FREEWHEELING

Two long, parallel rows of uniform, tightly framed black and white images snake along the walls of the gallery. Modulating shades of grey ripple along its length while light and reflections glance off the perspex in the farthest frames. Eighty photographs although it's not immediately clear what they are pictures of, constitute the largest group of works Arturo Herrera has yet conceived. The images vary enormously, but none of them contain the perceptual depth of a conventional photograph. Instead the eye is confronted by a relentless series of flat planes, occasionally softened by the suggestive contours of a watermark, that show closely cropped details of crayon smudges, calligraphic brushstrokes, or the cartoon-graphic outlines of what might be a white gloved hand, part of a bird's foot. They are arranged with no discernable order. What strikes you is that each frame contains a satisfying abstract composition in itself, although every one is a tiny detail of larger, existing works on paper by Herrera.

To produce these images, the artist picked up a camera and started taking pictures of works in his studio in rapid succession, allowing himself to be led by arbitrary fragments that attracted his attention, only occasionally framing or composing the shots. He submerged the hundreds of sealed rolls of shot film unsystematically in water for varying lengths of time, so that when developed, images emerged to different degrees – some darker than others, some almost bleached out – with layers of random marks and scratches.

In this piece, chance, and the notion of the index, play a significant part in the artist's working process. The creation of a new body of work derived from existing works is both a kind of documentary project and a further reflexive layer in Herrera's ongoing investigation of the semiotics of abstraction. At the same time, the strategies he employs here to avoid formal composition rely on the principles of chance: using the camera to dictate the perceptual process – mechanising it to a degree, relying on the essentially abstract function of the cut or crop in photography to compose the images – and allowing accidental effects to leave traces on the images in the developing stages. Replacing the craft knife with a camera, he highlights the proximity of the index and abstraction.

The photographs function on multiple levels. They constitute a directory of the process of their making and of the original marks they represent, and they are 'chance compositions' (to borrow the term coined by Hans Arp). Like Ellsworth Kelly's *Colors for a Large Wall* (1951), which used chance and the indexical transfer of found objects (the coloured awnings of windows, matched in paint on sixty-four identical sized panels and arranged randomly) to take on geometric abstraction, Herrera's eighty photographs, sharing a similar framework, begin to unravel the syntax of Herrera's own abstract language.

Like the artist's first newly completed animated projection, *Les Noces* (pp. 47–60), which also draws on Herrera's works on paper and photographs, and is shot in black and white, they seem to consolidate several key aspects of the artist's engagement with abstraction to date. The relation-

ship described underlies a working process that involves the faithful transfer of marks and forms through several stages, or layers of interference, so that they preserve unevenly the traces of their original imprint. As well as using found images, Herrera produces hundreds of marks in the process of generating material for his collages. Although his practice involves a great deal of painting and painterly devices, it pivots on the generative potential of found (as opposed to original or spontaneous) marks. Finally, chance is exploited as a method of abstraction.

While chance and the index were deployed by artists such as Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Cy Twombly and Ellsworth Kelly as methods of critiquing the ideological and aesthetic conceits such as the self-presence of the artist in the expressive stroke associated with abstraction in the 1950s, in Herrera's work these devices operate as part of the artist's instinctive and emotional approach to images, coexisting with a finely tuned aesthetic sensibility and genuine belief in the communicative power of abstraction. If there is a critique in Herrera's work, it represents a position that is no longer oppositional. Although there is a tangible ambivalence towards critique – on one level, the works are simply and joyously about relationships between colour and form, line and space – in a redemptive, modernist sense – on another, they reveal a post-modern reflexivity in their mixing of quotations, their fragmented engagement with visual culture, and the non-authoritative presence of the artist.

Herrera quotes the expressive drips and smears of action painting and the graphic language of children's colouring books using the principles of

collage to assemble elaborate, part-drawn, part-cut compositions, harking back to the Surrealists and Dadaists with psychologically charged juxtapositions. Interrogating the autographic mark, his art traces the uncanny dichotomy that has polarized much of late twentieth century art practice, between abstract expressionism's credo of self-presence in the act of painting, and the absence embodied by the index or ready-made.

Paradoxically, Arturo Herrera's work is instantly recognisable, despite (or perhaps because of) the apparent sublimation of the artist's own hand in favour of the copied, cut and collaged marks of other image-makers. He speaks the language of others with such eloquence that his every mark seems to meld into a collective visual subconscious. Particularly in the impenetrable all-over drawings Herrera occasionally produces, where the caricatures of human limbs or natural objects float amongst intricate tracings of spontaneous-looking brushstrokes and thrown paint, the subliminal (never explicit) associations come thick and fast.

This sense of doubling haunts his work in a way that echoes the imbrication of opposites (self/other) in Freud's exposition of (un)heimlich. But while Freud was making a psychoanalytic analogy for the construction of the modern subject in 1919, here the relationship between the artist's autographic mark and its indexical function creates a sense of unfamiliarity with the familiar. Herrera's manoeuvring, made visible in the group of eighty photographs, prompts us to look again at the marks and shapes that together construct the image that addresses us. The psychological resonance of such a tactic is surely not lost on Herrera, as the combination of childhood

imagery and abstraction foregrounds the historical relationship between Modernism and psychoanalysis.

