

Francisco Infante

What is this a photograph of, you are probably asking yourself. It is a nature scene, obviously, but is it a tropical scene (rippling water on the ocean, with the beach in the background) or a winter scene (a frozen lake)? You finally decide that it is probably a winter scene.

But what is this semi-circular thing that is above the lake? It is mirrored on one side, but on the far right tip you can see its “backside”—apparently, it is made of wood construction. It seems to be floating in air, barely touching the lake beneath it, although if you look closely you can see the wires that are holding it.

Your initial assumption is probably also that this semi-circular mirror is very large, framing a large expanse of the frozen lake. But then you remember that the camera can play tricks with scale, so perhaps the mirrored object is only an inch long, or even less, and it is the camera perspective that makes it look much larger.

All in all, it seems strange and slightly disorienting, although quite beautiful.

The artist who took this photograph is Francisco Infante (pronounced “In-fahn’- tay”). Despite his Spanish name, Infante (b. 1943) was one of the leading “unofficial” artists in Russia during Soviet times. The “unofficial” artists did not create art work in the government-mandated “Social Realist” style. Rather, the art work they created was for themselves and their close friends. The Soviet government considered this work subversive and, therefore, the artists had to keep much of it hidden from public view.

During the 1960s, Infante was part of the artistic group “Dvizhenie” (meaning “Movement” in Russian), and movement is central to much of Infante’s work. Infante has said that all of his works are based on his “kinetic attitude to the world”: in other words, on the artist’s belief that nothing in life is ever static. Infante is continually aware that life consists of constant movement: everything moves; time as well as objects.

The question facing him, though, was how to depict “movement” in an art object. In the 1960s, while a member of Dvizhenie, Infante worked on a series of kinetic sculptures (sculptures that have moving parts). Infante also worked on paintings that did not physically move, but that depicted movement. For example, in the mid 1960s and early 1970s, he painted a series of spirals, which he thought of as depicting the path of a dot of light as it strove to simultaneously move vertically and horizontally. Infante also began to experiment with photography, since it can capture and “freeze” a moment in time.

In addition to being fascinated by movement, Infante also wanted to explore the relationship between humans and the natural world. We humans are certainly part of nature (our bodies consist of natural compounds), but we are also somehow separate from nature. Similarly, the things we build come from nature—even the most seemingly “unnatural” things, such as steel and shining mirrors, are constructed from natural materials. But once constructed, these objects separate themselves from nature. Technology has been particularly important to Infante because it takes movement and constructed objects into an ethereal dimension, and he has developed detailed plans for sculptures in space and other “futurological” designs.

In the 1970s, Infante concluded that his earlier work did not adequately capture the complexity of the world around him. As a result, Infante began to work almost exclusively by briefly placing an object that he had made (usually a geometric object) into the natural environment in such a way that it confuses the viewer as to what is “real” (i.e., part of the natural environment) and what is not.

Infante captures this art event—this mystery, this interaction of human and nature—through a photograph that he calls an “artefact.” Infante describes the artefact as “the constructed, playful interchange between an art object and nature” and says that it shows “something which cannot be, but is in some mysterious way occurring.” Infante views the artefact as the embodiment of the mystery of the universe and our relation to it.

The artefact shown on this card provides a good example of the mystery that Infante is trying to achieve: it captures and holds a fleeting moment of time, it unites the natural and technological worlds, it seems both playful and deeply spiritual, and, because of the ambiguity about the size of the mirror, it unites the microscopic and the infinite.

Of the leading figures in the Russian “unofficial” art movement, Infante is perhaps the one who works most consciously in the tradition of the Russian Suprematists and Constructivists of the early 20th Century. Like them, Infante’s work centers around such themes as movement, chance, paradox, technology, and the relationship of nature and human kind. Like those early 20th Century artists, Infante is also attempting to collapse the infinite into a finite space: to try to depict in a single art object infinity in all of its “unobtainableness.” This is what gives the artefacts the spiritual quality that they seem to possess.

Although Infante’s work was first shown in the West in 1965, it did not receive much attention outside of the Eastern Bloc countries until the advent of glasnost. Since then, Infante has been recognized as one of Russia’s leading artists. His work has been shown throughout the world and is included in numerous public and private collections.