Mix Not Match Not

NEVILLE WAKEFIELD

It is a photograph of nothing much, a sliver of forest, a bucolic scene from the edge of town. The image is neither spectacular nor banal. Taken from a park near the artist's home in Chicago, it might be a beatific homage to a natural order that fringes the city: to the purloined pleasure of the stroll, the reflective poetics of the promenade, perhaps a lost paradise of innocent pleasures once conducted in public spaces. It is a beautifully printed photograph. The grisaille tones of the silver gelatin stand in stark contrast to the Fischer-Price palette of the exhibition's surrounding works. Coming upon this untitled work is like finding an Anselm Adams print hanging casually at a Toys-R-Us. But the flare of reflected light that opens the middle ground of the image into the blind of an unseen horizon suggests a natural order tainted by artificiality. The familiarity that this photograph presumes is short-circuited, as if the medium, tantalized by its own suggestion of meaning, has become Narcissus, absorbed in its capacity for self-reflection. Photo and forest are synonymous, a labyrinthine architecture of shadows and reflected realities. Both play with the symbolic currency of light and darkness for which Herrera's untitled image merely equivocates a rate of exchange. To this uncertain maze of possibilities and vanishing paths, Herrera adds and intensifies the reflective chicanery. As it turns out, in order to create this image, Herrera held a mirror to the camera, refracting the bright gape of the horizon line into the camera's internal mirror. We are positioned literally in the jaws of dilemma—caught between the pictorial and symbolic, an abstract grimace of blazing light and closing darkness.

Perhaps it is the context. This untitled image is after all the sole representational statement in the abstracted landscape of Herrera's installation. One's view of the photograph is often partial, occluded by a billowing abstract wall drawing to one side and an enigmatically punctured white plane to the other. The image, which promises the only moment of representational traction within the carefully choreographed ambiguity, insists on sliding away. Like the space beyond the tree line, these obstructed views keep the photograph in a state of suspended suggestion, shuttling constantly between itself and its surroundings, glimpsed but not seen. Its behavior might be that of Alice's looking-glass—a sink into which reflections are poured only to repool on the other side.

Herrera's forest marks a symbolic division, the serration of nature from nurture, the transitional space between the urban and the sylvan, the conscious and unconscious. The rational light of the cosmos fails to penetrate, leaving in its absence a darker, phobic space. Yet it is both closed and open at the same time. The forest on which it is based exists as an infinitely repeatable fragment whose totality can never be fully perceived. We enter its space aware of the anxiety of penetrating deeper and deeper into a limitless world—its mystery indefinitely prolonged beyond the veil of tree trunks, leaves, and nightmare greens. The view beyond is withheld and our perception of the forest as a psycho-physical space is based on an act of anthropomorphizing. The photograph is grafted onto the imagination where its reach is quickly extended into the psyche. The forest reverts back to an oneiric space, pivoting on an invisible line between daydream and nightmare.

As a conceptual hinge, Herrera's use of photography is one element in what Michel Foucault describes as a heterotopic environment, a space capable of accommodating shifting senses of place and time. "Fragments of a large number of orders glitter separately in the dimension, without law or geometry. . . . [In] such a state, things are 'laid,' 'placed,' 'arranged' in sites so very different from one another that it is impossible to find a place of residence for them, to define a common locus beneath them. . . Heterotopias are disturbing probably because they secretly undermine language."[1] Like Foucault's heterotopia, everything in Herrera's installation is contingent and relational. Nothing is given. Elements as disparate as site-specific wall paintings, free-standing cutouts, prints, photographs and floor-strewn ready-mades are brought together in a single, unstable space in which fear of disorientation and loss come again as giddy pleasure. Order is fragmented into a series of actions and arrangements that refuse narrative closure. Overwhelmed by the wealth of interpretative possibility, we have nowhere to turn but ourselves, no judgments to trust but those that are wholly contingent on our own presence as viewers.

