACES, BUT FROM THE CAREFUL CONSTRUCTION OF A SCENE WHICH CONVEYS THE GRAVITY OF THE FLAGELLATION OR THE RESURRECTION, WITHOUT RELYING ON EXCESSIVE MOVEMENT OR GESTURE. LIRA'S FIGURES ARE COMPARABLY SELF-CONTAINED; THAT IS THE EXPRESSION IN THE GESTURE IS MINIMALIZED AND ALMOST IMPERCEPTIBLE AT TIMES. THE DISROBING FIGURE SEATED IN A CHAIR, IN *TRANSFIGURATION* (1985) OR GAZING AT A LANDSCAPE AS IN *MYSTERION* (1987), LOOKING IN A MIRROR, OR OUT A WINDOW IN *ENYGMIA* (1986), ARE ALL ENGAGED IN ACTIVITIES (OR INACTIVITIES) OF SOLITUDE, OBVIOUSLY A FAMILIAR AND UNAVOIDABLE STATE OF BEING FOR THE ARTIST. SUCH A CONDITION (OF ISOLATION) SERVES LIRA AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO EXPLORE THE BASIC FIGURE/GROUND

RELATIONSHIP IN THE MOST REDUCTIVE POSSIBLE MANNER. THEIR NAKEDNESS ALLOWS LIRA TO STRIP THEM OF THEIR EXTERNAL ARMOR, HAVING THEM FUNCTION ALTERNATELY AS SILENT PRESENCES, APPARITIONS, STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS OR EVEN EMISSARIES OF LIGHT.

EVEN MORE SIGNIFICANT THAN HIS IMPASSIVE VIEWPOINT IS LIRA'S DECEPTIVELY SIMPLE CONSTRUCTION OF PICTORIAL SPACE. LIRA INCORPORATES HIS ACTORS (AS THEY OFTEN SEEM TO APPEAR IN A THEATRICAL SETTING) WITHIN AN ELUSIVE, FLUID ENVIRONMENT THAT IS OFTEN SIMULTANEOUSLY INTERIOR AND EXTERIOR. IT IS THE BODY OF WORK, EXEMPLIFIED BY *THE HISTORIAN* (1986); *LIVING WITHOUT A MYTH* (1988) AND *LIBERTAD II* (1988) THAT CALLS TO MIND THE INTIMATE INTERIORS OF VUILLARD AND, MORE PARTICULARLY THE SUN DRENCHED, BRILLANTLY HUED VIEWS OF SOUTHERN FRANCE OF PIERRE BONNARD. HOWEVER, THE LIGHT IS SO PERVASIVE IN THESE PAINTINGS, AND THE DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN ROOM AND LANDSCAPE SO BLURRED BY VIBRANT COLOR, THAT THE MOST APPROPRIATE COMPARISON IS TO THE LUMINOUS PAINTINGS OF THE MORROCAN PERIOD, CA. 1912-13, OF PIERRE MATISSE. LIRA'S USE OF VERTICAL PLANES OF GLOWING PURE COLOR BATHES THE FIGURES IN AN UNRELENTING, EVANESCENT, ALMOST PITILESS LIGHT, WHERE ALL SECRETS ARE DISCLOSED, ALL MODESTY DISSOLVED. THESE FIGURES ARE AT ONCE COMFORTABLE AND UNSETTLED, BOTH QUIETLY CONTEMPLATIVE AND WAITING ANXIOUSLY IN DREAM-LIKE ROOMS AWASH IN FULL CHROMA; IT IS LIRA'S FREE INVENTION OF ARCHITECTURAL SPACE AND "PSYCHOLOGICAL LIGHT" (THE ARTIFICIAL MANIPULATION OF LIGHT, ITS SOURCE AND FOCUS) THAT DISTINGUISHES HIS WORK FROM OTHER LATIN AMERICAN AND EUROPEAN MODERNIST SOURCES.

THE SENSATION OF CONTAINMENT IS PALPABLE, YET LIRA'S FIGURES NEVER SEEM CONFINED OR TRAPPED BY THESE SPACIOUS, EMPTY ROOMS; RATHER THEY EXUDE A FOCUSED ENERGY THAT MAKES THEIR ACTION (OR INACTION) PROFOUNDLY RIGHT. LIRA ACCOMPLISHES THIS BY SUGGESTION, WITHOUT NARRATIVE DEVICES OR CONVENTIONS (SOMETHING MANY LATIN AMERICAN ARTISTS ARE WONT TO EMPLOY) OR FORMAL SOLUTIONS (THE GRID OR GOLDEN SECTION), BUT RATHER WITH AN INTUITIVE, INTERNAL ORDERING. THE LIGHT THAT EMANATES FROM THESE PAINTINGS IS OF A SPIRITUAL NATURE, REVEALING AN ALMOST NAIVE FAITH IN A STATE OF BEING THAT CAN ONLY BE ATTAINED THROUGH MEDITATION, TRANSCENDANCE AND, OCCASIONALLY, ART. AT THE SAME MOMENT, THE INESCAPABLE REALITY OF ISOLATION EVEN WITH THE MOMENT OF ENLIGHTENMENT WITHIN REACH (THIS BEING ONE INTERPRETATION OF MANY) CAN BE FRIGHTENING TO THE POINT OF EXISTENTIAL ENERVATION. IN ACTUALITY, LIRA'S FIGURES ARE ACTORS ON A STAGE OF THEIR OWN CHOICE, FOR IN THAT CHOICE RESIDES THE POTENTIAL FOR SELF-KNOWLEDGE AND SELF-REALIZATION.

