Daydreams and Symbols: Julio Larraz's Paintings by Donald Kuspit

"I attempt to create a different reality where dreams serve as the foundations for a parallel universe."
Julio Larraz, 2014

"What is surprising in the life of dreams is not so much to find oneself transported into fantastic regions, in which all accepted behavior has become confused, all established ideas contradicted; where frequently (and this is even more frightening) the impossible mingles with the real. What strikes me much more is the assent given these contradictions, the ease with which the most monstrous paralogisms are accepted as altogether natural, in such a way as to make one believe in faculties or notions of a special order, foreign to our world."
Charles Asselineau, *La Double Vie*, 1858[1]

"The ambiguity of the symbol, which you continue to see as something accidental, is for me an absolutely necessary characteristic of every true symbol because it is the genus, and interpretations crawl out of it like so many species." Joseph Görres in a letter to Friedrich Creuzer, 1819[2]

Julio Larraz's *Dreaming in Longhi* (2015) has that air "of immediate absurdity" that André Breton said was characteristic of Surrealist art. What could be more absurd than a rhinoceros in a bullring watched by a group of masked figures lifted from a Venetian painting by Pietro Longhi? But the absurdity—the sense that the scene is unrealistic, a fabrication and fantasy, meant to shock and astonish—is deceptive: Larraz's painting is based on Longhi's realistic rendering of *Clara the Rhinoceros on Display in Venice* (1751). Clara was brought to Europe in 1741 by a Dutch sea captain and impresario and exhibited in the major cities of Europe. She was a novel spectacle—intriguingly foreign, with an intimidating horn and bizarre body—and she fascinated cultured Europeans. It was as though the elegant Venetians in Longhi's paintings were looking at their own animal underside: the naked Clara was the monstrous reality behind their decorous appearance. She was, in effect, a revelation from the depths of the unknown, and as such was excitingly enigmatic. Clara was the third living rhinoceros to be seen in Europe after Roman times. The first arrived in Lisbon in 1515, and died en route to Pope Leo X in Rome, a gift from King Manuel I of Portugal. It was unrealistically rendered by Albrecht Dürer, who did not actually see it. He covered its soft body with hard, armor-like plates, as if to suggest it was an invulnerable warrior. In 1577, a second rhinoceros arrived at the court of King Sebastian I, in Lisbon. After the death of Sebastian in 1578 and his successor, Henry I, King Phillip II became king of Portugal and moved the rhinoceros to Spain. But Clara, the third rhinoceros, was a widely known celebrity, traveling across the continent, a most amazing specimen in the cabinet of natural curiosities.

Larraz does not simply quote Longhi's painting, as though in homage to it, but he dreams in it, as he says, and treats it like a dream—his daydream. His daydream is not exactly the same as Longhi's—it cannot be, for Longhi's picture acknowledges the reality of a scene he actually observed, while Larraz's picture acknowledges the reality of Longhi's picture rather than of the scene it represents. Larraz imaginatively transforms it, by eliminating some of Longhi's figures, rendering others with a certain gestural flair, so they become more expressively present, and changing the setting of the scene. The rhinoceros is now in a bullring, not in a stable eating hay. Something is lost in the "translation"—Larraz's picture is clearly not an exact copy let alone facile reproduction of Longhi's picture—but something also is gained: insight into its meaning. "The manifest content of a dream is the symbolic disguise of its latent content," Sigmund Freud famously wrote in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). The task of interpretation is to make the latent content—the unconscious meaning—of the dream manifest. Larraz does this with deft irony. He evokes the latent sexual meaning of Longhi's picture—a Venetian carnival scene, as the masked figures suggest—without spelling it out. One might say that he finds the sexual spirit lurking in the letter of Longhi's picture, boldly conveying it through the enormous rhinoceros casting its shadow on the painterly sand of the bullring.

We have a bird's-eye view of the spectacle, a clear overview affording a certain perspective on it—hovering above it with the "evenly suspended free-floating attention" that Freud said allows one to become attuned to the unconscious—to get insight into the unconscious import of the scene, epitomized by the dream symbol of the rhinoceros. Longhi's picture tells a story; Larraz's picture, by arousing our curiosity with the way it re-tells the story, gives us access to its secret meaning, seemingly hidden yet not so hidden. For his rhinoceros dominates the picture, taking up more than half of it, while Longhi's rhinoceros, however much in the fore-ground, takes up only a third of the picture. The eight spectators—five in the first row (four men, two on each side of a regal woman), three (all women) in the second row—behind the rhinoceros take up two thirds of the picture. The balance of forces is more evenly distributed than in Larraz's picture, where the rhinoceros clearly has more weight and force than the human figures—now three men in the first row, two women in the row behind them. They seem incidental, petty, and powerless compared with the gigantic rhinoceros. In Larraz's picture, the rhinoceros is an idol to be worshipped rather than a pet in a zoo.

