

Sema D'Acosta
ONE-COURSE MEAL

Before making any assessments, our first and foremost consideration when approaching the art of Miki Leal (Seville, 1974) must be painting, the driving force and motivation behind his work. Although we cannot help being captivated by his alluring images and the infinite suggestions they disclose, the most important aspect of his pictures is syntax, a series of intrinsic features related to pictorial grammar that manage to succulently convey a steady stream of evocations so subtly that we hardly notice them and fail to establish a probable logic based on the contents. All of his creations have something in common, a kind of obsession he has progressively enhanced and modified over the course of his career, which has to do with the spring mechanisms that make something pop into his head and simultaneously create a driving need to share it through the language of painting. In this respect, for *One-Course Meal* he has prepared a broad compendium of some of the recurring motifs in his visual repertoire, a review of the principal landmarks in a personal cartography determined largely by elements related to memory or the artist's own experience.

Many of the issues addressed in this exhibition serve as anchors for those disjointed memories which come together to shape Miki Leal's expressive territory, a kind of interweaving itinerary of sensations that lead us straight to his preoccupations and the particularities of his creative universe. Another novel aspect of this show is the inclusion of small fired-clay still lifes, a traditional albeit currently underrated genre that has always interested Leal. These pottery pieces should not be viewed as isolated or one-off creations but as appendices to his works on paper that address common themes in his oeuvre, as attempts to move past the two-dimensional realm in a natural continuation of his ongoing research into the possibilities of the medium, capable of overcoming the limitations of the pictorial surface and occupying space in a dialogical manner.

Normally, his discourse is built on indicators drawn from his immediate context and the unexpected signs that appear around him; personal experience is his usual source of inspiration, a booster mechanism that allows him to unpremeditatedly select individual images which serve him as both support and premise. This catalogue of retrieved perceptions must be understood from a sensory perspective. The artist does not intend them to represent anything specific; they merely suggest open scenarios with the potential to capture and trap the spectator, ordinary themes taken from daily

life whose simple presentation and easy ability to make us identify with these shared impressions renders them universal, nearby places which, in some private, inexplicable way, strike us as familiar. There is something spontaneous about them, an appealing quality which, above and beyond the actual message, takes hold and almost releases us from the obligation to evaluate their narrative facet. As Leal himself admits, “What I like about my work is how I communicate the things I leave unsaid. The challenge is to tell what you know, but without actually uttering it. That’s more or less how I define what I do; it’s what works for me. I never think on my pictures because I don’t really believe I’ve got a style. Artists who have a style think about it and do it, but that never works for me. I just work. I work on each picture. And I don’t know who I’m making it for. It is whatever comes out. My pictures are never clear-cut. They have a mysterious quality which emanates from the things that remain unsaid.”¹

In Miki Leal’s work we must pay particular attention to the way he applies the paint: loosely, almost in a single stroke, without pentimenti, making sure that the end result is not too similar to the model so that the observer can be guided by the stimulating power of suggestion of just the right pace of brushwork, the perfect colour highlight and, above all, the precise placement of each thing to create a balance in the work that ensnares the spectator. The seductive power of his pictures is a product of the chromatic harmony of the different tones he uses for each object in relation to the other elements and the surface area occupied by each. Whether they are garden plants, the cover of a handbook or a shirt from the artist’s own cupboard is of secondary importance; what truly matters is how each object is painted. This substantial method of conveyance not only releases him from programmatic obligations and conceptual justifications, but also manages to lend each work a dynamic, coherent integrity. As Ignacio Tovar noted when describing his pictorial merits, “Miki’s ability to combine disparate elements in his pictures with such casualness and panache is both surprising and disconcerting, although it also holds our attention long enough for us to be drawn into the world he has created without a struggle. Once inside, we find that the laws governing the picture are coherent, that the relationships established between the different parts, whether figurative renderings or abstract blotches, have their own logic, until we finally reach the point where rational analysis no longer matters.”² José Miguel Pereñíguez underscored these uncanny powers: “Returning to Miki’s work, its rich, complex iconography may give rise to superficial or hermetic readings. It is so

¹ Leal, Miki. “Miki en Canadalia. Reflexiones de Miki Leal”, in *Balada Heavy* (exh. cat.), p. 29. Madrid, Galería Magda Belloti, 2007.

