



Gunther Gerzso

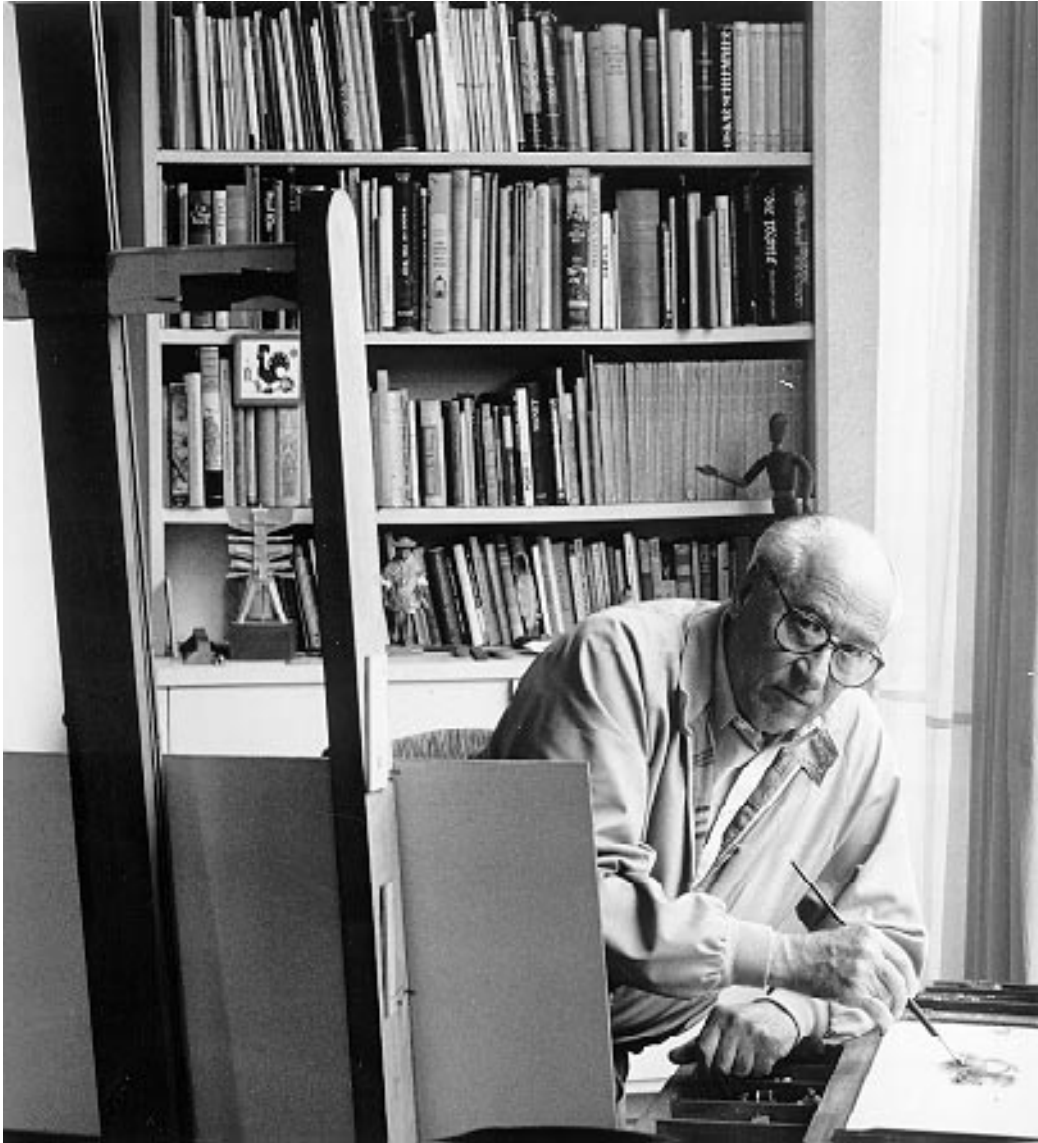
80th Birthday Show

September 28 - October 28, 1995

Mary-Anne Martin/Fine Art

23 East 73 Street New York, NY 10021
Tel (212) 288-2213 Fax (212) 861-7656

*Selections from this exhibition will travel to
Galerie Rahn, Zurich in Spring, 1996*



Gunther Gerzso in his studio, 1991

photograph by Carole Patterson

Cover illustration: 13. **Muro rosa y naranja**, 1962

Gunther Gerzso was born June 17, 1915, in Mexico City. His mother, Dore Wendland, a German born in Berlin, was a singer and a pianist. His father Oscar Gerzso, a Hungarian businessman who emigrated to Mexico in the 1890's, died in 1916.

At the age of twelve Gerzso was sent to Lugano, Switzerland to live with his uncle, Dr. Hans Wendland, an art dealer, collector and art historian. Wendland took over the direction of Gerzso's education, with the idea that the young boy would become his heir. They lived on a large estate, filled with valuable paintings, and Gerzso received intensive training in the history of art. He attended Swiss schools and met influential figures in the European art world, among them the painter Paul Klee (although Gerzso was not then aware that this was an important artist) and the Italian set designer, Nando Tamberlani, who inspired Gerzso's later interest in this field. In 1930, due to the Depression, his uncle was forced to sell his estate and art holdings and Gerzso decided to return to Mexico City to live with his mother and sister. He attended the German school there from 1931-33 and received his *abitur* degree. During this period, he drew designs for theater sets and costumes, not imagining that he would ever see them executed.

However, the year after graduation he met Fernando Wagner, an actor, producer, and director, who used Gerzso's stage designs for productions of works by Molière, Lope de Vega, and Shakespeare. In 1935, Gerzso moved to Cleveland, Ohio to study at the Cleveland Playhouse where he soon became staff set designer. Over the next four years he designed sets for more than fifty plays.

In 1940, encouraged by an artist friend, Gerzso began teaching himself to paint. Later that year he

married Gene Rilla Cady, a musician from California who was studying at the Playhouse. They settled in Mexico in 1941 and Gerzso devoted himself to being an artist full-time. However, the uncertain finances which developed from this decision led him to accept an offer in 1942 to design sets for the movies. During the next twenty years he designed sets for about 250 films, working with such important directors as Luis Buñuel, John Ford and Yves Allegret. Painting became a hobby.

His paintings from the 40's and 50's had two primary influences. The first was an appreciation of the Mexican landscape and pre-Columbian art which was awakened by his travels while filming. The second was Surrealism which was fostered by his friendship with the poet Benjamin Péret, and the artists Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo and Wolfgang Paalen, refugees who made their way to Mexico from war-torn Europe in the 1940's.

A trip to Greece in 1959 inspired his work for the next three years, his so-called Greek period. However, by 1962 pre-Columbian influences had reappeared in his paintings.

Gerzso retired from film set design in 1962 to devote himself to painting full-time

(though in 1983 he was persuaded by John Huston to come out of retirement temporarily and do the art direction for the film of Malcolm Lowry's novel *Under the Volcano*). In 1978 he received the National Prize of Mexico and in 1991 he was named *Academico Honorario* by the Society of Architects of Mexico.

Today Gerzso lives in Mexico City with his wife, Gene. They have two sons: Michael, an architect and computer consultant in Mexico, and Andrew, a flutist who lives in Paris and is currently musical assistant to the conductor, Pierre Boulez.



5. **Presence of the Past**, 1953

Visiting Gunther Gerzso

Mary-Anne Martin

I first saw a painting by Gunther Gerzso at the Galería de Arte Mexicano. It was my first trip to Mexico and I had come to pay my respects to the famous art dealer, Inés Amor. After a quiet talk with this extraordinary woman, who had the ability to make first time visitors feel like long lost friends, she asked me if I would like to see some paintings by contemporary Mexican artists. At that time I was a cataloguer of modern paintings at Sotheby's and was familiar with only the biggest names—Rivera, Orozco, Siqueiros. Occasionally we had a Tamayo, too. I eagerly accepted Ms. Amor's invitation and she showed me several works. The Gerzso stands out in my memory. The colors were vibrant and the surface was glossy and cold. I remember my reaction as one of puzzlement. With all my art historical preparation and my years of training in an auction house, I was unable to place this painting in a convenient pigeon hole. It reminded me of no Mexican painting I had ever seen and even less of the European ones I was used to.