The Italian word "carnevale" is derived from the Latin words "carne lavere," meaning "taking the meat away," combining "carne," meaning flesh, and "levare," meaning to lift. A carnival, in which the meat that cannot be eaten during Lent is used up, is a carnal festival, a time when one feeds on animal flesh, as though to become a wild animal. The rhinoceros symbolizes the meat that was there for the taking during the time of the carnival, a time to make sexual hay, as it were. It is all body and no brain, and its horn is a phallic symbol—a fantastically erect penis, ready to penetrate, with irresistible energy, any orifice in the human body. In Catholic Italy, Carnival is a time of merrymaking, and of self-indulgence, when one eats,

drinks, and makes sexually merry, pursuing pleasure to excess as though there is no tomorrow: tomorrow is Lent, a time of fasting and penitence, when one repents the enjoyable sins committed during Carnival.

The participants in the Venetian Carnival wear masks, hiding their faces—and thus their identities—so they cannot be held responsible for any mischievous merrymaking they may pursue, especially sexually merrymaking with strangers. With a mask on, everyone is a stranger to everyone else, allowing anyone to make strange love to anyone. The young woman in Longhi's painting—and in Larraz's re-creation of it—wears a black mask, suggesting her hidden sexual interest in the older, splendidly dressed aristocrat in front of her. The older woman with her could be her chaperon, but she is just as likely to be her go-between. A sexual rendezvous seems in the offering; she may already be the aristocrat's mistress, the chaperon-like figure her maid. Or the young woman may be one of the prostitutes Venice was known for. They plied their trade during the Carnival. She and the rhinoceros are both eye-catching females, suggesting that they have something in common. They are poles apart in the picture, separated by the spectators between them, but dialectical intimates. The chaperon-like figure in Longhi's picture is a distinct person; in Larraz's picture, she's no more than a shadowy appendage of the young woman, suggesting that she's of little consequence compared to the young woman. Whoever and whatever the young woman is, Larraz makes Longhi's narrative more open-ended and tantalizing, enriching the story with possible meanings. One might say that Larraz's picture is imaginatively speculative and suggestive, while Longhi's picture is matter-of-factly descriptive and banally realistic.

Longhi painted two pictures of Clara. The version Larraz uses has been thought to be a punning joke. The maskless and cloakless young man standing on the right—the three other men in the same row wear white masks and black cloaks—holds a whip and a horn in his right hand while his left hand points to the rhinoceros. It is clearly the rhinoceros' missing horn—the horn that is not missing in Larraz's picture. Longhi's young man has disappeared from it. He's dispensable, but the horn is indispensable. The pointy horn speaks to the sexual point of the picture: the horn is the symbol of a cuckold, that is, the husband of an unfaithful wife. And of course it is also the symbol of the penis of her illicit lover. Is he one of the white-masked young men in Longhi's picture? Is the aristocrat the husband she is betraying with one of the young men in Larraz's picture? Are they in an arranged marriage, unsatisfying to both? We will never know. Both pictures are charged with sexual mystery and innuendo, making them intriguing and emotionally engaging.

The horn on Larraz's rhinoceros is provocatively large and dangerous—a menacing shadow flashing like a bizarre lightning bolt across the smooth white fence of the first row of the bullring as though trying to penetrate its skin. Is the young woman a virgin, as her white skirt suggests, or even the Virgin Mary, as her blue blouse suggests? (Thus speaking to the familiar whore/Madonna syndrome of male fantasy.) Such inspired cross referencing or compounding of symbols, adding to their resonance by metaphorically integrating their meaning, is absurdly surreal. Where Longhi's painting speaks the rational, discursive

language of what Freud called the secondary process of consciousness, Larraz's painting speaks the irrational, eccentric language of what Freud called the primary process of the unconscious. One might say that Larraz brings out, all but explicitly, what is going on unconsciously with Longhi's figures.