² Tovar, Ignacio. “Las zapatillas (deportivas) rojas”, in *Premios Altadis 2006* (exh. cat.), p. 14. Arles, France, 2007.

inevitable that it seems banal. However, there is something beyond the work itself, something that audiences often fail to properly grasp: the power of that work to insert itself in one's own personal experience, not as a parallel story or diary, but as the essential way in which one's experience of reality is woven."³

The title of this project, *One-Course Meal (Plato combinado)*, is a half-playful, half-ironic name in which Miki Leal takes a humorous look at himself. Leal took these words—a reference to the all-in-one platter (meat/carb/greens) found on the menu of virtually every cheap eating establishment in Spain—and drew a connection between the standard presentation of this dish and the composition of a contemporary still life. The original Spanish term, which literally means “combined dish”, also alludes to the way in which he unabashedly and intentionally mixes the three conventional pictorial genres (landscape, portrait and still life), taking ingredients from each in no apparent order and combining them to create ambiguous, disorientating scenes that defy classification. Of course, this play on words also points to a distinctive, defining trait of his artistic personality: his rare ability to establish synergies with other artists and engage in shared projects.

Pottery

One of the principal things that will set this exhibition apart is the presence of pottery, a hitherto unexplored art form in Leal's career which he will publicly present for the first time at the CAAC. Miki has always been fascinated by the textures and tactile aspects of artwork (he frequently breaks, tears, wrinkles or cuts the edges of many of his works of paper), so perhaps it was only a matter of time before he decided to experiment with clay, a malleable material full of possibilities that has allowed him to create new three-dimensional forms unlike anything he has produced before. Considering the identity of this particular museum and the importance of pottery in its history—in the 19th century it was turned into a ceramic factory after Charles Pickman purchased the property, forcibly vacated by the former monastic tenants during Mendizábal's sweeping confiscations of church property in 1836—it is easy to see the connection between these new pieces and their temporary home.

³ Pereñíguez, José Miguel. “Un canadien errant (grandes clásicos del Canadá)”, in *Balada Heavy* (exh. cat.), p. 23. Madrid, Galería Magda Belloti, 2007.

The different objects which Leal now presents as sculptural still lifes were inspired by specific motifs largely drawn from paintings or fragments retrieved from the depths of his unconscious, a transfer of images bathed in the glow of intimacy and personal reminiscence which facilitates a constant dialogue between the various elements. On this point, it is interesting to note that one of Leal's principal referents in questions related to this material is Francisco de Zurbarán, particularly with regard to the ceramic items that figure prominently or inconspicuously in some of his best-known canvases, such as *Still Life with Pottery Jars* at the Prado Museum and *St. Hugo in the Refectory*, a canvas painted for this very place, the Monastery of Santa María de las Cuevas, in the 17th century. In the latter painting, the still life is a secondary element included in a group portrait, a marriage of genres that appeals to Leal because of the singular way in which two supposedly unrelated categories are intertwined.

One-Course Meal can be divided into five different sections that address some of the fundamental traits of Miki Leal's creative personality, giving us a particular synthesis of common themes and motivations in his work as well as a general reflection on aspects of his identity as an artist.

Personal Memory

One of the elemental spheres in which this artist's work unfolds is the realm of evocation, a vaguely defined territory where reality is deprived of its boundary markers and becomes soft and porous. Immersed in this unidentified place, Miki retrieves past sensations as if they were sparkling, inconsequential flashes, a trail that emerges as blurred streaks encoded in paint. When we remember, we forget the details and the once-clear picture of that past experience loses definition. The deepest, most abiding memories are inextricably linked to emotions, forming a subjective reservoir from which the artist drinks repeatedly and incessantly, as if it were a nourishing elixir; however, this practice should be understood not from an existentialist perspective, but as the habit of a believing, practising epicurean.