So many years later, with thirteen years in an auction house behind me and thirteen years since I started my gallery, I still know no painter quite like Gunther Gerzso.

I'm not exactly sure of the first time that I met him. The Gerzso house in San Angel felt like a cool sanctuary with leafy gardens visible from within. I immediately liked this avuncular figure with a sardonic wit who reminded me of my Viennese father. "I was assembled in Mexico," he told me when I ask him about his European ancestry. I liked his wife Gene, who had her own sense of humor and who understood what made Gerzso tick. There were acres of bookshelves and paintings hanging everywhere. The Gerzsos were people that I would have liked to be with under any circumstances. That Gunther happened also to be a great painter was a fact completely apart.

Going up to Gunther's studio for the first time

is impressive. There is an exterior staircase leading to a room with an alcove. Everything seems spotless. No drips of paint on the floor, no evidence of furious creativity. Just one painting in progress on the easel, and possibly a work that is finished and wrapped up neatly in brown paper waiting to be picked up. More books. A collection of tacky snow domes sent from all over by friends who know he thinks they are funny. If Gunther feels expansive he will open up a few drawers in the flat files and show you some recent prints. Or he will take you to the "Cemetery," where he keeps paintings that he has started and has abandoned at some stumbling point. Sometimes he will show you a work from a style that he tried and discarded—perhaps a dada collage. On another occasion he will give you a glimpse of his archives. Here he keeps a pencil sketch of almost every painting he has made, together with notations about the medium, its present whereabouts. In most cases he has a good transparency of the painting as well. In this meticulous record keeping he is like Klee or Kandinsky.

The comparison to Kandinsky is not accidental. Gerzso's studio is orderly, his mind is disciplined, his paintings are the product of a reasoned aesthetic. Here is visual music: endless themes and variations, full of harmony, color, discordant notes, tensions and peaceful resolutions. Gerzso works like a composer, orchestrating his compositions. He cannot run out of ideas; the notes can be replayed in countless arrangements.

Gunther Gerzso is Mexican. Trained in Europe not as a painter but as an art historian, he returned to the land where he was born and developed an artistic vocabulary that is his alone. He copies no other master. He celebrates the landscape of Mexico and its pre-Columbian beginnings. He paints the heart and soul of Mexico.

Celebrating Gunther Gerzso's 80th birthday

with a show in his honor seems right. In 1982 we inaugurated this gallery with a Gerzso retrospective show in Paris at FIAC, organized with our friends and associates, Mariana Pérez Amor and Alejandra Yturbe of the Galería de Arte Mexicano. The following year we again collaborated with GAM in the publication with Edicions du Griffon in Neuchâtel, Switzerland of an important monograph on Gerzso with texts by Octavio Paz and John Golding. In 1984 we presented this book at Mary-Anne Martin/Fine Art at the opening of

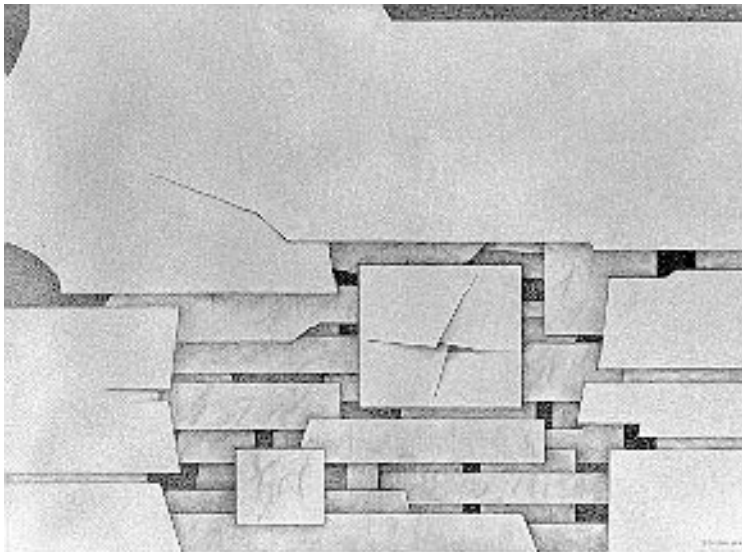
Gerzso's first New York retrospective show. Since then we have collaborated in the publication of Gerzso's first suite of bronze sculptures, an idea born of the friendship among three Gerzso admirers: George Belcher, who kept insisting that Gerzso's work would translate into bronze; Hank Hine, who had the knowledge and

San Francisco facilities to make this possible; I was the third partner, who was able to put everyone together, offer moral support from the East Coast and make occasional trips to the West Coast when progress seemed to be slowing down and I felt things needed stirring up.

A wonderful half-brother of the sculpture project was the production of Gerzso's first color etchings, the magnificent **Palabras Grabadas** suite. Production of the sculptures obliged Gerzso to spend two or more months at a time in San Francisco. Still there were lulls, pockets of time between the fabrication of the maquettes and the development of the molds; more time between production of the bronze casts and patination. Sensing that Gerzso needed to occupy himself with more than shopping during these hiatuses,

Hank Hine suggested that the artist create some color etchings at the Limestone Press, Hine's print studio. Although Gerzso had produced lithographs before and silkscreens as well, he had made only one etching up till then, a small black and white experiment. The Limestone experience was a great success and the resulting portfolio of ten etchings by Gerzso accompanied by ten poems by Octavio Paz was published in 1990. Gerzso was encouraged by Hine to produce a suite of five large etchings and aquatints from

1993-5 which Mary-Anne Martin/Fine Art exhibited at ArtMiami '95. In 1995 they produced a series of twelve **Temples**, evoking Mexican archeological sites, small lyrical etchings printed in dark green ink. These **Temples** (many of which are illustrated here on pages 6 and 7), with accompanying poetry by Dr. Hine, will be



20. **Huacan**, 1967

presented to the public for the first time at Gerzso's 80th birthday show at Mary-Anne Martin/Fine Art.

To mark this show as a special event we have asked a number of writers, critics and colleagues to send us a few words of tribute to Gerzso. These are our birthday greetings to him, printed on the following pages.

All these years have passed swiftly. There have been periods of sadness and illness, frightening moments. Gerzso has survived a heart bypass operation and paints with renewed appreciation of life. I no longer bring him Swiss chocolates when I visit him at his studio as I know he must watch his weight. I look forward to our visits. Gunther and Gene are old friends.



To an exemplary artist and not less exemplary friend,
I wish you many more years in order to continue
enjoying your art and your friendship.

René Solís, Mexico, September 7, 1995

Gunther is a genius, a giant of the imagination.
Gunther sees the layers of which our world is made.
He didn't ask that the world be complicated and that
every perception and articulation be compounded
with the world's intricacy, ambiguity and
impermanence. But knowing it is so, he gives nothing
less to us than his candor.

Hank Hine, Tampa, August 31, 1995



"...I wonder whether if André Breton had seen the
totality of Gerzso's work he might not have been
forced to invent a new category of Surrealism, as he
had done in the 1940s in his desire to bring Gorky's
achievement into the Surrealist fold, whether he might
not have been forced to acknowledge the ability of
abstract art to challenge our preconceptions of
perceived reality."

*John Golding, London, 1983,
quoted with permission of the author, September 1995*



For twenty-seven years Gunther Gerzso and I have
shared a friendship. My appreciation of him comes
from knowing the disquiet underlying his art. But my
great affection is from the heart.

Salomon Grimberg, Dallas, August 21, 1995

I have had the extraordinary privilege of knowing
Gunther and Gene since the inception of his Octavio
Paz collaboration. Through various projects they
resided in San Francisco for months at a time. Their
old world grace, razor sharp wit, erudite minds and
appreciation for all things excellent made time spent
with them some of the happiest in my life. Their
experiences and their voracious desire to learn span
three continents, four languages and a circle of
remarkable people. To know them has been to
expand.

Dede Hine, Tampa, August 31, 1995



The work of Gunther Gerzso pursues the absolute
purity of color and line; it astonishes and captivates
as only great painting can do. It evokes the unique
sense of beauty and harmony which conforms to the
universe.

