ARTURO HERRERA: EASY AS PIE

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Works of art that are as deeply grounded in procedure as Arturo Herrera's recent collages (pp. 29–31) confront the critic with a whole dumpster-full of difficulties, so let me begin in innocence, where I am comfortable, and confess that my interest in and approval of these collages arose from the experience of looking at them in a New York gallery. It blossomed forth in the fullness of my not knowing a damn thing about them or how they were made. I just liked the profusion of solutions, the brave lightheartedness, and the *macho-twee* extravagance. I also liked the scale. The collages hang free on large sheets of paper about eight feet tall – a little more than twice as high as they are wide. They are about the size of a Renaissance niche for a life size sculpture, or a court portrait by Van Dyke, or a Palladian doorway opening off the sala.

Browsing through the work, I noticed that each collage seemed to have been based on a central, human-sized cartoon character whose image was nearly obliterated by subsequent layers of collage and painting. In some cases, you only saw the figure because cues from adjacent works led you to suspect that it was there. Even so, the collages *were* portraits of a sort, at least in the sense that the human-sized figure, before it was occluded and abraded, had obviously been used to determine the size and scale of the finished works. The subliminal, figural presence of the cartoons (or at least

the centrality of their residue) rhymed and resonated with the body of the beholder, establishing the sort of bond that seventeenth century portraits can, when they manipulate us unknowingly into the stance of the portrait's subject, when we find ourselves, for some reason, standing contrapposto in a public gallery with one hand on our hip. It was a nice trick, not quite hiding the figures, and an intelligent one.

I decided that the cartoon characters in every collage were probably the 'deepest' image in a geological sense. After that the order of the layering got fuzzier, but generally you could say that the cartoons were occluded by collage, mostly decorative wall paper, and the collage was abraded by painting, and I loved the skittering energy Herrera achieved by patterning out the cartoon image with decorative collage, dispersing areas of colour in the manner of a rococo carpet, then abrading their elegant disposition with a vertical rush of gestures that read more like creative fence-painting than New York school *écriture.* In this way, to my eye, at least, on that day, the collages embodied an unusually complex recipe for visual coherence.

They retained a whisper of the cartoon's centrality, the fragrance of the wallpaper's ambient decorative stability, all overlaid by the rushing water-fall dynamics of the vertical gestures. This figure-to-pattern-to-gesture re-cipe, I decided, came very close to Pollock's self-deprecating description of New York School painting as 'apocalyptic wall-paper', and its success, as a recipe, was demonstrated, I thought, by the ease with which Herrera's collages hung cheek by jowl in the gallery and still retained their singular integrity – although they did lose 'depth' and become perceptibly 'flatter'

than they would if they were not so closely juxtaposed. This, however, was a minor quibble. All told, my experience of looking at Arturo Herrera's collages was good enough for me to check the pricelist and flinch but not despair, since the works were expensive enough that people would take care of them; they were good enough that I would certainly see them again, and memorable enough that, when I did come upon them in somebody's guest bedroom, we could always renew our acquaintance where we left off in the gallery.

The opportunity to continue this relationship came sooner than I expected. I was asked to write something for this exhibition, and I readily accepted. At this point, I needed to know just how, or in what sense, this group of works constituted a set, so I asked the artist, not really expecting an answer, and he told more than I really wanted to know – this, because I grew up in the world of Warhol's "Uh", and Ed Ruscha's "Gee whiz, I dunno", back when critics were more on their own and out in the cold. These days, we are all more complicit. Artists supply procedural narratives up front, almost reflexively and regardless of how good their work is, so art historians can write about their procedures without coming to any of those dangerous evaluative conclusions that might come back to haunt them at tenure time. These days, if an artist makes it known that he likes to work naked in the studio with a rose between his teeth, this must be recounted, breathlessly, and accounted for, as if it were important, and, to be quite candid, if I were an artist, today, beholden to academics, I would probably do the same thing.

The problem with this mandate is that it places a great deal of credence in the artist's perfect knowledge of his or her own intentions. It gives authorial intentions more weight than they ever deserve and radically reduces the possibility of those fresh readings that fuel an artwork's historical longevity. It forces us to deal with the artist's work as the end-point of an intentional narrative, rather than the starting point of an extended public conversation. By this fiat, the critical space between preening connoisseurship and lumbering art history is virtually eliminated, because once in possession of a 'creation narrative', fresh reading become next to impossible and irrelevant anyway in a world where everyone wants the textbook reading of the text book image. So, despite my reservations, I bow to the times.

