Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York, October 21 – November 25, 2006

Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin, November 25 – December 23, 2006

BETWEEN FOREST AND WALL

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My first thought on entering Arturo Herrera's exhibition of large-scale collages at Sikkema Jenkins & Co. in November 2006 was of the Berlin Wall. Odd, I know—and most certainly far from what the artist himself had in mind. But consider the scale and installation of the thirty-nine works that constituted the Sikkema Jenkins show: reaching to more than four feet across and over eight feet high, and hung just nine inches apart across all but two of the gallery's walls, they together formed an impeccably built enclosure that surrounded, indeed contained, the gallery's visitors. And behold the specific image that confronted me as I turned into the gallery space: *#22 DF2* (page 59), a towering composition of twelve separate sheets of collaged paper interlaced with paint applied by both brush and the artist's own fingers. In its sheer palimpsestual intensity, the work resembles nothing so much as one of the Wall's own intricately graffitied concrete panels, whose snaking procession once divided the city Herrera now calls home.

The Sikkema Jenkins exhibition (whose dense hanging was emulated in the subsequent showing of fifteen collages from the same series at Berlin's Galerie Max Hetzler a month later) also called to mind another, more abstract, location: the forest. For just as they surrounded and enclosed their viewers, the show's collages also invited gallery visitors to roam and explore, to *enter into* them as just so many overgrown paths. In this sense, Herrera's looping fields of painted, sprayed, stenciled, and pasted-on color appeared less as applied marks than tangled brush, and the works' scale evoked doorways rather than looming concrete mass: collaged surface as portal to a lushly filled world within. The experience of looking at these works, certainly, is one of exploration. We feel compelled, as if at a forest crossroads, to venture within and between them, to initiate investigations into both the specific pictorial matter of which each is comprised as well as into the infinite variability of visual experience they together afford. Herrera's collages beg for—and amply reward—our *Wanderlust.*

Wall and forest, then; containment and exploration. These opposing spatial and experiential models together structure Herrera's most recent collages. These works are built from the dialectical relationship contained within each of these two pairs: just as their surfaces confront us as so many layered and marked-up planes to be disarticulated and read, so they simultaneously invite us—indeed, *overwhelm* us—to enter into and lose ourselves within their infinite pictorial tangle, their dense thickets of narrative and formal suggestion. Herrera locates the terrain of his art precisely between these two possibilities, both of and beyond each alone.

Let's start with basic ingredients. The seventy-five collages constituting Herrera's latest series are built from two found images and twenty abstract line drawings. The found images, taken from a coloring book Herrera purchased in a used book store in Caracas, consist of a capped and obliquely peering dwarf, fists clenched behind his back, and an accordion-playing young boy, staring

out with strangely oversized eyes and thickly plastered hair. Having selected these two characters as the backbone for his series—attracted, he has said, by their awkward strangeness—Herrera asked a professional illustrator to create back views of both. Repeating the four resulting figure studies (boy front/back and dwarf front/back) five times, Herrera then superimposed his twenty line drawings across their surfaces. These twenty base images were then cut out, initiating a process of chance experimentation (as Herrera occasionally reversed, doubled, or repeated his combined elements) that produced a total of seventy-five distinct images. The individual works' components are specified by their titles, which, following a number that designates the place of each within the series as a whole, consist of "B" or "D" (boy or dwarf), "F" or "B" (front or back), and a number between one and five that identifies which of the five distinct line drawings is applied to each figure view.

That Herrera's dwarf and accordion-playing boy speak the Esperanto of international mass culture is clear enough: though taken from a generic coloring book, they appear, and many will assume them to be, Disney products. Of perhaps greater interest than their mass cultural associations, however, is the particular mode of these figures' formal insertion into Herrera's images. Alternately staring out at or holding their backs to their viewers, they both confront us and offer an implied suggestion to follow. The latter notion is particularly significant. For in commissioning rear views of both boy and dwarf and partially building his series around just these, Herrera engages the specific history and significance of what is known in German as the *Rückenfigur:* the pictorial convention of a rear-facing figure who serves as a kind of surrogate viewer, guiding beholders into representational space and serving as a locus of identification within the image. Such figures are already in evidence in Jan van Eyck's masterful fifteenth-century panel paintings—where they mirror and thematize, as Joseph Koerner has written, viewers' "own attitude of visual amazement" towards the work before them—and become particularly central within the development of European landscape views from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, within which they frequently serve to mediate between beholder and represented world.[1]

