

The Retablo Project (and other works)

A conversation between Alexander Braun and Christoph Kohl

Your »Retablo Project« came about in collaboration with commission painters from Mexico City, in particular the well-known Mexican retablo-painting family of Vilchis, and it is still being continued. The first panel of the project dates from 2003 and shows three figures: a man made of felt, whom you integrated into your work as a constant a long time ago, a skeleton, and you yourself, standing behind a tree. Can you tell us how you came by these motifs?

I'm not sure whether it really was the first retablo that Alfredo Vilchis painted. The first thing I commissioned from him consisted of eight panels with different motifs, six of which arrived six months later as a first delivery. But the panel you describe was certainly the first theme that I wrote down. It was intended in a certain sense to stake out the total framework, and to introduce the figures in their mutual relationship: the felt-man and the skeleton as protagonists and myself as the silent voyeur, who takes an interest, but does not intervene in the action. In that sense it is a very good thing that this panel is dedicated to Christ and not to a particular saint. In this way it lays down a general tone which then becomes specific as the series proceeds.

Before we concern ourselves with the details, can you briefly outline what »retablos« actually are, and how we should imagine your collaboration with the painters on the spot in Mexico?

It is not altogether clear how the word became established as the term for private devotional panels or supplication panels in the churches of Latin America in the centuries following the conquest by the Spaniards. Strictly speaking, the panels in my retablo project are actually »ex-votos«, because it's not a saint at the centre of the depiction, but the story of the sponsor of the panel. In general, however, the term »retablo« has become established for panels with an ex-voto character. Retablos function rather like the ex-votos of southern Europe – as thanksgiving panels: something good has happened to the believer, or else he or she has suffered some accident which then, as a result of prayer, has turned out well after all. In retrospect, the believer then goes to a painter who takes commissions, and asks him to depict this anecdote with a signature and proof of authenticity, and to dedicate it to a particular saint. Finally, this panel is taken to a church or chapel by the person who commissioned it, and hung on the wall.

Is it important for the genre where the panel is hung?

That depends on the motif. If it is a retablo in the traditional sense, in other words one that depicts Christ or the Virgin Mary or a saint, then it is not personalized and can hang anywhere. These panels are mostly used in a domestic setting, for a domestic altar or something like that. If by contrast it is an ex-voto retablo, in other words deals with the specific story of a particular person, who would like to express himself through the panel and make public his experience, then of course it only makes sense to put it in a place where others will see it.

And this is the genre which interested you?

Yes, only this one. For here we have aspects which are of interest in the context of visual art: narrative associations, a personalized authorship, the question of where individual responsibility for one's own life ends, and where something like fate or destiny begins, indirect information about social relationships etc. The mere depiction of a Christian figure does not say much about the circumstances of people's lives, but an everyday anecdote can say a great deal.

Was it clear to you from the outset that there would be panels on which your figures would be seen?

No, not at all. I chanced upon the retablos, because in the context of my group of felt pictures, which depict skeletons, I had started to collect papier-mâché skeletons associated with the Mexican »day of the dead« ceremonies. I had come upon this tradition, in turn, in 1999 during my tenure of a scholarship at the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas, which of course is not very far from the Mexican border. In addition I had while I was there executed a video work – this side and that side of the Rio Grande. A certain affinity with Mexican culture had come about, in other words. A subsequent scholarship in northern Spain gave this more depth. One of the best dealers in Mexican crafts is Nancy Nenad from Arizona, from whom I acquired numerous skeleton figures, and who is personally acquainted with most of the craftsmen and women in Mexico City. It was on her premises that I first saw more recent retablos painted by Alfredo Vilchis, and I became an immediate fan, especially because of the liberal manner in which he dealt with the themes he depicted. Alongside the »ordinary« disasters of everyday life, there were motifs related to the problem of migration, to 9/11, to jealousy, adultery, gay and lesbian love, gender reassignments – absolutely everything, and much of it in total opposition to the moral teaching of the Roman Catholic church – very subversive, very anarchic! So I tried to collect what I could find and what I could afford. At first without any ulterior motives in respect of my own artistic work.

The range of themes is really astonishing. One would expect things like illness, accidents and natural disasters.

The proportion of themes dealing with interpersonal problems is amazingly high. And we mustn't forget political topics. In 1995 a study was published by the University of Arizona Press which dealt exclusively with retablos by Mexican immigrants giving thanks for example that they survived swimming across the Rio Grande, or weren't picked up by the border police in the Texan desert.

