

A NEW MEXICAN WAVE

Jettisoning her historical baggage, Elena Climent heads a revolutionary generation of painters from the land of mariachis and murals.

Like the children of a dominating and accomplished father, the recent generation of Mexican painters has had trouble coming of age. The achievements of the country's three great muralists — Diego Rivera, David Siquieros and José Orozco — were almost too complete. The next generation had little with which to finish out the 20th century. Many Mexican painters left the country, either in spirit or in fact, to escape the shadow of los tres grandes.

Elena Climent is among a younger generation of artists who have found their own way. They treasure primitive imagery, folklore and folk art rather than the theories of Andy Warhol and Jackson Pollock. In exploring the different facets of Mexicanidad, or Mexican-ness, these painters have created an art with vitality and promise. It should come as no surprise that they have also found a following.

Climent's work evokes an earlier era, but not that of the muralists, who portray social themes. Rather it recalls the Open Air School, a group of self-taught painters who recorded Mexico's private life in the 1930s and 1940s. Climent's paintings resemble snapshots of daily life; her eyes are attuned to the beauty one finds today in the altars, shops, backyards, kitchen cupboards and windows of Mexico. The beauty is not so much in the objects themselves, but in the care and visual sense with which they are arranged.

To appreciate the paintings one must understand that life in Mexico has changed, that Diego Rivera's flower-sellers and peasants are rapidly vanishing into myth. Climent's subjects are taken from the world that is replacing them: the ubiquitous plastic baskets, Del Monte sauce jars, vinyl tablecloths and candy packages that are part of today's Mexico.

"There is a certain way that people put things together that is very Mexican," notes Climent. "The people are very, very visual." To the visual sense one can add the economical: "In Mexico, everybody uses

everything. You never throw a can away, you use it. Even a plastic bag will be made into a plant pot. In a church in a very remote town, I've seen an altar decorated entirely with plastic bags. It's overwhelming."

Born in 1955, Climent decided to become a painter when she was 16. Her father, the Spanish artist Enrique Climent, had come to Mexico after the Spanish Civil War, but he remained ever immersed in the memories and passions of the European world he had left behind. Climent's mother, who came from a working-class Brooklyn Jewish family, also abandoned her origins to find a new life in Mexico. With their mixed background, the parents were uncertain about what identity to bequeath to their children, but Elena and her siblings took the decision out of their hands by becoming Mexicans.

Elena was raised, though, in an atmosphere suffused with European tastes and nostalgia for times past. Her household fostered an old-world aesthetic code, a standard by which everything could be measured; she called it the Climentometer. At first Elena began drawing instead of painting, to keep some distance from her father's imposing artistic presence. And though she lived for a time in Europe, she eventually outgrew the preoccupation with classical European ideals of colour and symmetry that fuelled the Climentometer.

Climent is self-taught for the most part, but there is nothing naive in her outlook. Her technique makes it obvious whether the material she portrays is plastic, glass or ceramic tile, but in a painterly way that resembles more an Old Master than a photo-realist of the 1970s. Showing what things are made of is very important in her paintings, and her attention to detail is what partly draws her audience. Mexicans recognise her intentions as easily as they do her objects; her paintings acknowledge their own passion to make order and beauty out of the commonplace. One show



Top: Pared Roja Con Jaulas, 1990. Above: Altar Con Azulejos, 1992.

in Soho are very depressing — it's all with the mind, not with the gut. There's also a general attitude of contempt for more detailed work. If you work very hard on something small, you are seen not to value your time."

Interest in Latin-American art has grown, and part of the reason, Climent feels, is that it retains its youth and vigour. "When I visited Europe and saw the young people, I got the impression there was no future, that everything was already done; the common denominator was a lack of vitality. And one day, after many months, I went to see a show of Mexican artists. It was a shock. The contrast really hit me. And not just because it was Mexican. Remember, I had been brought up with an international point of view, not a nationalistic one."

Elena Climent describes her painting as a search for continuation with the past, but never a return to it; her intent is to find life in the present. She refuses to

share the widespread conviction that real worth is only to be found in earlier times, though she can explain how this belief came about in her own country. "Mexico City thirty years ago was one of the most beautiful cities in the world. It was famous for its transparent air. Then suddenly it grew out of control, and now everybody is trying to cling to the past. The general wave of pessimism is so strong, so destructive. It's important to find reasons to believe in the present."

By painting the simple objects of everyday life, Elena Climent has found her route to the present. She has also found hope for the future. "The subject that is crucial for any artist nowadays is the survival of the human spirit. We feel we're endangered, physically and morally, and that we're losing our individuality because of mass-production. It's encouraging to learn that this is not true. Once an object produced in a factory gets into a person's hands it becomes personal again. That's a reason for optimism." R