



Evolution of a Pictorial Style in the Offspring of a Painter

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Abstract

A comparison between pictorial styles of the Cuban painters Michel Mico and his father Fidel Mico is presented in this article. The transformation process of the knowledge and feelings assimilated by Michel from his father into a personal style was drawn from visual analysis of their paintings. Differences and similarities found in visual impact, composition, focus, visual pathway, arrangement of the third dimension, size, frame orientation, mass and form separation, and light suggest a deep influence of Fidel in the evolution of Michel's style. Results and its corresponding interpretations reported here could be of interest for scholars currently investigating the evolution of the contemporary Cuban art.

Keywords: Art; Documentation; Painting; Provenance; Research; Aesthetic

Introduction

The altruistic attitude of the Cuban painter Fidel Mico (b. 1962) for teaching to young artists is one of the most notable features of his personality, in spite of that he spontaneously emerged without sufficient support to develop talent [1,2]. The influence of this artist in the career of tenths of Cuban painters could be a formidable research subject, but comparisons between works of Fidel Mico and his son Michel Mico, born in 1983 could also be a contribution for understanding the heterogeneous evolution of the contemporary Cuban art (CCA) [3]. The natural wit showed by Fidel from 10 years old was probably transferred to Michel from childhood although there is not graphical evidence supporting this assumption. By 2004, Michel started formal training at the Academy of Fine Art "San Alejandro" after three years of training in local studios and group exhibitions in Galeria Hernandez Cardenas, and Casa Museo Huron Azul (Havana). A project on the Michel's career has recently been started, but there is not even enough information to complete deep analysis, writing, and publication dealing with his career. The primary aim of this work is to find convergences and divergences in oil on canvas painted by Fidel and Michel by comparisons between individual artworks in the hope to open a pathway for studying the evolution of the CCA. The study of the Bruegel's family is an example of useful

information for understanding this interesting genealogical process, but a defined methodology for studying the influence of a painter in the career of other artists has not been found in the literature. Therefore, a rational idea could be performing independent visual analysis of artworks painted by a progenitor and his/her offspring. In addition, it could be taken for granted that comparing compositions containing similar elements will improve accuracy and certainty of the visual analysis. In this work, the author reports comparisons between landscapes painted by Fidel Mico and Michel Mico as a point of departure to study transference of pictorial ability and aesthetic precepts from a father to his descendant.

Interview

Jose A. Buxadó (JAB): When did you start painting?

Michel Mico (MM): First, I started drawing when I was 6 years old by using pencil, like any child. I drew landscapes with volcanoes and dinosaurs which fascinated me. Obviously, I was born in an environment plenty of artistic creativity looking to my father from the beginning to the end of every canvas. I enjoyed a childhood with spontaneous creativity that I stopped at 11 and restated at 15 years old. My serious works of paintings started when I was 19 years old.

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JAB: Did your childhood influence in your vocation? I mean your decision to be a professional painter.

MM: Definitely, it did. I had two periods of obsessive intensity of drawing during childhood to the point to know the scientific name of each dinosaur species. I was actually fascinated by the world of those kings which governed earth for millions of years, and I did not want to do anything that were not reproducing their majestic designs and colossal fighting for survival. At present, I think that I own my talent to my difficulties to express ideas and feelings through words during my childhood. Maybe I developed more visual capacities than linguistic abilities during my childhood walking between my father's paintings. It was good to feel how a limitation may become into a source of talent.

JAB: Who were the most influential persons in your decision to be a painter?

MM: I think that the most influential factor was tradition, but my family was also important. My grandmother worked as drawer, and my father is a professional painter. It is important to note that my father has been the most influential person in my career. He has been inspiration and a great challenge. He is always stimulating me to be better than him, which I am not sure that will happen. Debate with my father on every painting has been a dominant factor in the evolution of my pictorial style. Our professional confrontations remains in my mind: he asked me to add more details to my paintings, but our visions on realism were not the same, and I told him that the worst thing that happened to me was to be the son of a painter. Fortunately, I do not think like that anymore. At present, he is my best accomplice, and the hardest judge. His requirements have been fruitful.

JAB: Do you like the contemporary Cuban painting?