In Herrera's case, the status of the *Rückenfigur* is a bit more complicated. For not only do his boy and dwarf remind us more of the mass-printed page than the spaces of lived experience, but they are barely visible in many, if not most, of the series' seventy-five collages. And we frequently see these figures, as noted above, not as guides or surrogates but as subjects of confrontation, staring directly out at *us* before them. In this duality, Herrera's boy and dwarf can be understood as encapsulations of what Koerner, building on Heinrich von Kleist's discussion of the canvases of Caspar David Friedrich, has described as the necessarily paradoxical status of the *Rückenfigur,* "as a site of both our identification with, and our isolation from, the painted landscape"—indeed, with and from painting and drawing themselves.[2] At issue in Herrera's repeated dissolution of the boundary between figure and ground, then—in his dispersal of boy and dwarf as just so many skeins of color and pattern—is not the figure as such, but rather the figure as an embodiment of painted, or better hybrid, surface. The staring eyes and turned backs of boy and dwarf thus function as those of Herrera's images *themselves,* establishing the viewer's encounter with these two figures as a distillation of that between spectator and work. Do we not sense, on recognizing the outline of a face in one of Herrera's dense collage weaves, that these images are themselves subjects, seeing us before we see them?

The tension established by these central figures between identification and confrontation returns us to the opposition of forest and wall with which this essay began. In both cases, the dialectic at hand is one between inhabitation (of space, of figure) and the obstruction of just such a move. A similar opposition links as well the two formal models most directly engaged by these works: gestural abstraction and analytic collage. For if the tangled abstract patterns of Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning—both of whose work is clearly evoked by Herrera's own—has long been understood as a kind of intricately woven field into which viewers can imagine entering, collage has functioned since its earliest artistic use by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque as a means of interrogating the flat surface of the picture plane, of precisely *eradicating,* or covering over, "inhabitable" space. The ambitious project of Herrera's collages is to engage both these models simultaneously, to create from their seemingly intractable points of opposition a new game board of pictorial and critical possibilities.

Let me briefly expand on these historical connections. Rosalind Krauss, one of Picasso's most brilliant contemporary readers, argues that because collage, by definition, is built from pictorial matter affixed across—and thus covering over—pictorial space, it constitutes nothing short of a "metalanguage of the visual" for which the eradication of original surface "and the reconstitution of it through the figure of its own absence" serves as a master term.[3] Accordingly, we approach collage "not as an object of perception, but as an object of discourse, of *re*presentation," one that demands to be *read* rather than simply perceived.[4] Picasso's seminal collage works, Krauss demonstrates, are rooted in the interrogation of just this discursive condition. The variably sized violin f-holes that repeatedly fill his collages of 1912–13, for instance, work not to evoke representational space but rather to *write,* through the differential relationship of signs, "foreshortening" as a pictorial convention, inscribing the concept of depth across "the very place from which it is—within the presence of collage—most absent."[5] Picasso's work thus not only presages the semiotic play of postmodernism by over half a century, but establishes what we could call *discursivity* as the primary engine of collage as an artistic process.

Krauss surely had the criticism of Leo Steinberg in mind as she formulated this analysis, for Steinberg, writing a decade before, had reached similar conclusions in his consideration of Robert Rauschenberg's own collage-based work. Describing the heterogeneous surfaces of Rauschenberg's images as "flatbed picture planes," Steinberg argued that these works provide an analogue not to visual experience, but rather to the scattering of information across a table, bulletin board, or any "receptor surface on which objects are scattered, on which data is entered, on which information may be received, printed, impressed."[6] Rauschenberg's works, he thus asserted, stand in direct contrast to the Abstract Expressionist canvases that preceded them—which remain, for all their radicality, a form of nature painting, suggestive of tangled thickets and atmospheric space. Similar to Krauss on Picasso, then, Steinberg sees Rauschenberg's collage-based practice as rooted in a transformation of the image surface from a pictorial to a discursive field, one rooted in the compiling of data and information rather than any evocation of an inhabitable worldspace within.

