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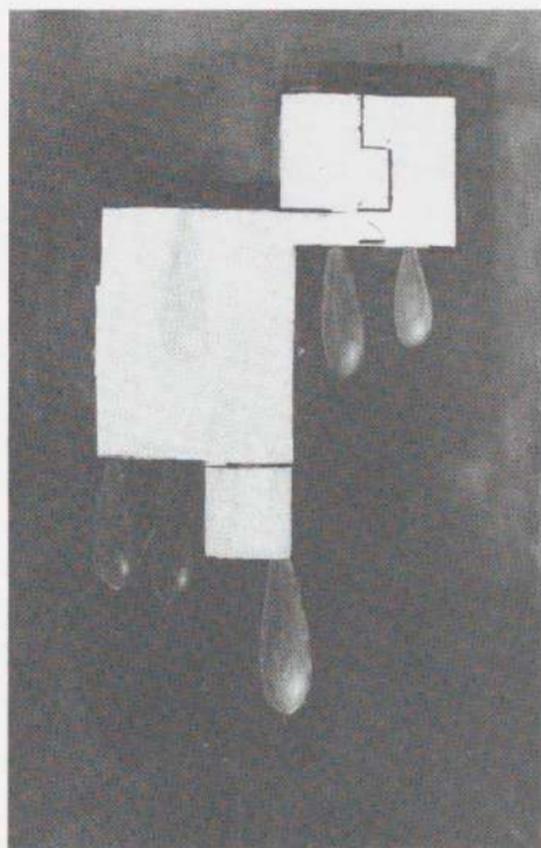
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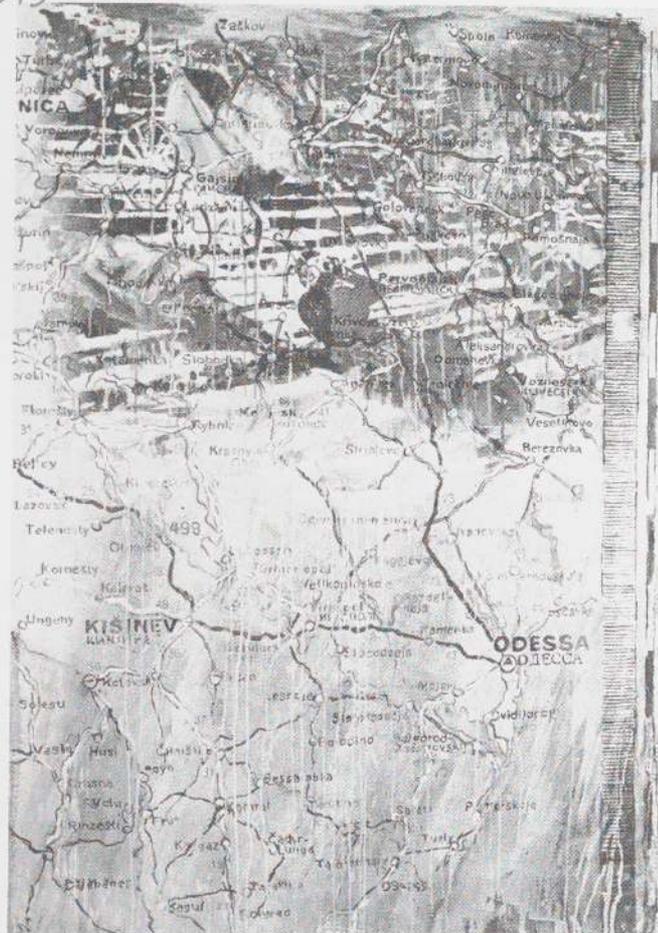
guillermo kuitca

projects



**The Museum of Modern Art
New York**

September 13 - October 29, 1991



Odessa, 1987

"... from the number of imaginable cities, we must exclude those whose elements are assembled without a connecting thread, an inner rule, a perspective, a discourse. With cities, it is as with dreams: everything imaginable can be dreamed, but even the most unexpected dream is a rebus that conceals a desire or, its reverse, a fear. Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else."

Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*¹

Guillermo Kuitca's paintings of city and house plans, road maps and theater sets, are fraught with feelings of longing, passion, desire, and fear. The maps usually chart known locales, a slice of London, a piece of the Ukraine, but as the work has progressed, the identity of the areas depicted has become less crucial. Though the specificity of their references can still evoke a narrative informed by the viewer's sense of history, they also chart personal territories, promoting a kind of mind-travel. The romantic, theatrical melancholy that pervades Kuitca's work speaks of loss. The pain and terror of the dictatorship in his native Argentina has resulted in a diaspora, as many have left their homeland, and the artist communicates the ensuing nostalgia in a manner as Argentine as a

tango. Kuitca's art also expresses a concern with the human body, a subject that has formed a leitmotif in European and American art of the last decade. His house plans, for example, serve as metaphors for the human organism, with all physical and psychological functions and frailties in evidence: they weep, bleed, defecate, have broken hearts, and suffer from AIDS. His work speaks simultaneously of the body and the universe, the spirit and the flesh, of turmoil and isolation, of Argentina and Europe.

Kuitca was born in 1961, the child of a psychoanalyst. His mother is a member of the extremely active analytic community in Buenos Aires, and analytic theory and practice appear to have had a profound impact on his artistic vision. He began studying art as a child and, in his relatively brief career, has produced a surprisingly large amount of work. Around 1982, Kuitca began to develop the imagery he continues to use today. The paintings in the series *Nadie Olvida Nada (Nobody Forgets Anything)* often feature primitively rendered beds, the covers usually turned down, ready for occupancy, but empty. Sometimes a small, perhaps maternal female figure, back to the viewer, contributes to a feeling of isolation. Despite common associations with birth, passion, and death, these clean and tightly made beds seem more like the resting places of childhood. They represent security, but also banishment from the mysteries of the adult world. For Kuitca, the bed is a site of emotional turmoil, alienation, and constriction.

During the early eighties, a time when he directed several experimental theater productions, Kuitca began to depict stage spaces in his paintings. These canvases frequently seem to represent the moment after violent action has taken place. We are left with the resulting devastation: overturned furniture, figures lying hurt or dead, emotional estrangement. If, in this work, the play represents life, it is not quotidian existence; rather, the theatrical framework serves to expose the drama that simmers beneath mundane events and associations. The paintings of stage sets also recall the dreams that return us to childhood, where spaces are huge because they are seen in relation to our smaller selves.

Kuitca, who extrapolates universal themes from personal experience, sometimes includes biographical references in his paintings. *El Mar Dulce (The Sweet Sea)*, the title of one of his theatrical works, is also the name of a series of paintings of theater sets done between 1984 and 1987. The theme is Argentine immigration, and the title refers to el Rio de la Plata, the waterway by which Kuitca's grandparents arrived in Argentina around the turn of the century. The subject reappears in *Odessa*, one of the first road map paintings, which was executed in 1987. The work shows the area from which his family came, superimposed on an image he had used in the *El Mar Dulce* paintings — a baby carriage, out of control, tumbling down the Odessa steps. This image is taken from Sergei Eisenstein's classic film *Potemkin*. It is one of

a series of events in the film that accompanies the Cossacks' massacre of the people of Odessa. At the end of the sequence, the baby lurches from the carriage to the ground. For Kuitca, the image came to symbolize an event from his own family history: his grandmother had accidentally spilled boiling liquid on one of her children, who died as a result. Kuitca redefines the baby carriage, the domain of the lost child, as the vessel that brings the family to the new world. Eisenstein's sequence also suggests the pangs, violence, and trauma of birth. In the case of Kuitca's ancestors, it was rebirth in a new land.

The house plans also appeared in 1987. They always show the same generic four-room apartment, most often isolated, but sometimes as a modular unit in a larger complex. The artist imagines this as the home of a family of three: mother, father, son. These are Kuitca's most flexible images. When rendered as three-dimensional, the plans become scale models, and, like the stage sets, some seem to represent the immediate aftermath of tumultuous action. In *Coming Home* (1990), the house plan becomes an airport landing strip seen from an airplane about to touch down. In *Oil Cross* (1988), it is elongated into the configuration of a cross. Thorns appear for the first time on the house plans, as do tears, hanging bodies, and bones.