In this exhibition, many of those reminiscences are related to a degree of childhood and adolescent happiness; certain objects from that lost home and other profound impressions that have remained latent inside him are translated into paintings and pottery pieces. Scattered among these interpretations is the solid image of his father, a central figure in his life whose premature demise brought about a radical and ultimately life-altering change during his youth. In fact, this is a good time to mention that Miki Leal entered the faculty of fine arts reluctantly and on the rebound. What he really longed to be was a professional guitarist, and he originally had every intention of taking that route; in fact, after completing his secondary education he received a scholarship to study at the prestigious Berklee College of Music in Boston. However, he was prevented from embarking on this adventure by the unexpected death of his father, a loss that marked the end of one stage of his life and the beginning of his pictorial vocation.

Although the majority of Miki's output is intensely autobiographical, sifting through the dreamlike shards he offers us to find specific details of actual episodes in his life or precise events that made an impression on him is no easy task. The exegesis of this domestic universe is cryptic; his intention is not to reconstruct anything, but to create a private record based on a method of regurgitating his immediate surroundings without falling into the trap of contemplative or hedonistic considerations. This aesthetic hunch underscores the poetic quality of the tiny, insignificant acts that comprise our daily existence and are the sediments of a subjective memory anchored by affectivity.

The Image Collector

For quite some time, Miki has saved clippings, photos and objects of diverse provenance which, when the time is right, can plant the seed of a new story in his head. Sometimes the reference is literal, other times a bizarre fantasy, and yet others simply a switch that activates a preamble. These clues, scattered and sown in his consciousness in the form of flashes, are found in the most unlikely places: on an exotic adventure in a foreign country or puttering about the house on a workday, at the back of his bedroom cupboard, in an antiques shop in Los Angeles, or on a remote beach on the French Riviera. Extraordinary and ordinary events, grassroots and high-brow, the immediate and the inaccessible: all are examined with the same careful attention. His eclecticism makes no distinctions between subjects. He simply lets

himself be carried away by the emotive power emanating from the observed thing, establishing an order of priority according to his own personal criteria. Apropos of his many paintings inspired by jazz albums, Kevin Power explained, “Leal, of course, does not talk about books, films or albums as a critic; he speaks of what they have meant to him throughout his life, from his teen years to the present moment. [...] His aesthetic is an intimist mishmash; Miki is an enthusiastic street sweeper of bebop, with a light touch—an ironic touch, very Miki—driven by easily recordable curiosity. [...] He improvises effortlessly on a lyrical keyboard of sight and sound, delightful sounds with a spirited core. His works are about the pleasures of existence, the musical snippets that, if we are lucky, fill our lives. They are flowing, vivacious, informal, but never careless.”⁴

Miki Leal is a collector-artist, a hoarder of signs who amasses sensations elicited by what he sees. His retina records, his brain transcribes. He appropriates whatever he finds suggestive, whatever he believes concerns him, whatever he identifies within his firmament as something near and familiar, even when it is not. All it has to do is strike a chord. Old editions are a good excuse for acquiring a reliable easel, whether it be a record cover or a DIY manual. Design and typography provide a sturdy stretcher, serving as a counterweight to balance the structure. Like an indefatigable deep-sea diver, he descends into the depths time after time, following tiny clues until they lead him to places and people that strike him as vaguely familiar. Like the adherents of Pop Art before him, he has no compunctions about borrowing images from the media, soaking up mass culture when necessary. He also profits from the popular aesthetic, disaffected and genuine, that finds its footing in triviality. He takes it as he finds it, pure and unadulterated, without theatrics or poses borrowed from the “finer” arts.