MM: Yes, I do. There are many young talents in the current generation of painters who are exploring the work of the old masters, particularly concerning to the legacy of Giotto di Bondone (1267 - 1337), and Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475 - 1564). I think that they are discovering themselves. I mean their actual nature as offspring of Spanish, African, and Chinese people. Probably, future generations will be unable to abandon the essential issues of the old cannon of aesthetics. I feel that the youngest Cuban painters are more eclectic than previous generations, because they open space for more genres, and concepts. In addition, they have been receiving much more visual information from any part of the world, and there is a traditional capacity in this society to understand different cultures. In intellectual terms, the youngest painters are better than previous generations.

JAB: Now, talking about your personal style, do you think that it has been influenced by any artist?

MM: Yes, it is. My personal style has been influenced by the work of Ivan Ivanovich Shishkins (1832 - 1898), and my father, although I continue in a constant search, because I do not think that I have a definitive style. Shishkin's work made me to believe in realism

when I studied his Catalogue Raisonne. I think that he showed the beauty of nature as no one is able to do it. Chapters could be written on any of his paintings. There is too much to learn from his legacy.

JAB: I know that your paintings were shown at the group exhibition 170th Anniversary of the birth of Esteban Chartrand y Dubois (1840 – 1882) in 2010 at the Church “San Francisco de Asis” (Havana, Cuba). What did call your attention in that exhibition?

MM: There are many interesting issues in the work of Chartrand: mostly, the use of light, shadow, and contrast. Concerning to the exhibition, I just can say that the place was what I always dreamed for showing my paintings. Unfortunately, I have not the encyclopedic knowledge and qualification to describe that building. The mystic environment of that spiritual enclosure was the most impressive feature at the exhibition. It is a very ancient small church. It was incredible the excellence in the use of space. The curatorial work was exquisite. This old master deserves our veneration in a place like that.

JAB: I have been studying the work of your father during 8 years, and you have been up-to-date on my work. Would you accept participating in a research project for documenting your work?

MM: Yes, of course. I would accept it, because I want to be known in other countries, and learning from other painters.

JAB: I have observed that your work has been diverse. Have you considered additional expansion to other genres?

MM: Yes, I have thought it. Actually, I feel a need to do it.

JAB: Can you describe your painting process?

MM: Actually, my painting process is not standard. I am highly variable concerning to the painting process. I am not stable in that issue. I use different work flows and resources, looking for my purpose of painting. I have not an exact sequence to say.

JAB: What did you feel after entering to the National Academy of Fine Art “San Alejandro” to study painting?

MM: The academy is a place where students feel a peculiar artistic environment. We felt a continue creation process. It is a wonderful place, in this sense. In fact, I was excited when I entered to the academy for the first time. Later, after several months studying, I felt that I was losing my time. Why? Because professors were teaching me what I just knew, and it was like learning the same lessons twice. I felt a need to be free, but I visualized some aesthetic dogmas, and that was not what I wanted. I am a very independent person.

JAB: Do you remember a professor that influenced in your pictorial style?

MM: There was not a professor that influenced in my personal style at the academy.

JAB: What artists from your generation could be considered important?



MM: I do not see anyone, including me, until now. Someone important is who makes contributions that changes concepts in the pictorial art.

JAB: Where you have shown works in exhibition?

MM: The first one was at the Gallery “HerCar”. I showed at “San Francisco de Asis”, as you mentioned before, and another at the Hotel “Parque Central”. These have been the most important for me.

JAB: What countries would you like to visit?

MM: First, I would like to visit Australia. I would also like to visit Russia, Germany, Greece, and the United State, mostly New Orleans where I knew, through friends living there, that there is a strong cultural movement.

JAB: What foreign painter would you like to know?

MM: There is a German painter, but I do not remember his name now. I would also like to have known the Polish painter Zdzisław Beksiński (1929 - 2005) who tragically died. I knew about his work through a film dealing with part of his stormy life. The Beksiński’s oeuvre has been the most impressive to me.

JAB: Do you feel part of a national tradition?

MM: Yes, I do, because I work on landscape painting, because this is my country, and because what I see every day in this island.