Larraz is an exquisitely subtle latter-day Symbolist and Surrealist. As the art historian Henri Dorra writes, both Symbolism and Surrealism involve the "juxtaposition of perfectly ordinary objects so unusual and in some cases so jarring that it constitutes an insuperable challenge to rational investigation and calls forth responses from the unconscious."[3] The rhinoceros is an unusual object—it certainly was to Longhi's spectators. He juxtaposes them with the rhinoceros, making for an incongruous relationship. Larraz exaggerates the incongruity, enlarging the rhinoceros at the expense of the spectators, who are reduced to incidental presences in his picture compared with their prominent presence in Longhi's picture. Paradoxically, the more estranged they seem—and the more separate they become (Longhi's figures can reach out and touch the rhinoceros, while Larraz's figures are not in the same space as the rhinoceros)—the more the rhinoceros seems to symbolize the animal in their unconscious, that is, their instinctive sexuality, or more particularly what Freud called its sadistic component, symbolized by the whip that appears in both pictures. Violence lurks in both pictures in the form of the rhinoceros. But Larraz's rhinoceros, with its slashing horn, looks much more violent and ill-tempered than Longhi's dehorned rhinoceros, complacently feeding on hay.

Larraz's rhinoceros is gray, its shadow black, except for the shadow of the horn, which is also gray. The blackness suggests that the onlookers are participating in some kind of black mass. The devil traditionally takes animal form; the rhinoceros is in effect the devil. It's certainly ugly compared with "the beautiful people" viewing it. The spectacular rhinoceros dominates the picture; the spectators submit to it in fascinated attention, as though it were a hallucination—their hallucination. The billowy grayish shadow of the young girl's white skirt has two blackish horn-like protuberances, suggesting that she is as "horny" as the three men—the aristocratic older one, his arms boldly akimbo, the other two young and dashing, one with a whip suggesting sadistic tendencies (but looking too thin and small to do damage to the thick-skinned rhinoceros)—and thus also a devil worshipper, if more secretly. Interestingly, the figures in Longhi's picture cast no shadows, while those in Larraz's do, making them more mysterious by doubling them. One might say it is the shadow of their unconscious, following them wherever they go. They seem to be outdoors, while Longhi's figures are clearly indoors. The right and left legs of his rhinoceros—those closest to us—cast a rather thin, tentative shadow, compared with the dramatic, full-bodied shadow cast by Larraz's rhinoceros. The unconscious speaks a shadowy language, and Larraz's rhinoceros is the unconscious incarnate—the unconscious rendered as flesh.

The young woman's two horns are sexually suggestive—perhaps her breasts condensed in shadowy displacement. (Displacement and condensation are the methods in the madness of dreams, as

Freud remarked.) The horns are imaginative projections of her sexual excitement—the unconscious sexual excitement aroused in all the figures by the rhinoceros, symbolizing the larger-than-life animal, not to mention the wild beast, in their own smaller-than-life selves. The animal is a captive in the ring, contained but untamed. He is likely to gore to death any toreador who approaches him. The black-and-white bands that form the ring convey the contradiction built into the picture. On the one hand, we see the civilized, decorative veneer of human beings. On the other hand, we sense their animal nature, and more pointedly, their potentially self-destructive daemonic sexuality, looming in the dangerous rhinoceros, with its large body doubled and enlarged even more by its shadow. The opposites are unconsciously connected if self-consciously at odds. The tension between them gives Larraz's picture an exciting power that Longhi's picture lacks. Larraz's picture is disquieting—jarring, to use Dorra's word—while Longhi's picture is peculiarly reassuring, for it suggests that we can, after all, master the animal in us, or at least keep it at bay in a cage.

Freud thought that "in talented hands, 'day dreams' serve as a preamble for creative writing,"[4] and, one must add, creative painting. Representational pictures, such as Longhi's, are the painter's creative daydreams in front of reality. If Longhi's daydream about a real, historical event puts it at a certain imaginative remove, then Larraz's daydream of Longhi's picture puts it at an even greater imaginative remove, making it seem ahistorical and make-believe—theatrically staged. Larraz's rhinoceros is in fact mythologized into a sort of isolated hero in a drama in which the spectators are the chorus. Indeed, Larraz's bullring has much in common with the amphitheaters in which the ancients performed their tragedies and comedies—and there is something comic about Larraz's spectators, just as there is something tragic about his rhinoceros. The spectators seem to be seated in judgment of it; it will soon be sacrificed to the gods of entertainment.