*Mariana Pérez Amor and Alejandra Yturbe,
Mexico, August 30, 1995*

I shall always be grateful to Gunther Gerzso for
opening my eyes to the pleasures of Mexico: its
beauty with his art, especially his paintings, so full of
vibrancy and mystery; its charm expressed in his
quirky sense of humor and laconic irony; and, not
least of all, its culinary delights by introducing me to
and feeding me my—and probably his—first and only
repast of fried *gusanos*.

Ruth Ziegler, New York, September 7, 1995



With his unique style, the contribution that Maestro
Gunther Gerzso has made to contemporary painting,
establishes him as one of the most solid figures of our
time. To have had the honor of working with him has
been a great experience in our career as editors and
printers of graphic work.

Luis and Lea Remba, Los Angeles, August 24, 1995



I salute Gunther Gerzso on the occasion of his 80th birthday exhibition. He has borne the standard of excellence aloft for so long! He has burned, as Pater would have said, with a gemlike flame, kindled and rekindled over so many decades, with absolute integrity. As he knows, I regard him as an essential figure in the history of Mexican painting whose impress will remain always, I'm sure.

Dore Ashton, New York, August 22, 1995



Gunther, my friend: As I wish you a happy and healthy 80th, I remember our early morning conversations driving the bridge to the foundry and the wonderful stories you told over breakfast in the Korean coffee shop. I thank you for letting me witness the births of *Yaxchilán*, *Tollan*, *Constelación*, *Semblantes*. Come back soon to San Francisco, the city you love.

George Belcher, San Francisco, August 17, 1995



When Gunther Gerzso was 55 years old of age I wrote:

His visual language is unmistakable: planes that suggest landscapes, planes that suggest architectures, planes that suggest monuments, planes that suggest walls of a dreamlike environment. His meticulous and sensitive accumulation of planes transforms at times into forests of resonating crystals, where the eyes perceive whispers and humming.

Now that he has turned 80, I want to confirm that perception I had then of an artist who has known how to remain true to himself.

Raquel Tibol, Mexico, August 27, 1995

In 1976 when I was curator for the exhibition *Gunther Gerzso: Paintings and Graphics Reviewed* the artist commented to me:

Churchill used to say that when he went to Heaven he would dedicate the first million years to painting to find out what it was all about. And yes, it is true. One needs as many as five lives and still the only indispensable thing is constant work.

Almost two decades later one notes that Gerzso, a perpetually young artist, has continued to follow his artistic destiny.

Barbara Duncan, New York, August 25, 1995



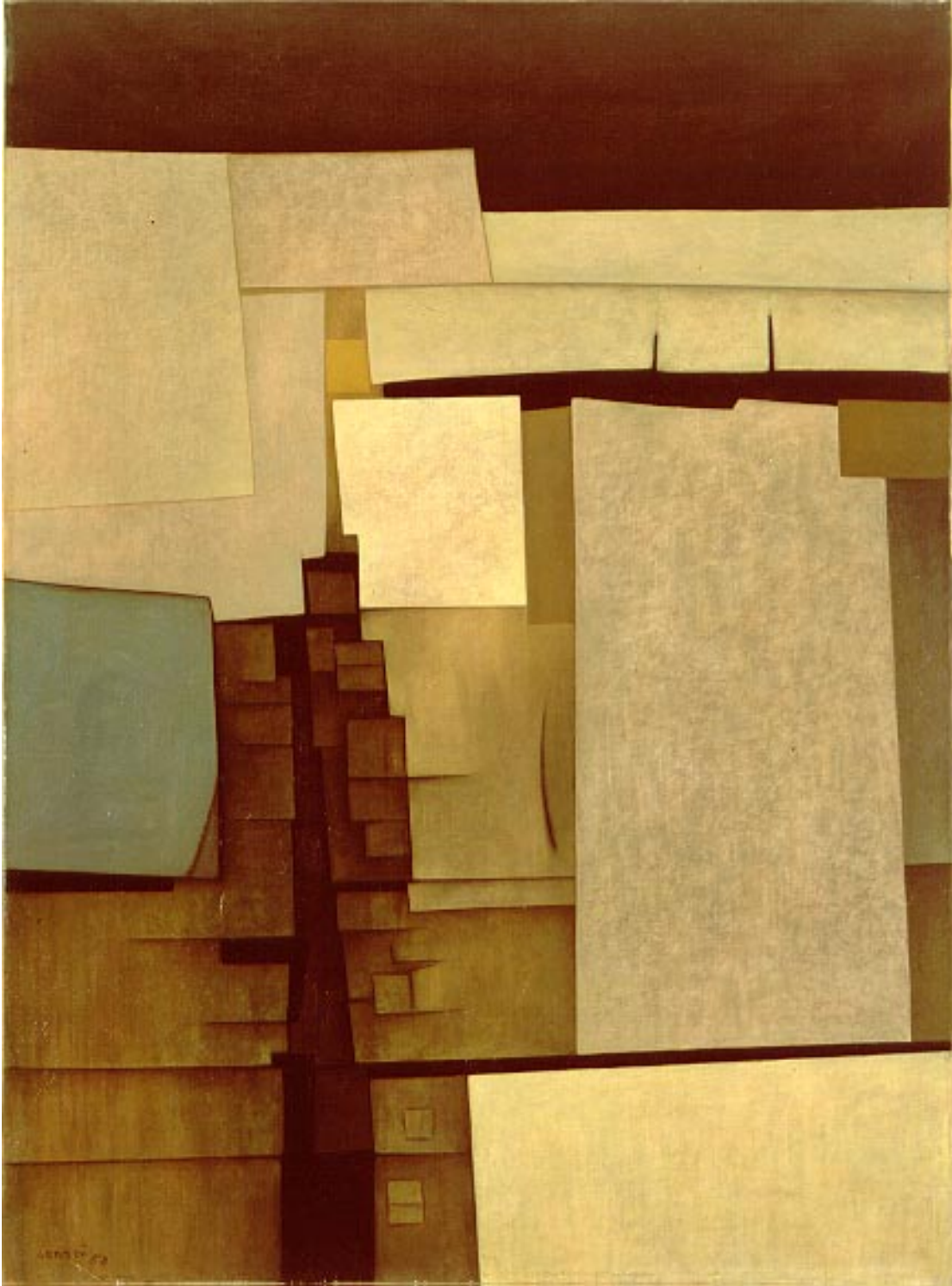
Gerzso calls our attention to the presence in his paintings of the dark backgrounds that are the equivalent of the nothingness and the fear, and the intimate relationship between this nothingness and at times this death, with the splendor of the surface that translates into the metaphor of the wall or the body that traps his mind. Body, wall, void: a labyrinth which he constructs like a gallery of self-portraits, by which the artist affirms that his works express who he is and how the rest of the world appears from his interior vision. That is to say, Gerzso paints, as John Golding has said, the landscape of the mind.

Those landscapes are constructed from sacred spaces, as if they were temples with secret chambers, impenetrable ramparts which hide the coveted center; but there are also wounded citadels, elegant scars of an invulnerable secrecy that gives up its mystery only to vertigo.

His painting is a house/body, a luminous mantel in which is revealed a delicately constructed world of opposites: order and emotion, eros and death, ice and lava. There, too, are his identities crossing this dark plane, always behind the hermetic layers of color.

Rita Eder, Mexico, August 22, 1995





9. **Untitled, 1958**



12. **Tierra quemada**, 1962



14. **Southern Queen**, 1963

Interview with Gunther Gerzso

Marie-Pierre Colle

*I want to paint constructions of the mind
whose light calls out equally to one's feeling
and one's intelligence.*

Gunther Gerzso

I had first met Mexican artist Gunther Gerzso literally "under the volcano," on Popocatepetl, where director John Huston was filming his version of Malcolm Lowry's novel. Gerzso, as art director, created the sets. Albert Finney had the lead along with Jacqueline Bisset. Emilio Fernández, "El Indio," acted the part of a brothel owner and palenque proprietor. Gabriel Figueroa was the cinematographer. It was 1983, and Gerzso had returned to film.

