

The original piece in English follows the excerpted clip below from the Colombian monthly *El Malpensante*. The article is about a recently-deceased, well-known Colombian painter named Juan Antonio Roda.

# malpensante Breviario

## Roda: una apreciación

(en miniatura)

Por Matthew Fishbane

*Traducción de Julio Paredes*



Mi experiencia con el maestro Roda comenzó muy tarde en su vida, en 1994, cuando llegué a Bogotá para dictar clases en un colegio privado del norte. Yo tenía apenas veintidós años. Cómo terminé enredado en el fascinante mundo que Juan Antonio había creado por los lados de Suba, resulta irrelevante para este legado. Pero si de algo puedo dar fe, mejor quizás que varios que lo conocían desde hacía largo tiempo, es del incuestionable magnetismo de Roda. Su fuerza de gravedad era la de un cuerpo celeste, y al encontrarme lejos de la casa, caí, como tantos, bajo su órbita.

Y, bueno, saltemos al final: una tarde hizo mi retrato. Cuento con un registro preciso de esa tarde (además de la imagen tamaño pliego que ahora cuelga enmarcada en la casa de mi padre en Virginia), pues tan pronto como terminó la sesión volé a la casa para escribir todo lo que podía recordar. Parecía apenas justo que la retratada fuera recíproca.

Recuerdo una de esas típicas tardes encapotadas: las cortinas medio transparentes del estudio de Roda mantenían la cambiante luz de Bogotá en un tono sobrio. Recuerdo a Roda preparar el caballete y el papel, ordenando a un lado sus herramientas. Levantó las cejas hacia mí como si dijera "¿Ya?". Me acomodé en la silla y esperé más instrucciones. Echó una mirada, se quitó las gafas, se restregó los ojos con el borde de las manos, se frotó la cara, volvió a mirar. Me hizo mover hacia un lado. Como todos los grandes artistas, Roda era insuperable en el acto de mirar.

—Estás todo oscuro —comentó—. No veo sino sombras.

Levanté la cara. Con un ligero movimiento de la mano, fijó la inclinación que inadvertidamente le había dado yo a mi cabeza y pareció satisfecho.

*(continues...)*

## RODA: AN APPRECIATION (IN MINIATURE)

MY EXPERIENCE with Maestro Roda began very late in his life, in 1994, when I came to Bogotá to teach in a private school *del norte*. I was just twenty-two. How I ended up enmeshed in the madly charming world Juan Antonio had created on the side of Suba is entirely irrelevant to his legacy. But one thing I can attest to perhaps better than those who knew him for a long time is Roda's pure magnetism. His gravity was that of a celestial body, and on finding myself far from home, I fell, like many, into his orbit.

And, well, to skip to the ending: one afternoon, he drew my portrait. I have an account of that afternoon (besides the *pliego*-sized likeness hanging framed in my father's house in Virginia) because as soon as it was over, I raced home to record everything I could remember. It seemed only fair for the portraiture to be mutual.

I remember a typically overcast afternoon: translucent screens in Roda's studio kept Bogotá's shifting light demure. I remember Roda preparing an easel and paper, arranging his tools nearby. He raised his eyebrows at me as if to say, "When?" I sat in the chair, waited for more instructions. He looked, removed his glasses, rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands, massaged his face, looked again. He shooed me to one side. Like all great artists, Roda was excellent at looking.

"You're all dark," he said. "I see only shadows."

I lifted my face. With a tiny movement of his hand, he fixed the tilt I had inadvertently given to my head, and seemed satisfied.

He rubbed the page with his bare hand, swept across the edges like a blind man getting his bearings. I looked around the studio, from the long library of art books to the gifts from painter friends to the self-portraits and framed etchings. Pinned on the windowsill were unposed photographs of every grandchild. He caught me nervously glancing about under his intrusive, hard gaze. He would take a few moments just to look. I tried staring back at one eye, then the other, then a spot just over his forehead. He clicked his tongue: "I have to look at you."

Then he began to draw. I tried to watch which pencils he picked up and guess from the quality of the strokes what might be appearing. I could make out cross-hatchings, long lines, rubbing out; for dark marks and textures he gripped the easel to apply the necessary pressure. His legs were tucked under his chair, crossed. While he worked, his breathing was loud through his open mouth.

What did I think of? I remember my mind was still.

"Just say when you want to rest," he said to me.

"Okay."

"You want to rest now?"

"It is tiring," I said.

We stopped but I stayed on this side of the drawing, where I couldn't see it. I thought that if Roda had wanted me to look, he would have shown me. Coffee was brought and his wife Maria came from the house to visit. She had a distressing story to tell of friends being robbed at gunpoint. Roda clicked his tongue at the news: why had the victim resisted? Give away the handbag, he said. I think Maria understood this to mean it was time for her to leave his studio. On her way out she said, "Don't make faces, because," and finished the clause with a gesture at the easel.

Roda extended conversation across the long pauses for silent work. We talked about Lady Macbeth, the fate of Shostakovich, a Catalan friend who had married a Russian to learn Russian, with miserable consequences. He compared my face to the portraits on the sarcophagi of Roman-era Fayoum. He told me his family once had a player piano, and that he regretted never learning to play. He talked about seeing Wagner's *Tristram* in Barcelona when he was a boy. He told a story about creativity, and freedom: "I once presented a black-and-white painting for a collective show. The curator said to me, 'But Maestro, you who so much likes color, who *tiene tanto dominio*, why present *this*?' I told him it was like going up to a composer and saying, 'You're missing the trumpets.'" And for some reason, in his reverie, a French pun came to mind, that he let out with mirth: "*A Marseille on voit la mer de partout*."<sup>1</sup>

He moved the easel up, unscrewing metal braces, to work on my hands. Hands and face make a portrait, like a San Agustin statue.

And then, later, he said, "*Bueno, eso es, supongo*." He looked at what he had done. "You seem very *niño* to me." I stood up. "Sit down. I'm going to do some more."

He worked some more. The music ended. "That's enough. I'm done." He looked again. He pointed back to the seat. I obeyed.

"You could keep painting until the end of the world," he said, setting down the five tools he had used onto the stool next to him. "You get caught up in it. There's a point in portraiture that's dangerous. It becomes photographic; you want everything to be perfect, and the idea is to not lose the moment where the work is still alive. You can easily lose the roughness and vitality trying to make it look too much like what it is."

He said, "It always seems miraculous to me that there's any resemblance." I felt the same.

After refusing to let me pay, he asked if he might keep the portrait for a day. "Maria will want to see it finished."

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<sup>1</sup> In Marseille, one sees the sea from everywhere, or sees (punning) everywhere, shit.