The story of these collages goes like this. On a trip home to Caracas, Arturo Herrera came upon an old children's book that dated from the years of his youth. Two images in this book interested him: a drawing of a dwarf and a drawing of a boy playing the accordion. Herrera photographed these and sent them off to an illustrator, instructing him to draw their back views, as if one were viewing the boy and the dwarf from behind. This created two pairs of images; two drawings of the dwarf, each with the same graphic footprint, and two drawings of the boy, each with the same graphic footprint. All four drawings, however, were differentiated by their interior, lineation.

By photography and projection, Herrera enlarged the resulting four images to human size and made five copies of each. He then intervened by making an abstract drawing based on the distinct linear pattern of each

image, like a musician improvising five times on each of four given melodies, making a total of twenty original drawings. He then cut out or cut up copies of these drawings, made, again, by photography and projection. He added collage and painting and ended up with seventy-five collages that stand on the wide side of an opening delta that moves from one book to two drawings to four drawings to twenty drawings to seventy-five collages, adding information and suppressing repetition at every level.

This meant that the formal recipe I had come up with while looking at the work cold was one step short. It actually went image-to-*drawing*-to-collage-to-gesture and that made sense, since the drawings accommodated each of the four distinct images to their rectangular enclosures creating twenty distinct workable, collage-able, paint-able armatures. At this point, to be honest, having derived this formal clarification from the artist's tip sheet, I was good with Herrera's collages and ready to look at some more, but since I was writing a catalogue, not shopping or writing a published critique, I found myself speculating on those covert cartoon images peeking out through the collaged detritus, the dwarf and the boy playing the accordion, portrayed front and back.

I thought that the artist, having emigrated over the course of his career from Latin America to the Northern Europe, might have recognised something in these Humoresque, Dignified images from his youth in Venezuela. He might have seen in them a droll pre-figuration of his present situation in Berlin, a covert invitation to his geographical destiny. Or, maybe he found in the cartoons a confirmation of the extent to which Walt Disney and his folk-

sy ilk have managed to Germanise the imagination of tropical America by populating the dreams of children with elves, forests, deer, dwarves, villages and happy bakers flinging open their shutters to greet the morning by rubbing their fists in the eyes – none of which were much in evidence in the tropics.

This cultural cross contamination might well have encouraged Herrera to mimic the postwar German penchant for painting things out, à la Richter and Polke, and take a little revenge on Disney by 'Americanising' his Germanic cartoon-icons, overlaying them with a style of painting and collage that pays homage, in equal parts, to New York school painting and Miami style wallpaper. Or maybe these images didn't encourage him to do anything. Maybe the geological layers of the work are straightforward biographical strata, rising from youth to maturity, or maybe they trace a pseudo-historical Greenbergian history of painting from image, to abstraction. Who knows?

I can only point out that artists for the last sixty years have been dreaming up excuses to make this kind of acquisitive, potentially entropic image, and that Herrera's excuses are no worse than Pollock's or Rauschenberg's or Polke's or anyone else's. More to the point, I have spent a great deal of the last half-century listening to artists, who wished to obliterate narrative from their work, dreaming up narratives to justify this obliteration of narrative to a public, both private and professional, that can't do without some kind of a story or some new, zeitgeisty historical category, like 'cartoon abstraction', that implies a story. The reasons that might possibly underpin

this fervid quest for narrative have always eluded me. I have wondered: do we need stories because we don't have any or because we all have the same one?

In either case, this artistic ambition to dispense with narrative and the ongoing institutional resistance to letting that happen is so pervasive, that one might easily construe the history of art since Abstract Expressionism as a series of attempts by artists to abolish narrative, each of which is followed by a successful cultural effort to reinvest this work with 'back-story' – by grafting Jung on to Pollock, Freud on to Bacon, Marx on to Judd, Lukács on to Nauman, Benjamin on to Warhol, Bataille on to Salle, Adorno on to Barney, etc., etc. Speaking for myself, I have begun to suspect that this whole 'narrative' obsession is nothing more than a handy pedagogical beard – a way of speaking about art without confronting the anarchic implications of talent, sophistication, facility and contingency – a folk idiom that says absolutely nothing while passing easily for connoisseurship or scholarship depending on the speaker.

