

“Confessions of a Mask”
by Evan Moffitt

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By Evan Moffitt

*¡Un Proust que vive en México! Y haría
por sus hojas pasar los deliciosos
y prohibidos idilios silenciosos
de un chofer, de un ladrón, de un policía.
– Salvador Novoⁱ*

Who is Julio Galán? The question echoes teasingly across the artist's archive, sometimes posed by the man himself. Answers found in his painted self-portraits and the many photographs of him taken by others—in which he poses as a cowboy or *charro*, a peasant *china poblana*, a pirate, a prince—beg ever more questions. “People need not know so much about me to understand my work,” he once said, and yet there he is, again and again, with a face as round and pale and melancholic as the moon, dressed in all manner of period costumes, wearing so many masks it's hard to know which likeness is true. Galán's enigmatic iconography, meanwhile, seems the stuff of legend. “What you see is not what it is,” the fabulous fabulist often proclaimed. If artists use lies to tell the truth, as the adage goes, then “the image that Galán projected was conceived as a truth in disguise,”ⁱⁱ a denuding of our desires and cultural mores through a delirious form of drag. Indeed, Galán's “hermetic world is a place where every window and door leads back again to the self,”ⁱⁱⁱ a labyrinth that shows us who we are by mirroring who we want to be.

The challenge, then, is how much to weigh the biography of an artist who so frequently resisted interviewers' attempts to interrogate him—and how much credence to give what little he divulged about his past. There are at least a few facts: his childhood spent in the oak and pine groves of the Galán-Romo estate on the outskirts of Ciudad Muzquiz, Coahuila, a mountainous state in northern Mexico nestled along the Rio Grande. His lifelong bond with the strong-willed and creative women in his family, including his sisters Sofia and Lissi, and his favorite cousin Golondrina. Galán once described his mother, Elisa Romo, as “an elegant and eccentric woman” who loved a good costume party, “worried about jewelry and perfumes,” and showed him affection by buying him dolls.^{iv} Those dolls were to be his primary companions throughout his life, making their way into many of his paintings and receiving guests to his home and studio in grand style. None of this likely endeared Galán much to his father, whom he called an “arrogant macho,” “imposing and pretentious,” a two-term town mayor who “only cared about power.” Elisa “was a father and a mother at the same time,” he said, but wasn't always able to protect him.^v For even in the privileged confines of the ranch, the horrors of the outside world seeped in. Galán developed a strong aversion to hunting after seeing bears, deer, and rabbits trapped and gutted by his father and brothers, and a morbid fascination with death, which cast its shadow across the property in the form of the family mausoleum.

Bears stalk many of Galán's earliest paintings. *Al cabo ni duele, verdad?* (1982) imagines the Galán-Romo crypt with eight cutaway windows revealing eight mummified bears, like the set of the TV game show Hollywood Squares. With their cutely bandaged ears, claws, and lidless eyes, these anthropomorphized ancestors

are equally endearing and threatening. Each is adorned with a specific emblem—pink opera gloves, a bouquet of flowers, a sacred heart, a sorcerer’s hat—which may hint at their identity. To those outside the family circle, however, Galán’s dead relatives appear like enigmatic *lotería* cards. The formal resemblance to a card game or a game show may not be a coincidence: *Autoretrato con el oso, la estatua, y la carta de adios* (1983), for instance, cuts up and mismatches the body parts of a bear, a Greco-Roman marble, and a preppy young man in a triptych round of consequences, or what the surrealists appropriately called “exquisite corpse.” As Galán would have learned in Catholic school, death and dismemberment can lead to new beginnings—though for a young queer child, its re-enactment may have simply been an excuse to play.

Such signifiers of mortality are always profoundly ambivalent in Galán’s work. In the purgatorial landscapes of his paintings, every exit could lead either to heaven or to hell. Passionate love is never very far from pain. Galán “empathized and identified with the hunted, the victimized”^{vi}, but his animals are not always nurturing. If we are meant to empathize with the flayed bruin in *No que no?* (1983) or the drugged-out pet cub in *Niño en cama* (1983), what of the mama bear in *Las garras del oso maloso en su final* (1982), of whose wickedness the artist has so bluntly informed us? Her claws—beringed and clad in blue surgical gloves—clutch the severed legs of some pitiless boy, which are further tied together with rope, rendering any hope of escape impossible. Neglect enacts its own quiet violence: *Con los sentimientos y sin los sentimientos* (1982) depicts a mother and son starved for love, the child literally bound to her with only a lash of maternal obligation. Galán’s avatars ricochet between extremes of carelessness and control.