WHICH LEAVES US TO CONSIDER THE LAST TWO ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS OF LIRA'S WORK, TEXTURE AND COLOR. THE SURFACES OF LIRA'S PAINTINGS ARE, AS THE POET AND CRITIC JOHN YAU APTLY DESCRIBED THEM, FRESCOLIKE; WALLS OF DRY, LAYERED PAINT THAT CONTAINS, AND RETAINS, THE ENTIRE HISTORY OF EACH IMAGE. LIRA'S PROCESS IS COMPLEX, LABOR INTENSIVE AND, OF PARTICULAR SIGNIFICANCE, TIME CONSUMING. EACH APPLICATION OF PAINT ALTERS THE SLOW, METICULOUS EVOLUTION TOWARD THE FINAL COMPOSITION; THE MASKING OR OBLITERATION OF ONE AREA OR ELEMENT, THE SANDING OR SCRAPING DOWN OF ANOTHER, CONCEALING OR REVEALING OTHER LAYERS OF EARLIER MOMENTS THAT

NOW RETURN IN OTHER GUISES. SANDING BRINGS A LUMINOSITY FROM WITHIN THE PAINTING, THE BUILD-UP OF THICK PIGMENT ADDS A PHYSICALITY THAT SUGGESTS THE TRUE TACTILE REALITY THAT LIRA SEEKS. IN MAJOR PAINTINGS SUCH AS *THE CREATOR* (1987), THE CORPOREAL ASPECT OF THE PAINT CONVEYS THE FULL WEIGHT AND CONVICTION OF THE VITAL INTERIOR LIFE OF THE SEATED PROTAGONIST. THE ENCRUSTED AND THINNED AREAS FUNCTION AS DAPPLIED LIGHT AND COOL SHADE FOR LIRA'S CLEAR, MODIFIED FORMS. THE ROUGH TEXTURE SERVES TO EMPHASIZE THE MATERIAL FACT OF THE MOMENT; THAT INSTANT WHEN SUBJECT AND MATTER MELD INTO A SINGLE EXPERIENCE.

COLOR FOR LIRA REPRESENTS THE FULL MEASURE OF PAINTING'S POSSIBILITIES. THE GREAT COLORISTS OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, BONNARD, MATISSE, ROTHKO, AND PRECIOUS FEW OTHERS, ARE A SINGULAR BREED, INDICATIVE OF THE RARITY OF SUCH A GIFT. LIRA'S ABILITY TO EMPLOY A WIDE RANGE OF COLOR, FROM THE FULL COMPLEMENT OF WARM TO COOL BLUES, GREENS AND YELLOWS OF EVERY IMAGINABLE VARIETY, AND PARTICULARLY ALL THE SUBTLE DEGREES OF RED TO ORANGE, GIVES EACH OF HIS PAINTINGS ITS UNIQUE TEMPERATURE. PAINTINGS SUCH AS *HERMIT 6* (1985), *SHELTER* (1988) AND *TIME* (1989) ARE SYMPHONIC COLORISTIC INVENTIONS, FULLY REALIZED AS COMPLETE ARTISTIC STATEMENTS. THERE ARE FEW PAINTERS TODAY WHO HAVE SOUGHT TO UNDERSTAND AND EMPLOY COLOR TO THE EXTENT THAT LIRA HAS DURING HIS CAREER, AND FOR THOSE WHO STILL DELIGHT IN PAINTING, THAT WHICH LEONARDO DA VINCI DESCRIBED AS "THE GRANDDAUGHTER OF NATURE", SUCH AN ACHIEVEMENT IS EDIFYING AND ENVIABLE.

IN CONCLUSION, IT IS SUFFICIENT TO SAY THAT IN HIS MOST RECENT WORK, BENJAMÍN LIRA IS (ONCE AGAIN) BREAKING NEW GROUND FOR HIMSELF. HIS CONTINUING EXPERIMENTS WITH COLLAGE HAVE EXPANDED THE PICTURE PLANE, ADDING DIMENSION AS WELL AS INTRIGUE TO HIS INTERIORS. LIRA HAS EVEN REMOVED THE FIGURE AS A MEANS OF DELVING INTO THE PERILOUS ARENA OF TWO-DIMENSIONAL SPACE. REGARDLESS OF THE DIRECTION HE TAKES, LIRA HAS CHARTED HIS COURSE AND STEADFASTLY FOLLOWED IT, WITHOUT CONCERN FOR FASHION OR PHASES IN THE ARTWORLD, AND FOR THIS WE WHO ADMIRE HIS WORK LOOK FORWARD TO THE NEXT BODY OF WORK WITH EAGER ANTICIPATION.

ROBERT G. EDELMAN, NEW YORK, SEPTEMBER 1991.

