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Review

Age Matters

By Joel Silverstein

My generation - Pollock, Rothko - they ended up destroying themselves and their work too. I look at it from an entirely different point of view. I do what I like to do and that is a blessing. So I am in competition with nobody except myself.

Esteban Vicente

The artist, at an inspired 97 years, has been thrice blessed: to be the beneficiary of a long and healthy life, to be able to paint the way he wanted and to witness a gradual ripening and broadening of his creative powers. In the Nineteenth Century, Thomas Eakins likened the artistic personae to that of the professional athlete, i.e., focused individuals who identify themselves through constant training, through a discipline that's designed not merely to make the body stronger but to train the mind, based on a physical or materially based set of decisions. This process enables the athlete to champion over competitors, the time clock and injury. Thought is evidenced by a process of doing.

The simplistic philosophy that there can be only one winner, one person that delivers, garners the inflated ego, the fat pay check, endorsements and media coverage, is a symptom of our own time, not of Eakins'. Eakins' scullers and boxers display Zen-like concentration, a self-contained joy in being the best for its own sake. Boxing is called the sweet science, implying an aesthetic or synaesthetic dimension. Enthusiasts proclaim the sport an art.

It is, therefore, not so outlandish that, in surveying the late work of Esteban Vicente, I was struck by his parallels to George Foreman. Both artist and athlete are of moderate temperament, totally devoted to training and the execution of their respective crafts. Their ages command our attention. Between a heavy-weight boxer in his forties fighting a title bout against a man more than 10 years his junior (Foreman vs. Moorer) or a creative artist in his nineties there are some similarities, but the uniqueness of the visual artist's situation essentially demands a new arena of critical judgment.

Something more draws these men together, even though Vicente's aesthetics are hardly combative. When Forman trained and won, he did so with an eye to the next fight, as it related to the span of his entire career as a fighter. A more temperate attitude in order to go the distance was not something important to the Abstract Expressionists, with their boozy-brawly lifestyles and romantic early death scenarios. But I think there is much more than a little to be said for an artist who faces the zeitgeist as part of a fraction, and the denominator of this statement is the conscious decision to view one's life as a single entity, a container to be addressed apart from fashion, fad and other people's needs.

In this way, art is as organic as living itself, and if you have lived life as an expression of art, as has Esteban Vicente, the two become indivisible. The mid-century's avant garde based their identities on the Picassoid ego, a variation of the cult of the artist/hero. By contrast, Vicente's work is almost egoless, the structures of Cubism are rendered as Asian ink painting. His oeuvre of the last 30 years reflects the irony of a Japanese koan.

It's about losing yourself in order to find yourself.

Esteban Vicente was born in 1903 in Turegano, a small town in Northern Spain. After studying sculpture at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Madrid, he turned to painting, moving first to Paris and then to Barcelona. The Spanish Civil War convinced him that more could be done for the Nationalist cause from abroad, and so he immigrated to New York in 1936. Vicente has been described as an American painter using a broad American vernacular; however, issues of Spanish style and identity have always been present in his work.

As a young man, Esteban witnessed the painting classes of Joaquín Sorolla, an artist known in New York for the murals at the Hispanic Society. Sorolla married the luminous plein-air effects of French Impressionism to the graphic concision and moral gravity of traditional Spanish painting, a lesson not lost on Vicente. Apart from the more traditional Spanish masters, Goya, Velasquez, Zurbarán and the still-life painters Luis Melendez and Juan Sanchez Cotan, Vicente continued his Modernist education by relating to the Cubism of Juan Gris. Of course, the Spanish titan of Modernism is Pablo Picasso, but Vicente was able to derive from Cubist structure in general without deferring to the elder Spaniard's stylistic originality. Like Bonnard avoiding Cubism entirely and, thus, bypassing Picasso's influence, this was no mean feat.

By the mid-Forties, Vicente moved to 10th Street and became friends with or had met the major members of what was to become known as the New York School. He was chosen by Clement Greenberg and Meyer Shapiro for inclusion in the breakthrough exhibition, *Talent 1950*. The trajectory of his work had evolved through a prolonged figurative phase, most of the works from which the artist later destroyed. Like de Kooning, Vicente didn't develop his mature style until he was in his late forties.

During the decades of the 1940s and 50s, Vicente relied on limited color with Spanish tonalities of black, brown and gray. At a certain point, the artist created small collages of torn painted papers. This filtered into larger works with exciting results. Collage freed him. In a series of untitled works from the mid-Fifties, the materiality of the painted paper ironically produced pulsing rhythmic compositions mimicking the elements of flight.