Aware at an early age of his own difference, the artist must have felt confined in Muzquiz, like an exotic animal trapped in a gilded cage. Over and over again, his paintings reproduce a sense of psychological imprisonment: transposing the real landscapes of Coahuila onto fictive, labyrinthine architectures of the mind, they are full of high walls and bars or bounded by thick borders and painted frames. The remarkable *Laberinto azul* (1983) reimagines domestic space as a maze full of terrors, with figures pursued by ravenous bears and flying knives. Around the central white dress in *El ropero de sofía* (1984), with its side-straps for a paper doll or an asylum patient, are shelving cabinets transformed into tiny rooms, the shoe-box sized tableaux containing mousetraps or trap doors leading nowhere. And in another untitled painting from 1984, a young man stands atop a stepped plinth with arms extended, a bolt of electricity winding from his fingertips through a maze of walls before dissipating at a dead end.

Such works express a fear of wasted potential. In them, “childhood appears not so much a temporary refuge from adult cares as a prison from which no escape has yet been found.”^{vii} The family home resembles a tomb where the sleep of death creeps up on waking dreams. Indeed, Galán’s figures stretch their arms out as if sleepwalking, as in *Tengo mucho miedo (y yo estaré allí)* (1984), *La novia* (1983), and *Siempre te buscaré (Lissi)* (1982); even with eyes closed or covered, we sense that they can still see. When portrayed frontally, his stiff figures appear ready for the dissection table. At the same time, they mimic the rigid posture of his dolls, those tokens of unconditional love, their arms open in eternal embrace.

In Galán’s work, earthly escape is not always possible, but there are other ways out of the prison of social structures and of the body. *Quedate Conmigo 2* (1985) imagines a different kind of eternal embrace: Christ’s promise of redemption as he was crucified for man’s sins. Galán’s self-portrait clings to the bare and bloodied Son of God as he hangs from the cross, while Jesus swings down an arm in reciprocation. Crucifixes were abundant in the Galán household, as they were in the churches and parochial schools where the painter spent most of his childhood; depictions of Christ in pain would have been some of the first examples of figurative sculpture and painting that he encountered, as they are for most children in Mexico. Notwithstanding the undeniable homoeroticism of these images—as well as historically queer-coded representations of Saint Sebastian, penetrated by arrows like a pincushion—their eschatology affirms the body as an earthly conduit to the divine. As Caroline Walker Bynum has argued, for Christian mystics and martyrs, physical pain and pleasure were the sensory manifestations of God’s love. Partitioned into reliquaries, a body became a sacred image but remained vulnerable to putrefaction.^{viii} All this must have resonated with a young Galán as he sought an explanation for his desires in a religious and iconographic tradition that seemed to celebrate them even as it condemned them. The painter even

made his past-self a holy relic in *Niño finguiendose muerto* (1985), whose central boy lies in a funereal bedchamber, tightly enclosed in a box like those glass coffins containing saints' lavishly robed skeletons. Suffering and sublimation are just stages of the journey towards redemption.

Yet, like the end of a labyrinth, transcendence is no closer at hand while we remain trapped in our mortal coil. "In Galán's work, the Catholic underpinnings become part of a narrative of impossible love," as Eleanor Heartney has observed.^{ix} "The melancholy that so often suffuses his self-representations is an indication of the fact that his quest for a perfect union can never be fulfilled. The child can never return to the mother's womb, the novitiate can never become one with his God, the lover can never completely possess his beloved." Sweeping outdoor vistas, freed from the confinements of domestic life, are landscapes of ceaseless longing: where, for instance, is the "beloved" invoked by the title of *El amor contigo nunca entró en mis planes* (1991), which floats atop rugged mountains and a placid lake that recall the terrain of Muzquiz or Monterrey? Vanished—perhaps having fled the barrel of the real gun which Galán has affixed to the canvas above the still waters. Even the kissing couple inset atop the bucolic horizon of *Niños con muchos huevos* (1988) seem fated to grow apart, as their "huevos"—quite literally eggs, here symbolizing their dreams and desires—march towards a gap in a dam from which they seem certain to fall. Christ promises to make us sinners whole; but a broken heart might not so easily be put back together again.

