

# The new romantic

Milo Lockett, a painter based in Chaco, talks about how he became a bit of a sensation

BY ANA LAURA CARUSO  
PHOTO: JEFFREY

Milo Lockett is sitting on a yellow couch at the Teresa Anchorena art gallery in Palermo neighbourhood, where his paintings are on permanent exhibition. He is a youthful 40, runs an easy smile, dresses in jeans, and wears a checkered shirt which doesn't fully cover his arms — they're full of tattoos. He orders strong coffee, lights a cigarette. A group of tourists assembles to watch his work at the back of the gallery; their voices are heard all over. "Energy, these paintings have energy," they say.

As a painter, Lockett's most outstanding feature is simplicity. His work resembles the inner child who lives inside every adult as well as the essence of primitive painting, when art was a representational ritual aimed at understanding the world. Two years ago, Milo Lockett received the 'up-and-coming' painting award at ArteBA. He has other records to his credit at that same art fair: best-selling painter in 2006 and 2007. These days, his work is being exhibited at the Teresa Anchorena gallery and at the Centro Cultural Borges in downtown Buenos Aires.

Suddenly, it seems, Lockett has become the perfect example of new art trends. How does the artist feel about that?

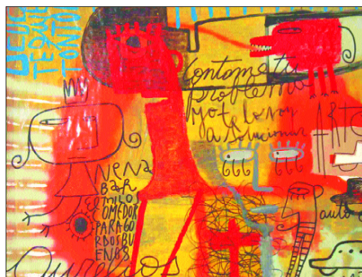
"I think people like my paintings because they are not pretentious or too unconventional," he says after a longish pause. "Critics have said that my work has become fashionable and that my drawings sell because they are nice. In any case, I don't want it to be like this."

Lockett talks about his work with great modesty and a sense of vocation. He's not sure he wants the extra pressure of fame. "I don't want to become fashionable; I'd like to be something else in the future."

Born in Chaco, Lockett spent ten years on his art. His work has been displayed in several local and foreign exhibitions in North America and Europe. The artist, however, has not travelled abroad yet. Before deciding to become a painter, Lockett used to run pubs in his native Chaco; he also managed shops linked to the textile industry. In 2001, when Argentina sank into one of its worst socioeconomic crisis ever, Lockett's business went bankrupt. That's when he changed his mind about business and about art.

"I worked all my life, since I was a child. In 2001, I perceived that something was about to change. I had invested and lost a lot of money. The country was falling apart and, in the middle of that chaos, I organized an exhibition, it went really well. Then, all of a sudden, I decided to put an end to my textile business. It was a drastic decision, but I needed a change of life. That's the way I am. When I want something, I just go for it."

No longer a businessman, he is still an inspired joker today, dreamy and dreamy; cheerful in one



Work by Milo Lockett.

painting, melancholy in another. Lockett makes his home in Chaco with wife and ten-year-old daughter. "My paintings are raffled at art fairs in the province," he says. "There is a butcher's shop with this painting of a cow I did once, hanging from the wall. I love that kind of stuff. My private story is romantic because I come from a small town. People used to see me as a businessman. No-one thought that I would end up as a painter."

## SOCIAL WORK

Regardless of who he is, Lockett has a magnetic attraction partly due to his social work in Chaco, where he runs art workshops for needy children and indigenous people. The son of a restless father, a middle-class businessman, Lockett says he was nurtured on charity work.

"My grandparents came to Argentina from Ireland, with no possessions to speak of; they just came to work the land. My father taught us to share and not to flaunt the wealth we later acquired. We were never rich, but my family was very generous anyway. If we had three pairs of sneakers, he'd tell us to give one away."

During his childhood, this was his first experience of social awareness. But a life-changing event was in the works; it happened in his teens, and it made him realize he had to engage seriously in social work.

"I had an accident when I was young and immature," he says, amused. "I got home a bit drunk one night. I was supposed to go on holidays with my friends the next morning. I thought I would never be able to wake up, so I decided to sleep on the roof," he says. "Thing is, I fell off from the roof onto the street and broke my back. I spent one hundred and twenty days in hospital. It was a nightmare. Next to me there was a woman from the Wichí indigenous community. I got so intrigued that after recovering I went on a trip across Chaco. That was my first 'awakening,' because I knew that, someday, I would be able to help people."