Portrait, Landscape, Still Life

The three largest pictures in *One-Course Meal* form a triptych inspired by the time-honoured genres of painting, a far from indulgent look at this historical categorization in which the artist flouts and shatters their fundamental identifying principles. Although Miki Leal’s iconography is always au courant and his themes are

⁴ Power, Kevin. “Miki Leal. Rasguños en el vinilo o cómo descubrí América”, in *Mikithology* (exh. cat.), p. 166. Salamanca, Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca, 2009.

lifted from a contemporary context, the origins of his work are not detached from tradition. Quite the contrary, in fact: tradition supplies him with a preliminary structure which he then unhesitatingly reinterprets according to his own set of rules, a new charter of vision in which the cinematographic condition plays a crucial role. In his case, the frame is not a window whose boundaries delimit a selected slice of reality; instead, we must evaluate it as if we were looking at a film still, a fraction of a longer scene which, if we recall the on-screen/off-screen dichotomy, suggests that the field of action is larger than the framed area we see and extends out into the surrounding space. Even the way he moves closer to or away from his subjects—now showing a corner or significant detail, now offering a broad view of some unknown location—is similar to how the observer perceives the different shots in an edited audiovisual narrative. In this assimilation of cinematographic language, the spontaneous manner in which the characters enter or exit the picture or the decision to place certain objects in the foreground draws us into the composition just as a film sequence would.

We find an example of this syncretic alloying of the age-old elements of painting with 20th-century images in the group portrait included in this exhibition, an assembly of anonymous figures taken from a photograph by Henri Cartier-Bresson. Leal was irresistibly drawn to this picture, in particular because the convex curve in which the subjects were arranged reminded him of Velázquez's *The Drunkards* (1629) and Rembrandt's *Anatomy Lesson* (1632). The result, after adding an eye-catching, unexpected piece of fabric that covers the central figure, is an enigmatic postcard where we have no idea what is happening or how the figures are connected to each other, a splitting of factors that manages to re-upholster a classic frame with the freshness and unpredictability one expects of an active image of today. Having submerged us in this hazy region conjured up by his creations, which is usually somewhere between reality and fiction, the invented and the imagined, the artist prefers to hide the clues from us, because it makes no difference to him whether we recognize a place or unlock any secrets beyond the immediately apparent. Any association the spectator chooses to make is valid, an identification with his/her own experience of the world by means of vague impulses that can be traced back to sensory traits which all human beings share.

The Game of Tangram

Another element from his childhood home that Miki Leal has resurrected for this show is the game of tangram, an ancient, entertaining and mentally challenging pastime which he spent many hours playing as a boy. We might interpret its recreational and simultaneously intellectual essence, as a puzzle of shapes that must be fit together, as something metaphorically comparable to the activity of the artist, someone who must always start out with the same resources and constantly come up with different results. This game, a singular still life of right angles formed by simple, interchangeable pieces, also has a strong connection with geometry, which was of particular interest to Miki at the time given his constant preoccupation with distributing the weight of his compositional elements evenly to achieve an internal balance in each work.

Although his childhood reminiscences and meditations on symmetrical forms certainly played a part, it is important to note that Miki also arrived at the tangram, among other themes, by way of his investigations into pottery. Reading up on this subject, one of the legendary stories about the game's origin tells of a Chinese servant who, while rushing to deliver a valuable tile to the emperor, inadvertently dropped the piece, which shattered into seven unequal pieces. When he attempted to put the tile back together, the lackey found that it was very difficult to reassemble them in the original square shape, but that the pieces could be combined in an infinite number of ways to create many different figures—a fortunate discovery which he used to distract the ruler and downplay the gravity of the incident. When he first came across this story, Miki was struck by the fact that the game supposedly owed its existence to an object made of clay, a material which had absorbed him completely at the time. His initial idea was to try to recreate that original shattered configuration which had given rise to the game, and the notion flipped a few switches in his mind that inspired him to conduct plastic experiments with this universal brainteaser, a fanciful quest for a non-existent paradigm planted in his unconscious some time back.

