

ART

by Jean Charlot



At the Downtown Gallery, on Merchant Street, until the end of the month, the graphic works of Alfredo Zalce, an outstanding Mexican artist. Juanita Kenda, good hostess



ZALCE — "Girl with Bird in Cage" . . .



ZALCE — "Tigers and Girl"

that she is, pleasantly spiced the well-attended opening with an offering of pupus a la mode du Mexique, hot red beans and cold avocado spread. Supremely at ease with Latin American modes, she had met the artist on one of her incursions into areas that are not usual tourist fare, in Morelia, the artist's home town.

Zalce is a slightly younger man than the famed generation of muralists that already recedes into history. These artists did take an active part in the Revolution. One-armed Orozco was at the front, there to publish Carranza's political sheet "The Vanguard". Siqueiros rose to captain in a battalion of adolescents nicknamed by the more seasoned troopers the Mama Battalion.

WHILE THESE adventures befell his older colleagues, Zalce was still in grammar school. Yet, he too had a direct taste of the revolution. In the so-called Tragic Ten Days, when Mexico City was torn between three military contenders, food was low and death high.

Zalce tells how his parents, having received news that he was not in school, searched for him. They found him, his satchel of schoolbooks at his side, seated on his haunches, entranced by the spectacle of flies pacing over the face of a still warm corpse.

Such an early meditative concern with death, at a time when Zalce was beginning to draw, guarantees the genuineness of what, in his art, pertains to Mexicanidad, an elusive fragrance at times, at times an overpowering stench, that brands as unique the best of Mexican art.

AS AN ARTIST, Zalce lives in a Mexico of his own, a patria in turmoil, the one he grew up in. One of his latest commissions was, for the Museum of History, a portrait of Emiliano Zapata, the peasant chieftain. Zalce was cautioned to represent him in a setting suggestive of his accomplishments.

When he carted the not inconsiderable painting, a portable mural rather, to the Museum, the director balked at the sight. "What are those corpses doing at his feet? Dead men are not anymore in fashion, my friend." To this day the painting remains in storage.

Zalce is a seasoned master of the two media that, by

their nature, bring art to the people at large, mural painting and the pennysheet.

TO THOSE FEW who seek him in his Morelia, Zalce will show at first a few prints then, once contact is achieved, a few easel paintings. If urged, and then only reluctantly, he may take the visitor on a grand tour of his frescos in schools, peasant communal halls, labor union buildings, in the City Hall and in the State Capitol.

This avalanche of art is equally epic in its scale and in its story telling. It launches coveys of unorthodox angels over ceiling areas of thousands of feet, spills dramatic clashes of heroes and vil-

lains up and down staircases. As Siqueiros once remarked, "Either you conform to the dictates of the architecture or you rape it." As a muralist, mild Zalce is a rapist.

Mexican prints never were intended to lie hidden in a collector's portfolio. Their reason to be is that same one that brought forth in Europe the gaudily colored pennysheets that peddlers retailed at city fairs and pilgrimages. A zeal equal to that of the pilgrim burning a candle before the image of the saint sparked the group of printmakers of the Workshop for Folkprints, of which Zalce was an animator.

ASKED FOR an estimate of the number of linocuts and lithographs on revolutionary themes he had made, Zalce somewhat shyly guessed that they would run into the thousands, but adds, "I did not bother to keep the record, and even the workers we made the prints for did not love them enough to keep them."

Pennysheets by function are topical. Heroes once praised and villains once reviled are soon forgotten. Though Zalce never felt any doubt as to his vocation as artist to the people, he now realizes that this tool of art he has mastered can also help people see beauty. The

twist of a tree trunk, the horizontal of the sea, the polychromies of dawn; man, man unqualified, neither hero nor villain, the fisherman, the miner, the cane cutter; and woman the child at the back, woman the child at the breast, these are subjects common place in words, that art alone can make new.

Nowadays, Zalce has resigned himself to be a fine art artist. Images of leisure replace the dynamic images of yesteryear. Perhaps more perfectly than others, the linocut in this show of the corner of a garden, a classical statue glimpsed through its foliage, best sums up his present attitude.



ALFREDO ZALCE — "Acapulco" . . .

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While these martial adventures befell his older colleagues, Zalce was still in grammar school. Yet, he too had a direct taste of the revolution. In the so-called Tragic Ten Days, when Mexico City was torn between three military contenders, food was low and death high. Zalce tells how his parents, ^ahaving received news that he was not in school, searched for him. They found him, his satchel of schoolbooks at his side, seated on his haunches, entranced by the spectacle of flies pacing over the face of a still warm corpse.

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