

# Hybrid Abstractions

## Comments on a series of collages

### by Arturo Herrera

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This essay concerns a series of collages by Arturo Herrera titled *Keep in touch* [*En contacto*] (2004) (page 124), whose characteristics make it quite different from any other painting or object conceived by the artist, especially his temporary, large-scale wall paintings. For the work in question, Herrera began by commissioning a professional illustrator to execute gouache paintings on paper, each measuring 35 x 28 cm. Thirteen different motifs were produced five times each, for a total of sixty-five hand-painted backgrounds. As the models for these commissioned paintings, Herrera chose scenes from animated films, reduced down to their fundamental elements.

The word “collage” comes from the French *coller*, meaning “to glue,” but it can also mean to recompose or overlap. In art history, collage is a technique whereby pieces of one and the same material are recombined or glued together; these elements may be cut (Arp), torn (Schwitters / Matisse), or simply come upon by chance (Picasso). In Herrera’s collages, the combination of material establishes a fascinating relationship which broadens our knowledge of the medium’s expressive possibilities, for the artist uses not just “worthless” pieces of paper but also commissioned paintings which he destroys by gluing these fragments atop them, for a recomposed whole.

In the artist’s studio, thousands of cut-out pieces of paper—taken from colouring books, illustrated books, and everyday publications such as magazines and newspapers—are piled on top of several tables. Mixed in with them are bits of coloured cardboard and paper bearing ink and watercolour drawings and cut into different abstract shapes. Some have sharp or torn edges, others reveal a fragile internal structure.

Measuring approximately the size of a hand, these paper forms are the raw material of *Keep in touch*. Basic, recurrent motifs are organised on the tables. Here and there, specific paper cut-outs have been placed in careful layers on uncut sheets of paper. A collage is emerging, somewhere between disorder and order.

If in the last century the underlying principle of collage was to dignify waste materials by turning them into pictures, thereby eliciting new meanings from their infinite combinatory possibilities, Herrera challenges this approach by commissioning someone else to produce the base pictorial material—a “valuable” original painting—which he then cuts up and destroys with extraneous, glued-on paper fragments. Depending on the number of layers, perforations, and cuts added, parts of the original background will remain more or less visible. From a typological viewpoint, this makes for a surprisingly differential effect: The artist accepts the collage technique as an accumulation of cut-out images, but takes it to its end point by destroying those basic images in order to bring about different levels of meaning, thus expanding their capacity to generate a wide associative field.

Herrera borrows subtly from the techniques used in animated film production, wherein the characters play out their story against a static background. This background often remains unchanged throughout an entire scene, with only the figures in each individual cell being altered to create movement; in this sense, the animated film process itself follows the basic principle of collage. Similarly, Herrera uses abstract, cut-out shapes as if they were animated figures to be arranged across a given backdrop. Against uniform, scenic background patterns (5 x 13 motifs),

the artist develops his narrative through a repertoire of these formal motifs. The individual collages appear as if film stills, bringing about an unexpected temporality.

On closer inspection, of course, the viewer detects fragments of the film's original storyboard and, curiosity sparked, is tempted to identify their source. The use of printed material, illustrations and paintings, as well the nature of how we view images, makes it impossible to avoid associations entirely. In Herrera's collages, however, the fragmentary nature of the image challenges the viewer's pictorial memories and pre-conceived notions, triggering instead a barrage of free-flowing associations. To a greater or lesser extent, the artist's relatively unencumbered pictorial language is susceptible to metaphorical or psychological interpretations, but the abstract cut-out forms themselves respond solely to the artist's aesthetic criteria. Indeed, Herrera's search for a personal aesthetic is what leads him to deliberately destroy his pictorial models and engage in the subsequent process of layering, gluing, and over-painting through which he seeks to create new levels of the visible. The elimination of one image gives way to a new image. Through his collages, Herrera attempts to seize the moment by delving into the relationships between destruction and creation, order and chaos, generating an excess of images and informational elements through hybrid abstraction.