Is there an historical moment when what we might call »modern« themes first start appearing?

If there is, then unfortunately I don't know it. But I'm sure it's something with its origins in recent decades.

Are there no older examples of this kind?

People are constantly pointing out that Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera collected retablos. Unfortunately I've never set eyes on this collection and as far as I know, nothing has ever been published on it. Maybe its whereabouts are unknown, maybe it's slumbering in some quiet corner and has not yet been appropriately researched. I don't know. But two retablos have been preserved in the collection of André Breton, which he acquired while staying with Kahlo and Rivera in 1938 and then took back to Paris. One of these pictures is very elaborately composed and better described as a painting, the other by contrast is in form and content very typical: a kneeling man in supplicatory attitude. According to the dates on them, they both go back to the 19th century, but that can be taken with a pinch of salt. In Mexico sometimes any old dates are put on pictures, and even in the late 1930s there will already have been a commercial aspect. But if there had been examples dating from the first half of the 20th century that were comparable to today's examples, then Breton would certainly have acquired them. I am fairly sure that the acceptability of depicting the whole range of human abysses in the form of ex-votos – including sexuality – is a more recent phenomenon.

Is this an expression of social change?

I think this is highly probable – and not just in the sense that moral values have changed. Let's venture the thesis that people are always particularly religious when their worldly existence is threatened. When they as individuals are rightless and underprivileged, they find comfort in religion. In the modern retablos this tradition of faith continues to be very strongly present – in the piety of the language, the firm belief in miracles. But in addition there's a desire to present yourself as an individual: I want to tell MY personal story, the miracle that happened to ME, that's what I want to see depicted. This inevitably leads to a specification of the themes on the one hand and a broadening of the range on the other.

Was it immediately accepted on the Mexican side, when you started commissioning retablos which depicted not real people, but your artificial figures? Might that not offend religious sensibilities?

To my amazement it was accepted at once, and no one ever questioned it. I myself was worried at first that religious sensibilities might be offended, and that's why I sent Nancy on ahead. She turned out to be a reliable partner during the whole project. I wanted her to test the water, so to speak, with the Vilchis family, to see whether they would accept such a commission at all. But there was no problem. On the contrary.

Doesn't that surprise you?

No. I think the reason is quite pragmatic: it's their job. Their professional self-confidence is based on the understanding that they paint on commission – which doesn't mean that Alfredo Vilchis in particular didn't have an artistic role with his own ideas and interpretations – but I am the client who comes along with his themes and pays the fee, so I choose the theme! In any case there's an ethos of respecting the theme that the client brings, however unusual it may be.

Did you familiarize the painters with your other artworks and with the context in which these figures had appeared hitherto?

All the painters with whom I collaborated got a copy of my catalogues and various pictorial material, in order to get to know the figures better, especially the Felt Man. It is after all of some importance for them to get a feeling for the figure as a character, and not just work by outward appearances. Beyond that, though, I think their understanding did not go beyond certain limits. None of the painters spoke English, so the bilingual nature of the catalogues hitherto didn't help, and none of them had the slightest idea about aspects of contemporary art.

Would it have helped if they had?

I think probably not. My concern after all is to rescue the authentic aspects of this folk art into »my« field of Western contemporary art. And without any colonial attitude. Of course it is a kind of appropriation in the interests of aspects that concern my work – but on equal terms. Collaboration of this sort is legitimized after all not just by some consensus regarding the equal worth of the cultural or intellectual background. It's not my business to put my partners on the same level of artistic consciousness. Rather, I have to ensure that within the whole project, their contribution is accorded enough space to develop self-sufficiently.

Can you make this process a little more transparent?

The whole project is geared to the self-confident encounter of two different artistic formulations. While I specify the protagonists in the pictures, lay down the basic theme and formulate a dedicatory text, I do not for example exert any influence on the composition of the scene. To the same extent as I lay down a conceptual framework on the one hand, on the other I delivered up my figures, which had always looked as I wanted them to, and done what I desired of them, to an alien artistic signature. In addition I urged the painters from the outset not to keep slavishly to my patterns. I left it to them to force the theme in a different direction if they felt like it, and in particular in the formulation of the dedicatory texts this was what regularly happened, including possible problems of comprehension or causal errors that might have resulted.

In the dedicatory texts, one notices a certain rotundness in the style.