Galán's paintings reproduce this rupture in both iconographic and spatial terms. He bifurcated numerous self-portraits and sutured them unevenly. In an untitled work from 1988, the artist conjoins two torso-height self-portraits, one right side up and the other upside down, with a ghostly, faint black line that enhances their phantasmatic mirror effect. In another untitled painting from 1994, the artist appears to have sliced directly through the canvas and removed part of the center-left side, so that his face, caught in a rapturous expression of religious or sexual ecstasy, has only half a mouth and nose remaining. Photographs of men's exposed crotches cut, presumably, from pornographic magazines hover above his penitent hands, outstretched and open as if ready to receive them. The work is not alone in Galán's oeuvre for the way it intermingles the sacred with the profane.

According to Magalí Arriola, such split portraits multiply the artist's image rather than simply dividing them. "This indulgent unfolding of his figure on the canvases uses repetition as a strategy to underpin not so much the singularity of his being, but rather a fluid and changing identity that allowed him to subvert social and cultural constructs in a historical setting—Mexico during the 1980s and 1990s—when binary and heteronormative values still dominated," she notes.^x These paintings exhibit what Leo Bersani referred to as "self-shattering," the ego death achieved through the *petit mort* of orgasm, particularly for the passive partner in sex.^{xi} While Galán spoke little of his romantic life, the notion of a redemptive fracturing of the body binds the latent queerness of his art to its Catholicism, and distinguishes it from the inviolability of the macho, a stereotype that Galán openly detested. According to Octavio Paz, "masculine homosexuality is regarded with a certain indulgence" in Mexican culture "insofar as the active agent is concerned," while "the passive agent is an abject, degraded being."^{xii} Yet for Galán, as for the martyrs, rupture can lead to transcendence.

Within the art historical canon, Bersani most associated self-shattering with the work of Caravaggio, that famously transgressive artist of the Counterreformation, and his practice of painting his own face onto the nubile bodies of his male models. Such "allo-portraiture," or composite portraits, signified Caravaggio's quest for unity through fragmentation and difference.^{xiii} It also envisions painting as a field where we can map our own subjectivity onto figures whose identity is fundamentally unstable. "Art alone initiates the visibility of pure relationality, of being *as* relationality," Bersani observed. Erotically provocative material in these pictures, meanwhile, "transforms the otherwise neutral unreadability of the eye into a willful reticence, as if we were being solicited by a desire determined to remain hidden."^{xiv} The eroticism of Galán's paintings depends on the same transference, a production of difference through sameness which appears at once solicitous and withholding.

In Galán's work, broken bodies are often held together by tender strings. Lines resembling capillaries or leather belts lace around the artist's self-portrait, tying them to other parts of the picture or simply anchoring them in their fictive plane. In *Cavayo Bello* (1987), for instance, a tangle of leather belts loop around the body of a boy

on all fours, his pants pulled down to expose his red underpants. He stares desiringly into a mirror at his own reflection, invoking the homoerotic charge that has attended such doubled representations since the myth of Narcissus, while the belts lend the composition a sadomasochistic air. The red ropes in *Arreglo sexual* (1991), meanwhile, tie like *shibari* bondage around the bare torso of a man posed as the *Salvator mundi*, or Christ Savior of the World, the weight of a whole blue planet resting atop his finger.

Ropes and cables were a pictorial device favored by many of Galán's contemporaries, such as David Wojnarowicz and David Salle. Galán would have encountered their work when he moved to New York in 1984, after six years studying architecture in Monterrey to appease his father. Finally, Galán was able to commit himself to painting full time. Still, it was not always easy being a queer, penniless Mexican at the heart of the US empire. The dreamy *El que se viene se va* (1988) imagines his adoptive home as a city floating in the clouds above a field of large, almost carnivorous flowers. The boy swimming in dark waters appears adrift, powerfully evoking the psychological experience of exile.