In 1888, Paul Gauguin, the first Symbolist, according to his contemporary and admirer, the critic Albert Aurier, famously wrote, "Art is an abstraction; derive this abstraction from nature while dreaming before it."[5] Dreaming before Longhi's picture, Larraz turns it into an abstraction—an abstract representation or, even more telling, a pure abstraction disguised as a representation. Larraz's *Dreaming in Longhi* is clearly an abstract construction, essentially linear, as the concentric curves of the viewing stand—the bullring—make clear, with some touches of contrasting colors: for example, the orange and red of the aristocrat's flamboyant coat, the blue and white of the young woman's dress, and the bolder contrast of black and white as well as gray and light brown. The viewing stand is, in effect, what Lawrence Alloway has called a "systemic painting," more particularly, a stripe painting, as the repeated stripe-like curves, seemingly decreasing in size as they extend and disappear into the infinite space beyond the canvas, suggest. They are seen in perspective. The white ones become grayish as they recede into space, and all of them become narrower as they relentlessly move, with formal rigor, in lockstep, the result a slice of hermetically perfected geometrical abstraction. The white stripes are broad, the pitch black and light

brown ones are narrow, with the tension between them proposing their interaction, as though to demonstrate Josef Albers' theory of the interaction of colors, but the integration is suspended. The divergent colors are ironically complementary rather than seamlessly combined in a common aesthetic cause. Dialectically unresolved, the system is absurdly self-contradictory.

Coherence and incoherence, heterogeneity and homogeneity, difference and sameness—the sense of unresolved relationship, epitomized by the absurd relationship of the spectators and the rhinoceros, and their different sizes and shapes, and the inconsistencies between Longhi's and Larraz's pictures of the scene—tie our attentive eyes together in a Gordian knot that can only be cut by our mind's interpretive eye. Irony pervades Larraz's paintings, both in form and content. Thus the ironical contrast between the oddly grotesque "gestural" shape of the rhinoceros and the streamlined curvilinear geometry of the equally grand viewing stand, and the ironically transformative quotation of Longhi's picture. More simply, representation and abstraction, each underpinning yet contradicting the other, are ironically inseparable in Larraz's artful pictures.

Art history is embedded in Larraz's paintings. Old Master and modern master works are repeatedly alluded to in Larraz's pictures, giving them uncanny depth and intellectual poignancy. One might say they are the unconscious of his consciously made pictures. He dreams in front of them, and in them, as the Longhi picture tells us. He finds a home for his imagination in his paintings, in solidarity, dependence, and identification with them and their creativity, their imaginative transformation of observed reality. That includes the reality of preceding works, which are, in a sense, their mentors and guides of his paintings. Similarly, they are the inspired point of departure for his own art, and for his self-understanding as an artist. There is no originality without tradition, the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott argued—it is a "facilitating environment," like the "good enough mother," encouraging and supporting one's growth—and Larraz is as traditional as he is original.

Again and again we see him alluding to—and cunningly acknowledging—the work of traditional masters, conspicuously in *Dans L'Ombre de Mont Saint Victoire*, less conspicuously in *Presuntos Implicados*, both 2014. Cleverly changing the name of Paul Cézanne's *Mont Sainte-Victoire*—the natural object of his obsessive attention and devotion, suggesting the deep emotional meaning it had for him, perhaps because it unconsciously symbolized what psychoanalysts call a "primary object," more particularly the mother's breast, the most emotionally primary and sacred ("saintly") of all objects, the object to which one remains unconsciously attached to all of one's life, Mont Victoire, suggesting Cézanne's artistic victory over the mountain, the mountain he successfully climbed with his art, the mountain lending its majesty to his art. Cézanne's art was above all an attempt to master and merge with Mother Nature, his so-called "vibrating sensations" conveying the vibrant life in her. If all mothers are saints, Cézanne became a saint by mounting her.

The isolated figure in Larraz's painting is clearly not Cézanne. He's walking away from the mountain rather than facing it. Larraz's figure wears a black-and-white striped T-shirt, a wide-brimmed hat to protect him from the sun, dark brown pants, and what seems to be a leather jacket, as its brownish color suggests. He carries a large sketch pad under his right arm, suggesting he is an ambitious artist. The figure's face is masked in shadow, hiding his identity, and he seems to have a cigarette in his mouth, as the white sliver of paint on his shadowed face suggests. He seems to be looking us in the eye, as though inviting us to guess who he is. He must be Larraz, although we can't be sure, for his identity is hidden in the shadow. We are in the same broad, expansive, dream space as we were in *Dreaming in Longhi*, but the dream is different, although there is a certain similarity: the artist confronts us—walks towards us—as the rhinoceros confronts the spectators. But we are on the level of Larraz's artist rather than hovering above the rhinoceros. And the artist is not confined in a bullring, nor does he look as fierce, dangerous, and imposing as the rhinoceros. But both are unmistakably there, presences to be reckoned with, and to challenge us. The yellowish empty wheat field through which the artist strides seems to be a kind of wasteland, like the brownish empty ring in which the rhinoceros appears. Both artist and rhinoceros are mirages in a desert, strangers in the world, existing in lonely self-sufficiency. Loneliness—the loneliness of the rhinoceros, the loneliness of the artist, as out of place as the rhinoceros—is the emotional subtheme of Larraz's pictures.