As to when the formal becomes the psychological, Herrera refuses to answer on our behalf. By placing this photograph in a predominately abstract installation, Herrera subverts the power of photography to signify reality in a psychologically uncomplicated manner. The photograph in this sense stands in for much of Herrera's work. All of Herrera's photographic works—the dispersions, the tight close-up of a razor-stubbled chin and jaw, or the pair of unidentified orifices—are seductively ambiguous. The paired cavities in an untitled photograph from 1996 might be nostrils separated by the overexposed bridge of the septum. Openings to the body, like those to the mind, become reversible constructs as these dark voids signify unidentified interior spaces leading to senses that forever remain a mystery. This image belongs to an established vocabulary of cropped, "accidental" biomorphic forms, which is a recurring feature of Herrera's work.

In a previous site-specific wall painting, *Tale*, a carnival of bulbous interconnected protuberances perform an unbridled scatological dance whose associations range from the angelic to kitsch, from putti to party balloon-twisting. The enclosed arabesques of the wall paintings sometimes evoke the surrealist origins of American Action Painting—like Arshile Gorky put through a blender. The mutant cartoon forms hover around the edges of recognition without ever quite coming within its grasp. The torrent of undulating shape culminates in an uncontained proliferation, as if Herrera has eviscerated the cuddly pleasures of cartoon innocence to find signifiers of thwarted sexual tension, a deliciously wry comment on the Freudian vulgarization that finds a penis in ever protuberance and a vagina in every cavity. The body of *Forty Winks*, a tangerine-flecked thought bubble that slowly ascends across a free-standing wall, might be a fragment excised from the dream of an REM sleeper to which the title perhaps refers. The violence with which it abruptly terminates suggests a scale unbounded by the cozy dimensions of the wall on which it is drawn. Shifting easily between the micro and macro, it could represent a carcinogenic dye portrait or the spill of a giant incendiary dream, in which case, the bubbly forms may be the benign outpourings of a child asleep, dreaming a bodily recollection, a polymorphic world of amniotic comfort.

The trail of abstraction in Herrera's work leads not to the palace of Platonic wisdom but back to the body of the beholder—a site we know to be as culturally inscribed by Walt Disney as it is by Sigmund Freud. Any attempt to politicize the sacred domain of childhood threatens to introduce perversity where happiness and fantasy once reigned. Innocence, supposedly the sacrosanct domain of the child,

1. Quoted in Brain McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 44. See also Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" Diacritics 16 No. 1 (1986)

is here repackaged as the temptation of the adult, a temptation reiterated in the fleshy apple/eraser readymade. The sculpture is a charming but nonetheless potent symbol of the fall from grace and expulsion from paradise, calling forth our culpability and complicity as adults in the fantasy of a childhood Eden. The child in Herrera's garden of innocence, however, is the guilt-free adult looking back at himself in a cycle of narcissism that allows him to nostalgically appropriate the "natural disposition" of the child in order to conceal his fall from grace. Having feasted on the apple, the adult recreates it ad infinitum in bright nursery colors, as if to erase the impression of his own indulgence. Children become the pretext and means for self-gratification within the spectacle of the adult dream.

However, when the illusion that ties the adult vision to the fabricated utopia of the childish imagination is severed without warning, we might find Donald Duck's beak in Cinderella's spleen or Jiminy Cricket's head up Pluto's ass. In Herrera's fantasyland, distinctions between child and adult, animal and human, as well as animal and animal are elided. Collage permits, if not invites, such "unnatural" combinations, producing a monstrosity born of nature gone awry. Herrera exposes nature as the space of differentiation, the space between the imagination of the child and that of the adult, the space between genders and species, between people and things. It is precisely this government of natural law that prevents the grafting of the vulgar, phallic red nose onto the nook of a one-armed chair. Animal traits in comics may provide the characters with a façade of innocence, but in Herrera's cosmology they speak of the never-ending state of undifferentiated becoming—the refusal to indulge in the stable subject positions that segregate the production of meaning from the consumption of meaning.