Now, Herrera's collages are neither Picasso's nor Rauschenberg's: they forego both the former's intricate semiotic analysis as well as the latter's heterogeneous material overflow. But in

utilizing collage, Herrera necessarily initiates a dialogue with each of these seminal models. Indeed, his recent large-scale works are full of just the kind of discursive matter that Krauss and Steinberg identify as central to Picasso's and Rauschenberg's earlier efforts. We see this not only in Herrera's boy and dwarf—both of whom, as noted above, suggest the printed page more than lived experience—but in his integration of clearly legible newspaper fragments (from the *BZ*, Berlin's tabloid of choice); his frequent use of stamped and printed materials full of repeated and heavily coded motifs (most often Op Art patterns that read as a "sign" of late-modern decoration); his utilization of spray paint to suggest the extended scrawls of graffiti (itself, as Steinberg discusses, a type of "flatbed" image); his frequent play between the positive and negative application of identical figures (thus foregrounding his image content as a matter of differentially applied marks); and, finally, his collages' repeated suggestion—in their all-over abstract patterning and often vigorous downward pull—of both television static and the movement of a celluloid film strip. All of these elements suggest Herrera's focus to be—as Steinberg claimed of Rauschenberg—culture rather than nature, and thus to root his work firmly in the history of collage as a discursive practice as outlined by Krauss and Steinberg. But these pictorial details also contradict precisely this idea: for each of them entwines its *cultural* significance (e.g., its insertion or suggestion of newspaper, decorative pattern, graffiti, etc.) with an unabashed evocation of precisely the *natural* experience on whose eradication collage's discursive investigations have, since Picasso, ostensibly been based. Like the Abstract Expressionists whose work his images so frequently evoke, Herrera can without question be considered—to borrow from Steinberg once more—a "nature painter."

Look, for instance, at *#20 BB4* (page 51). The image is built from a single sheet of Fabriano paper, painted silver, with repeated images of a gliding sailboat and a standing harp with top hat and flower stenciled across its surface. On top of this ground—which, as Herrera intended, unmistakably suggests wallpaper—a filigree of cut-out newspaper weaves the form of Herrera's accordion-playing boy, seen from behind, merged with one of the artist's twenty abstract line drawings. Viewing the work up close, we are hard-pressed not to begin *reading* the newspaper fragments that lace across it, something Herrera's careful placement—the fragments are right-side up, perfectly straight, and aligned to read left to right—invites us to do. We can follow what appears to be a regular feature entitled "Taxi Storys" (*sic*), an article about skincare products, and the announcement of a competition to win the somewhat meager prize of a deodorant set. Such word-for-word reading, however, is short-lived. For when our focus shifts from these particular passages to the overall form of the image's newspaper tracery, any thoughts of taxis or deodorant simply dissolve: we are suddenly absorbed into abstract space, enmeshed in the intricate tangle of Herrera's cleanly elegant line and merged with the barely visible *Rückenfigur* it weaves (who is roughly, if monumentally, life-sized). The effect is something like that of the old duck/rabbit drawing first published in Germany in the 1890s and later made famous by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein: we can see one image but not the other, demonstrating the manner in which perception is a matter of the mind just as much as the eye.

An argument could be made that the gridded ground of *#20 BB4* enacts a similar operation in reverse. For while its wallpaper-like pattern stresses the stock character of both its images and their application (just as does Picasso's own use of wallpaper in his earliest collages), these very same

images, considered individually, suggest the absorptive lure of calm seas and sonorous music, setting this evocation of natural—indeed, immersive—experience against their status as just so much rigidified cultural data. The fact that these pictures are made with antique bakery cutouts—still oily from years of use when Herrera found them at a Berlin flea market—only intensifies this structural opposition, situating their schematic imagery within the basest natural context of bodily ingestion.