Presuntos Implicados alludes to Pieter Bruegel's *Two Chained Monkeys* (1562), only in Larraz's picture; one of the monkeys is replaced by a blue parrot, perhaps the blue bird of happiness. The monkey is chained, as he is in Bruegel's picture, the bird is not chained—free as a bird. The opposites are married—the monkey's curved tail, reminiscent of the rhinoceros' curved horn, suggests he is male; the bright plumage, a sort of colorful dress, suggests the bird is female—but hardly reconciled. They're side by side, but as different as night (the monkey, with his shadowy body and mask-like face) and day (the luminous bird, with its glowing red eyes). They're both animals, but they are inherently different, however similar in size. They both confront us—they're right up against the window-like picture plane, unlike the Cézanne-emulating artist, who is set back in the mid-ground—and they boldly stare at us, drawing us into their space. The bird is as blue as the sky, the monkey as brown as the earth, and both are tropical creatures—creatures that one can find in Cuba, Larraz's native land, from which he was exiled as a youth. They are both in a cabin or hold of a ship, the greenish-bluish sea visible through the grid of the windows, each window a sort of minimalist composition of modular rectangles. Geometrical form and organic form—and the man-made and the naturally given—are at odds, as they are in *Dreaming in Longhi*. Bright sunlight pours into the room, sharply contrasting with the pitch black side of the broad windowsill, reflecting the outside light and outlining the inside of the windows in grayish shadow. It is another ironical tour de force of geometrical abstraction. Black drapes frame the left side of the row of windows, and black ropes curve across its edge, a sort of gestural counterpoint to the black plane behind the animals. A bird and

a monkey don't add up to a rhinoceros, but none of the three belong in the controlled, civilized place in which we see them; all belong in the wilderness. They are captives, unable to escape.

The rhinoceros is land-bound, but the bird and the monkey are traveling somewhere, probably to Cuba. Ships are a recurrent subject in Larraz's pictures, and it was by symbolic ship that Larraz arrived in the United States. *The Last Sight of M.Y. Lower Matacumbe* (2011) probably evokes his last sight of Cuba, *The Faint Light of Proxima Centauri* (2013) implies that he has been guiding his ship of life by starlight ever since he left Cuba, and *Coming Home* (2013) conveys his wish to return to his homeland, although it may be a black abyss, as the cave-like tunnel, cut in the barren wall of a fortress-like cliff, into which the boat is sailing suggests. Clearly Cuba is on his mind—a dreamland in his unconscious—as *On the Santa Ana River of Memories* (2014) indicates. Layer upon layer of memorable meaning is embedded in Larraz's pictures, as they are in dreams, making them finally unfathomable if also unforgettable. But many of them—*All Honorable Men* (2006), *Retrato de Familia* (2014), and *Fabiola in the War Room* (2015)—are clearly political in import.

Bruegel's *Two Chained Monkeys* also has a political meaning, if less obviously so. As the art historian Charles D. Cuttler writes, the two monkeys have been understood to be symbols of "the two provinces of the Netherlands fettered under Spanish domination."[6] The monkey is fettered—clearly a prisoner—the bird less clearly, but it also is confined in a cage-like space, as the windows, with their bars, confirm. The bird of paradise and the mulatto-like monkey—the coloring on his face suggests he is a mixed breed—may represent the white Spaniards, who regarded Cuba as a paradise when they "discovered" and conquered it, and the remnants of the native population, surviving in the compromised form of a mixed race. Both are fettered under communist domination. As the sea visible through the window suggests, Bruegel's painting also has a certain relevance to Larraz's *One Day in October* (2013), a glorious seascape, perhaps the coast of Cuba, with two small sailing ships in the distance, and *Light at the Bay of Mirrors* (2013), where the lighthouse signals the sea and the Bay of Mirrors may be an ironical play on the Bay of Pigs, the site of a failed American-financed invasion of Cuba. (It was planned and financed by the CIA, but the soldiers were Cuban exiles.) As Cuttler writes, the two monkeys in Bruegel's picture have "a view of Antwerp in the distance," suggesting that the picture can be understood as "a general statement of the imprisonment of man in the city," and the wish to be liberated into "the vast expanse of nature…where boats and birds sail by," and where one can indulge one's natural instincts and passions, "symbolized by the monkey."