So maybe Herrera's occluded cartoons embody the artist's disdain for the childlike attraction of narrative, or maybe they are, in fact, an adult capitulation to it, a return of the repressed, or maybe they constitute a complex compromise, a separate peace. In fact, the very proliferation of narrative options argues persuasively that the artist cares less about any one of them than in the pixilated dazzle of their simultaneous profusion. And, really, who cares? Isn't it true that we only think about this stuff because we are in the habit of substituting procedural narratives for value judgments?

Haven't we always assumed that by suppressing terms of value we will obliterate our habit of valuing of things? And aren't we wrong? Doesn't writing or saying anything about anything invest it with value? And if the words we write or say are obsessed with procedural intentionality, doesn't this lead the discourse inevitably toward the presumption that *procedure is value* and isn't that wrong? Aren't the procedures that Arturo Herrera employs to create his persuasive works of art usually employed, less adroitly, in aid of lame sociology, whimsical confession and attitudinal politics?

My experience argues for that they usually are. Moreover, compared to the mental gymnastic required to make narrative credible, the discourse of value is simple. The quality of works of art is nothing more than the quantity and intensity of the beholder's response displaced onto the object. The quantity of what one sees, feels, thinks, says, writes or pays in the presence of the object, or thinks it about afterwards, determines its value to you. The sheer quantity of knowledgeable community investiture determines art's public vogue. Having heard me say this, of course, one might suggest that the self-indulgent prolixity of my previous speculations on dwarves and Disney and Caracas constitutes an investiture of value in Herrera's work but one would be wrong. That stuff is only interesting gossip. It demonstrates the ease with which procedural narratives can initiate a cascade of commentary composed of nothing more than tabloid speculation about the 'relationship' between the artist and his work.

The relationship that assures art's public vogue exists between the art and the beholder, and on this subject, we may all speak on our own author-

ity, without fictions, clairvoyance, or hypotheticals. So our question is not really about the story behind Herrera's work. Our question is about the story-of-the-story, the consequences of Herrera's physical actions and their ability to generate the quantity and intensity of response that they do. This requires looking at Herrera's creation myth from the outside, as an abstract stochastic process, an armature that directs a related sequence of actionable decisions. So consider Herrera's procedure from outside, as a work-order.

We are required to begin with two distinct, found images that are stylistically related. We must transform these two images into four images that are all different but graphically related. We must elaborate these four images into twenty drawings that are all different but stylistically related. We must transform these twenty drawings into seventy-five collages that are all different but still constitute a unified field of expression. So each sequential level of elaboration requires more differentiations. Each level of elaboration is limited by the configuration of the previous level. Each elaboration is further limited by its fellow variations at that level. So, we were required to create increasing numbers of differentiated images within a constant and increasingly crowded the stylistic domain. As a result, each differentiation requires a decision of more delicacy, nuance and refinement than the one before.

This process itself doesn't 'create' anything but an escalating sequence of high stress situations from which the artist can only be extricated by an escalating application of innovation and facility. This requires constant and ever increasing attention to stylistic unity in an exploding field. It also re-

quires constant and escalating attention to visual diversity amid diminishing options. It requires two people, in other words, both of them talented and facile: one to hold things together and one to pick things apart, and in this regard I find myself thinking of the pianist, Glenn Gould, who liked to rehearse for his performances by listening to himself playing one piece of music on his headphones while playing his recital piece on a silent piano. These rehearsal rules seemed crazy to me until I realised that the rules were not there to help, they were there to distract. The music playing on Gould's headphones was there to distract his right brain into listening so his left brain could play the piece.

Herrera's rules, I suspect, serve as a similar distraction – a way of keeping the ordering mind occupied while the creative mind discovers novel and viable solutions. It is a matter of keeping the rules and simultaneously breaking them. It is an obstacle course that the artist has invented for himself and must succeed in spite of. And, in my retelling, I realise, I have made it like sound hard and gruelling process, so please be assured that artists don't do things that are hard and gruelling. They only do things that are, for them, as easy as pie. So we shouldn't feel sorry for Arturo Herrera. We should recognise I suppose, that our experience of the work mimics Herrera's investment in it as Bath mimics Waimea, but even at this diminished level, that experience is still smoother, grander and more complex than is required at the moment. And we learn something, too. We learn that Arturo can do it, and we can't.

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