Alongside deviations and mistakes which have to do with the relationship between literary Spanish and colloquial Mexican, there is indeed a certain mentality which leans towards a floweriness of language when it comes to describing things. That's a characteristic of retablos in general. Quite often a sentence ends grammatically in a different way from how it began, or the linguistic references to the dedicator, the dedicatee and the event itself get confused.

You must actually like that a lot. It reminds me of how you used sentences and thoughts in your early groups of works »Wortschleifen« [»Word Bows« (»bow« as in »bow-tie«)] and »Grosse Filzschleifen« [»Big Felt Bows«]. There too the message developed out of a complex confabulation.

I've never thought about it like that. But I suppose you're right.

That seems to me to be a sign of a certain passion for story-telling.

Let's put it this way. In the »Grosse Filzschleifen«, reading, in other words following written text, is to start with an instrument, a way of doing something spatially with the beholders, the readers, to set them moving in a particular way. The content of what you can read there is then a different matter.

Let's return to the first panel of the retablo project, which we already mentioned. There »Sr. Fieltro« and »Sra. Huesa« – in other words, »Mr Felt« and »Mrs Bone« – give thanks for having found each other and having become a happy couple. Both figures had appeared in your works before, but never as a couple. What was the decision to have them get married based on?

In the retablo project, when I want to explicitly grant the figures a private life and personal relationships, then there is a necessity to legitimize their joint appearance and their capacity as sponsors of a panel. To do this on the understanding of a mere friendship or something like that seemed not particularly plausible, nor does it accord with the spirit of the Mexican tradition. To have them get married was the obvious answer.

But it irrevocably attributes feminine gender to the skeleton.

That was the price that had to be paid. I didn't find it easy, since in the »felt picture« group of works I liked playing with the idea that from the bones alone – at least in the archetypal depiction that I employ – one cannot see whether the skeleton was that of a man or a woman.

I am reminded of the felt picture »Ring My Bell«, where a skeleton figure provocatively looks between its own legs.

»Ring My Bell« is where it is staged most obviously. The disco hit by Anita Ward in the late 1970s was already meant as an obscene double-entendre. She sings: »The night is young and full of possibilities, well come on and let yourself be free ...« and the repeated refrain is »... you can ring my bell ...«. Because it's a woman that's singing, we assume that by »bell« she means »clitoris«. When in my picture a skeleton says it, though, it could also mean the testicles. One associates it with something having once hung there.

The Felt Man, whom you've depicted both in your videos and sporadically in the felt pictures, has been around since 1998, the skeleton figure exists primarily two-dimensionally in the felt pictures, the first in this group dating from 1999.

That's not quite true. The prototype of the Felt Man appeared for the first time in 1997 in the video »Beyond«, albeit with head and hands of coarse cloth and not of felt. As for the skeleton, there was as early as 2001 an installation in which skeletons appear as little felt dolls. This »doll« variant has continued to this day, in the »Walden« group, as an important component of all the works I execute together with children, both in the photographs and in the videos and in a few small gouaches on wood.

I feel the spectrum between the »real« Felt Man in the videos and his later two-dimensional »apotheosis« on the felt pictures to be broader. The step between the two-dimensional skeletons in the pictures and the three-dimensional transformation into a doll seems not so great.

My sentiments entirely.

Is there a reason why the skeleton has never yet appeared in the videos?

During my scholarship in Spain in 1999 I once made an attempt with a rubber mask. That didn't work at all! I just left well alone after that. I think the reason is that in everyday culture the skeleton is more firmly anchored in the context of ghost-trains, Hallowe'en and horror films. But I want my skeletons to have as little as possible to do with this image.

But there's no way around the »vanitas« idea they symbolize.

It goes without saying that they are and will continue to be a »vanitas« motif, but they don't necessarily have to frighten or shock. I envisage a more conciliatory, friendlier version – that's also the reason for the execution in soft felt and pastel shades, always with a friendly smile. We'd have to include a digression on the typology of the skeleton, such as appears for example in the Mexican »Día de Muertos« ceremonies. In Mexico the skeleton is much more strongly integrated into everyday life – not least as the playful representative of the ancestors – and enjoys rather the status of a good pal. That's a bit superficial, but maybe we can sum up the difference in mentality between their culture and our central European culture as follows: while we understand the skeleton as the remains of our bodily existence, as what is left over, Mexican culture interprets it as something that is permanently present beneath the flesh from the day we're born. In this interpretation, the skeleton need not come from the beyond, because as the architecture of our body, our life, it's already omnipresent. The better, then, you come to an arrangement with it during your lifetime, the more harmonious will be the transition at the end.

