

Seduction, Darkly - On Arturo Herrera's Ambiguous Images

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Arturo Herrera's paper collages, paintings, drawings or cut-outs of monochrome felt, whether they constitute, generically speaking, wall paintings or objects or sculpture, are distinguished by clearly defined shapes and, often, by strong colours. Sharply contoured forms compete with a complexity in motifs resulting from his specific method of finding them: he fragments ready-made images almost beyond recognition, reiterates them, superimposes the fragments in numerous layers and combines them with inventions of his own making. Often, the fragments stem from the worlds of popular culture leading some critics to introduce the notion of a 'polluted' language of abstraction.¹

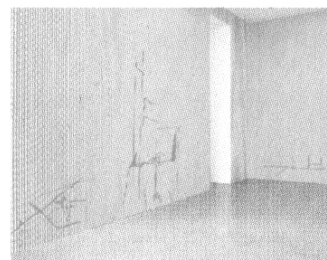
His wall paintings recall the works of Abstract Expressionism in both dimension and structure, whose spontaneous gesture is translated, however, into precisely conceived compositions of pigment or felt. The softness of the felt counteracts the heroic-male gesture of painting found in expressive abstraction. Its bodily connotation is taken up in Herrera's surgically exact cuts and lines. They are his tools in alienating not only found image materials but also his respective medium: the multilayered collages assume a sculptural quality while the monochrome felt panels align themselves into painterly gestures, and the most recent three dimensional objects are seized by a seemingly cinematic motion.

By way of manifold references to the imagery of the mass media, Herrera's works exhibit traces of pictorial narration. They may mislead the viewer into missing their critical reflections of institutions that inhere in such a dissolution of categorisations and hierarchies of materials. Thus the space occupying wall painting at daadgalerie Berlin in 2005 (fig.) is interlaced with references to El Lissitzky's 'Abstract Cabinet' of 1928 as well as Daniel Buren's 'installative' painting which radically challenges the autonomy of art. Severe red verticals caused the optically vibrating walls to dissolve and left it to the viewer to decide whether he was faced with colourful architecture in motion, a three dimensional walk-in sculpture or simply ephemeral decoration.

The lines drawn onto the wall as if by freehand not only veil the fact that Herrera's works are always preceded by a painstaking work process. In their extreme dimensions and scrawly distortion they also contain an element of the grotesque – of an aesthetics of alienation and hyperbole which characterises the artist's practice across all media. If art history treats it as a deviant from the classical norm, the grotesque developed artistic varieties which sometimes contain combinatorial, deforming and metamorphosing processes.² Dissolving (bodily) forms and organising principles opens up a game of associations on the logic and grammar of the image but also psychological spaces in which perception of the familiar is abruptly infiltrated by the experience of the other, the uncanny or the weird.

¹ 'Contamination' is the term used by Herrera's artist friend Josiah McElheny in an interview the two did together: Bomb Magazine, no. 93, autumn 2005, in <http://bombsite.com/issues/93/articles/2755> (22/2/2010); 'Infection' is the corresponding notion in Juan Ledezma, 'Neither Legible nor Abstract. Arturo Herrera's Work under the Sign of Ambiguity,' in Arturo Herrera, exh. cat. Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, 2007, pp. 61–70, 'Reverse Purism' is used by Ingrid Schaffner, 'Cut Up. The Art of Arturo Herrera,' in exh. cat. Centro Galego de Arte Contemporanea, Xunta de Galicia, 2005, pp. 129–139.

² See Frances S. Connelly, Introduction, in *Modern Art and the Grotesque*, Cambridge, 2003, p. 1–19, here pp. 2f.



3 See, for example, Ingrid Schaffner, 'Cut Up. The Art of Arturo Herrera' (see footnote 1); Maria Tatar, 'Arturo Herrera's Fabulous Monsters,' in: Arturo Herrera, exh. cat. The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, 1998, pp.19–24.

4 This work is extensively presented on the website of the exhibition 'Adaptation' (Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago 2008 et al.) where its definitive version was put on display for the first time: <http://adaptation.uchicago.edu/artists/herrera> (22/2/2010).

5 James Elkins, *Why are our Pictures Puzzles? On the Modern Origins of Pictorial Complexity*, New York / London, 1999.

6 Cf. also Josiah McElheny, Interview with Arturo Herrera, in *Bomb Magazine* (see footnote 1).

7 On the cognitive aspects of perceiving ambiguous images, see most recently: Dario Gamboni, 'Ambiguität in der Kunst: Bildtheorie und Interpretationsverfahren,' in Verena Krieger, Rachel Mader (ed.), *Ambiguität in der Kunst. Typen und Funktionen eines ästhetischen Paradigmas*, Cologne et al., 2010, pp. 209–224.

In Herrera's collages and paintings drawing on the imagery of cartoons and children's books, their very potential of 'dark' associations is cultivated in a particularly vivid manner.³ The darting tongues of the metal floor work 'Plot' (2006), too, deceive our accustomed modes of experience. 'Plot' not only claims, as the title suggests, a spot on the gallery floor and alludes to a potentially conspiratorial context (p.77). A common experience, stumbling on the sharp-edged, square steel plates of Minimal Art spread across a museum floor, is literally undermined by a dissolving biomorphic shape leaking from a fissure between the floor and the wall.

Between domestic idyll and female kitchen obsessions, artistic (especially Bauhaus) ideals of an aestheticisation of everyday life and their private counter-worlds, the portfolio 'Schloss' (Castle; 2009) weaves a complex web of associations (pp.17–23). The artist confronts the powerful visual seduction of artful pastry displayed in a 1925 book with blotch-like overlays in black ink, oscillating between childish scribbles, scuff marks and dark shades.

Whether they are drawn or applied by brush, the marks are nevertheless the result of a seemingly accidental, unintentional process. They are strokes, streaks and stains such as the ones appearing in 'Les Noces' which was made in 2007 and is based on a 1923 ballet of the same title that was scored by the composer Igor Stravinsky.⁴ While they allow for a quite cogent interpretation as 'contaminations', traces of drawing in the work of Arturo Herrera stand more generally for ambivalent 'irritations' of the image somewhere between ciphers of abstraction and traces of representation. Like open signs they are not only flexible in their medial incompleteness and potential transformation but also in their legibility between figuration and the non-objective.

It is this ambivalence of signs which Herrera explores in his works. Ambiguous – shifting, conflicting – shapes and forms dominate his pieces, and a particular physical quality of their materials. The dialectic of revealing and concealing is exerted in grotesque distortions and alienations, the image is questioned in terms of its legibility. Our visual recollection is challenged. 'Why are our pictures puzzles?' the art historian James Elkins⁵ asked a few years ago. While he critically derived the increasing complexity of images in Modernism from its extensive theoretical reflection, Arturo Herrera's works can be read as 'puzzling' in their own right.⁶ They are ambiguous images the visual perception of which draws on the memories and wishful thinking of their beholder⁷ and repay him or her all the more with perceptual abundance.

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