

An Enchanting Journey: The Story of Alfredo Arreguin **By Allana Joy Bourne, Seattle, Washington**

TO stand before an Alfredo Arreguin painting is to feel once again the depths of emotion a true artist can bring out. Daring eyes, at first hidden, suddenly look directly and powerfully at you. Luscious, juicy berries twinkle like ripe stars. Beautiful women at first hide in lush forests, and then boldly bare their breasts. The more you stare, the more you see. And the more you realize there is left to see. And to find.

Internationally renowned, and a friend of the SGI, Alfredo Arreguin is a man you want to say creates a world of magic; but only through years and years of disciplined effort in an artist's studio. Now he shares that studio in his modest home with the other two artists in his family—his wife and daughter.

Some art critics have called his art, "baroque." *Art in America* profiled him in 1993 and said, "It's when pattern is ignited by figure—mythical, political or religious—that Arreguin comes into his own." His art is exact and exacting. So rich in color that *The Seattle Times* stated in 1996: "Nobody uses color like Arreguin: hot, warm and cool—all at once." So rich in detail that the National Academy of Sciences honored him with his own retrospective in January 1996, in Washington, D.C. The Academy more recently published *Biodiversity II: Understanding and Protecting our Biological Resources*, with a copy of his triptych, "Tree of Life," on its cover. A description of this painting in the exhibition brochure states that the actual six-by- twelve-foot painting "draws the viewer into an astonishing realization: beneath the surface, in each shape and design, teeming life pulsates with complex, hidden vitality." And yet, so childlike, a portion of it was also published in *Ranger Rick* magazine in October 1997. Arreguin, a man who loves children, was most pleased by this.

In 1992, an exhibition of his works at the Tacoma Art Museum was called "Viva la Vida: Paintings by Alfredo Arreguin," and his friend, the poet Tess Gallagher, wrote the program notes. "It is the capacity of our eyes to feast that Arreguin celebrates most," she wrote. President Ikeda, in his recent dialogue on art with the youth division, states: "With a painting, we start by looking. Too many people ... are so intent on analyzing a piece of art that they don't really see it." Seeing is what an Arreguin work is all about. Once you start, you continuously see something new.

Arreguin was very young when he first felt art's pull— he credits his artistic mom. At 9 years old, his grandfather, seeing his drawings, took him to study at Morelia Bellas Artes Academy in Morelia, Mexico, his birthplace. It was, as Alfredo says, a "fantastic school of the fine arts," and he was its youngest student. There had never been a child like him enrolled there before. Not really being serious about art at that age, however, he mostly liked painting mustaches on other artists' pretentious portraits. Looking at him now, it's easy to see him as an impish, even a wild-hearted, youth filled with an undeniable explosive energy.

His father, who had plans to turn him into an architect, took him later to Mexico

City, but, by age 19, Alfredo took off for Acapulco. Seeking to learn English, he met an American family there and offered to take them around and show them the sights. They were from Seattle, Washington. They fell in love with Alfredo, and brought him back with them to the United States. The year was 1959.

Alfredo started attending the University of Washington to become something his father wanted when he was called up for the Korean War. After the war (where he says he spent thirteen months visiting Buddhist temples), he went back to the University of Washington, and having learned by then to speak excellent English, went on to get a master's degree in art. He met the noted sculptor George Tsutakawa, who became his mentor. And he made a commitment to become a full-time artist, which he has been ever since.

Alfredo's art is visually stimulating and disturbing at the same time. You cannot remain immune. You cannot remain passive. As the Academy's brochure further says: "Arreguin paints ... with the unbridled enthusiasm of a child fascinated with every detail and willing to believe in forces and powers that are sensed but unseen. These apparitions appear in his paintings in direct proportion to the viewer's willingness to believe." His strongest influences were not other well-known Mexican artists so much as the people's art of Mexico: colonial Mexican tiles, indigenous textiles, baroque church facades. His grandfather took him to the market as a child and the embroidery and the pottery captured his imagination. Those patterns are reflected in his paintings, especially the triptychs like "Tree of Life," and "Sueno (Dream: Eve before Adam)," which was purchased by the Smithsonian in 1995 (and which they regard as one of the seven most important acquisitions from among 600 works of art collected by the museum that year.)