This is one of the essential – and for some people also very confusing – aspects of your work with children. Is this in order? To have children as the symbol of youth and innocence appear together with the skeleton as the symbol of death?

Of course it's in order! For all sorts of reasons. It would take too long to discuss this here. I would merely point out that the traditional hierarchy is stood on its head in these works. It's not death that »wears the trousers«, but the children. The children play with the skeleton like with a doll, in other words they domesticate it. The skeletons are so defenceless and docile that they even decorate them with ribbons.

Is this the origin of the bows on the wrists and ankles of the skeletons on the felt pictures?

Yes. First the bows were tied by the children in the video works, only then did they jump across to the felt pictures. The symbol of the bow, as I use it, works in two directions. For the skeleton, it has the meaning of domestication, it's the expression of the skeleton's being taken over. For the children it is a milestone on the road of their development. The ability to tie a bow is an important step on their road to adulthood.

We've moved away from the retablos, but I think it's important to see how your inventory of figures was defined before you started on the retablo project and how maybe the perception of the figures changed as a result of their being included in the retablos.

I myself find it very exciting to look on my figures as it were from outside and to see how, ultimately, they emancipate themselves from me.

Let's stay for a moment with the figure of the Felt Man. Do you have the feeling that he has now established himself as a character in your artistic canon, even though his character is, if anything, characterized by characterlessness?

The Felt Man has over the years become, in his vital potential, precisely what I always imagined, namely a flexible projection surface. On the one hand, for beholders, a possible identification helping them to become a part of the artwork, and on the other – no less coherently – a kind of alter ego of myself.

In the »Endymion« group of works, for example, in which the felt figure represents Endymion, a figure from Greek mythology who lives for ever in a state of eternal sleep, the »alter ego« function predominates.

You can't say that so unambiguously. On the one hand, the Felt Man is more Alexander Braun than in any other of his manifestations, because he appears here in places / hotels which I have visited or occupied in real life. In that sense you are right. You have here a really quite complete biographical documentation of everywhere I've spent outside my own four walls during the past eight years. The longer the work-in-progress goes on, therefore, the stronger the mark left by this personal facet of the work. On the other hand, he is identified here as in none of his other roles, identified as »Endymion«. He is no longer anonymous, but bears a name which defines him as a literary personality.

A personality that could change again already with the next work.

That is the potential he bears within him, and which will be preserved for as long as no attempt is made to give him an individual physiognomy.

Would you agree with me that the Felt Man – for example in contrast to the Endymion series – undergoes his most abstract personification on the sewn felt pictures?

In the felt pictures, all the figures, removed from time and space whether as skeleton or Felt Man – come across somehow as universal and archaic. This is due partly to the dematerialized felt-picture spaces in which they move, in which there are no props, in which they do not even cast a shadow, but merely »emit« text. On the other hand this is reinforced by their bodily attitude, which rarely comes across as a snapshot, but more as a calculated pose, as something consciously staged, something that gesturally underscores what is said.

In their anonymity the Felt Man and the skeletons are ultimately related. Bare bones have just as little personality as amorphous felt.

That is really one of the most amazing details in the work. I was never aware of it until a collector spoke to me about it: in their essence, skeleton and Felt Man are absolutely on one level. They differ solely in their formal volume. The skeleton is a minus figure, everything is decorporealized until only a frame, the mere architecture of the body is left, while the Felt Man is a plus figure, where all the individual features have been filled out until a moon-face and fists result. If Felt Man and Skeleton Woman could indeed procreate, the intersection would presumably be something human with individual features again.

I am interested in how you see the position taken by the Felt Man in the sewn pictures vis-à-vis the skeletons. This is anything but unambiguous.

At least he is their equal in all respects. They meet in this undefined white space on entirely equal terms. I wanted at all costs to avoid the Felt Man going on the defensive vis-à-vis the latently implied vanitas symbolism of the skeletons. Then he would indeed have fulfilled the human role, which represents life, and thus is defeated by the timelessness of death. I didn't want that. In other words, the Felt Man must always appear a tad more authoritarian, in order to take up the cudgel with the skeletons.

In the first work, a panorama-like triptych dating from the year 2000, that is not yet so clear.