Vicente's work has always focused on structure. He says, "I reached the point where the plastic aspect of the thing was the real thing." From Cézanne to Mondrian, it's a great tradition of modern art, in which every element of the composition is essential. A late Cubist vocabulary that ultimately parallels or predates Hans Hofmann's use of brushed rectilinear shapes. The formalist aspect of Vicente's work is a given, a progress-based view of Modernism. Abstraction and the materiality of the paint were used to question art's roots in Renaissance illusionism or nineteenth-century Realism. But there is a fundamental dichotomy in Vicente's work, one that's evolved in the last phase of his life.

Like Hofmann, whose structuralist rectangles were couched in hedonistic color and metaphysical terminology, Vicente's late work is defined by gorgeous lyrical chromatics, meditative inaction and spiritual revelry. A flowering of Impressionism or Postimpressionism which retains a tangy, Spanish flavor.

Compared to the Color Field painters of the 1960s and 70s, Vicente instead negotiated his own unique response to his historical situation. Shadowed by the giants of Abstract Expressionism, Vicente could never eclipse Pollock and de Kooning in terms of sheer fecundity or ingenuity. More recently, a late figure like Philip Guston successfully

imagined a coda or third act for the Ab-Ex style by accessing early Surrealist predilections (de Chirico, Picasso, George Herriman's Krazy Kat syndicated comic strip) as well as a dark streak of personal myth (the lonely alcoholic artist, dying an old man). Vicente was posed with a challenge: Should he continue with a style fallen out of favor since the rise of Pop Art or change into something else? As a mark of his character, he did both. He evolved the Ab-Ex color field style by small increments and imbued its dry Formalism with poetry, pushing the material to carry meanings embedded in a few simple shapes.

Vicente's late abstractions are based on felt experiences, like memories of his garden in the Hamptons which fluctuate as the air, light and seasons do. Color is not decorative but an essential element equaling light itself. There's a pulse that's achieved through multiple layerings of paint applied with a spray gun. He also returned to the scumbling and modeling with the brush, creating an abstract equivalent to the lush variegated opticality of Bonnard. As author Elizabeth Frank has noted, Vicente's saturation of color was modeled sculpturally from the inside out, edges finely silhouetted following a topography that meanders around prickly curves and softened angles. His gradations and fluctuations are equivalent to Wallace Stevens' poetry about weather – materialist descriptions of internal states. The immaterial brought into clarity employing materialist methods.

I had the unique experience of visiting the artist's Manhattan studio recently. A series of color prints made directly from small, painted collages were displayed in conjunction with a series of large, brushed paintings. Their impression was one of great intimacy. The mark of a full and rich late period is one that can imbue intimacy to both a five-foot painting and a ten-inch collage. You can sense that here is a creative personality possessed with the utmost control of his means. The artist displays the energy, clarity, a straightforwardness and, may I say it again, pacing of a much younger man. Youth is not simply a time at the beginning of one's life, but an aesthetic independence that is communicated through understanding and summation. The Greek term *tekhne*, the source concept relating to art or skill, is summarily transformed into wisdom.

We are honored to present Mr. Vicente with **Review's** first *Lifetime Achievement Award*. Vicente has been making meaning for a whopping seventy-odd years. He belongs to a very special club: those who have been granted a full measure of creative fulfillment within the span of time granted to us. There are old master luminary supermen like Goya, Titian and Rembrandt. In our own era, there are the examples of Picasso, the half-genius/half-schlockmeister, and de Kooning who continued to shine despite the grips of Alzheimer's disease.

Can I say with certainty that Mr. Vicente will be placed within this hoary pantheon? On a certain level it doesn't matter any more than a theoretical fight between George Foreman and some fifty-year-old boxer in the future. Vicente has stated that he competes only with himself.

Think about what Goya would have thought of our age's phobic culture. The norms are continually revised. The young, the handsome and the beautiful no longer simply appear in the media, they are airbrushed to erase any imperfection. They are now digitized and computer animated, like the Laura Croft character in the *Tomb Raider* game franchise. Phony desire for phony youth. Old women are seen as dried up and ugly; old men become the butt of Viagra jokes. Mr. Vicente has taught us a priceless lesson, one that we should all memorize: Age matters. Painting is not a kid's game. In the hands of a master painter, a century is but a blink of an eye or an infinity of joy. We wish the artist more on all counts.