Modernism provides a natural touchstone for Herrera's work; it is acknowledged in the resolutely flat picture plane on which he works, in the Dadaist combination of high and low culture, and in his use of collage, the technical and conceptual lynchpin of his practice. Developed as a countercultural visual language by the avant-garde in the early years of the twentieth century, collage was rapidly incorporated into the language of advertising and mass culture by the beginning of World War II. Herrera's engagement with this process taps the medium's original subversive function, but also, in the artist's free mixture of styles and imagery, highlights its role in the fragmenting and randomising processes of contemporary visual culture.

Like the Cubists, Herrera uses collage to disrupt figure-ground relationships, create the illusion of texture and destabilise the picture plane. Paper layers vie for dominance as visual languages jostle with one another. The juxtaposition of disparate elements, with their latent psychological references, suggests a Surrealist lineage stemming directly from the collages of Max Ernst; the way Herrera's collages are often isolated in the middle of a white page recalls how the blank page operated as a 'spacer' in photomontages by John Heartfield and other Dadaists, to deprive their images of any illusory continuity with reality.

Although the term Modernism encompasses various political, cultural and artistic movements rooted in the changes in Western society at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, the principles of

abstraction constitute a universally recognised visual language of the modern era. From the implicit universality of the 'international style' in modernist architecture to the 'international' vision of Constructivism, or the cross-cultural borrowings of American abstract artists such as Jackson Pollock or Brice Marden, abstraction has always been associated with internationalism. As Juan Ledezma elaborates elsewhere, the Neoconcretist movement that emerged in Latin America towards the end of the 1950s was born of a reinterpretation of (Western European) geometric abstraction, and became the language of a new cultural identity synonymous with the experience of modernity. Entangled in politics, abstraction has been conceived both as a kind of visual Esperanto that transgresses national borders but creates new cultural ones, and as a context-specific fusion of shifting signifiers.

While the multiple 'modernisms' of Europe – from Surrealism to Art Brut, Dada to Constructivism – used techniques of abstraction to voice opposition to mainstream political and cultural hegemony, formalistic narratives of the development of modern art have tended to assert the domination of Western European and American modernism by privileging a narrative of linear development towards 'pure' abstraction. There are, however, many histories that fall outside of this narrative, including that of British modernism, which blended the psychological aspects of Surrealism with the abstract principles of Constructivism, and remained largely rooted in a semi-figurative way of working. In its selective borrowings from modernism, the unlikely mixture of influences and use of figurative imagery, Herrera's work finds some affinity.

Arturo Herrera's background as an artist from Venezuela whose formative years were spent in North America provides an already transcultural context for his engagement with Modernism, although his visual syntax is derived primarily from an American experience of modernity. His signature style combines a universally recognisable, graphic 'Disney' style of imagery lifted from children's books, comics and cartoons with the equally iconic visual keys of American modernism: from the calligraphic marks of Franz Kline to the drips, splatters and frenzied surfaces of Jackson Pollock, the subliminal notations of Twombly, the pop pastiche of Roy Lichtenstein, or the colour fields of Barnet Newman (think of Herrera's newest felt pieces).

In terms of critique, Herrera's work seems closest to that of Cy Twombly, whose use of graffiti in a painting such as *Free Wheeler* (1955), resonates with the dense impenetrable webs of Herrera's large, untitled graphite drawings from 2003. Both artists tackle Abstract Expressionism through a strategy of recoding the marks rather than undermining them, and the work of both has a psychological undertow, which operates as a subversive element counter to the formal construction of the image. Twombly interprets Pollock's looped skeins of paint as graffiti scratched into and across a surface, the random, repetitive act rendering less a trace of the artist's hand than a recoding as his absence; while Herrera construes the graphic language of cartoons to mimic Pollock, pointing to the disintegration of a coherent canon of visual styles. But Herrera's flattened, stylised version of the action painter's expressive stroke is probably best articulated by its translation into cut felt – evenly rendered across a depthless surface that mimics a veil.

Herrera's engagement with abstraction through the language of his adopted culture is central to the critical position his work takes in relation to contemporary visuality and the discourses of centre and periphery in the modern world. His tactics of quotation have the effect of collapsing dialectical distinctions between inside and outside, authentic and inauthentic, representation and original. Quoting the techniques and tropes of Modernism through popular culture, Herrera creates a hybrid palette of his own that embraces a post-modern social and visual environment.

A fragmented mixture of approaches and references that disrupts art historical canons of style, Herrera's work offers an allegory of postmodernism. His exuberant collages recuperate the energy of abstraction without being tethered to a set of culturally specific conditions; the consequence of what Fredric Jameson would call consumerist amnesia – which Herrera acknowledges through its alter ego, nostalgia. The waning 'affect' of contemporary visuality is countered by the nostalgic appeal of Disney imagery. Herrera's use of the index and other non-compositional devices correspond with the phenomenon described by Barthes as the death of the author; as for the psychic and spatial disorientation of the post-modern subject, Herrera's intricate webs undermine the function of style as a repository of cultural reference points. But Jameson's evocative description of the experience of post-modernity relates primarily to the experience of white, male, middle class, Western European and North American subjectivity.

As I argued earlier, the notion of otherness is inherent to Herrera's work, from the combination of visual languages to the process of tracing and

repeating marks, and in the simultaneity of the indexical and autographic mark. For others, i.e. those racially, culturally, sexually, geographically or otherwise marked out as the 'other', the same conditions of fragmentation, dis- (or re-)orientation, and the removal of the tyrannical author-auteur in post-modernism have opened possibilities for altogether different, parallel narratives and subjectivities. If Herrera's playful, paradoxical work demonstrates anything, it is this.

ELIZABETH FISHER
Exhibitions Organiser, Kettle's Yard