Once Herrera finishes experimenting, he sets about investing each new image with a plurality of visual matter. The collages thus engage in a dynamic interplay of colour, shape and visual attraction, creating a tension born from "seeing through sight" (*sehendes Sehen*), to borrow an idea put forth by Konrad Fiedler, the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century German philosopher. But when, precisely, is any picture finished? Who declares an incomplete creative process artistically complete? Herrera raises this

question by drawing a line between the recognisable and the abstract. It is precisely the ample scope of his pictorial process, which includes layers of over-painting both casual and measured in their application, that characterises a process whose end depends solely upon the artist's decision. It is thus the artist who is responsible for opening up the process of contemplation and new conceptual possibilities.

At this point, the viewer is challenged to become involved through a process of active looking. The artist has done everything he can to eliminate the meanings that existed in the artwork's foundational elements by building a series of multiple references that make for a puzzling display of graphic information. A transition to the viewer's individual looking is only possible if he is willing to participate actively and consciously. In music, we speak of "resonance" when certain sound waves make other systems vibrate simultaneously by means of frequency equity; that is, when the invisibleness of sound becomes visible in a given object. This is the effect that Herrera pursues in his work: to create a space of resonance in which the artwork vibrates. The colours, the paper fragments, and the forms represent nothing more or less than that which they actually are: an image. The elements of the picture are systematised according to criteria of shape, proportion, figure, and colour. Each work is the manifestation of the artist's wish to create for the viewer a space of resonance.

Herrera's collages contain traces of all the many techniques of modern art. Applied, dismantled, quoted, and eventually recomposed, they give form to new hybrid objects as the result of a wild crossover of contradictory concepts reconverted into abstractions. From the very edges of their elemental shapes, these hybrid creations challenge the viewer's memories and ideas about the image. Abstraction acts as the vehicle



through which the artist toys with notions of destruction and construction. Image fragments struggle against the wholeness of the completed collage, gradually settling into a balanced relationship by virtue of making us think about seeing in order to really see—Fiedler’s “seeing through sight.” Defying the reductivist principle, Herrera’s abstractions instead seek to multiply and accelerate the moment. Like a frenzied concert, silence is achieved only when the last note ends.

### Postscript

In Santiago de Compostela, Arturo Herrera lifted a motif from the fifth part of *Keep in touch* and had it painted as a monumental mural (page 204). In the first room of the exhibition, all sixty-five collages from the series are displayed, like a large tableau presenting all possible variations. Each individual work allows the hybridity of abstraction and the contradictory character of its emergence, through the gluing of paper fragments on top of a hand-painted background, to come to the fore. On the far wall of the last room, which stretches two stories high, we find ourselves, even at a great distance, confronted with a seamless mural that declares these very notions of constructed hybridity invalid. The part of the mural framed by the entryway is visible from the very first room; as we progress through the exhibition, this observable section increases in size, but only when we stand directly before the full mural does it include the space around it. Thinking back, we recognize the image from that first wall of collages, and we sense that it is growing out into the room, transgressing the space of the exhibition, and thereby producing a moment of heightened tension.

The monumental mural, an autonomous whole unified through its creation in flat paint, does not reveal that it is based on a collage. Rather, its motif interprets the museum site itself in a dramatic way, for in this room the architect has created a space that differs from the others in its railing-less catwalk, integrating a bridge-like motif that becomes a trademark. Herrera responds to this moment of danger by choosing a motif in which a wooden staircase, also without a railing, leads down into uncertain depths. This downward pull is countered by a black, abstract shape that shrouds a white-blue form, which itself exhibits an upwardly rising tendency. By taking up the entire wall, and as a result integrating the wooden catwalk of the upper story as well as the floor of the lower one, Herrera succeeds in amplifying the effect; by using these moments of color and architectural nuance, he makes the room appear part of his painting. Even the painted stonework of the stairwell seems to refer to things that can be perceived in the architectural history of the city of Santiago de Compostela. Through the techniques of enlargement and mural painting, Arturo Herrera has succeeded in declaring the hybridity of the motif—or more precisely, the contradictory nature of the original collage—invalid, while at the same time transferring this hybridity to the entire architectural space, a hybridity that like a harmonious echo resonates across the entire exhibition.