Montequin, Ernesto, “El extraño mundo de Miguelito” [The Strange World of Miguelito], Pagina/12, Suple. Radar weekly newspaper, Buenos Aires, November 15, 1998.

For quite some time, the world of Miguel Harte (who was born in Buenos Aires in 1961) was a hermetic and asphyxiating place formed by frigid seas of pictorial protoplasm (which, in reality, was Martilux, an industrial paint used to paint safes) from which emerged transparent bubbles inhabited by tiny homunculi with priapic protuberances and bulging eyes. They were minimal and enigmatic scenes that captured the eye (that "cannibal delicacy," as Bataille defined it in a happy distortion of a phrase by Stevenson) in its compulsive search without offering it any other reward than the furtive pleasure of its own indiscreet ferocity. Surrounded by his latest production, which is exhibited at the Ruth Benzacar Gallery until the end of November, Harte admits that the metaphorical overexposure of aspects of his own life in his previous works culminated in a kind of autobiographical claustrophobia. "I realized that there was no more development in those works. They were like a dead end. I was more expectant, more absorbed and fearful of advancing in other directions. Getting out of the autobiographical is a relief," he confesses.

Fortunately, Harte's world, like ours, is subject to sudden and capricious mutations, and in this case the metamorphosis gave rise to a desire to tell small stories starring a fantastic fauna, apparently escaped from the nightmares of a nineteenth-century naturalist. "Beneath the work I had been doing until now there was a narrator. It's something very strange for me, I don't know if I'm doing it well or badly, and I didn't think I was going to enjoy it. But it's coming out on its own. And I like it. Before I built small scenes that one didn't know very well what they meant. Perhaps the change is due to the fact that I had to move on to something else so that those scenes would assume the main role within the work."

Dangerous Relationships

Harte's first contacts with contemporary art anticipate the usual initiatory rites of every budding artist: at the end of the 1960s, in the midst of Di Tella euphoria, his father opened the Vignes gallery together with Julio Llinás, where artists such as Berni, Suárez, Roberto Jacoby, Oscar Bony, and Emilio Renart exhibited. Located on Florida street near Av.Corrientes, the gallery accommodated new conceptual experiences that were gestating at that time, and managed to survive two or three years without selling practically a single painting. "I remember going when I was six or seven years old. It was a huge space that didn't look like a gallery. Pablo Suárez exhibited a purely conceptual work (I think it was about ten thousand stacked newspapers) but I suppose at that time I couldn't appreciate it as art. The relationship with Pablo began at that time. Later my father became very close friends with him and they had other projects together, and he installed himself as a kind of uncle or second father," says Harte. Twenty years after that oblique and symbiotic kinship, to which Marcelo Pombo was added, a kind of rule of three emerged that irreversibly disrupted the opaque arithmetic of Argentine art in the early nineties. Harte recognizes that Suárez's is an influence barely contaminated by

anguish: "At first perhaps yes, because I felt that I had been following him a lot and it took me quite a bit to detach myself from him. Later I separated myself quite a bit from his image, and now I like to find things of Pablo (I refer to certain formal resolutions) or of other artists that I love very much, like Gordín or Pombo. When they appear I preserve them, I assimilate them... and I protect them," he adds.

An Epic in Miniature

In many of his latest works, Harte uses battle scenes between insects and other beings of monstrous anatomy that could be grouped under the title "Scenes of the Struggle for Survival." Suspicious of any defined intention and any univocal meaning, Harte clarifies that these battle scenes have no definite connotation or message, but simply function as episodes of a cruel and ambiguous narration that allows reconstructing the secret epic of a future prehistory. That nature in a state of fermentation (which Harte seems to have used after verifying that its expiration date has passed) captive in clots populated by polyps, indefinable organisms and minerals, overflows through gashes and perforations inflicted on the pristine surfaces bruised by the traces of an interior combat. (To achieve this effect, Harte uses a polyester paint applied with a blowtorch on a wooden support that he must sand endlessly until he manages to imprint contusions and dents on them).

Art and Artifice

Until now, Harte was not accustomed to titling his works. *El Jardin filosofico* [The philosophical garden] is a laborious exception that took him four months of work. On a small rocky but vaguely organic platform emerges a carnal tree, furrowed by veins and covered with tiny vaginas and penises. Its crown is formed by clusters of microscopic faces, plunged into an inscrutable ecstasy. At the foot of this tree opens a lake full of a viscous and metallized liquid, in whose center there is a whirlpool that dangerously attracts a little man leaning on the shore with a colorful insect shell. The iconographic filiation of the scene does not exhaust its enigma or its innocence, made strange by its allusions, since it is a celebratory appropriation of one of the myths of traditional alchemy: the legendary *Arbol de la vida* in which the masculine and feminine unite with all their binary and symbolic repertoire (the sun and the moon, gold and silver, etc.) and which guards among its roots a lake of mercury, a mythical substance whose possession grants knowledge of all the mysteries of the universe and also the ability to transmute metals into pure gold. Although Harte claims to have taken the alchemical image as a purely visual trigger for the work, the choice betrays his will to subject nature and its laws to the arbitrariness of artifice. These microcosms populated by carnal vegetations, minerals of visceral appearance and hyperreal and fantastic beings at the same time (Harte confesses that he often uses real insects, or parts of them, to create the bizarre anatomy of his characters) exude an elusive and indefinable mystery. The American poet Marianne Moore, with an unobjectionable oxymoron, unknowingly defined the effect produced by Harte's works when she declared that the poet's labor was to create imaginary gardens inhabited by real toads.