Now, at his studio, our photographer asks if Gerzso minds if he smokes.

"No, but who knows if the paintings do?" Gunther says in a mock-serious tone. With those words, we are welcomed to his San Angel Inn house. Forty-six years earlier he had remodeled it and moved in with his wife Gene and their two sons, Andrew and Michael.

The garden is Gene's domain. The house has the order and the exactness of Gerzso's paintings. Tall shelves of books cover the walls and make it cozy. There are no rooms or corridors without books. He is an avid reader, devouring three or four books a week. Between the shelves are pre-Columbian sculptures. "A miserable sample of the pieces I formerly had," states Gerzso.

Gerzso is a large man of impeccable demeanor; his long face is without wrinkles, and has the dissecting glance of a surgeon, maybe as cool as the impression of his paintings can be. His posture is upright, austere, parsimonious, and when he sits down he rests his enormous hands on his knees. His thin lips release a sigh. His demeanor when speaking is determined, intelligent, and provocative. He always quotes from

this or that book, a habit of his disciplined, formal, European education. As we wait for the sunlight to photograph a detail next to Gene's piano, Gerzso remarks, "It's like in the movies; everyone waits for the sunlight."

Gerzso spent more than twenty years in film, from 1940 to 1964. He was living in a house which had belonged to Julio Castellanos, when one day Francisco Cabrera, the movie producer, knocked on his door. He asked Gunther to do his next film, **Santa**, with director Norman Foster. This initiated a career of more than 180 films during the famous golden years of Mexican cinematography. During that long period he would go to Churubusco Studios to earn his daily bread. In the afternoons he painted, but without any pretension of making art; it was a form of escape, a *violon d'Ingres*. For Gunther, painting is the antithesis of filmmaking. One is still, motionless, the other full of action and movement. Painting has a simple technology, film is complicated. Painting is an individual achievement, film a collective one.

The crisis in Europe in 1930, and the economic situation there, interrupted his education in Switzerland. Gunther was living in Lugano with his uncle, Dr. Hans Wendland, an art dealer who instilled in Gunther a love of art and a refined eye. Upon returning to Mexico in 1931, Gunther's first work was in a production of one of Molière's plays. His attitude toward Mexico then was an ambivalent one; he had no access to Mexico's cultural elite, and there were few theaters in existence, so he found his way to the theater world of Cleveland, Ohio, where he worked as a set designer. The American stage technique impressed him, and he learned much about Broadway's theater arts of the thirties. He met Leslie Howard. During the summers he returned to his country and started collecting paintings by Julio Castellanos, Orozco, and Siqueiros.

In Cleveland, Bernard Pfriem, an art student, presented him his first oil colors and advised him to leave the theater and dedicate himself to painting. Gerzso answered, "You're mad! I'm not a painter!" But nonetheless, it was then that he started painting. He found these first efforts clearly unsuccessful.

His friend Juan O'Gorman, painter and architect, introduced him to the group of Paris surrealist painters. Gerzso knocked at a door at number 4 Calle Gabino Barreda. Remedios Varo, the wife of Benjamin Péret, opened the door.

She was living in quite a primitive state, Gerzso recalls, but hanging on the walls were sketches by Picasso and Ernst. In the neighborhood also lived Leonora Carrington. Edward James and Matta would visit them when they were

passing through, and they all exchanged visits Sundays in one another's houses. Gerzso was asked to make a scene for a window-front exhibition to aid the British war effort. Times were hard, and there was little work. Gunther worked alone, painting canvases influenced by Picasso and European surrealism, particularly that of Tanguy.

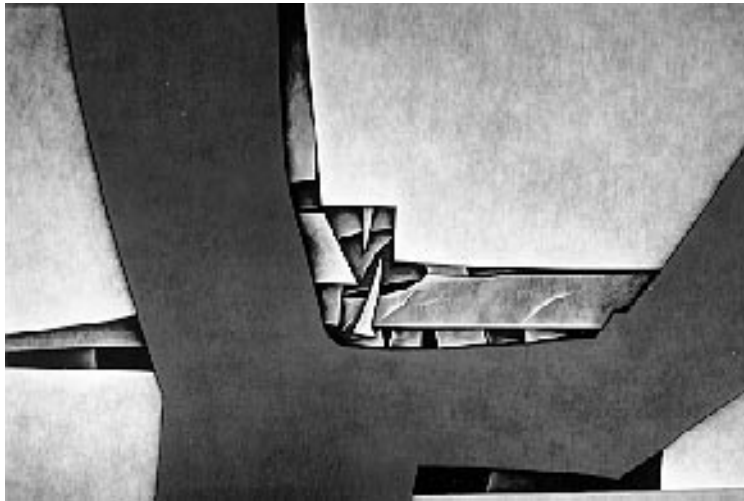
One day, he recounts, he had the desire to create something that had to do with the Americas alone. He found his style in a small painting, **Tihuanacu**, that was the father of all of his later work. In 1951 Inés Amor offered to show his work in her Galería de Arte Mexicano. "It was the biggest failure of the century," he recalls. "No one went, no one bought."

His work since that time shows the immense

impact of the Mexican landscape upon him. Gunther speaks openly of the importance the forms of the pre-Columbian world hold for him. Ramon Xirau comments that in Gerzso's work, the great spaces remind him of architecture from the pre-Columbian world, the deep dreams and the precise profiles recorded by those walls.

Gerzso has always worked in his studio at home. "Remember that when I started out I was only a part-time painter." In his studio there is the order and rigor of a laboratory. The walls are covered by books and shelves for the paintings.

His drawing table was made by a carpenter of movie sets. But on some shelves he has his "horror collection": a dwarf from Carcassonne, a Virgin from Rocamadour, a Buddha from San Francisco's Chinatown, a bronze reproduction of an Etruscan piece bought in



15. **Plano rojo**, 1963

Munich, a thermometer from the Bon Marché, the anti-works of art that amuse him.

On one of his easels, a wedding present in 1940, rests one of his latest paintings on Masonite, in greenish yellows. Gunther achieves his heightened colors by superimposing subtle layers of oil on a polished surface of paint. The Mexican colors, deep and intense, the jungle and jade greens, pervade his work. But Gerzso emphasizes that technique is fundamental. "In painting there is only one basic rule: painting fat over lean." He shows me the catalogues of pigments and materials, from which he has ordered the colors he uses. "I like to see Daniel Smith's catalogues. They bring me back to life when I am tired of reading anthropology, politics, and philosophy."



22. **Verde-azul-amarillo**, 1968

“I see paintings as patients. We are the doctors who try to save them.”

Gunther Gerzso



11. **Mitología**, 1961



17. **Mythologie**, 1964

As a work method, Gerzso elaborates fine sketches on bond paper. He has a thorough archive of all the drawing studies he has done for each painting. From a loose sketch, he sets about establishing a geometrical scheme. He determines points of intersection of lines by use of the golden mean. "I used to ruin canvases; I read that Mr. da Vinci also did several preparatory drawings, to the point that when the drawings were finished he was no longer interested in the painting. Those are the true battlefields. I envy Mr. Picasso, who would begin a painting just to see what came from it, and if it turned out, then fine. But my style is like flying an airplane; you

cannot improvise."

Gunther registers every work session in a folder; which pigments he has used, how many layers he has put down, what oil, which varnish, and the date.

For Gerzso, painting is learned by looking. He has spent days in the Louvre differentiating Titian from Tintoretto. "A painting is not only the theme but the substance, the way it has been painted. Venus and Adonis six feet away, but also at twelve inches. My uncle told me I had to observe until the artist's very soul had entered me.

