

Chronicle of an Unfinished Painting

A friendship between two of Spain's best-known creators—director Víctor Erice and painter Antonio López—resulted in a film about art, time and the limits of empiricism.

BY TERRY BERNE

Ostensibly, Víctor Erice's mesmerizing film *Dream of Light* is a documentary about Spanish artist Antonio López's attempt to paint a quince tree which grows in the backyard of his Madrid home. But the nearly 2½-hour film, whose original Spanish title is *El Sol del Membrillo* (Sunlight on the Quince Tree), soon reveals itself as a profound, ultimately transforming cinematic meditation on the art and artifice of representation. One of Spain's most acclaimed filmmakers, Erice is director of just two other features: *Spirit of the Beehive* (1973), which brought him international recognition, and *The South* (1982), which confirmed him as a spinner of luminous, penetrating psychological portraits and a master manipulator of light and narrative rhythm.

Time and its unremitting flux are principal themes of *Dream of Light*, first shown in the U.S. at the 1992 New York Film Festival and again at the Film Forum in New York last spring (coinciding with its release on video). The film opens with López, who is a close friend of Erice's, stretching a canvas for what will become his failed attempt to paint the fruit-laden quince tree in the limpid but fleeting midmorning light of a late-September day. Amid a myriad of sounds from the neighborhood, which abuts the confluence of railway tracks emerging from a nearby train station, the camera follows López as he prepares to paint. He appraises the tree from different angles, then situates his easel before it. He traces a line in white paint along the wall

beyond the leaves, then drops a plumb from a cord stretched between two metal poles posted on either side of the tree. Using a ruler he divides the canvas into quadrants, then presses a pair of nails into the ground to mark the exact position of his feet. Finally, he paints a series of vertical and horizontal white marks on the pendant fruit itself, as well as on various leaves and branches of the tree.

All this careful groundwork serves to delineate and frame the tree, to ready it for perspectival treatment. These preliminaries also alert us that the painting will be executed within an explicit conceptual framework (López works in a realist tradition with deep Spanish roots [see *A.i.A.*, Oct. '93]). We are made immediately aware that this is going to be a rationalist enterprise, based on empiricist precepts, and partaking as much of science as of any presupposed notions of artistic intuition suggested by the romantic image of an artist poised before a tree. The line between nature and culture could not be drawn more heavily, though neither



Artist Antonio López painting his backyard quince tree in Víctor Erice's documentary *Dream of Light*. Photos courtesy Rosebud Films, Madrid.

could the links with earlier painters from Leonardo to Velázquez.

Although Erice's seemingly neutral camera is not permitted to occupy the same space as either the easel or the painter's eye, through a sequence of close-ups of the paint-daubed tree and of López's apparatus, the director cleverly allows us to mentally situate ourselves in the painter's place. This rapidly establishes the intimate relationship between screen and canvas, viewer and artist, which makes *Dream of Light* so miraculous, and ultimately confers on the film a status beyond that of a mere documentary.

If López's task is to capture on canvas the ephemeral beauty of his quince tree bathed in the morning light of late summer/early autumn, Erice's is to accompany him in the enterprise. Though we are treated to shots of the tree and hear the wind sizzle in its leaves, the tree itself is always proffered as a passive object of regard. The film's focus is on López's stance before the quince tree and the slow accretion of pictorial evidence that the canvas reveals. While López paints, he continues to mark the leaves and fruit with white hyphens and crosses, later revealed as attempts to trace the downward movement of the foliage under the increased weight of the maturing fruit. Changing light, we learn, is not the only hindrance to López's realist project.

As days and then weeks pass, we partake of the mundane activities of life in the López household: a trio of Polish masons tear down, then rebuild, walls; López's wife (who is also the film's producer) supervises the renovations and concentrates on her own artistic endeavors; a younger artist paints in an upper studio; friends drop by; López listens to news of the Gulf War on the radio; clouds appear in the sky and the weather grows cooler. We are also offered vignettes of the daily cycles in the



The canopy-covered quince tree and López's easels.

world outside the patio wall: the coming and going of trains, the darkening sky over the city, the shifting blue shadows of televisions in nearby apartments at night. The random echoes of the city—voices of children, rumbling trains, accelerating motorcycles—play an important part in Erice's evocation of the sensual. Along with lingering shots of rooms, chairs, tabletops and other everyday objects, they serve to desacralize the enterprise at the film's center and to suggest that art here is inserted into a matrix of quotidian activities that belie all moral or esthetic hierarchies.

A visit from Enrique Gran, a painter friend of López's, introduces a note of irony and makes explicit the film's elegiac tone. While López continues to work at his easel, the two reminisce about art school, sing an old song and evoke the years of their friendship. A leitmotif in their conversation is Gran's search for a lost snapshot of the two artists taken the day they met at Madrid's Escuela de Bellas Artes.

When unseasonably stormy weather arrives, the seemingly indefatigable López mounts a canopy over the tree so he can continue painting. But after a month of work, and about two-thirds of the way through the film, the relentless rain and changing light lead him to abandon the canvas. Undeterred, he immediately begins a pencil drawing from the same perspective. The artist persists in this second medium, but the foliage sags further, the fruit begins to drop. It becomes evident that the original radiance of late summer, when he began, has long since disappeared. Eventually, López is

forced to submit to the tree's very vitality. At one point, he explains to a visitor that the process of painting the tree, of being next to it for an hour every day, is more important to him than the resulting work. Finally, he dismounts the canopy, collects his things and withdraws, leaving the tree suddenly isolated and exposed to the torrential rain, an emblem of modest and fugitive fulgor, kindred to the solitary, iconic trees of Beckett's *Godot* or Tarkovsky's *Sacrifice*.

