

DAR VOLTA POR CIMA¹

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Let us begin with a question: why still paint, draw, model, or sculpt? What would be contemporary about continuing artistic practices that seem to have already said everything? Indeed, for many centuries traditional disciplines such as drawing, painting, and sculpture (but also printmaking²) were attributed mimesis as their immanent role, from which one had to begin in order to infer another-idea that always lay beyond the work itself. However, as we know, from the twentieth century onward things changed, and meaning came to rest on its interpretive potentialities rather than on developed technical skills, through which alone, it had been thought, a work of art could come into being. Yet, since the invention of photography, and perhaps even more rapidly with the expansion of the sculptural field, all disciplines were tempted to explore and occupy expanded positions, accepting the fact that they would no longer be limited by the conditions of a particular technique. So then, when we think that beyond mere mimesis, beyond mere representation, art is idea, why insist on the practice and refined development of a particular technical medium? I mean, why insist on painting on canvas, drawing on paper, or modelling? And even more so, why do so in terms of figuration, now that the hidden work of Hilma af Klint has come to light to renew our enchantment with abstract art, whose form *is* the message?

After all these changes, in which the withdrawal of God from the world of art marks the moment of a new beginning, drawing, painting, and sculpting seem the result of a melancholic obstinacy. Perhaps they are, but at this point it is necessary to clarify that voluntary permanence in commonplaces is both a challenge to imagination and an act of resistance. Only thus will we understand that the work of artists such as Alfredo Frías, Sonia Ruiz, or Martín Di Girolamo acts as a lure, for, far from the strategies of hegemonic Anglo-Saxon conceptual art, which leaves little room for the intimacy of the hand, they show us that figuration has not died and can even be part of the most contemporary conceptualisms.

Let me cite Luis Camnitzer and his idea that conceptual art is not defined exclusively by formal hybridity, reductionism, dematerialization or textualization, nor by its content or materials

¹ Portuguese expression meaning “to get out of a tight situation, to overcome a physical or conceptual obstacle.”

² The aesthetic analyst Juan Acha considers printmaking subordinate to drawing, since in it the line remains the determining plastic element.

and supports, but (above all) by the strategies of creative procedures and the materials with which the artist works. Let me also mention the beautiful and well-known text by Giorgio Agamben, *What Is the Contemporary?* (2008):

"...With respect to the present, "contemporaneity" is a disconnection and a dislocation. Truly belonging to one's time means not fully fitting into it nor adapting to its demands; it means being out of step, and therefore inactual. Precisely for this reason, through this deviation and anachronism, one is able, more than others, to perceive and grasp one's own time..."

Both Camnitzer and Agamben guide us into the most interesting and complex aspect of the work of Frías, Ruiz, and Di Girolamo, since despite their permanence within traditional disciplines of drawing, painting, and sculpture, they successfully avoid that overwhelming nostalgia for craft and narrative that so often obstructs access to the complex ideas at stake in any work of art.

Case 1

Together with those authors, or rather, through their thought, we understand that both Constantine P. Cavafy and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood constellate within the rich genealogy that animates the work of Alfredo Frías, because he has chosen to visit them again and again, and because in the "inactuality" these loving visits imply, not only a paradoxical and intense contemporaneity is consolidated, but also a commitment to the political dimension involved in a declaration of sexual sovereignty of bodies, where otherness and difference lie in ambush.



Alfredo FRIAS

Portrait of Juan Using My Clothes

Graphite and watercolour on paper

24 × 32 cm

2020

Case 2

Sonia Ruiz is another example of obstinate devotion to personal solace, not so much through technique and its appropriation, but through using technique to underline the worn yet affectionate atmosphere of intimate family rituals, in which the immanent tension of the scene is softened by the compassion suggested by the top-down viewpoint, also called the “eye of God.” Thus, that second innocence of old age is accompanied by a loss of definition in line, colour, and brushwork (I return once again to Camnitzer and his idea that conceptual art is defined as an attitude toward means and procedures, that is, as a way of establishing priorities in which the idea defines and conditions the paths to be taken through technique, and not the other way around).



Sonia RUIZ

Untitled

Graphite and oil on canvas

100 × 70 cm

2018

Case 3

Behind the apparent literalness of the works in Martín Di Girolamo's exhibition *Get Out*³, there are at least four complex operations through which this series moves far beyond the merely narrative and pamphleteering character that initially concerned me, since didactic or propagandistic art has always seemed to me the result of intellectual limitation.

The first refers to a "family resemblance," a "rhyme" with the Hellenistic sculptural tradition of suffering yet perfect bodies, usually represented at the precise moment when tragedy is about to unfold (I am thinking of *Laocoön and His Sons* or *Boy with a Goose*, among many others).

The second operation is the installation of history's defeated within the logic of the traditional monument, which for centuries has been the sculpture on a pedestal, and here things become interesting, since this type of monument was always made to commemorate the victors. Contemporary monuments, for example those dedicated to concentration camp victims, have attempted to escape this logic of pedestal sculpture, because their authors felt that such a strategy was insufficient to name what cannot be named. And here the third operation appears: by reclaiming the concept of monument and working with portraiture, Di Girolamo paradoxically advances beyond the discipline he masters, transforming it into a tool for rebellion, the act of naming the unnameable, giving a face to the defeated, because only in this way can they enter language, and thus allow the viewer to grasp some sense of horror. Some may say: "but

³ Currently at Maman Fine Art Gallery, CABA, Argentina.

these images have gone viral on social media, everyone has seen them.” I would answer: “precisely for that reason they have become trivialized to the extreme and no longer matter to us.”

The fourth operation consists in inserting them into the art world and, respecting the monument tradition, casting a new light upon them that intensifies the tragedy those bodies are experiencing, to the point that the indifference with which we once viewed them in screens disappears.



Martin DI GIROLAMO
Ahed
 Epoxy resin, fibre and polyurethane paint
 170 × 250 × 150 cm
 2019

Conclusion

For those concerned about the tyranny of the art market, to the point of confusing it with art itself, it is honest to acknowledge that, indeed, captured by strategies that render it merely profitable, the contemporary art market seeks to determine the degrees of “conceptual contemporaneity” through which an artistic object is validated as a material and symbolic commodity. But it is precisely in this context that the obstinate tenacity of a disciplinary work ends up acquiring an intrinsic value of resistance. Indeed, *dar volta por cima* the absolute capitalism that turns everything into merchandise, certain conceptual strategies have managed to colonize traditional academic artistic disciplines, not in order to cling to the past by praising hand-based virtuosity, but to update our very idea of the “contemporary.”