These observations are speculative and only partial, but the tracing of such tensions and reversals, within both *#20 BB4* and Herrera's series as a whole, could continue for pages, if not volumes. These collages are so densely layered in their narrative and pictorial suggestion, so monumental in both scale and execution, that we simply lose ourselves in them. And this, most basically understood, is precisely their point: to generate a depth of perceptual and associative experience within the explicitly flattened terrain of collage, while simultaneously expanding and intensifying collage's exploration of the discursive operations of pictorial matter. As Herrera commented to Josiah McElheny in 2005, "the challenge is, how can an image so recognizable . . . have another meaning that I impose on it? Is it possible? Can I make something so clear ambiguous? Can I uproot it?"[7] Herrera's two central figures of dwarf and accordion-playing boy again provide paradigmatic examples. Beyond their utilization of the *Rückenfigur*'s identificatory draw, do we not *feel* something of the deep forest's enchanting allure when we see them, tangled in the complex matrix of Herrera's multilayered surfaces, greeting and leading us in as if we ourselves were some lost princess? But simultaneously, are we not mesmerized by the manner in which these figures are spliced, obscured, and dissolved across the paper before us, alternately piling up and cancelled out as just so much pictorial matter? Herrera redeems his mass-cultural sources by excavating the utopian promise within them, engaging the simple childhood fantasies that even the most debased of forms, from tabloid papers to cake decorations, can generate. But his lacerated surfaces also suggest that something vaguely sinister lies within these forms, as well as us. For just as we *enjoy* Herrera's figures' elegantly violent fate, so their submerged stares, preceding and frequently directed out at our own, suggest a knowledge of, and wait for, our own similar turn.[8] It is in this sense that the forest, both here and throughout Herrera's oeuvre, is such an important reference point; for, as Deborah Singer has written, the forest "is a place of relaxation and comfort, where we might go to get away from the frenzy of our everyday lives, but also a dark place, where unknown dangers may lurk among the trees."[9]

Violence is in fact internal to both Herrera's pictorial means and his images themselves. Collage is an art of out-of-place ruins, defined by the simple fact of the cut. Both of these notions are engaged by Theodor Adorno in his posthumous *Aesthetic Theory,* in which the great German theoretician describes collage as the "inner-aesthetic capitulation of art to what stands heterogeneously opposed to it": a means by which art admits the ruins of "the reified prosaic world" into itself and thus "cleaves visible scars in the work's meaning."[10] Herrera is certainly aware of these stakes. Indeed, he takes Adorno's dialectically rigorous modernism as, in itself, one more element for his dissecting gaze. As he commented to McElheny: "The x-acto knife cuts everything into little bits, fragments that I then use to create new images. These are like little bits of modernism all around me. And the fragments have this hopeful connection to some ideal from before. Dislocating and destroying elements results in a hybrid that recalls and at the same time undercuts its origins."[11]

A better summation of Herrera's project would be hard to find. But the artist also sells himself short here. It is fragments not just of modernism that he dislocates and destroys, but of postmodernism as well—whose roots, as Krauss and Steinberg illustrate, lie deeper and more tangled than we might initially suspect. Herrera's most recent collages, we might say, are *post*-postmodernist: they borrow from and move beyond their antecedent "isms" by setting the essential terms of each against the other, while simultaneously maintaining a hopeful connection to, and skeptical remove from, both. And more than this, these collages explore the very real human experiences—fear and wonder, as well as critical distance—of which such abstract aesthetic notions are comprised. In their scale, installation, and both material and narrative density they suture us, their viewers, into the world they form. There we are free to wander their paths and confront their looming surfaces, to let them both transport and contain us—as forest and wall alike.

1 Joseph Leo Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), page 163

2 ibid., page 217

3 Rosalind Krauss, "In the Name of Picasso," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), page 37

4 ibid., page 38

5 ibid., page 33

6 Leo Steinberg, "Other Criteria," in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), page 84

7 "Arturo Herrera," interview with Josiah McElheny, *Bomb Magazine* 93 (Fall 2005), page 73

8 A related duality is evident in the commissioned rear views of these figures. For while they can be understood as a kind of Cubist seeing-from-all-sides that foregrounds purely imaginative vision, these views also call our attention—as in the tightly clenched fists held by the dwarf behind his back—to the uncertainty of where Herrera's figures mean to lead us and just what they have in store.

9 Deborah Singer, *Arturo Herrera: Before We Leave* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2001), unpaginated brochure. Also relevant in this respect are the essays written by Hamza Walker, Neville Wakefield, and Maria Tatar on the occasion of Herrera's 1998 show at The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, published in the society's January 1998 newsletter.

10 Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), page 155

11 *Bomb Magazine* (see note 7), page 71

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