The film ends with López recounting the dream of his which inspired Erice to make the film, while the camera, until now an unobtrusive witness, is shown in profile beside the tree where before the painter had stood. In his dream, López sees a quince tree growing beside the house where he was born. Feeling that he himself is planted, treelike, in the muddy earth, he watches stupefied as the fruit rots on the branches and an eerie light bathes the scene. Through a striking, multiseason time-lapse sequence, Erice shows us the fallen fruit, still marked by López's ciphers, as it desiccates and decays. With the arrival of spring, the tree revives and new buds appear among its leaves.

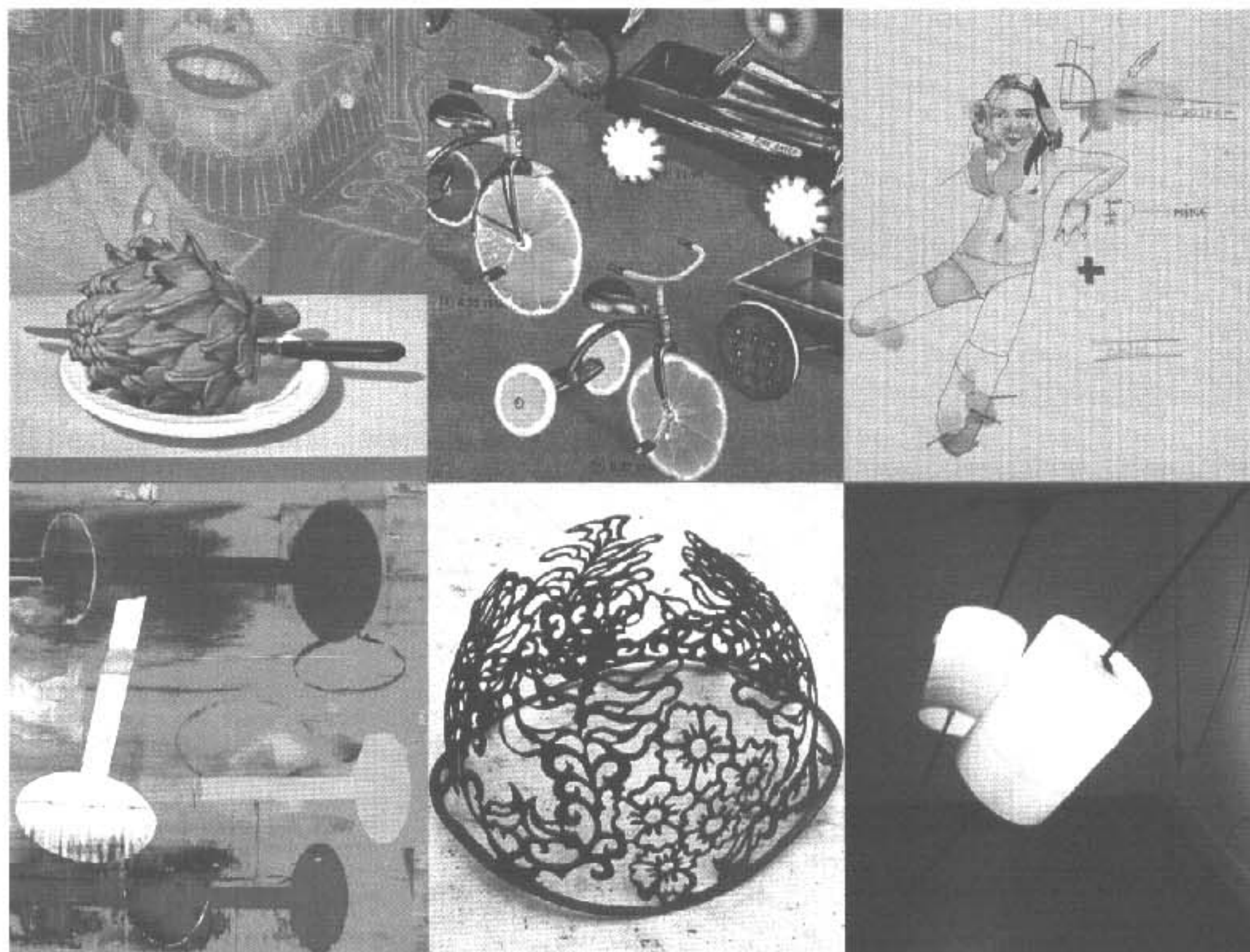
Dream of Light is fundamentally a tale about the impossibility of representing nature through art, at least when nature is approached from the analytic perspective which has reigned in much of Western art since the Renaissance. It subtly reveals the lacunae that lie hidden at the base of empiricism, the insurmountable distance between the eye of the artist and the ineluctable dynamism of nature. For all his sincerity and patience, his skill and cleverness, in the end López has to aban-

The film's focus is on López as he paints a quince tree bathed in morning light of late summer and early autumn, and on the slow accretion of pictorial evidence that his canvas reveals.

don the task of capturing the light and life of his tree. But his attempt is also a compelling metaphor for something much wider—our ultimate failure to truly embrace or comprehend nature, be it through science or through art. One can't help wondering how a classical Chinese painter might have depicted this same tree, or how van Gogh or Mondrian, to name two artists whose paintings of trees marked their epochs, might have approached López's quince tree. Although the film clearly points to the imperviousness of time to all rationalist attempts to detain it or to capture its evanescence, *Dream of Light* also suggests that one of the results of persisting to do so may be a kind of wisdom. □

Dream of Light (El Sol del Membrillo) was directed by Victor Erice from an original idea by Erice and Antonio López, and was produced by Maria Moreno. It was shown at the Film Forum in New York (May 3-16) and is distributed on video by Facets Multi-Media, Chicago.

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