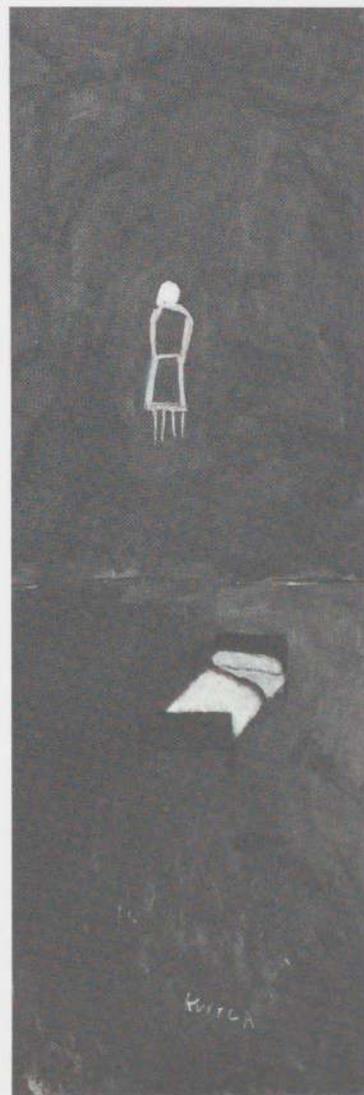
Kuitca also produced his first city plans in 1987. By 1989, he was painting road maps on the mattresses of actual beds, inscribing the larger world onto a piece of apartment furniture; universes collide. The interweaving of different levels of reality, and the easy movement between them is essential to Kuitca's art. This fluidity is a connecting thread or inner rule as Calvino would have it. It is made possible by the artist's use of established, symbolic modes of inscription — the road map, city plan, floor plan — taken out of context and sufficiently abstracted that emotional associations to time and place survive, but literal meanings are sublimated. It is not surprising that Kuitca has recently made paintings of the heavens. Having covered all known territories, he now feels free to navigate in any realm he chooses. And this latest development may indicate a leap from an earth-bound, existential vision to a personal cosmology.

The flexibility Kuitca enjoys is also possible because of an underlying theme, there regardless of the ostensible subject of a given painting: the physical and psychic state of the human organism. The artist makes the beds with painted mattresses into abused objects that recall the filthy detritus found on city garbage heaps. One's bed is the most personal and private of places, so it is especially unnerving that Kuitca's appear to carry "the discharge and waste of another's body."² With these works, the artist not only evokes the larger world represented by the road maps, and the private sphere of the apartment, he also makes reference to the human animal's basic functions, the micro-universe inside the body. A similar effect is achieved in a painting from 1990 with a blood-red background, which shows a detailed plan of

an unidentified city. The pattern of streets, avenues, and squares is delineated by thorns, rather than conventional straight lines. Together, the thorns, blood-red color, and title, *Una Idea de una Pasion* (*An Idea of a Passion*), recall the physical torment of Christian martyrs. Some viewers may recognize the metropolis as San Francisco. This information is not crucial to an understanding of the work, but it adds dimension: in relation to a city so identified with the gay movement, one associates the reference to martyrdom with the AIDS epidemic. The painting's network of city arteries becomes a metaphor for the veins that run through the body.