Though Galán quickly fell into the thriving East Village art scene of the 1980s, he often felt like an outsider there. He "admired the work of the leaders of every movement: Schnabel and Kiefer from Neoexpressionism, Basquiat from graffiti, and Clemente and Polke from figurative." However, he maintained, "I was very clear that I didn't want to paint like them, not in my technique nor in my content. With nostalgia and solitude, I was reassured what was Mexican. I started doing *chinas poblanas*, *charros*, *tehuanas* and confirmed that I could just be myself."^{xv} This self-conscious othering accounts for Galán's posthumous association with "Neomexicanismo," a movement that included artists such as Monica Castillo and Nahum B. Zeñil. The Neomexicanists quoted historical Mexican painting styles from folk art to *retablo* in subversive ways, using a visual language commonly associated with patriotic and patriarchal narratives to question their ideological frameworks. Galán's adoption of Mexican stereotypes and Platonic personalities reveals nationalism to be a kind of pompous drag.

Many of the Neoexpressionists, similarly, precisely rendered their gestures to give the illusion of spontaneity, undermining the ejaculatory and masculinist precepts of Expressionism. Both movements thus had a critical relationship to history that has not always been fully recognized by art historians. Writing of Salle, Schnabel, and others at the time, Hal Foster complained that such paintings "only give us hallucinations of the historical, masks of these moments. In short, they return to us our historically most cherished forms—as kitsch."^{xvi}

There's plenty of kitsch in Galán's paintings, to be sure, but that kitsch is fundamental to their radicalism. Foster's criticism hardly applies to Mexican art, which forges historical memory through rituals of masking and collective hallucination, from Día de los Muertos celebrations to Passion plays. "Mexican art is essentially an *ex-voto*, a visual stitch in time," Colin Eisler observed of Galán's work. "Painting or sculpture, tinted marzipan or pressed-tin relief—all remember fate, the passage of time. Art recalls the tossing into, or snatching from, the jaws of death, disease, or other disaster."^{xvii} *Los cómplices* (1987) hurls tradition into the fire: beside Galán's self-portrait, in an embroidered *charro* suit and *sombrero*, standing with a horse and *rebozo* rugs, is the artist's scrawled declaration that he wishes to burn down a museum. Galán dons such signifiers of Mexican identity only to desacralize them. In *Los siete climas* (1991), he takes on the country's indigenous heritage, painting himself in a feather headdress, his bare chest covered with black and white designs that seem to spell "OTO". As Teresa Eckmann has noted, photographs of Galán taken by Juan Rodrigo Llaguno, which the painter used as references, show a "J" on his right arm, spelling "*joto*," or fag.^{xviii} Removed from the final composition, it suggests an affinity between oppressed sexual and racial minorities, but one that the artist chose to hide from his public, ensuring the work's reading would remain ambiguous.

Galán shared this simultaneously irreverent yet coy attitude with Andy Warhol, who attended one of his first exhibitions in New York, organized by Warhol's assistant at *Interview* magazine, Page Powell. The artists' work could not have been more different, but they both loved Camp, seriality, and portraiture, and had an ambivalent relationship to their Catholic upbringing. Warhol's extravagant lifestyle and calculated persona clearly left a strong impression on Galán; his fetish for celebrities and commodities quite naturally extended his practice

of painting them. The Pop artist's act held up a mirror to the vanity and materiality of American culture like nothing ever had before. Only those with an eye for Camp could be certain he was really performing. "To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role," Susan Sontag observed. "It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater."^{xix}

A consummate performer, Galán once defined pleasure as "something synthetic, flashy, glittery, and not possible." Warhol almost certainly would have agreed. And beauty? "For me, beauty is something very very very very," Galán said. "It can be written like that, can't it, 'very' four or five times?"^{xx} This sense of excess is palpable in his overworked canvases, in which every mask-like representation conceals other faces, other masks. In *Ya no* (1988) Galán's face has been multiplied quite literally as a series of paper masks, each affixed with a unique expression or decorative element, such as rhinestones, flowers, clock hands, or a third eye. A different Julio for every occasion. Just above the center of the painting, a mask has been cut from the canvas, leaving a hole for the painter to show his face—or another to stand in for him—as if at a carnival fun fair. The cut takes the baroque eroticism of folds, wounds, and other voids to its logical extreme, while transforming the entire picture plane into a stage. In life's play, whatever face that fills this void can be no more real than any other.