JAB: Are you interested in the work of any contemporary painter?

MM: At present, I am not interested in the study of any contemporary painter.

JAB: Do you paint at any specific time of the day?

MM: I was working exclusively at night during a long period of time, but I found that I did not get what I wanted. It was good, because there was silence, but I have organized my work, and at present I take advantage of the sun light which is more important to me, and I rest at night.

JAB: Are you able to work in absence natural light?

MM: Yes, I can do it.

JAB: What is the importance of the drawing in your work?

MM: It is very important. Drawing gives more coherence to artworks. If you have a good drawing, you can do a better work, but actually I have not a defined order when I start a painting. Sometimes I start directly painting “a la prima”, without drawing. I do not need drawing when I paint landscapes.

JAB: Have art market requirements affected the evolution of your work?

MM: Of course, and it makes a huge pressure on every artist at global scale.

JAB: Would you prefer to be known through advertising or through peer-reviewed publications?

MM: The second alternative would be idyllic. It is the most trustable and serious, but I will not reject any opportunity.

JAB: Which subjects are you more interested to represent in your artworks?

MM: At present, landscape is the most important to me, because I have not been able to paint a landscape as I really would like to do it. The nude also attracts me, because of the diversity of ethnic groups coexisting in my country, and their offspring, but at present, I am consecrated to landscape.

JAB: Do you think more on the visual impact or are you more interested in transmitting a message to the viewer?

MM: I am more interested in the visual impact.

JAB: What painters you have studied in depth?

MM: First, I studied to Michelangelo Buonarroti, and later to Ivan Shishkins. I have also studied too much the work of the British illustrator Simon Bisley (b. 1962), although he is not a painter. His comics are highly pictorial. He is the only artist of comics that is interesting to me.

JAB: It is almost unavoidable to think on comparisons between artworks of Fidel Mico and yours. Does it have affected you?

MM: Comparisons between ours artworks only affected me during adolescence when I felt the need to develop a personal style, and to avoid being an exact copy of my father. At present, this feeling has gone, because my work has changed to move far away from my father’s work.

JAB: How do you build the third dimension in your paintings?

MM: I try to use a combination of light and color, but I think light is very important. One of them has not sense without the other.

JAB: What are you doing to inform on your work?

MM: At present, I am doing nothing specific on this issue. However, the Australian photographer Robert William Grove, and the journalist Anne Pavey Grove have been active in their country reporting on my work, and the work of my father. This is a field that I want to open, because I have too much to say to the world.

Contextualization


Fidel Mico is one of a few contemporary Cuban painters who recently escaped from invisibility through documentation and publication of his work. Persistent interactions with the work of Michel Mico have been almost unavoidable while working in the project Fidel Mico Catalogue Raisonné (FMCR). Transfer of love for painting and artistic abilities to his son, and transformation of Fidel’s knowledge and feeling into Michel’s style were always floating at the studio. In a wider sense, a detailed review of exhibition catalogues at Fidel’s studio allowed finding coexistence of several generations of painters working in the same genre, and genre combinations. A small sample of the paintings showed at the group exhibition “Primer Salon Nacional de Paisaje Víctor Manuel” in 2003 is evidence in favor of the argument on the healthy and rich evolution of the CCA. The artworks showed at the monastery “San Francisco de Asis” by the Cuban painters Lester Campa Melo, Ramon Vázquez León, Diego Torres Rodríguez, and Omar Torres López were featured by the curator Jorge R. Bermudez in a single statement: “The empty criterion on the

mimetic vision of reality to be molded as landscape, generally sweeten and asynchronous with the dominant taste, did not prevail". A similar trend was clear seven years later at the group exhibition organized for celebration of the 170th birthday of the Cuban painter Esteban Chartrand y Dubois 1840-1882. In reference to the paintings showed this time at the monastery, curators wrote: "The contemporary significant presence (impronta) includes novel interests in this genre evidenced in realist, conceptual, surrealist or expressionist approaches."

First-Hand Evidence

Comparisons of Fidel's artworks with those painted by Michel, by using a comprehensive check list built from the literature for visual analysis, to discover how both artists represent the three-dimensional world on a two-dimensional surface, revealed evidence of a spontaneous evolution process in Michel's work [4-9]. The author found at least eight paintings useful for comparison showing direct influence of Fidel in the work of his son (Table 1).