Other influences include Eastern and Near Eastern sources "as diverse as the stenciled kimono or the intricately chased sword hilt.... The dialogues of these patterns as Arreguin uses them in concert causes all history to become an instantaneous present..." states Tess Gallagher in her 1992 program notes. She also includes this description of the triptych, "Sueno":

Especially in this triptych I am aware of how pattern induces a certain state of tranquillity, a spiritual balance, in which it is possible again to believe in what is before us. Arreguin has made the jungle paradise more real than life, so that it has enough excess to be true—this sinless effulgence of breasts and butterflies, parrots and red berries, baboons and iguana, tendrils and primordial eyes emerging from indigo leaves.

Alfredo's uncle invited him back to Mexico to exhibit in 1992. "I was very worried," Arreguin says, "when I returned to Mexico thirty years later, how my fellow Mexicans would view my art. Americans have accepted me as an artist, but would Mexico?" It was then he realized, although living in the United States all these years, he had actually tapped into the deepest cultural well of his own country. People's reaction to the exhibit was emotional. "Other artists told me," he said, "the youth of Mexico are distracted by art which has no meaning and no connection to the culture. Your paintings, they said, even though painted in the United States, bring

out the deepest feelings of our culture.” In 1997, he was awarded the “Ohtli” award (signifying, “the straight path, the one that will take you to the realization of your destiny”) by the Government of Mexico. This honor is given to Mexican-Americans who work consistently for the benefit of their communities. It was at this ceremony that his SGI friend, Jose Cifuentes, decided to introduce Alfredo Arreguin to the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin and the writings of Daisaku Ikeda. Alfredo immediately responded, wanting to know more.

Echoing President Ikeda’s words that “true art, true culture, strives to enrich the individual and encourage self-expression,” Alfredo declares that art exists to enrich the culture, not to make money. His deep feeling for life and his universality outside the narrow confines of one cultural influence are reflected in his collaborations with other artists. “I never expect the emotion that people get from my paintings,” he concludes. “But when I see people in tears, I realize it anew.” He and Tess Gallagher created a card in 1986 using her poem, “Refusing Silence,” and his triptych, “Shilshole,” to speak out against the buildup of nuclear weapons worldwide. It is this personal history that makes him very interested in the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism and the desire to create a peaceful world.

Indeed, just as President Ikeda says that “public art museums were born when the people insisted that they, too, had a right to have access to the great works of art,” his own success, Arreguin says, is due to museum exposure, not to art sales in galleries.

I gave Alfredo a copy of President Ikeda’s dialogue on art after our initial interview. When I asked him later what he thought of it, he joyously declared: “Everything he said is what I have been doing and saying all my life! And it’s very wonderful how President Ikeda expresses himself, very simply and beautifully.”

“Each painting is like your own child,” Alfredo continued. “If you sell it at all, you must first make sure it is going to be well taken care of.” He has exhibited all over the world, and in 1997, he was asked to contribute a piece (“Frida’s Messengers,” a presentation of Frida Kahlo) to the Seattle–Nagoya International Print Exhibit in Nagoya, Japan.

Coming full circle, Alfredo’s father attended the National Academy of Sciences opening in 1996, coincidentally his 90th birthday, and, seeing the scope of his son’s work, was moved to tears. “Please forgive me, son,” Alfredo relates his father’s words at that time. “I thought you were just fooling around all these years, until I heard you were exhibited in the Smithsonian.” His greatest success, he further states, is that his father admires his work, and has created a special gallery in his home to display it.

When meeting a true artist, one can never remain objective, or untouched. My experience in visiting Alfredo Arreguin’s home and interviewing him for this article was to realize President Ikeda’s point in the deepest part of my own life when he says: “People who appreciate art and culture are important. Truly cultured people are those who value peace and lead others to a world of beauty, hope and a bright tomorrow. For that reason, nurturing and spreading an appreciation for art and culture are crucial toward creating peace.” □