As a painter, he financed his own

trips during his earliest period. That was until he gained support from the government, during (current Culture Minister) José Nun's term in office. "It's difficult to design a project when no budget is available. Besides, you may do a lot of planning in advance, but when you get to Chaco, you discover that things are far different from what you expected to see. You either have no raw materials to work with, or people are not interested," he says. "I don't like to force anyone into the workshops. My main goal is to try to make kids and adults understand that anyone can paint, and let them experience new sensations. I like it when children get their clothes stained with paint."

## AS A PAINTER, LOCKETT'S MOST OUTSTANDING FEATURE IS SIMPLICITY.

when they are no longer neat and tidy. I think it gives them great confidence."

## ART AND POLITICS

Even if committed to social work, Lockett says his ties with politics are not good. "I'm always standing on the opposite corner, it makes me think better," he says. "I was invited to (the coastal resort of) Mar del Plata a month ago to participate in a forum about 'art against discrimination.' I was on the panel of speakers. The main problem in Chaco, I said, is that it is almost always shown as a deprived corner of the world with no resources at all. It seems as if we were condemned to be beggars forever. And it's not like that at all." He pauses at this point.

"I wonder why they only care to show the province when it's flooded, instead of, for example, showing a doctor getting deep into the forest everyday to give medical aid to the population. Take last year, for instance. On television you could see hundreds of trucks from Buenos Aires, all carrying water bottles for the population. The bottles ended up on supermarket shelves, but no-one talked about that — we are all accomplices. I need to believe that something better is on its way, because my province needs a change," he



"I'm not just a fad," says Milo Lockett.

says. "Educational problems result in schools turning out irresponsible, unethical professionals. It's not right to make money at any price. Besides, when you help someone, you must fully commit to it. Partial commitment is not enough."

## POINT AND LINE TO PLANE

Lockett's paintings are full of colourful figures and purposely naïf words or phrases that often invite viewers to think: how did he get there? He explains a little timidly, "I started including sentences on paintings to fool around with some friends who are highly educated. I scribble anything from recipes to corny words, such as 'girl', 'sweet', and 'friend'."

We never think about the real meaning of these words. Think of the world 'love,' for example. Sometimes, we are not aware of what it means. I'm proud of having rediscovered the meaning of certain expressions. This is the reason why my paintings are untitled. I like people to give them the name they want."

Although he started painting as a child and participated in a few workshops and contests, Lockett

is, by and large, a self-taught artist. "The learning process is everlasting. You may attend the best school of art, but that won't make you the greatest artist," he says. Lockett's favourite artist is Pablo Picasso. He also admires Argentine artist Antonio Berni, and mentions contemporary painter Diana Alsenberg as a strong influence on him.

Art changed Milo Lockett's life by allowing him to sense things in a different way. "Art can, indeed, change the world," he says. Such a romantic idea arose after all the ups and downs of fortune. "I am a good loser because I'm always eager to go for more. I'd like to be a doctor, a teacher... I would like to be forever young. I am fussy and I live in a state of permanent chaos. So when I play, I never play it safe, I risk it all. If you start a project thinking you'll only be one more in the crowd, you won't get anywhere. But if you tell yourself, 'I'm going to be the best,' well, that's different," he says with a confident smile.

Centro Cultural Borges. Sala Berni. Viamonte corner San Martín April 10 to 21. Galería Teresa Anchorena. Permanent exhibition. Costa Rica 4818.

## Faena awards prize

### The Faena Group has announced

the winners of the F Prize to the Arts. An international jury, made up Jessica Morgan, Carlos Basualdo and Okwui Enwezor, had to choose between 350 projects sent in by artists from thirteen Latin American countries.

First prize, 100,000 pesos, went to Wilfredo Prieto (born 1978) from Cuba. Uruguay's Martín Sastre (born 1976) was the runner-up and will receive 50,000 pesos.

Prieto's project is titled *Opio* (Opium) and is basically an intervention: mundane objects will be slightly modified, thus gaining special momentum and raising questions. This Cuban artist has an impressive curriculum; his work was shown at the last Venice Biennale for example, but this is his first project in Argentina.

Martín Sastre meanwhile is no unknown quantity here, for example his very funny video (the Rose Conspiracy) about Princess Diana living anonymously in a marginal neighbourhood in Montevideo was shown during the Ushuaia Biennale. His project for the Los Molinos building is titled: *Qué pretende Ud. de mí* (What do you want from me), a famous phrase of Argentina's film star Isabel "Coca" Sarli. Through her the serious side of Argentine reality and its economic woes will be addressed, but knowing Sastre it will surely be extremely funny as well.

Both projects will be presented next year, respectively in March and May, in the Los Molinos building, part of the Faena Art District in Puerto Madero.

MG