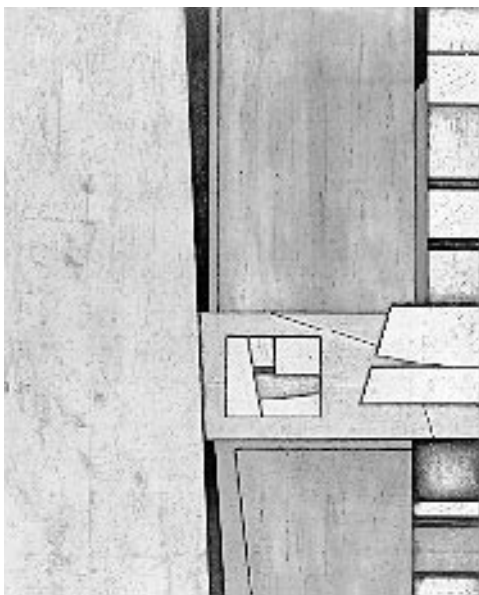
"I admire Morandi, who takes a bottle and paints it. When I see Bonnard's wife, having a

cup of tea with her dog and cherries, I find it marvelous. A painting must be brought to a point where it communicates the emotion that informed it. Then it detaches itself from that emotion and acquires its own life. That is when spirit inhabits matter. A painting isn't always achieved because it does not always reach that point. I see paintings as patients. We are the doctors who try to save them"

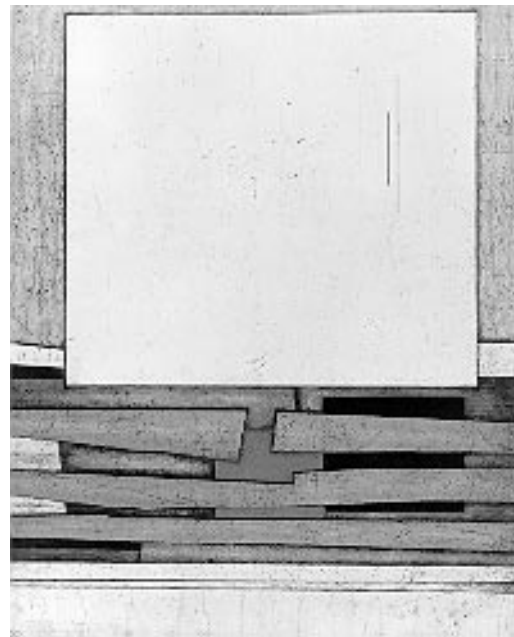
In Gerzso's life, everyday routine has the same precision as his painting. When he was in film he would wake up at five in the morning and would not go to bed until ten at night. These days he wakes up at six-thirty, starts reading at seven. At nine he has breakfast and sometimes goes back to bed to finish a book. He showers, and goes up to his studio, working until two. He has lunch and half an hour later goes to his room to read Newsweek or The New York Times Book Review, The London Book Review, or a catalogue if it has arrived in the mail. He devours essays, histories of art, biographies, novels, poetry.

What happens after painting, family, and books?

"Nothing happens because there is nothing more. I watch television, starting with the news, but I am not really interested in what I am seeing.



37. **Diálogo**, 1993



37. **Manantial**, 1993

It helps me concentrate, and ideas develop for the next day. Television is just an instrument. I can't concentrate in silence. I am fascinated by this procedure, this new use for television. Where, from the screen filled with realistic, boring, and tacky images, ideas for a sketch are born. In the same way, when I'm listening to music I concentrate on the CD's cover or on the booklet. I read and listen, listen and read."

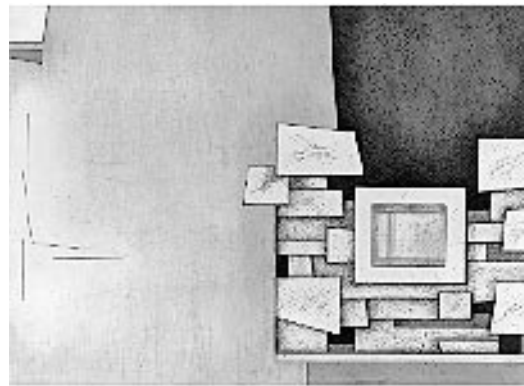
We return to his painting. At first look it could appear repetitive. Gunther comments that yes, this is so, but true of Renoir as well. Because even if one day he paints his children's nanny, the next he will paint the back of another woman; he always returns to the same thing. "Titian is also repetitive, El Greco is repetitive. They are variations on the same subject; that is what we now call style. The truth is that a painter feels trapped. What gives personality to my paintings? It's a mystery. I found a world and that world I cannot explain. When you have found it, things turn out a certain way for the rest of your life.

"One paints for oneself. The great Renaissance masters, when painting a commission, were filled with restrictions and conditions of

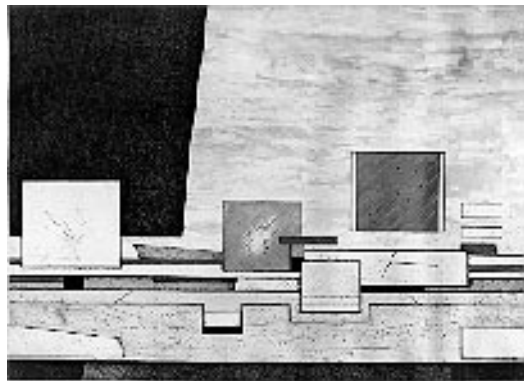
how they were to paint. They would say, 'Look, I want an Adoration of the Magi, but I want the Virgin to have my wife's face and Saint Joseph to have my uncle's, my nephew as this other person, and I want the background to be my ranch!' In spite of all of that, they achieved splendid works of art. I once was asked to make a painting that matched a red carpet, chosen by the collector. The amazing thing is, it turned out well!

"But I am not a great admirer of my own work. There are too many doubts in the creative process, too much suffering. I have spent my whole life doing this and I don't know if it was worth it, but then I remember that when Mr. Cocteau visited Mr. Picasso in the south of France he told him, 'I can't work, I am a disaster, these doubts kill me.' So damn it, why do I complain?

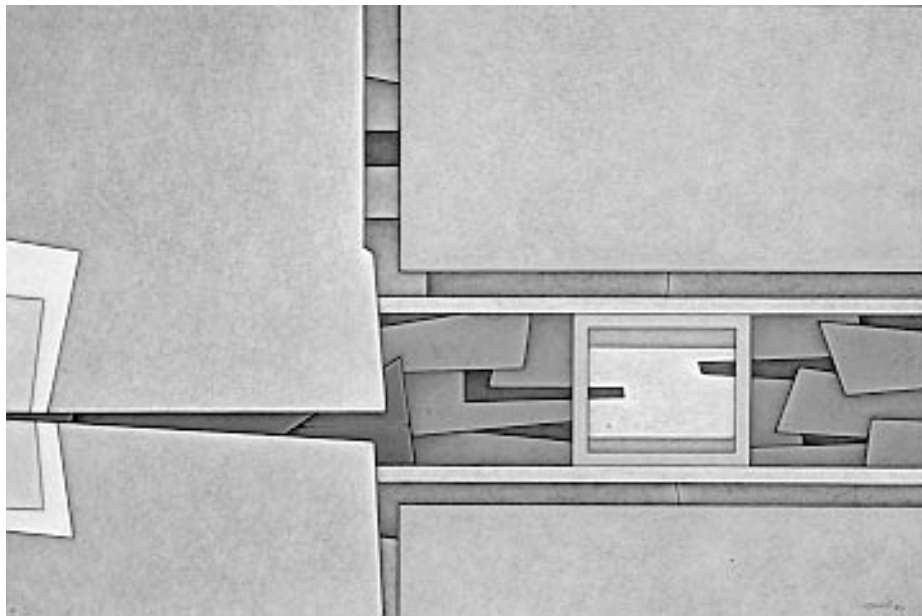
"To paint, you have to paint. You perspire, move the paintbrush, a ridiculous pastime, because painting by itself does not mean anything. The paintbrush is nothing but a poor animal's hair; but you wiggle it, and suddenly something appears. Something that has a life of its own. It could be the Guernica, the Sistine Chapel, or maybe one of those remarkable paintings by Mr. Van Eyck."