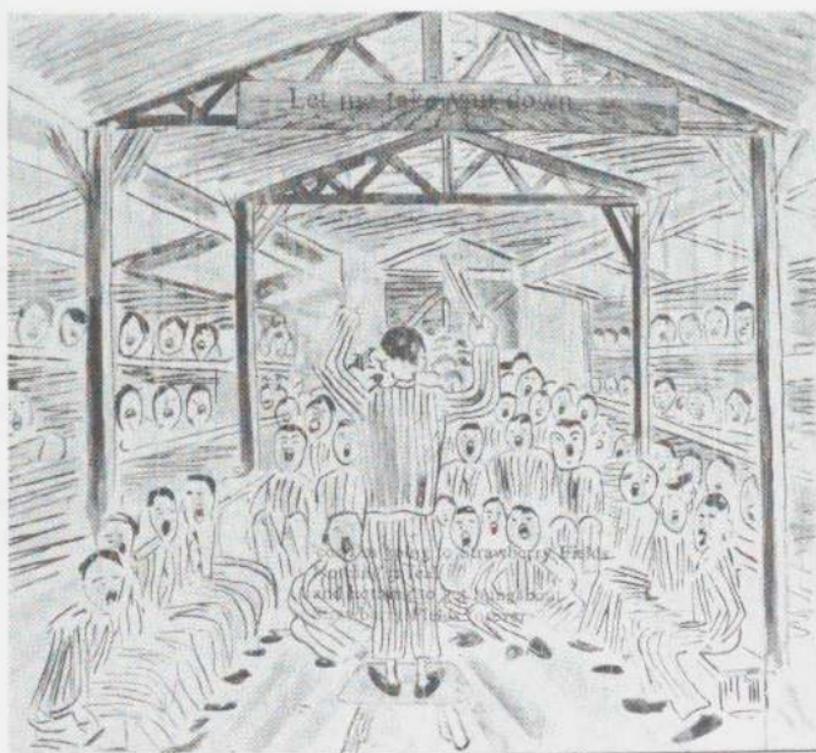
The list of artists who have moved Kuitca is diverse: it includes painters Antoni Tàpies and Francis Bacon; latter-day Conceptualist Jenny Holzer; German performer Pina Bausch, whose work prompted Kuitca's involvement with theater in the early eighties and inspired a shift in the internal scale of his paintings to one that is theatrical and enormous; Gilbert and George, who use photographic mediums to create large and colorful works with homoerotic themes; and the writer David Leavitt. Perhaps the most salient of Kuitca's references is to Frida Kahlo. Kuitca saw her work for the first time in Madrid in the early eighties, and she became a major influence, providing him with a means of integrating indigenous Latin American and specifically Catholic imagery into his art. As a Jew, Kuitca initially felt that Catholic symbols were not his to use, and it took time for him to introduce them into his paintings. The main vehicle for the personification of his symbolic, abstract forms, they also make reference to much in the history of Western art, adding both emotional and intellectual range to his work.

Kuitca's paintings share a number of important formal and conceptual qualities with Kahlo's. Both artists have integrated biographical information into their work through the use of personal symbolism. Kuitca's baby carriage tumbling down a flight of steps may be an elliptical symbol



Nadie Olvida Nada, 1982

compared with those utilized by Kahlo, who often employed self-portraiture to make the content extremely specific. But Kuitca's biographical references are equally pointed. Like Kahlo, Kuitca frequently puts words into his paintings. He says that he chooses phrases because they repeat in his mind, developing a kind of resonance. In



Strawberry Fields Forever, 1988

works from the series *Tres Noches (Three Nights)* (1985–86), Kuitca integrates the title into the painting, something Kahlo does in *Unos Cuantos Piquetitos (A Few Small Nips)* (1935) and other works. Both artists also include songs in their paintings, although there is a fundamental difference in the way they relate word and image. Kahlo's is the more literal sensibility, and in *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair*,



Frida Kahlo, *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair*, 1940

which records a defiant act on her part, the lyrics speak in the voice of a man who no longer cares for his lover since she has cut her hair. In comparison, *Strawberry Fields Forever*, which shows men, in what appears to be a concentration camp barracks, singing the Beatles' psychedelic lyrics, is enigmatic in the extreme.

Kahlo employs the same kind of theatricality as Kuitca, secularizing Catholic imagery to speak of her own devastating physical disabilities as a form of martyrdom. In *The Broken Column* (1944), we see inside her trussed torso to a broken classical column that is her spine. Nails protrude all over her body, and tears fall from her eyes. In Kuitca's 1989 treatment of a related theme, the artist shows a floor plan (a metaphor for the self, or perhaps the family) that is a maze of thorns, dripping blood.

Most of the artists of interest to Kuitca see the human body as an arena for personal exploration and the challenging of social taboos. Bausch, Bacon, and Gilbert and George are examples. And in *Lamentations*, a work that fascinates Kuitca, Jenny Holzer tells us "I have a/ hot hole/ that was/ put in me./ I can live/ with it./ People made it/ and use it/ to get/ to me./ I can hurt/ it too but/ usually I put/ my thinking/ there for/ excitement."³

Surrealism provides a precedent in early modernism for the focus on sexuality, the body, and its functions, so often found in the work of artists today.⁴ Kahlo, who graphically depicted her sense of physical humiliation, was, of course, a Surrealist discovery; André Breton claimed her as one of them.⁵ While Kuitca is not a Surrealist per se, he employs certain strategies akin to those of that group. Among them are a focus on the human body, a concomitant involvement with eroticism, and a psychologically oriented world view. In a work such as *Disposable House Plan* of 1990, which shows a floor plan defecating, the artist clearly attempts to transgress socially accepted boundaries; the same is true of the 1988 painting *Coming*, on which he has splattered what looks like semen. That he is open to utilizing associative techniques is evidenced in the method by which he chooses words for his paintings, and his works frequently have a dreamlike quality. Also, he uses his art analytically, as a means of understanding his own emotions.