One's sexual instincts and reckless passions are symbolized by the erotic *Soprano* (2014), probably also a symbol of passionate Cuba, which was celebrated for its pleasures before puritan communism conquered it. Her voluptuous body and full breasts, emphasized and contained by her heart-shaped bodice, and made crystal clear by the red jewel and white pearl dangling from it, suggest that Cuba is the object of Larraz's fascinated desire. Her body presses against the picture plane, inviting us to possess her. Cuba sings in his heart and he wants to embrace her, but she's aloof and emotionally distant however physically close.

But there are compensations, symbolic substitutes for the unconscious object of compulsive desire: Cézanne had Mont Sainte-Victoire, Mother Nature's rugged, unappetizing breast, difficult to climb, except with one's eager eyes, a symbol of what psychoanalysts call the bad breast, frustratingly out of reach in the distance; but Larraz has the more succulent, delicious, tasty breast of *Vanilla Ice and Kentucky Bourbon* (2014), with a sweet cherry for a nipple, invitingly in front of him, swallowed whole by his eyes, ready to be slowly digested by his mind's eye. Both the *Soprano* and the *Vanilla Ice and Kentucky Bourbon* are tempting, but the woman is cold, untouchable, and indifferent, while the dessert is warm, edible, and enjoyable—better than nothing. Irony and contradiction inform the pictures, as they always do in Larraz's works: vanilla ice has a sweet taste; Kentucky bourbon has a bitter taste—and is colored rather than white, once again evoking the difference between whites and other races in Cuba. The beautiful, glamorous woman is also bittersweet, a pleasure to behold, but the sight is painful because she cannot be held in our arms, only in our hearts, like Cuba. Larraz's pictures are psychosocial dramas, articulating the conflict between the life-and-death instincts, Eros and Thanatos, as Freud also called them, the former serving the pleasure principle and manifest in the libido, the latter serving the reality principle and manifest in aggression.

If *Vanilla Ice and Kentucky Bourbon* represents Eros—pure pleasure, in this case, the profound pleasure of oral gratification, since eating and drinking are the most constant, insistent, and fundamental pleasures (one eats vanilla ice, drinks Kentucky bourbon)—then the cannon in Larraz's *Reception Committee* (2014) represents Thanatos. But it is also subliminally erotic: a black phallus, forcefully penetrating the white skin of the black hole in which it appears, leaving a gray shadow—a sort of spent blackness, blackness mingling with whiteness, suggesting the melancholy that Aristotle says follows copulation—on the white surface to mark its presence and triumph. I suggest, no doubt fancifully, that the rust dripping from the opening is the residue of the ejaculate, spoiled by urine, or perhaps simply a memento mori of the destruction that war always leaves in its wake.

Black and white, sometimes ironically reconciled in gray, where they neutralize each other, are the standard bearers of Larraz's dialectic of Eros and Thanatos, his penchant for the double entendre, the Gordian knot in the under-mind of the unconscious. Sometimes they are conspicuously at odds, as they are in the rows of the amphitheater in *Dreaming in Longhi*, the lighthouse in *Light at the Bay of Mirrors*, and in *Fabiola in the War Room*. The striking contrast between the naked, thin, odalisque-like appearance, and Fabiola's black hair, black rimmed stockings, black high heels—the outfit of a prostitute ready for sexual action—and the white sheets of her bed, along with the even more dramatic contrast between the black telephone the heavyset standing man holds and the black suspenders that support his white trousers and on his white shirt—he's clearly an important, powerful politician, doing the Revolution's business, as the map of Cuba on the wall behind him suggests—seems to epitomize Larraz's mixed emotions about Communist Cuba. For all its moral pretensions, its politicians are

corrupt, immoral, domineering, authoritarian, power-hungry, and exploitive. In *Arcturus and Fabiola* (2015), we see Fabiola wearing sunglasses—a version of the Venetian carnival mask—in a black limousine, probably being driven to a sexual rendezvous with a politician, demonstrating his power by way of his power over her—his command and control of her. He's like the rhinoceros in *Dreaming in Longhi*, a dangerous beast with a big sexual appetite, as his huge horn suggests. Fabiola is on her front, as though ready to be penetrated from the rear, suggesting the perverseness of the Cuban rulers, ready to stab Cuba in the back. I suggest that Fabiola, a fallen woman, is a symbol of Liberty fallen on hard times, Liberty oppressed and fallen, Liberty and the People betrayed by the Communist Cuban Revolution, unlike Eugène Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* (1830), leading the French people to freedom from tyranny. The Cuban Communist Revolution led to tyranny, thought control, and, as the ruthless politicians in Larraz's pictures suggest, the reign of terror that revolutions typically end in.