Tampering with the laws of nature in this sense becomes a Sadean exercise. In *The 120 Days of Sodom*, de Sade's most extended description of the orgiastic universe, the taboo of boundary—that between brother and sister, parent and child—is systematically transgressed. In a passage that might read as a description of the exhibition's larger, more complex wall installation, de Sade writes; "All will be higgledy-piggledy, all will wallow on the flagstones, on the earth, and, like animals, will interchange, will mix, will commit incest, adultery and sodomy."[2] Biomorphic painting, popular culture, biology, mute space, conceptual practice, erotogenic zones and functions are the syllables comprising Herrera's vocabulary. Collage, which is mixture once removed, goes against nature, hybridizing reality in defiance of the laws of segregation, violating Leviticus' Biblical injunction, "Thou shalt not let thy cattle gender with diverse kind; thou shalt not sow thy field with mingled seed; neither shall a garment mingled of linen and wool come upon thee."[3] Herrera exploits the impossible. Only here, in the boundless aesthetic space of experience, can the strictures of the world be truly unraveled. Only here can a smile become a grimace, an inviting cavity a Disney projection, childhood play adult perversion.

For all their Spartan economy, Herrera's installations are highly operatic. Herrera shares with artists as diverse as James Lee Byars, Felix Gonzales Torres, and Gabriel Orozco a sense of the reduced gesture or intervention calibrated in terms of deflection rather than effect. Discrete elements and objects effect subtle indiscretions, shifting the psycho-spatial pressures of the environment barometrically—in ways that can be felt before they are seen. This absence of identifiable content initially makes for an opacity at odds with the precisionist choreography of placement and the careful mapping of visual incident. What was initially mistaken for austerity now reads as formal impurity—rampant and contagious. The different elements cross-pollinate and the residue of Sadean transgression lingers in the metalanguage of the installation. At few points can a

2. Marquis de Sade
The 120 Days of Sodom and Other Writings
(New York: Random House, 1966), p. 56

3. Leviticus XIX: 19

single work be isolated from the psychic charge of its neighbors. This sets up a series of checks and contaminations between different works and different media. Just as Herrera's cropping of biomorphic forms is a radical introduction of absence, the finely orchestrated placement of the objects delivers the viewer to the spaces in between—liminal areas in which the behavior and misbehavior of fragments provide a metaphor for subjectivity held not in the resolved state of being but of becoming. In the face of such continuous dislocation, a relational wholeness cannot be maintained and the mirror Herrera holds to subjectivity offers no singular reflection.

According to Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic model, the self is never indigenous in the sense of belonging to basic instincts or biological needs, but always a function of a reflected other. He describes the system of abstract differentiation as belonging to the "mirror phase," a phase that occurs twice during the child's development, first when the child becomes aware of his or her own image in the mirror, and later with the acquisition of language. The child's initial experience of the self is open-ended, exploratory and unfocused, corresponding to the polymorphously perverse stage of its sexual development. But at the moment of self-recognition—the first mirror phase—the child recuperates the totality of his or her body in an image to gradually become conscious of him- or herself as an entity separated from the surrounding world—from the continuity between the child, the maternal breast, and its own excrement. The narcissistic fascination with the image is due to what Lacan terms "prematurity of birth" or "primordial discord" and becomes a compensatory device for the actual disunity and incoherence of the self experienced by the child:

> The mirror stage is interesting in that it manifests the affective dynamism by which the subject originally identifies himself with the Gestalt of his own body: in relation to the still very profound lack of coordination of his own motility, it represents an ideal unity, a salutary imago; it is invested with all the original distress resulting from the child's interorganic and relational discordance.[4]

Herrera's art is an invitation to reexperience a relational discordance. No single element, position or view is capable of restoring the reflective totality of language or image. Lacking the drama that would facilitate a spatial identification of the self in relation to its reflection, Herrera's installation follows the boundaries of inside and outside while observing neither. The fragmented phantasm of the pre-narcissistic or "morselated body" is thus constituted as a reflection that never takes form: the extruded eraser makes sense only in the cross-sectional view which its uncut form withholds; collage suggests a continuation the blade denies; the multiple reflections of the photograph offer neither fear nor reassurance but only the indeterminate area of the in-between. In this limbo, Herrera collapses fear and anxiety, leading us from the illusory Eden of differentiation into the darker spaces of the polymorphously perverse where no harm is done in denying aesthetic revelations their certainty. •

4. Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection* trans. Alan Sheridan, (Tavistock: 1977), p. 12