37. **Sagrario**, 1993



37. **Ciudadela**, 1993



26. **Paisaje: Rojo-Ocre-Azul**, 1984

Gerzso as a Sculptor

Although critics have long noted the architectural and scenographic aspects of Gerzso's paintings, it was not until he received a commission in 1978 from the silver company *Tane* that Gerzso created a three dimensional work of art. This effort **Tataniuh** inspired two more commissions, one from Grupo Alfa in Monterrey for a bronze screen in their corporate headquarters and another from the Protexa company for an outdoor piece on a monumental scale. Although the maquettes were designed, these projects were never executed because of Mexico's financial crisis in 1982, which caused many projects to be abandoned. He did complete one commission in 1982 for a



Gerzso working on **Semblantes**



35. **Semblantes**, 1994



30. **Yaxchilán**, 1988

silver sculpture to be used as an annual award from the Association of Engineers and Architects of Mexico. In 1987 Gerzso was asked to produce a suite of bronzes for Hine Editions, San Francisco. For inspiration the artist drew on pre-Columbian art and many of the works which emerged bore such titles as **Yaxchilán**, **Tollan** and **Stele**. The success of these sculptures led to other projects, such as the large piece at the Tamayo Museum published by GVG editions, Monterrey, and **Semblantes**, a double-sided relief of 1994, which will be exhibited for the first time at Mary-Anne Martin/ Fine Art. The artist is currently completing a suite of eight large bronze sculptures in Mexico which will be published by Ediciones Masri as well as four more large scale works with Galería Lopez Quiroga.



33. **Constelación**, 1989

Gunther Gerzso

Dore Ashton

Dedicated to the memory of Marta Traba

Tautology: Gerzso is Gerzso and nothing else. So wrote his friend Octavio Paz who, with a great poet's concision characterized

Gerzso's work with the epithet: "The icy spark." For more than three decades Gerzso has held the attention of those who recognize the singular consistency of his paradoxical approach. The smouldering colors, so brilliantly heightened, inexplicably give off a glacial emanation. In his ever unfolding vistas, in which there are inescapable hints of the majesty of the Mexican landscape, there is a light distilled, or rather, invented by the artist to lure the imagination beyond or behind the scenes into uncharted spaces. But (and there is always a but here) the artist resists the grandiose. Who wishes to know these paintings must know them in their details. Each surface is worked with minute transitions; each line is modelled to its finest nuance; each color is built for its maximum opacity, its most expressive density. The icy spark must sustain itself in the time it takes to build these sensitive surfaces, and the time it takes to scan them for their embodiment of all that has passed in Gerzso's mind and sensibility.

So Gerzso is indeed Gerzso and nothing else,

but how did he come to be Gerzso? Putting aside the natural endowment of all artists of value, there were certain circumstances that can be said to have prompted his choices. For one thing, although he was born in Mexico, he spent his formative years

abroad. He had a cosmopolitan upbringing that brought him into contact with people, places and ideas that spoke to his temperament. He spent several years in the Swiss home of an uncle who had been a pupil of the great art historian Wölfflin. He even met the artist Paul Klee with whom, I believe, he has affinities—Klee who spoke of "the prehistory of the visible" and whose lectures and assignments to his pupils included one on "Earth, water and air." Although still a boy, Gerzso was precocious. He quickly recognized the importance of the writings of Le Corbusier given to him at his uncle's house. Not so strange an attraction if we think of Corbusier's sculptural flights as epitomized at Ronchamp. The tectonic impulse was natural to Gerzso and has played a

strong part in his becoming Gerzso. Another impulse that I suspect was just as natural to his temperament was generated in Switzerland when the youth encountered an Italian actor and set designer who fired him with the ambition to create for the theater. Subsequently, the theater and later



8. *Paisaje*, 1957

the cinema not only provided Gerzso with a means of support for many years, but also sharpened his perceptions. The man who designs the discrete world that each theater set must represent is required to rationalize illusion. His whole task is to abstract and accentuate in order to make a convincing whole. He must draw from the world of experience those elements that can give an absolute illusion of a place and a time. Very often those who write about Gerzso's work, in which he makes extensive use of overlapping planes, invoke the language of Cubism as the source. I think rather that it is Gerzso's long experience with flats and scrims that has tempered his pictorial idiom.

If I speak of Gerzso's initial formation as an independent painter, I must emphasize that it was his return to Mexico in 1942, after several years of being a resident set designer in the United States, that fortified his resolve. He returned to his birthplace, I suspect, with the express intention of making it his own; of coming to terms with its strangeness, its overwhelming feeling of profound apartness from all other Western culture. Even native-born Mexicans are aware of the peculiar otherness of Mexico, and in awe of it. Carlos Fuentes has spoken of all of Mexico as a "sacred zone," and Octavio Paz has written again and again of Mexico's unique heritage stemming from its unusual fusion of colonial and Indian elements. Gerzso was clearly smitten and inspired by his rediscovery of his native country. His enthusiasm was undoubtedly swiftly kindled by the presence of a small but infinitely important group of foreign painters and poets who had taken refuge, during the Second World War, in Mexico City. The whole story has yet to be told, but the heroic years of Surrealism in Mexico were to be definitive in its cultural evolution. The tremendous energy such people as Wolfgang Paalen and Leonora Carrington and the poet Benjamin Péret brought to Mexico City was unparalleled. This energy was quickly put into the service of the important esthetic battle against an ingrained and unchallenged habit of assuming, as most Mexicans did, that the art of the great generation of muralists was the only indigenous modern art possible. The Surrealist band, with their emphatic emphasis on free association and the importance of reverie, would be effective in opening a way for young artists to elude the mural tradition.

Gerzso profited by the momentary excitement. He soon came to know Wolfgang Paalen, a well-traveled and exuberant painter who had arrived in Mexico full of enthusiasm for the American indigenous traditions (he had first visited Alaska and the Pacific Northwest where he studied Indian arts). Paalen's response to the Mexican landscape reflected the Surrealist *état d'âme* even after he renounced certain Surrealist tenets. He wrote in a letter of "the sullen greatness of this high plateau . . . its emptiness under a fathomless sky whose clouds are piled up so high that one grasps immediately the thirteen heavens of the Indian mythology . . ."

He quickly grasped Gerzso's individual adaptation of Surrealist juxtapositions, and when he wrote the catalogue foreword for Gerzso's first exhibition in 1950, he spoke of things that are still pertinent to Gerzso's vision:

It might seem strange to speak of Mayan monuments and Kafka in the same breath; yet the fathomless antechambers in the writer's castles, the walls of his imaginary China, can be sensed on the ascending terraces, in the endless vaults and pyramids of pre-Cortesian Mexico. There are no milestones in eternity, and the lonely men on their way from the lost city to the possible city have come to know that the nearest is also the farthest. For them, the ancient glyphs which can no longer be read, and the glyphs which cannot be read yet, are equally meaningful.

Certainly the monuments of the old Indian theologies with their rectilinear shapes and their uncanny perceptual effects are to this day engraved in Gerzso's imagination and peer out from his seemingly abstract works. The Surrealist point of view—for more than anything else, Surrealism was a point of view of existence—has remained germane to his creation.

No doubt Gerzso's flight into the interior (interior Mexico, interior Gerzso) was assisted by his friendship with an extraordinary poet, Benjamin Péret, with whom he became friendly toward 1944. Péret's exceptional personality, acknowledged by all who knew him, could not fail to have impressed the sensitive painter. He had come to Mexico with a grand ambition: to write a book on the myths, legends

and popular fables of the Americas. The foreword to that book, *La Parole est à Péret*, was endorsed by distinguished writers and painters all over the world when it was published in 1943 (among them André Breton, Aimé Césaire, René Magritte, Wifredo Lam, Marcel Duchamp and Max Ernst).

Péret wrote with tremendous conviction of the importance of the native imagination, dipping back into history to quote Goethe: “man cannot remain long in the conscious state and must plunge again and again into the unconscious because the root of his being dwells there.”