Table 1: Paintings selected for comparison by visual analysis (Photos: Fidel Mico).

Nº	Paintings by Fidel Micó	Paintings by Michel Micó
1	 <p><i>Camino al bohío N° 1, 2001, oil on canvas, 38 x 52 in. (95 x 130 cm), USA collector.</i></p>	 <p><i>La Campiña, 2007, oil on canvas, 38 x 52 inches (95 x 130 cm), Spanish collector.</i></p>
2	 <p><i>Atardecer en la sierra N° 2, 2004, oil on canvas, 21-1/5 x 28 in. (53 x 70 cm), USA collector.</i></p>	 <p><i>Bruma, 2009, oil on canvas, 21-1/5 x 28 inches (53 x 70 cm), Italian collector.</i></p>
3	 <p><i>Espejo del monte, 2006, oil on canvas, 21-1/5 x 28 in. (53 x 70 cm), Cuban collector.</i></p>	 <p><i>Camino de luz, 2006, oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches (90 x 120 cm), USA collector.</i></p>
4	 <p><i>El salto de la paloma, 2006, oil on canvas, 80 x 52 in. (200 x 130 cm), USA collector.</i></p>	 <p><i>Donde todo comienza, 2007, oil on canvas, 48 x 40 inches (120 x 100 cm), Mexican collector.</i></p>



The paintings Camino al bohío N° 1, and La Campina seem to be the best examples for comparison between Fidel and his son, because both works are almost identical. Michel reinforced the visual impact from the foreground to the middle ground, and reduced the protagonist role of clouds. Although Michel kept the same visual pathway, he changed the focus from clouds to the trees behind the house in the middle ground spreading the sight to left and right, reinforcing the viewer's attention to the painting. A more careful construction of the third dimension and a release of the middle ground pressure on the viewer are immediately perceptible in the work painted by Michel. His work evidences of his father's capacity to transfer feelings, and stimulating creative freedom in other artists to obtain more advantageous conditions of light and environment. This was repeatedly confirmed during visits of the author to the studio. A comparison between Atardecer en la Sierra, and Bruma is a little more difficult, but some relevant conclusions may be drawn. In both works, with equal size, a river crosses the painted place suggesting the same visual pathway in both paintings, but once again Michel introduced his personal style by removing trees from the foreground in the right compartment and including two palms and small mountains in the middle ground. An ancient fundamental concept on the novelty of a painting could have being part of the creative process when Michel painted Bruma. Nicolas Poussin (1594 - 1665) remarked that: "The novelty in painting does not consist principally in a new subject, but in new and good disposition and expression, and thus the subject from being common and old becomes singular and new" [10]. Michel used a more sophisticated method for holding the viewer's attention. The sight is trapped between small mountains, the sunset, and three palms placed in the left compartment. He also reinforced separation between mass and form, possibly for preventing confusion of identity. Contours of forms within groups are equally interesting, although different, in both works. In a lower key, Michel discarded warm colors, and used a wide range of grey and green to represent a wetter and colder environment. The treatment of a river flowing from the foreground in the painting Camino de luz may deserve a deep study if compare with the painting Espejo del monte. Obviously, both artists disagreed not only on the size, but also on the more pertinent frame orientation to emphasize the subject. The visual impact suggests that Michel found the opportunity to show a different perception of the same scenario by including an almost infinite amount of details from the foreground to the background, avoiding element simplifications, and reducing the protagonist role of the river. Michel enlarged the visual pathway, as did in La Campina, leaving the viewer attention floating between both sides of the river and the foreground of the painted place. The arrangement of lines becomes more interesting in Camino de luz where beauty of the tropical landscape is highlighted in every detail by introducing more diversity of line, spacing, tone, and color. Concerning to logic development of light, the influence of Fidel in

