

"MARIANO AKERMAN: BRIDGING CULTURES"

Excerpts from a note by Sara Mahmood

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan. As the last slide vanished from the screen, the sizeable crowd gathered at the German Embassy auditorium on the evening of May 12th, 2010, broke into animated applause. Had they checked their watches, members of the audience would have found to their astonishment that they had been held spellbound for an improbable two hours and fifteen minutes. Not many lecturers on German art could have inspired such rapt attention.

One of the good things about life in Islamabad these days is the sparkling presence of Mariano Akerman. Combining a formidable knowledge of the art canon with his exceptional skills as a teacher, the Argentinean painter and art historian Mariano Akerman has an unusual capacity to enthrall his audience. One of a rare breed, he is a scholar who delights as much as he informs. Presenting German art to a lay audience and holding them spellbound for two hours is one proof. Another is the enthusiastic response of Pakistani student audiences to the opportunity Mariano provides for them to probe their own artistic heritage and its relationship to the art of other civilizations. Building bridges between cultures – between east and west, between scholar and layman – he describes as his vocation.

Earlier this year in Islamabad, Mariano delivered a series of twenty-one lectures to a group of adult enthusiasts eager to deepen their understanding of the visual arts. Beginning at the beginning with how to appreciate a work of art, the series moved on to trace unexpected themes and linkages that brought the art canon to life in new ways. Here is the testimony of one participant to Mariano's teaching style and breadth of perspective:

"Some of the topics are quirky areas of art appreciation I had never considered, but all are stimulating. It is particularly interesting to be drawn into discussions during these lectures rather than simply taking part in a dry question and answer formula."

Communicating his ideas about art to those interested in learning is described by Mariano as fulfilling his need to balance the independent views of the scholar with the human impulse to share. Not that giving is entirely one-way traffic. As well as enriching the audience, the teacher in the course of teaching engages in a dialogue with himself, which in turn helps to deepen his own understanding.

[...]

As a student at the School of Architecture in Buenos Aires, the young scholar Mariano Akerman chose visual communication as one of his elective subjects: his graduation project focused on the relationship between boundaries and space. Mariano's work was deeply informed by Lao-Tsu's observation that clay is shaped into a jar, but it is "the emptiness inside" [...] The critic Monique Sasegur noted "his theoretical formation rests on his architectural career; the rest is lived experience."

[...]

Mariano Akerman was influenced by the thinking of architect Robert Venturi, whose *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* he read in the mid eighties. By championing the eclectic approach of postmodernist architecture, Venturi sought to mitigate the exclusivist “either-or” approach of modernist architects such as Mies van der Rohe. “Less is more” was the mantra that encapsulated the modernist movement’s devotion to the principle establishing that form follows function. “Less is a bore” was Venturi’s spirited riposte to the pared down modernist approach.

Venturi also emphasized the fact that contemporary designers are heirs to a wide diversity of artistic influences. While Mariano criticizes much of postmodernist architecture for connecting with the past in a superficial fashion, he nevertheless admires the work of the postmodernist architect Louis I. Kahn, whose powerful designs draw on diverse historical sources, and wraps ancient ruins around modern sanctuaries.

It is [...] after leaving Argentina [in 1991] that Mariano Akerman expanded his work as scholar, communicator and teacher of the History of Art and Architecture. In Pakistan, he has targeted students in a wide range of educational institutions. Among them are Islamabad College for Girls, Post-Graduate College for Women, The National University of Modern Languages, Allama Iqbal Open University, Alliance Française and COMSATS. Mariano is particularly enthusiastic about his interaction with young Pakistani audiences. “Young Pakistanis are very curious about their pre-British past and how to connect with it. There is a freshness in the way they engage. Exposure to information and ideas helps them formulate the right questions to help them uncover the richness of their past.”

It is the combination of his intoxicating enthusiasm with his breadth of interest as an independent scholar that enthralls Mariano’s listeners. As noted by the student quoted earlier, he brings unfamiliar “quirky” areas of the art canon into focus.

[...] As an artist, Mariano continues painting and holding art shows. He has received more than twelve prizes in both art and education and his works are featured in the Centre Pompidou in Paris. He likes to remind one that his priorities include his work as scholar and teacher. Anyone who navigates his site at <http://akermariano.blogspot.com> will be surprised by the originality of his ideas and the variety of links on offer, each with a wealth of illustration from the scholar’s always expanding archives. Moreover, each link brings a different piece of the jigsaw into focus. New connections emerge bridging cultures in unexpected ways.