Péret invoked New Mexican kachina dolls and Mexican jade masks and insisted that “the marvelous is everywhere, of all times and of each instant.” His poetry, with which Gerzso was intimately familiar, is, for all its Surrealist dislocations and abrupt transitions, remarkably close in spirit to the images of Gerzso, even those most akin to the tradition of Klee and Malevich (and Klee, it must be remembered, was much admired in the first Surrealist exhibition in 1925). Péret’s poems written in Mexico are redolent with the imagery of the place. *The Swirl of Dust* for instance begins:

“When stones slam their doors as a sign of despair” and finishes, “between vines digesting centuries would fill with thundering Americas hardly suspected in a comma.” Even more startling, perhaps, is the prophetic poem written in the 1930s with the compelling first stanza:

*Here begins the glacial house
where the roundness of the earth is only a word
as light as a leaf
whose quality matters little
In the glacial mansion dances*

*all that the movement of the earth cannot prevent
from dancing
all the beings whose existence is improbable
There time is the same as the partition of an empire
as the long march of Lilliputians
as the cataract 1800 meters high*

(from *Four Years After the Dog*)

I dwell on the affinities between Péret and Gerzso because I believe that for all the apparent formal language in the paintings, and for all the



6. **Paisaje amarillo y negro.** 1954

knowing incorporation of the modern plastic idioms, Cubism, Constructivism, and even Surrealism (if we think of the abstract branch consisting of Miró and Gorky), Gerzso’s paintings remain rooted in the Surrealist philosophy in which surprise and wonder, and dramatic heightening and otherness, are worshipped. Above all, the unaccustomed collisions of images. The important function of juxtaposition in the Surrealist theory is served admirably in Gerzso’s paintings, as it is in Péret’s poems. There are, for instance, enormous vistas in the work of both, and these vistas, seen from afar, have a millennial silence that, in Gerzso’s paintings, prompted one of his most sensitive critics, Marta

Traba, to write of “the zone of silence.” Naturally, in the real Mexican landscape, there are birds, toads, jaguars, creatures that are making sounds. But in these paintings we are too far, too much in a reverie, to perceive them. Yet, just as Péret juxtaposes the great stones of Mexico with a line as fine as a comma, and just as he draws a glacial house remote from the roundness of the earth, only to invoke the dance with all its roundness, so Gerzso makes juxtapositions that could never be adequate-

ly assessed in purely formal, plastic terms.

I think Traba was right to see landscape as the central motif in Gerzso's life's work, and specifically, the Mexican landscape. His work as set designer for over two hundred Mexican films brought him to survey the entire country with an eye to wresting from the panorama a telling abstraction. Yet, this is a landscape of the mind, through which flows so many elements, not the least, the human image. Metamorphosis, another Surrealist value raised to the highest degree, plays its part in each of Gerzso's paintings. So do ambiguities, and secrets, that all writers on his work have felt reside behind the hard, luminous picture plane. Take only one of his paintings and linger with it: *Landscape, Orange-Green-Blue* of 1982.

We are confronted with a vast but bounded field of orange (not entirely opaque however—there are yellow and ocher undertones and flecks of ocher making the final plane vibrate). This field is, as are many fields in Gerzso's paintings, not only a field but a wall and also a curtain as might exist on the stage of an *avant-garde* drama. Within the field are four unattached lines, each with a nimbus, each as frail as a comma, and each providing the painting with a different scale. Now scale, as every painter knows, is a difficult problem. It is not just a matter of large and small. It must incur mysterious relationships. Klee never spoke of scale in itself. Rather, he spoke of "measuring and weighing." One can measure and weigh the plane of orange only as one measures the weightlessness of these threads of line. And temporality, as Klee insisted, enters. The time the eye takes to scan the plane is measured in terms of the fragile commencement in the line.

In this painting, as in many other recent paintings, Gerzso has again invoked the special qualities of line which can at once describe the final boundary of a form and suggest the life of the form behind. The shaded line, the swelling line, the diminishing line, the hairfine line serve him both to illuminate the character of his planar forms and to suggest mystery and depth. A pair of blue bars, overriding the orange plane in this painting are separated from it by delicate dark lines. These two blue bars, as musical as any of Klee's, set off another set of juxtapositions, and another, as the

horizontal planes pass into infinity.

But it is not only a matter of the surprising juxtaposition of planes in different scales. Here, and I think in most of Gerzso's paintings, there is a specific surreal emphasis. The three dappled blue shapes, roughly rectangular, that ride on the very surface of the painting, are, in fact, windows, and the cool blue is nothing other than a Magritte-like allusion to sky. Glass, reflection, sky, boundaries, houses, inside, outside—how many associations does he not compress in this intense abstract painting by means of these unexpected illusions of the real. The cracked, window-like shape has existed in many of Gerzso's paintings, including works as long ago as 1965, and can be compared to other shapes in his paintings in which there is a deliberate, slashing rent—symbol of broken idols, shattered monuments, archaic memories of separation and even death.

There are paintings that Gerzso has titled to refer us to the association with ancient Mexico, and others where the shapes, so firmly trapezoidal or rectilinear, inevitably evoke the architecture of the Mayans or the Aztecs. But there are others in which he gives us the clue to the reading that he calls "personage-landscape" (in Spanish it has its implicit poetic elision: *personaje-paisaje*). These are paintings in which the personage, as would a character in the theater, is all but hidden behind the coulisses. It is a presence. It exists in a vertical clatter of planar infinity, or on the vast plateau of Mexico, but always reticent, always masked. This personage is certainly Gerzso, who has diffused himself throughout his paintings, with only a few, but very telling clues to his physical being as a man. The process of masking; of layering memory (does he not call one of his paintings *Ancient Abode*, and suggest the living presence of himself and all others?) is carried out with a painter's rigor. Each plane secretes another. Each color makes another shine. Each line has its opposite. Everything in the world is firmly compressed. And behind, the vivid presence of the eye that discerns, that extends. Gerzso is certainly Gerzso and nothing else.

Checklist of the Exhibition

1. **Personaje**
signed and dated '42; also signed, titled and dated on the reverse
oil on canvas
23⁷/₈ × 20 inches (60 × 50.8 cm)
(Private collection, Massachusetts)
2. **El Mago**
signed; also signed, titled and dated April '48 on the reverse
oil on masonite
17¹/₂ × 13³/₄ inches (44.5 × 33.6 cm)
(Private collection, Mexico)
3. **Pueblo**
signed
mixed media on board
12³/₄ × 18³/₄ inches (32.5 × 47.5 cm)
(Private collection, Mexico)
4. **Two Personages**
signed and dated '50
carbon transfer with color wash on paper
10¹/₄ × 16¹/₂ inches (26 × 41.9 cm)
(Private collection, New York)
5. **Presence of the Past**
signed and dated '53; also signed, titled and dated on the reverse
oil on masonite
28³/₄ × 21¹/₄ inches (73 × 54 cm)
6. **Paisaje amarillo y negro**
signed and dated '54; also signed, titled and dated IV 54 on the reverse
oil on canvas
32¹/₄ × 21³/₈ inches (82 × 54.3 cm)
- 6a. **Paisaje**
signed and dated '56; also signed and dated I 56 on the reverse
oil on paper
19 × 12¹/₂ inches (48.2 × 31.8 cm)
7. **Abstracto en rojo**
signed and dated '57
oil on masonite
24 × 16³/₄ inches (61 × 42.5 cm)
8. **Paisaje**
signed and dated '57; also signed and dated on the reverse
oil on masonite
43³/₁₆ × 25⁹/₁₆ (109.7 × 64.9 cm)
(Private collection)
9. **Untitled, 1958**
signed and dated '58
oil on canvas
32 × 23³/₄ inches (81.3 × 60.3 cm)
10. **Greek Landscape**
signed and dated '59
oil and sand on canvas
18¹/₄ × 24 inches (46.3 × 61 cm)
11. **Mitología**
signed and dated '61; also signed, titled and dated VIII 61 on the reverse
oil on canvas
21⁷/₈ × 32 inches (54.3 × 81.3 cm)
12. **Tierra quemada**
signed and dated '62; also signed and dated VII 62 on the reverse
oil and sand on masonite
15 × 21⁷/₈ inches (38 × 55 cm)
13. **Muro rosa y naranja**
signed and dated '62
oil and sand on masonite
15 × 21³/₄ inches (38.1 × 55.8 cm)
14. **Southern Queen**
signed and dated '63; also signed, dated and titled on the reverse
oil on masonite
18¹/₈ × 24 inches (46.7 × 61 cm)
15. **Plano rojo**
signed and dated '63
oil on masonite
23¹/₄ × 36¹/₄ inches (59.1 × 92.1 cm)
(Jacques and Natasha Gelman Collection, Mexico)
16. **Personaje en rojo y azul**
signed and dated '64
oil on canvas
39⁷/₈ × 28³/₄ inches (100 × 73 cm)
(Jacques and Natasha Gelman Collection, Mexico)
17. **Mythologie**
signed and dated '64; also signed, dated I 64 and inscribed M-4 on the reverse
oil on canvas
25³/₄ × 31⁷/₈ inches (65.4 × 81 cm)
18. **Sud**
signed and dated '64; also signed, dated I 64 and inscribed M-3 on the reverse
oil on canvas
31⁷/₈ × 25³/₄ (81 × 65.4 cm)
19. **Paisaje amarillo**
signed and dated '65; also signed, titled and dated VII 65 on the reverse
oil on canvas
21¹/₂ × 31⁷/₈ inches (54.5 × 81 cm)
(Private collection, Mexico)
20. **Huacan**
signed, titled and dated '67
gouache and graphite on paper
11 × 14¹⁵/₁₆ inches (28 × 38 cm)

