

# proof

## 1 GETTING TO EXPRESSIONISM, 1959–1961

OCTOBER 1959 BEGAN INAUSPICIOUSLY in Buenos Aires. Economy and labor minister Álvaro Alsogaray wore a somber face as he unveiled the national budget for the coming fiscal year. The annual deficit would amount to 38.5 billion pesos, out of a total budget of 209 billion. Most of that deficit came from the maintenance of inefficient state enterprises created during the Peronist regime. Because so few Argentines had the confidence to buy government bonds, he would have to go to the world's financial capitals, hat in hand, to make up the balance through borrowing. "The country cannot continue to pay public employees with money borrowed from abroad," he admonished the national Congress. "When a private business mismanages its funds, it goes broke, and the reputation of its leadership is tarnished. But when a public company is incompetent or commits excesses, the losses are hidden and the entire country pays,"

the lecture continued.<sup>1</sup> Soon he left for New York City, seat of the World Bank, to see what could be done.

But despite increasingly refulgent spring weather, October was generally a difficult month for Argentines in the years following the 1955 military coup that had toppled President Juan Perón before proscribing him and his party. October 17 was the anniversary of his 1945 ascent to power, and the masses who still followed the deposed general plotted protests and demonstrations, always in the face of official prohibitions. In 1959 they seemed to be planning something larger, perhaps including violence. In a series of raids in the preceding week the police and the military had seized several caches of firearms and explosives, including machine guns, TNT, and bomb-making equipment. They also arrested several persons, most of them former laborers at a state-owned meat packing plant that had been the target of a bitter and bloody strike earlier in the year.<sup>2</sup> On the actual anniversary, thousands of uniformed officers patrolled the streets; they arrested three hundred people who defied the ban by chanting slogans in honor of the “fugitive tyrant,” as the newspapers generally called Perón because mere mention of his name was also forbidden.<sup>3</sup> Such searches, bans, and arrests were all legal under the State of Siege that the elected government of President Arturo Frondizi had declared eleven months earlier in response to a violent strike by oil workers.

During the days before the tense Peronist anniversary, Minister Alsogaray returned from the United States bearing good news: credit would likely be forthcoming. “Matters are proceeding on a good path,” he reported. “There will not be a problem financing our plan for next year. Everything depends on the strength of the effort that we will bring to sustaining the struggle we have begun.”<sup>4</sup> The second year of the austerity plan would be harder than the first, but only the government would feel it, he said, and not the people. Yet in the succeeding days the government quietly made two somewhat curious announcements that illustrated the price of the bailout: the Communist party would be banned, despite the fact that it had almost no adherents; and the Republic of South Vietnam would be recognized.

Culturally, Buenos Aires bubbled along in spite of the political and economic machinations. The city welcomed the National Ballet of Cuba with its star dancer Alicia Alonso. A play about Argentina’s past political corruption, *Un guapo del 1900* (A Thug from 1900), opened at the house of Francisco Petrone’s troupe. *El candidato* (The Candidate), a film that allegorically but boldly exposed the aristocracy’s weakness in the face of the

Peronist machine, was playing at the city's largest theater, the Gran Rex. The International Strip-Tease Festival was in its second week at Cine Retiro downtown, though the country's morality laws kept it rather chaste.

Coincident with these events, Luis Felipe Noé opened his first solo exhibition of paintings at Galería Witcomb. Both major dailies sent critics to cover the show. One called Noé's paintings "singularly dramatic." The other noted influences from the spontaneous methods of Informalism. But the review focused on Noé's use of a "semi-figurative language" to create "images that might present themselves in our darkest dreams," which might be "appropriate to the reading of certain strange tales by Poe."<sup>5</sup> The works in this exhibition unfortunately do not survive, but the show is important for another reason: there Noé met two of the other future members of Nueva Figuración, Rómulo Macció and Jorge de la Vega; he also met Alberto Greco, a nonmember of the group who strongly influenced its early course.