the work of Michel seems to have been limited in a landscape with abundant vegetation and stones. Other relevant issue is the absence of element projections between compartments in the work of Michel. The painting El salto de la paloma is one of the works commissioned to Fidel by an USA private collector in 2006, and showed in exhibition at the 48th Annual Coconuts Grove Arts Festival in February 2011 [11]. The visual impact of this painting suggests a great effort to obtain perfection in every detail. The focus is placed according to a relationship with lines and forms for guiding the sight to the principal element: a waterfall. However, Michel did not face this huge challenge, because the attention centre is wider in the painting Donde todo comienza. In this painting, the viewer is free to enjoy biodiversity into an intimate scenario plenty of species and natural interactions. A complex ecosystem is directly represented by Michel where, on the contrary, the waterfall is not the principal element. Light plays different roles in these paintings. Fidel fully enlightened the scenario, and Michel regulated light intensity from the middle ground to suggest humidity introduced by the waterfall in a small space limited by a stone wall and shadows of highly entangled and compact vegetation. In El salto de la paloma, Fidel granted major protagonist role to water flowing around stones from the background in an open space, but Michel seems to have been more interested in the environment generated by the aesthetic synergy of compositional elements.

Discussion

Most characteristics of the work of Fidel Mico could be divided into two categories. The first one suggests the possibility of the influence from impressionists, a Russian old master, and Cuban landscape painters from the 19th century. A second category could be components of a personal style developed during 40 years. Michel, on the other hand, is more difficult to analyze, because he is building a personal style, apparently at random, from the study of all known genres, painting landscapes, portraits, still lifes, abstractions, and an extensive diversity of genre combinations. The Sir Joshua Reynolds' reference to William Shakespeare (1564 - 1616) as "that faithful and accurate painter of nature" (Reynolds 1778), and the famous aphorism of Simonides de Ceos (556 b. C - 468 b. C): "painting is mute poetry, poetry a speaking picture" could be discussed in this study case [12]. The argument: "persistence on landscape genre, crossing and breathing modern times, emerging with fresh, and up-to-date visions, keeping fidelity to traditions, with modern eyes" is supported by Fidel's brotherhood with the spirits of forerunner masters who kindly accept moving his hands, feeding his imagination and soul. He works with an exceptional vision, and Caribbean feeling, to reach actual, but at the same time, dreamlike images. Some of his paintings teach on the spirituality, containing a remarkable devotion to symbolic representations [13,14], but Michel has taken

a radically different pathway. If attention is paid to his virtual gallery at the website ArtsCad it would be easy to understand the intensity of Michel's current exploration in the pictorial art. The still life paintings *Bailarinas* and *El rey y sus ovejas* are good examples of the time spent by him looking for perfection in a particular genre [15-17]. Certainly, an individual style will derive from these efforts, but it remains to see how much it differs from his father's style. In many Fidel's paintings, the principal element is a small mass of light irradiating the landscape, introducing serious doubts on the formal correspondence between poetry and painting. Although this particular challenge has not been faced by Michel, he has obtained satisfactory results facing other complex tasks, suggesting a remarkable interest in poetic messages and rejection to exact imitation of nature. Devotion for finding perfection has also been observed in the abundance, and diversity of vegetation painted by both artists provoking that the viewer feels him-self as to be in the painted place. In most landscapes, details are not simplified, but highlighted for unfolding Cuba's beauty. The presence of more than one landscape within a canvas is perceptible in Fidel's paintings, but it is timidly found in the work of Michel. He is creating his own style for using acute angles as compositional elements of balance, for building careful constructions of the third dimension and three dimensional arraignments that release the visual pressure on the viewer. It seems to be reasonable taking into account an advice of Leonardo Da Vinci (1452 – 1519) to painters: "to be solitary and consider what he sees and discuss with himself, choosing the most excellent parts of the species of whatever he sees. If he does this, he will appear to be a second nature" [5]. The evolution of technical issues of Michel's work may be qualified as outstanding, but the emotional side of painting remains to be developed at large. Human capacity to perceive reality is very limited, but Fidel allows nature to penetrate his artwork as he becomes absorbed in the creation process. His perception of nature seems not to be limited to what he sees, but he also discuss with himself. Color, fragrance, light, feeling, and infinite pleasures flow through every exposed nerve when someone discovers his canvas in exhibition or at the studio. The viewer is trapped by a kind of sweet energy which provokes a slight repentance after a movement that makes losing one of thousands of perfect angles which once again offer additional endless streams of unavoidable spiritual pleasures. Obviously, obtaining these results from the viewer requires decades of inquisitive devotion to the pictorial art. Both painters, but particularly Fidel, work as if they were aware of the redefinition written by Ludovico Dolce: "the painter must labor hard not only to imitate but also to surpass nature" [18]. Decoding a color language that is almost ubiquitous in every small detail of Fidel's painting is a challenging, and maybe a prohibitive task. Tropical trees, rivers and natural paths invite to visit unknown and very intriguing places through an innocent interrogation: "what is