»Madrugada« is a work that formulates the basic theme – a kind of prologue that introduces the figures. The skeletons had at this time already been established for a year, but the Felt Man joined in this sewn version for the first time. The skeletons stand or sit on a line and gaze at an imaginary horizon behind the beholder. The title, the Spanish word for the dawn twilight before sunrise, suggested itself therefore. In other words more a calm, amicable exposition.

But it was soon to change. In the very next picture in which the Felt Man appears, the traditional hierarchy which one would expect is turned on its head: the Felt Man is holding a skeleton in a headlock under one arm. One is lamenting, while the other is giving the ironical advice: »In this world, a bit of suspicion never did any harm.«

That was precisely in accord with the desire to create respect for the Felt Man right from the start. The skeletons are on the defensive here, and present a woeful image. That was precisely the right sign, if the protagonists were to be mutually balanced in what was to come.

In three felt pictures dating from 2005, the two figures then appear conspicuously as a couple. Is that due to the influence of the retablo project that was already in progress at this time?

That is doubtless a reflex from the retablos back to the felt pictures. However in the felt pictures there are no everyday scenes comparable to those in the retablos. I like the idea that the retablos document the everyday lives of my protagonists while in the felt pictures, they appear in their official capacity. The felt pictures are their job, so to speak, there they act seriously, pregnant with significance.

But often ironically too!

I don't exclude that. Irony is also a »serious« rhetorical figure. Vilém Flusser says of irony that it's the only position from which a person has an overview of »his conditions«.

On one of the 2005 pictures the Felt Man and a skeleton have a kind of rutting fight, as though they were competing for dominance in the picture...

The skeleton hovers in the air in front of the Felt Man. Both have brilliant orange eyes, and one can read the lines: »TRICKLING SAP OF MAPLE / FIBRE OF MANLY WHEAT« [the text is in English in the original].

...and the text conspicuously takes the form of a towering phallus inclining forwards.

That helps to underscore the spoken words and the tension between the two figures.

Where do the lines come from?

In this case they're borrowed from Walt Whitman, from his »Leaves of Grass«, the first edition of 1855, which centres on the »Song of Myself«. Whitman here creates an analogy by speaking of the magnificence of the American landscape while at the same moment meaning himself, his bodily advantages. This triggered a fair degree of irritation, not to say outrage, among his contemporaries.

Does the second picture dating from that year also refer to Whitman? Felt Man and skeleton are seen looking into the distance and saying: »LAND OF WHEAT / LAND OF THE HERD / LAND OF THE SWEET AIRED PLAINS«. The skeleton is lying on the ground with one arm and its legs tied up, as you do when you round up cattle.

»Hogtied« is the expression the cowboys use. That is a very strange body-language, the way the skeleton – once again, more on the defensive – pulls itself up in order to take part in this yearning gaze over the »sweet aired plains«. Yes, that's from Whitman too.

Time and again in your pictures there's this very strong aspect of poetry, which manifests itself not least in the addition of textual material. Can you explain that a little?

In the phase so-to-speak of my artistic socialization during the 1990s there were for me two important inspirations: Alighiero Boetti and Ian Hamilton Finlay. In respect of Finlay, I had the pleasure of once exhibiting with him and visiting him a number of times at his home in Scotland; by then, unfortunately, Boetti was already dead. One can learn by example from both how an intellectual concept and pure sensuousness can be united to make a sustainable work of art. I certainly do not share all of Finlay's ideals, his enthusiasm for Neo-Classicism for example or his definition of beauty and virtue. I find it absolutely magnificent, however, how he has established his personal vision of art in the 20th century against the prevailing zeitgeist. And one can learn from him what suggestive power and pictorial force emanates from words, and how one can cleverly dock on to the history of art/literature – the genre is immaterial – in order to draw energy for the present. That is an attitude which sees itself in the best sense as the continuation of a discipline and which doesn't have to keep compulsively reinventing itself. In other words, a description such as »sweet aired plains« cannot be improved upon, it is perfect, one can only find it in a host of possibilities and use it. In the case of other lines, I reserve the freedom to shape them to my conditions, which is why the question of where the text comes from does not always have a simple answer.

Can you give us any examples of your way of appropriating language?