"I was to play my part on the stage without once ever revealing my true self," the narrator of Yukio Mishima's *Confessions of a Mask* (1949) says of concealing his sexuality. "I believed optimistically that once the performance was finished the curtain would fall and the audience would never see the actor without his makeup."^{xxi} Galán, for his part, rarely broke character. "I always carry a mask with me," he said.^{xxii} The truth in these many guises is that each of us contain multitudes. Beneath the masks we wear, identity is itself a fiction being made up over and over again.

Galán insisted that his penchant for dressing up and painting himself as other characters was an expression of authenticity. "If I paint my hair purple or green, if I paint myself with bruises, if I wear 30 diamond rings it is because I need to hide, be someone else, to project myself and my work. With my clothes and my paintings, I set up labyrinths, muddles, clues and obstacles. I know I don't look the same from portrait to portrait, from one day to another, from one way of painting to another, but I've been like this since I was five in order to survive."^{xxiii} Galán sought safety in the exaggerated performance of gender roles, as so many queer men and women have before him. At the same time, these performances demonstrate that the "straight" world, the world of machismo and nationalism and religion, is also always acting.

Such evasiveness lures us towards the realization that what we believe to be fixed about ourselves and the world we inhabit is really unstable. Paz called it the work of "dissimulation," an act at which "the Mexican excels." The dissimulator, he wrote, "is not counterfeiting but attempting to become invisible, to pass unnoticed without renouncing his individuality... Every moment he must remake, re-create, modify the personage he is playing, until at last the moment arrives when reality and appearance, the lie and the truth, are one."^{xxiv} At the center of this labyrinth, a maze of mirrors in which every facet of oneself is distorted or reflected, we find the same person who is always different. We find the one who is Julio Galán.

ⁱ Novo, Salvador. *Pillar of Salt*, trans. Marguerite Feitlowitz (University of Texas Press: Austin, 2014), 158.

ⁱⁱ Arriola, Magalí. "Red and Green Can Also Be Something Else," in *Julio Galan: A Rabbit Split in Half* (Museo Tamayo: Mexico City, 2023), 95.

ⁱⁱⁱ Heartney, Eleanor. "El fruto amargo de Julio Galan/Julio Galan's Bitter Fruit," in *Julio Galan: exposicion retrospectiva* (Monterrey: Museo deArte Contemporaneo de Monterrey, 1993), 42.

^{iv} Galán, Julio to Silvia Cherem. "The Secrets of Pain: An Interview with Julio Galan," in *Julio Galan: pensando en ti* (Monterrey: Museo de Arte Contemporaneo de Monterrey, 2007), 342.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Eckmann, Teresa. "A Rabbit Split in Half and A Boa Constrictor Digesting an Elephant: Julio Galán and Seeing Beyond the Hat," in *Julio Galan: A Rabbit Split in Half* (Museo Tamayo: Mexico City, 2023), 39.

^{vii} Heartney, 39.

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- viii Bynum, Caroline Walker. *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (Zone: New York, 1991).
- ix Heartney, 46-7.
- x Arriola, 95.
- xi Bersani, Leo. *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays* (University of Pennsylvania: Philadelphia, 2009).
- xii Paz, Octavio. *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (Penguin: New York, 2005), 39.
- xiii Bersani, Leo and Dutoit, Ulysse. *Caravaggio's Secrets* (MIT Press: Boston, 1998), 8.
- xiv Ibid.
- xv Interview with Silvia Cherem, 343.
- xvi Foster, Hal. *Recordings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Bay Press: Seattle, 1985), 76.
- xvii Eisler, Colin. "The Strange World of Julio Galán." *Interview Magazine* 19, no. 3 (1989), 53.
- xviii Eckmann, Teresa. *Julio Galán: The Art of Performative Transgression* (University of New Mexico: Albuquerque, 2024).
- xix Sontag, Susan. *Notes on Camp* (Penguin Classics: London, 2018).
- xx Galán, Julio. Interview with Vanesa Fernandez. *The Boxer* (Galerie Thaddeus Ropac: Paris, 1995).
- xxi Mishima, Yukio. *Confessions of a Mask* (New Directions: New York, 1958), 101.
- xxii Interview with Vanesa Fernandez.
- xxiii Interview with Silvia Cherem, 340.
- xxiv Paz, 40-1.