Luis Felipe Noé (1933– ) was the best-trained of the four artists of Nueva Figuración and also the movement's intellectual leader. Born in Buenos Aires, he grew up in a culturally accomplished environment. His father had been editor of the cultural magazine *Nosotros* and the programming chair of Amigos del Arte, an important exhibition society. Trained as a lawyer, the elder Noé counted celebrated artists Pedro Figari and Emilio Pettoruti among his clients; he also managed a family business in hatmaking. Politically he was staunchly anti-Peronist; shortly after Perón's fall he had edited the report of the official investigation that accused the regime of corruption and human rights abuses.<sup>6</sup> Luis Felipe followed his father to law school, but he also studied painting privately on the side for a year and a half under National Academy teacher Horacio Butler. (A member of the so-called "Paris Group" that included Alfredo Bigatti and Raquel Forner, Butler painted in an idiosyncratic Fauvist-Cubist style that left little trace on his student.) The 1955 fall of Perón opened new opportunities in journalism, and Noé left law school before finishing the degree in order to write art criticism at *El Mundo*. He later worked at *La Razón* and at *La Prensa*, in both cases as a copy editor of political news.

At the opening of his first exhibition Noé also had a fateful meeting with his former teacher that illustrates the stylistic distance between the two. Noé recalled that Butler told him at the opening, "You have given me a great lesson. Doing the exact opposite of what I taught you in painting has led you to excellent results."<sup>7</sup> Among the four artists, Noé's path to expressionism was the shortest. *Júpiter tonante* (fig. 1.1) is a dark and murky work

from 1960, created with oil paint, enamel, shoe polish, furniture polish, and floor wax. These materials are shoved, spattered, scraped, and thrown, leaving a surface that surges with obscure energy. The principal figure actually occupies a negative space, as the area surrounding it is more heavily worked. A woman's face with eyes closed sits on the figure's right shoulder, turned on its side, above curving forms suggesting a body. She could be one of Jupiter's conquests. Jupiter raises a sword in triumph as he dances over a skull, but the exaggerated and self-satisfied pose introduces a note of sarcasm. He also wears the traditional pointed jester's cap, showing that we need not take him seriously. Jupiter is of course the all-powerful thunderer in Greco-Roman mythology, but Noé has here made him foolish and pretentious as he strides through the elemental sludge. Noé's paintings in the years 1960–61 often took up the theme of power and its exercise. Another work from 1960 shows a confusion of dangling figures with the title *Short History of Human Indulgence*. One from the following year shows a figure on horseback and two others in shadows, with the title *Theory and Practice of Power*.

Noé's skepticism probably sprang from a sense of disillusionment about the political evolution of Argentina. He wrote that after the election of Frondizi in 1958, "In the intellectual and artistic environment, all was effervescence, though it was probably more emotional than rational. Even the nihilists were optimists. It seemed that we had a future in our country."<sup>8</sup> Frondizi's Radical party won a clear mandate with 52 percent of the popular vote, well ahead of the 33 percent of its nearest rival. But soon the new president was forced to backtrack and renege on his promises. Three months after taking office, he opened the country's oil resources to foreign companies. While this helped to secure Argentina's self-sufficiency in petroleum, it also set off a wave of strikes in the Peronist-dominated unions. In response the president imposed the State of Siege before the end of 1958. In early 1959 his attempt to privatize a city-owned meat packing plant led to a strike that soon went nationwide as several allied unions joined the walkout. The government pronounced the action a "revolutionary strike" and broke it with troops, tanks, and six hundred arrests.

In mid-June the newspaper *La Nación* published documents that it said proved Frondizi's victory had been possible only through secret alliance with the exiled Juan Perón. The former dictator had delivered the millions of votes of his followers to Frondizi in exchange for certain commitments.



Figure 1.1. Luis Felipe Noé, *Júpiter tonante* (Thundering Jupiter), 1960. Mixed media on canvas, 78¾" × 59". Private collection.