The Fabulous One

The magically real world of Alfredo Ceibal

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You could call Alfredo Ceibal a surrealist, but that might make his fanciful paintings seem too threatening. Sure, there are disembodied hearts sprouting arteries like botanical tendrils, window views showing perilously off-level horizons, and cavernous interiors dwarfing lonely, unamused inhabitants. But all that seems splashed onto the canvas in the spirit of dark, good fun.

“Latin America is surreal,” says the artist, who was born and raised in Guatemala and now lives in New York City. “Wherever you go, it’s in the way things happen there, or the way things are arranged. When you grow up in that kind of environment, surrealism is not something you really decide to put in your work. It’s the way things are-and the way things are presented to you by the world, by the church, by your family.”

Actually, Ceibal is more of a fabulist than a surrealist. His paintings function like fables, astounding the child within us with cautionary tales. But also like fables, Ceibal’s paintings brim with whimsy-both light, as in Saul Steinberg, and shadowy, as in Bosch. As befits the work of an author whose homeland has been injured by genocide and earthquakes, death is, if not celebrated, then honored everywhere-in large, populous, social-event pictures with titles like *Don Cirulo’s Wake, Tonito’s Wake* and *Marimbero’s Wake*; and in more rarefied, metaphysical rhapsodies in which life and the afterlife seem to merge, as in *To Die Dreaming*.

And though Ceibal is not HIV positive himself, many of his paintings refer specifically to AIDS.

“It is an issue that involves us all, whether we are positive or not,” he explains. “I have had relationships-friends, family who have become HIV positive. When you learn about it, it affects you in ways that are inevitable.”

Ceibal is largely self-taught. His work surges with the strength of folk art-freedom from fetishistic pride in art historical references and clever manipulations of material, pure pleasure in enchanting the viewer. But it is anything but unsophisticated. If you need a category in which to put Ceibal’s work, you might try “magical realism.” But be careful.

“That term has been pointed out as something negative,” says the artist, “because some people take it as a style that has been exoticized. They use it to sort of fulfill a lack of exoticism in their

own culture. I don’t take it that way, though. When people say that some of my paintings are like Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s writing, that is their option. Everybody sees a painting differently.”

Think of Ceibal’s paintings as fabulous in that other sense of the word. His paintings are afire-with chandeliers, candelabra, torcheres, volcanoes, cigarettes in long, elegant holder, hellfire. You expect the swells, grandees and mystics who inhabit some of his pictures to inquire, “Are we all lit?” And we should be, Ceibal seems to be saying. His tales show how closely our idea of fabulous is to religious feeling, to faith-irrational, charismatic-and to hope.

“Fabulous?” he asks. “That’s not exactly the right desciption of this style, though it is a narrative style that somehow fabulizes the everyday, common things that happen in life.”

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