For Kuitca, all tools and strategies are means to an end: the construction of a multifaceted art. His cities, roads, stage sets, and apartments conceal memories, fears, and desires. That his paintings are almost excessively dramatic, with titles like *House Plan with a Broken Heart*; that the play is a crucial metaphor, emphasizing this nearly artificial theatricality; that, in every map, plan, and set, Kuitca mimics symbolic representations of experience, only underscore the sadness. It is a sentiment with which one can readily identify. Political exile and social estrangement are norms of our era. As time cuts us off from our past, and external pressures shape our lives, we become alienated from some part of ourselves, as well. Kuitca strives to express this state of being, and the struggle for connection through which we may overcome it.

Lynn Zelevansky
Curatorial Assistant

List of illustrations:

cover: *House Plan with Tear Drops*, 1989. Acrylic on canvas, 6'27¹/₈" x 55¹/₈" (190 x 140 cm). Courtesy Annina Nosei Gallery, New York

Odessa, 1987. Acrylic on canvas, 49¹/₈ x 33¹/₂" (125 x 85 cm). Collection Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

Nadie Olvida Nada, 1982. Acrylic on canvas 55¹/₈ x 20¹/₂" (140 x 52 cm). Collection the artist

Strawberry Fields Forever, 1988. Acrylic on canvas, 37³/₈ x 41¹/₄" (95 x 105 cm). Collection Mr. and Mrs. Jorge Helft, Buenos Aires

Frida Kahlo, *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair*, 1940. Oil on canvas, 15³/₄ x 11" (40 x 27.9 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Edgar Kaufman, Jr.

biography

Born Buenos Aires, Argentina, 1961
Lives and works in Buenos Aires

Selected Exhibitions

- 1991** *Metropolis*, Martin Gropius Bau, Berlin
- 1990** Kunsthalle Basel *
Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art,
Rotterdam *
Städtische Museum, Mülheim *
- 1989** *New Image Painting, Argentina in the Eighties*,
America Society, New York
U-ABC, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam;
Museum Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon
XX Bienal, São Paulo
- 1988** *Salón Internacional Bienal*, San José, Costa Rica
- 1987** *Arte Argentina 1810–1987*, Instituto
Italo-Latinoamericano, Rome
Art of the Fantastic, Latin-America, 1920–1987,
Indianapolis Museum of Art; The Queens
Museum, New York; Center for the Fine Arts,
Miami; Centro Cultural de Arte Contemporáneo,
Mexico City
- 1983** *Buenos Aires a través de sus artistas*,
Cultural Ciudad de Buenos Aires; Akademie der
Kunst, Berlin; International Union of Architects,
XV Congress, Cairo
*Artes visuales y democracia, La Nueva Imagen
de los '80s*, Centro de Artes y Comunicación
(CAYC), Buenos Aires

* Individual exhibition

Endnotes:

1. Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), pp. 43–44.
2. Charles Merewether, *Guillermo Kuitca* (Rome: Gian Enzo Sperone, December 1990), n.p.
3. Jenny Holzer, *Lamentations* (New York: Dia Art Foundation, n.d.) n.p.
4. There is a growing body of scholarship relating to the issue of women and Surrealism. The treatment of the female body by Surrealist artists, and the role of female members of the movement are two areas of exploration. See, for example, Susan Rubin Suleiman, "Pornography and the Avant-Garde" in *The Poetics of Gender*, Nancy Miller, ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), and Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 1991).
5. There has been disagreement as to whether or not Kahlo should be considered a Surrealist. It is possible that she developed her style independently. However, as is seen in works like *The Broken Column*, Surrealism seems to have had an impact on her following her exposure to it.

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