In the line shooting dead-straight through the three-metre picture »THE FORCE THAT THROUGH THE GREEN TRENCH DRIVES THE FLOWER«, a certain part derives from Dylan Thomas. Thomas however had a pure nature picture in mind, where »the force that through the green fuse drives the flower«. Thomas didn't use the word »trench« and so there's no hint of the ambiguity inherent in the word which means both a harmless furrow and has connotations of the slaughter of the First World War. Another example: the skeletons on the first two large skeleton pictures declaim: »I THINK I GROW TENSIONS LIKE FLOWERS IN A WOOD – WHERE NOBODY GOES« and: »PAIN IS A FLOWER LIKE THIS ONE, LIKE THAT ONE, LIKE THIS ONE.« Those are borrowed from poems by Robert Creeley, but much modified vis-à-vis the original. But we shouldn't forget the German-language section, where we have magnificent text fragments by Adalbert Stifter associated with the installation »Silling«, such as »FERNER WALDSCHOSS« (»distant bosom of the forest«) or »EIN ANFLUG JUNGER FICHTEN« (»a flight of young spruces«). When the skeleton says: »IHR ARMEN BETROGENEN DINGER, EIN FERNER WALDSCHOSS LOG EUCH HERAUS« (»You poor deceived things, a distant bosom of the forest lied to exculpate you«), the expressions »armen betrogenen Dinger«, »ferner Waldschoss« and »log euch heraus« occur in Stifter's novella »Der Hochwald«, but in quite different contexts and separated by pages of text.

In the felt pictures, the lines of text are on principle written back to front.

We must be more precise. It's not the lines as a whole that are written back to front, but each letter in itself. Spoken lines are always read away from the mouth of the figure. In other words it's a kind of individual language. There wouldn't be much gained, for example, by looking at the picture in a mirror. The direction of the lines would then be wrong.

Why have you used these particular codes? Is it as if we were looking at Lewis Carroll's Alice after she had gone through the looking-glass?

I don't have the feeling that the figures ever went through a looking-glass. I have more the feeling that they were always on the other side. I wanted people to read what they say, but not to give the impression that the figures were speaking for the beholder. I wanted to oppose the service-character of text. Barbare Kruger or Jenny Holzer, Remy Zaug, even Lawrence Weiner, exploit the characteristic of advertising by formulating their statements as message. They need to be read quickly as slogans. That's not what I want. In my case, it's introverted speaking.

In your case, the beholder as reader is forced, if anything, into the role of a voyeur.

That's more like it. My figures say what they say in their own sphere, how they want it and when they want it, irrespective of whether or not there's anyone out there listening on our side. They act with each other in their own world, a parallel universe of white felt.

I think the text which you write in long ribbons across the surface also serves to define the space. The figures without the text would be somewhat disoriented and lost in the white of the felt.

Because the letters are read in sequence, the text banners have a strong movement impulse. Basically that's very comparable to the »big felt bows« we mentioned earlier. The reading defines the space. But here it is not so much the beholder's space as the suggested living-space of the figures. Because they speak »spatially«, they gain more physical freedom of movement for themselves.

Let's get back to the retablos. What is now the crucial new level that the retablos add? Is it the aspect that you now allow your figures a private life, so to speak?

I think I've set them free in two senses. On the formal plane, because I allow other artists to interpret them in their own style. On the content plane, because I allow them the intimacy of a private life: everyday conflicts, sexuality, differences of opinion, jealousy etc. – everything that belongs to that, and which was kept out of the felt pictures.

If one regards the skeleton as a metaphor, in its iconographical function as a vanitas metaphor it cannot possibly have a private life. That is excluded.

Yes, completely unthinkable. Only through the visualization of a possible everyday do the two figures become quasi-human. I suggest a private sphere behind the »professional occupation« of having to represent a timeless metaphor.

The style of painting, an – in the best sense of the word – naive presentation, further increases our liking for the protagonists.

It increases our liking for the figures and at the same time increases the paradox which is inevitably present in this picture system, because the pictorial world as presented is more complicated than it formally seems. If you pursue the logic of the retablos to its conclusion, they will lead you ad absurdum. There is something of Beckett about it. It's a tangle of levels of reality and impenetrable causalities.

Can you be more explicit?

It starts with the fact that I as artist have been hitherto the, let's say, responsible »creative instance«. »Mrs Bone« and »Mr Felt« are figures which I use as I like for my artistic work. I'm the boss in other words. Now, though, the responsibility is shifting. For what happens to the figures in their lives, Providence, Fate, in the form of Christian icons is responsible: Christ, Our Lady of Guadalupe, Santo Niño de Atocha, Saint Ramón Nonato etc. – they can all suddenly determine or change the course of things in the lives of my figures if they are only called upon for help sufficiently imploringly. So who really guides the fates of Mr and Mrs Felt and Bone?