behind that..?" leaving the viewer in absolute levitation over infinite alternatives of natural scenarios "... behind that..." His diagonal transit from light blue to green, and then to dark green with intermediary well balanced shadows is a test for human thinking at the limits of rationality. A passionate interest on nature and consequences of environment destruction is evident from his open speech to the world, emphasizing the rights of future inhabitants to live in a healthy planet. Fidel places the most relevant natural features at first plane, giving us a smooth intensity of the symbols that should be saved by the humankind. Although the above mention features are not evident in the work of Michel Mico, paintings of both artists demonstrates exquisite care of light, color, line, and shape. They gradually unfold space in-depth from the background opposing their own pictorial solutions to the traditional conception of landscape painting. One may, in fact, go so far to say that there is a useful precedent to understand developmental processes in a family of painters. The study of artist families may be a source of knowledge on the evolution of pictorial movements relevant for the History of Art. For instance, the Bruegel's dynasty was a remarkable case where sons and grandsons of a great master were painters [19,20]. It is important to note that learning processes may differ from a family to another. In this particular case, Jan Brueghel (1568-1625), and his brother learned nothing directly from his father Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1525-1569), because they were children when he died. However, unlike his brother Pieter Brueghel the Younger (1564-1638), Jan developed original style and repertoire of compositional elements and scenarios. A direct continuation of the legacy from Jan to his descendants could be expected, but it was not straightforward. While Jan's lineage of painters was interrupted during one generation, Pieter's sons Jan Brueghel the Younger (1601-1678), and Ambrosius Brueghel (1617-1675) and his grandsons Jan Pieter Brueghel (1628-1664) and Abraham Brueghel (1631-1690) were the outstanding artists that kept alive the tradition and excellence of the family. Changes of composition details, imitations, omissions, derived compositions, misattributions, inventions and variations on subjects have been the starting points not only to study the Bruegel's dynasty, but also to find explanations on the life and career of Dutch/Flemish painters from 16th to 17th century.

Conclusion

The method followed in this work for studying the style evolution of the artist Michel Mico from the influence of his father could be effective for investigating other artists and pictorial movements. Differences found from comparisons of similar paintings were remarkable, contributing to facilitate understanding the extension and dynamics of changes in the CCA. The evolution reported in this work is ongoing, because Michel Mico is even building his personal style. Although significant efforts for finding perfection were observed in Michel's paintings, the wide range of genres and

genre combinations faced by him makes difficult a reasonable forecasting of his future directions and outcomes. Some challenges have not been faced by Michel while he obtains the best from his father, but devotion has been demonstrated in others. This is clear evidence of the alternative pathways that may take any artist during career development, and a confirmation of Michel capacity to find novel pictorial solutions from his individual aesthetic precepts. I submit that the above-mentioned research serves as a contribution to the study of the evolution of other artistic movements.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Author Information

Jose A. Buxado (b. 1965, Havana, Cuba) is an independent scholar and writer. A graduate of Havana University and holding a Master in Science, Buxado is currently collecting and analyzing information to complete “The Fidel Mico Catalogue Raisonne”. He has submitted this project to Catalogue Raisonne Scholars Association, and International Foundation for Art Research. His research interests include ambidextrous painters, blind painters, landscape painting, appraisal and valuation of artworks, and art-market interactions. His professional career spans more than twenty five years in the fields of science, technology, and business, but he has started research on visual art after a visit to the studio of the ambidextrous painter Fidel Mico, and informal meetings with artists of the pictorial movement known as “Horizontes”.

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