The tangram has an inherent particularity which quite aptly defines Miki Leal's sculptural preoccupations, a new outlet for expression in his work where he is less interested in the actual manipulation of the material in the studio than in the combinatorial possibilities of those forms in space once they are finished. The artist is unexcited by the idea of meticulously modelling or carving a volume; what truly matters are the relationships established between the objects, a way of expanding beyond and

outside the pictorial surface and using three-dimensional space to solve problems commonly faced in painting, which depends on the logical connection between the different parts and the general impression conveyed by the whole.

Sharing Is Growing

Miki Leal is not your average artist. In the course of his career, he has striven to distance himself from generality and find his own path which, viewed in hindsight over a decade after his trailblazing began, is characterized by a number of rare and distinctive qualities. The idiosyncrasy that distinguishes his characteristic style, symbolized by an attractive way of painting, is largely a product of his aesthetic intuition and ability in combination with other natural, inherent aptitudes, such as his high emotional intelligence and broad social spectrum. From the outset of his career, even before completing his Fine Arts degree, Miki's jovial, open disposition has allowed him to mix and mingle bonds of friendship with creative possibilities. This shared energy has been poured into group projects which are almost always interwoven with his personal enterprises, generating spontaneous working dynamics that have always been more important to him than materializing the work or achieving certain goals.

I find it curious and highly remarkable that Miki Leal has, from the very beginning, worked in groups. He has always known how to find the right coupling points that allow him to fit seamlessly into his context and experience growth on both the individual and collective levels, capitalize on the potential of others rather than merely relying on his own, and welcome the contributions of his fellows without prejudice, casting off fear and radiating enthusiasm. As someone who believes in complementarity and absorbs the constructive aspects of every debate, he naturally accepts that working in harmony has the potential to produce something new which is mutually enriching and reveals unforeseen facets in every member of the team. Sometimes this collaborative spirit has given rise to joint creations (with Norberto Gil in the early days, with Juan del Junco and Fer Clemente in The Richard Channin Foundation, with José Miguel Pereñíguez, and now with Cristobal Quintero), and in other cases it has inspired independent projects developed along parallel lines, as with Abraham Lacalle. In these multiple products the only thing the collaborators must watch out for is the diction, the way the message is constructed. The rest, even when nothing is pre-agreed or discussed, is always positive.

This deeply ingrained choral sentiment is undoubtedly a by-product of the artist's musical training, which taught him the value of a group effort where the instruments of each individual member work together to weave a full, rich, harmonious melody. In this type of creation, whether in a band or an orchestra, plurality is the norm and soloists are the exception—and even they usually require some form of accompaniment or collaboration. It is virtually impossible to separate Miki Leal's social and artistic identities, a peculiar quality which allows him to be the author, energizing force and agglutinating core all at once.

For this solo show at the CAAC Miki has also chosen to produce a bilateral project, on this occasion in tandem with Cristobal Quintero, whom he has known since his university days. As a logical continuation of their constant, energetic discussions of art and painting, the two artists have come up with a multiple installation for the Capilla de Afuera or Outer Chapel entitled *Approximate Inventory (Inventario aproximado)* which somehow captures the spirit of that continual exchange of effervescent aesthetic ideas. Although they know that materializing abstract thoughts as complex plastic forms is not feasible, in this project they have used humour and irony to bodily illustrate some of the key mental concepts of their profession, such as light, colour, volume, perception and language. In addition to this unstructured overview of the foundations of their craft, an approach that defies explanation and translates into visual follies and keen *trompes-l'oeil*, they have also tackled the three-dimensional representation of other two-dimensional pictorial difficulties that crossed their minds and are related to specific movements and artists of every era, including Sánchez Cotán, Caspar David Friedrich, Paul Cézanne, René Magritte and Pablo Picasso. There is a great deal of fun-loving mischievousness in this synopsis, a novel playing field where praxis and theory, the plausible and the impossible, reality and its representation paradoxically collide.

Text about exhibition *One-Course Meal: Miki Leal* (Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo, October 30, 2013 –February 2, 2014)