That is a situation similar to that on the client side. There's a certain dispute as to authorship: nominally the panels of Sra. Huesa and/or Sr. Fieltro are commission, but in practice you are the one who pays the painter.

There is a retablo-immanent logic and an external logic. The problem is that these two levels cannot be kept neatly apart. That is ultimately what is so attractive about this game.

According to the dedicatory text, Mrs Bone and Mr Felt are the sponsors. Period. But then you come along and step on to the pictorial plane yourself and act as a sponsor in the medieval sense: he who pays for the painting also features in it! Can one see it thus?

One can see it from the perspective of the sponsor, but one could also say that I have secretly smuggled myself in as a voyeur to see what my figures are up to. After all, to start with I don't intervene in the action, Sra. Huesa and Sr. Fieltro don't seem to be aware of me at all – it's as though I were wearing camouflage.

That poses the question of whether you are on the same plane as the figures at all, or not perhaps on a parallel plane.

Possibly. But that doesn't make it any easier!

And finally, in order to make the confusion complete, your alter ego intervenes sporadically in the immanent action of the picture after all. Was that planned?

That was actually planned, albeit only at a later point in time. Alfredo Vilchis forestalled me on retablo #6 and then I was no longer reticent with this option.

How did that come about?

I had formulated retablo #6 as a kind of revenge for Sr. Fieltro's adultery in retablo #5, namely in such a way that Sra. Huesa received a visit at home from other felt men, strangers, who admired her beauty and also the fact that she thanked them for not letting her husband notice anything, because she would still do her housework in spite of these amours. Alfredo Vilchis then sought for a solution to the time problem – secret lovers plus housework – and without further ado chose me as the solution: *I stand there in other words and do the washing up!* That was the first boundary transgression in which I was actively involved in the action.

When did you first deliberately use this ploy?

In retablo #15. Here, Mrs Bone laconically gives thanks for being able to keep certain secrets to herself so well. »Secrets« means me – I embrace and kiss her in the cellar of her house!

That is the point at which the system undergoes a short circuit!

One way of putting it. I have an affair with one of my own artistic creations, at the expense of her husband, who is likewise an artistic creation of mine. And we are caught *in flagrante* by a retablero, who sits in Mexico painting us!

This kind of short circuit does not however lead to the implosion of the system.

Quite the contrary. It is what really dynamizes the system. It opens up in every conceivable direction. It learns to perpetuate itself by its own devices. This is a very splendid interpretation of the »autonomous« art-work, which releases itself from confusion into independence.

Your active intervention on the level of the action does not, however, automatically mean that you turn up in the text as well.

True. The caesura of referring to myself by name as »Sr. Marrón« – in other words »Mr Brown« [translator's note: the artist's name »Braun« is the German word for »brown«] – at the dedication level has so far happened only on the panels concerned with leisure activities: watching television together and holidaying in Acapulco (retablos #11, #12 and #16). There Sra. Huesa and Sr. Fieltro no longer appear plus me as silent voyeur, but we three as a group who spend our leisure time together.

Do you think that this »leisure-time level« is different from the actual retablo level? Is this in turn a fiction stage that leads further into the depth?

Let's put it this way: the system of the retablo project is obviously arranged in such a way that it permanently opens up some meta-levels or other. If you like, you could argue that the three figures »Bone«, »Felt« and »Braun« within the retablo project play a particular »professional« role and that they only appear as actual private persons on the »leisure-time level«: »Sr. Marrón«, who looks a little like Alexander Braun, »plays« within the project the role of the invisible voyeur, while in his leisure time he, quite privately, lounges around on the sofa or goes on holiday to Acapulco with his »colleagues« Felt and Bone.

And then in the end the great world event once again breaks over this little world in that you have your protagonists escape by the skin of their teeth from the inferno of 11 September or the tsunami.

This is ultimately based in the essence of the retablo genre. The scale of private happiness or unhappiness is always the whole world or the worst conceivable disaster in it. If you define your existence as the result of the benevolence of higher powers, then everything this side of death is as it were tantamount to a miracle: it is a miracle that you were not in New York on 11 September. It is a miracle that you weren't lying on a beach in Thailand when the tsunami came etc. And if something bad does happen to you nonetheless, then you can still be thankful that it wasn't even worse.