As *Guanahacabibes* (2015) implies, Larraz's Cuba is a black-and-white place. It is a place of lofty white clouds, and sublime pies in the sky (symbolizing ambitious idealism), amorphously formless and hopeful, inspiring and aspiring. But behind them absolutely black planes suddenly loom, diagonally slicing through the blue sky, blocking it out, symbolizing the bleak truth about Communist Cuba. The contradiction is unnerving, threatening, extreme. The work is an abstract allegory utilizing realistic elements to convey the absurdity that is Communist Cuba. With a few simple elements, Larraz epitomizes the contradiction that is Cuba.

In *Fabiola in the War Room*, the map of Cuba is a brown, desiccated blur on the wall—the same rusty earth color (the color of rotten fruit?) as the sand in *Dreaming in Longhi* and the wheat field in *Dans L'Ombre de Mont Saint Victoire*—in the midst of a sky-blue ocean, suggesting it is a sort of fallen angel. Cuba is as misshapen as Larraz's rhinoceros, suggesting it's also out of place in the world, indeed, along with North Korea, the last totalitarian Marxist-Stalinist countries in the world. Cuba is run by gangsters, as the cynical *Retrato de Familia* makes clear. There are two standing security men, one guarding a cardinal, the other a Cuban statesman. The cardinal and the statesman are seated together in an unholy alliance. The two security men wear dark suits and black ties; the statesman (commissar?) has a black tie and wears a tropical tan suit, its tan similar to the color of the map of Cuba in *Fabiola in the War Room*—he could be a Mafioso. Again, black and white play a big symbolic role in this cynical picture, along with sex—there for the asking, at least by the rulers of Cuba—as the fresco of female nudes behind the figures suggests. Big Brother—the rhinoceros?—is always watching, as the even more cynical *All Honorable Men* shows. These works are sharply critical of communism and Catholicism, shown to be equally authoritarian and repressive, except when it comes to illicit sexual expression. A prophet of the apocalypse, Ezekiel pronounced God's judgment on Israel: I suggest that A *Man Named Ezekiel* (2015) in Larraz's picture is Larraz himself. Like Cuba, Israel is a small state, with its own belief system, that is threatened by

enemies—the United States in Cuba's case, the Arab world in Israel's case. Larraz presents himself as the prophet of Cuba's doom. The amphitheater behind him has gone completely black. We know for whom the bell tolls in *A la Orilla del Santa Ana* (2014).

Again and again I found myself returning to the rhinoceros in Larraz's *Dreaming in Longhi*: it suddenly occurred to me that it had a certain affinity with Eugène Ionesco's play *Rhinoceros*, a classic example of the theater of the absurd. In Ionesco's play, all the inhabitants of a small, provincial French village turn into rhinoceroses, except for the central character. A revolutionary change has occurred: the village has become a commune of look-alike and think-alike animals. The play has been read as a criticism of the sudden upsurge of communism, fascism, and Nazism in pre-World War II France. The rhinoceros is a dumb, shortsighted creature; Ionesco suggests that communists, fascists, and Nazis are also dumb and shortsighted, not to say dangerous animals. Similarly, Larraz's picture can be read as a criticism of the Communist Revolution in Cuba, a small village compared to the United States, its neighbor. Larraz seems to be suggesting—certainly in his political pictures—that the Cuban revolutionaries are as totalitarian and dictatorial as the Soviet Communists, the Italian Fascists, and the German Nazis were.