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21. **Paisaje en azul**
signed and dated '67
gouache and graphite on paper
12½ × 17¾ inches (31.8 × 45.1 cm)
22. **Verde-azul-amarillo**
signed and dated '68
oil on masonite
19¼ × 13¼ inches (49 × 33.7 cm)
- 22a. **Azul-amarillo-blanco**
signed and dated '69; also signed, titled and dated on the reverse
oil on masonite
17 × 18⅞ inches (43 × 46 cm)
23. **Naranja-azul-verde**
signed and dated '72; also signed, titled and dated XII on the reverse
oil on canvas
26¾ × 36¼ inches (68 × 92 cm)
24. **Paisaje: verde-amarillo-azul-rojo**
signed and dated '73; also signed, titled and dated IV 73 on the reverse
oil on masonite
21⅞ × 28¾ inches (53.6 × 73 cm)
(Private collection, Mexico)
25. **Azul-naranja-verde**
signed and dated '79; also signed, titled and dated IX 79 on the reverse
oil on canvas
24¾ × 39⅞ inches (62.9 × 100 cm)
26. **Paisaje: rojo-ocre-azul**
signed and dated '84; also signed, titled and dated V 84 on the reverse
acrylic and sand on masonite
14⅞ × 21⅞ inches (35.6 × 54.6 cm)
27. **La casa del brujo**
signed and dated '91
acrylic and collage on paper
18½ × 25¼ inches (47 × 64.1 cm)
28. **Puuc**
signed and dated '93
acrylic, collage and pastel on paper
18½ × 25⅝ inches (47 × 65.1 cm)
29. **Desnudo**
signed, dated '88 and numbered 3/6
bronze with red and green patina
6⅝ × 14¾ × 5⅞ inches (17.5 × 37.5 × 13.1 cm)
30. **Yaxchilán**
signed, dated '88 and numbered 3/6
bronze with green patina
26½ × 23¾ inches (67.3 × 60.3 cm)
31. **Pájaro mitológico**
signed, dated '88 and numbered from an edition of 6
bronze with red, blue and black patina
15⅞ × 5⅜ inches (40.2 × 13.7 cm)
32. **Stele**
signed, dated '88 and numbered 2/6
bronze with green patina
16¾ × 8¼ × 2⅝ inches (42.5 × 21 × 6.7 cm)
33. **Constelación**
signed, dated '89 and numbered 5/6
bronze with green patina
43 × 16⅞ × 11¼ inches (109.2 × 41 × 28.5 cm)
34. **Tollan**
signed, dated '90 and numbered 3/6
copper construction with gray patina
17⅞ × 18 × 6½ inches (44 × 45.8 × 16.5 cm)
35. **Semblantes**
signed, dated '94 and numbered 3/6
bronze with blue-green patina
23 × 30⅞ × 2¼ inches (58.5 × 78 × 5.7 cm)
36. **Palabras Grabadas**
a portfolio of ten five-color etchings with ten poems by Octavio Paz, translated by Eliot Weinberger each etching signed, dated '89 and numbered 32/50
16 × 18 inches (40.6 × 45.7 cm)
published by Limestone Press in 1990
37. **Manantial, Diálogo, Ciudadela, Sagrario and Tierra amarilla**
a suite of five hard and soft ground etchings with aquatint
each print signed, dated '93 and numbered from an edition of 60
plate sizes: varying
paper size: 41½ × 33¼ inches (105.4 × 84.5 cm)
published by Limestone Press in 1995
38. **Temples**
a suite of 12 hard ground etchings with 12 poems by C. Henri Hine, translated by Alberto Blanco
each print signed, dated '95 and numbered from an edition of 50
plate sizes: varying
paper size: 14⅞ × 11¼ inches (37.7 × 28.2 cm)
published by Limestone Press in 1995
39. **Meridional**
signed, dated '95 and numbered 22/75
mixograph on handmade paper
18 × 41 inches (45.7 × 104.1 cm)
published by Remba Gallery 1995
40. **Recinto**
signed, dated '95 and numbered 70/75
mixograph on handmade paper
20 × 42½ inches (50.8 × 108 cm)
published by Remba Gallery 1995



1. **Personaje**, 1942

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John Golding quote from *Gunther Gerzso and the Landscape of the Mind*,
in **Gerzso**, Editions du Griffon, Neuchâtel, Switzerland, 1983

Gerzso's quote in Barbara Duncan's tribute appears in her article, *Behind the Artist's Walls*, exhibition catalogue of
Gunther Gerzso: Paintings and Graphics Reviewed, University of Texas at Austin, April 4-May 23, 1976, p. 22

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"Interview with Gunther Gerzso" by Marie-Pierre Colle from **Latin American Artists in their Studios**

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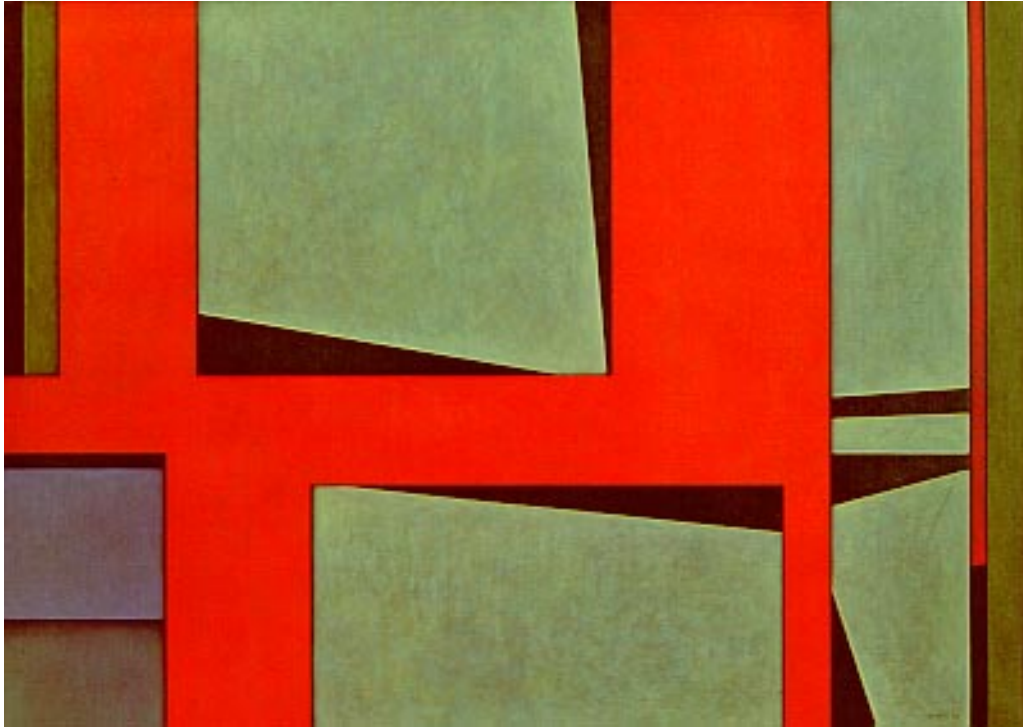
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Mary-Anne Martin/Fine Art

23 East 73 Street New York, NY 10021

Tel (212) 288-2213 Fax (212) 861-7656