Larraz turns Longhi's Venetian theater into a Cuban theater of the absurd. Venice lends itself to the transformation, if only because it is theatrical, an architectural showplace, a sort of stage set, as the Piazza San Marco makes clear. Absurdly built on stilts, raising it out of the surrounding sea, it is an island unto itself, an insular "floating city," as it has been called. Similarly, Cuba is an island floating in the sea, and, in its own way, a theatrical place, a self-contained world of grand illusions, indeed, absurd delusions of grandeur. Like Venice, it thinks it has a special place in the world, and like Venice it is a place of contradictions, symbolized by the contradiction between the rhinoceros and the spectators in Longhi's and Larraz's pictures. Both are theatrically absurd: the rhinoceros looms absurdly large and important to the spectators in the viewing stands, and they look absurdly small and unimportant viewed from the rhinoceros' perspective. Metaphorically speaking, the spectators are the people of Cuba and the rhinoceros is its thick-skinned dictator. The central character in Ionesco's theater of the absurd is implicitly playwright himself, a French artist passing judgment on the French masses by imaginatively turning them into mindless animals, as though to show their true nature—their inner reality. Similarly, the central character in Larraz's theater of the absurd is implicitly Larraz himself, a Cuban using imaginative art to pass judgment on Cuba, to recall *A Man Called Ezekiel*. Clearly there is something animal-like and brutal about the standing man in *Fabiola in the War Room*, and even sadistic—Fabiola is passively compliant, he is clearly a man of action, busy on the telephone—and the two standing henchmen in *Retrato de Familia*. The seated men are cunning animals—beasts in human disguise.

Larraz's Cuba survives under glass, scraps of *Ancient Leaves* (2014) seen through the magnifying glass of art, laboratory specimens preserved in the amber of memory, rusted and faded memento mori, fragments of the past that never was and the future that will never be. Cuba is a myth in Larraz's memory,

and like all myths more illusion than reality. The lyrical leaves are suspended in a dream space; all that is left of a dream are the few token feelings remembered after one has awakened.

But Larraz doesn't want to awaken, as his starlit nighttime pictures suggest. He is starry-eyed about Cuba, but more to the artistic point is his artist's eye, symbolized by the observatory, with its far-seeing telescopic eye, in *In Our Constellation* (2005), *Nessun Dorma* (2014), and *The Warlock's Lair* (2014). The observatory, a temple-like sacred space, sits isolated on the heights of a desolate promontory—the few trees do nothing to alleviate the barrenness. The observatory is, in effect, the artist's imaginative eye, his God-like consciousness of the cosmos, and of Cuba. It is his dream creation: it is a constellation in the sky, which is what it seems to be, at first glance, in *Sunset at Cape Laplace* (2014). But it is also a brown island on a blue earth seen from the moon, as the work ambiguously suggests. The house, with its pitched roof, pointing to the huge globe in the black sky, seems as deserted as the observatories. Like them, it rests on a barren terrain, a more rocky one—suggesting a "rocky" state of mind—than the flat plane on which the observatories rest. In all these works there is an air of pensive brooding, of profound silence, of unnamable dread, as though fearing that the globe, with its map of Cuba, already impinging on the small house, were about to fall on the house and crush it.

Larraz's Cape Laplace is named after Pierre-Simon Laplace, the mathematician who has given his name to the Laplace Transform, "a complex frequency domain that yields a function defined in a time domain," and more particularly "expresses a function as a superposition of moments." Larraz uses it as a symbol of the transformative function of art, more broadly of the imagination. To superpose is to place or lay one object on top of or above another, or to move one geometric figure so that it coincides exactly with another. One might say it establishes what Charles Baudelaire called a correspondence between symbols. Baudelaire's poem, "Correspondences," is the Symbolist urtext, and Larraz's pictures are original Symbolist poems. Emotional correspondences—correspondences that occur in the unconscious—are what Larraz's transformative imagination ingeniously creates. His is a particularly subtle, sophisticated intellectual poetry—a kind of pictorial conceptual art. He imaginatively superposes, so that they unconsciously coincide, the memorable life-transformative moment when he left Cuba and memorable art. He fixates that traumatic moment in his own memorable art, art that seems to have stopped time as time seems to have stopped when he left Cuba, and in the artists he ironically emulates. I think it is a sort of therapeutic exercise: imaginatively transformed, Cuba becomes aesthetically tolerable. Giving it imaginative presence, interpreting and re-interpreting it, idealizing it in the act of deploring it, he redeems it. He is possessed by Cuba, but he can purge it through his art. If the rhinoceros is Cuba then he is not afraid to enter the ring with it, unlike the spectators, who regard it as a sideshow.

Cuba weighs on Larraz's consciousness, but he carries its weight the way Atlas carried the globe of the earth. I suggest that what Winnicott calls the "unthinkable anxiety" involved in a "fear of breakdown"

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Dreaming in Longhi