

# THE TEXTURE OF REALITY

On Arturo Herrera's Collage Practices

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A burst of color, its dynamism spreading in all directions simultaneously. A vibrating *mélange* with all the energy that at first makes you think of a painting in its complex abstract texture. Or another one, put together from completely different elements: a large-format image made up of shades of black, white, and gray, covered by dense clusters of lines, running in parallel to each other. They build up into a fragile, spacious plane, a minimalist oscillation that expands as a flicker—a visual drone that gives rhythm to the disparate underlying organization of newspaper clippings and abstract-gestural images.

Closer inspection quickly shows that these intensely colored and formally complex abstractions are not paintings at all, but large-scale collages made up of hundreds of scraps of paper, collected from the most diverse sources. You can find small figurative fragments buried in the texture—here a photograph torn from a magazine or advertisement, there bits of illustrations of well-known paintings from art history or historical documentary photographs. A culturally trained eye will immediately identify some of the references, but many of them cannot readily be decoded, and some of the sources are indefinable from the outset. In any case, Herrera himself says that such purely analytical reading, an investigation into the ingredients of his pictures, will only take you so far. Of course it is important to him which (pictorial) materials will appear at which spot in the picture, but there is no key, no explicit subtext written into it by particular image fragments that could be considered independently. Quite the opposite: one could say that the myriad micro-references within the work run in the other direction, forcing open the clearly defined significations. Each of the elements here—quotes from other pictures as well as colored paper marks—resonates within an overall theme. Herrera's approach to collage follows an aesthetic practice that offers a contextual liquefaction of representation.

This means that the figurative fragments tend to merge into the overall composition. Viewers have to put in some effort to arrive at the picture plane and orientate themselves in the extremely dense collages, which often expand to a huge

scale. Only gradually can the eye perceive an order in the apparent chaos and beat visual paths through it like trails through a forest—trails that can just as quickly close up again and force the viewer to discover another way. Everything here appears to be intertwined: not so much in a clear syntax, more in compositions of complex musicality.

Herrera works in various media and uses different materials, like large cut-pieces of felt, various printing techniques, painting, sculpture, and even video. He is interested in probing the language of abstraction, where the boundaries of the figurative and the non-objective dissolve and merge into each other. The complexities of his compositional structures slow down the eye. This pictorial language sets up a carefully arranged suspension between object and form that can expand the view in both directions: into abstraction and representation at the same time. To lend a picture the necessary coherence, Herrera makes it as ambivalent as possible, escalating the suspenseful contradiction of its elements. The process of collage is the basic principle of his practice and at the same time the means of research into its aesthetic possibilities.

In his work, Herrera makes use of an extensive, constantly growing collection of found materials: bulks of the most widely varied bits of paper and print images. Roughly sorted according to size and type, mass-edition printed matter, typography, or leftovers from his own silkscreen printing workshop wait to become an element in the picture. Herrera will quickly find his way around this pool: "If, for example, I'm looking for a particular yellow, for me it's easier, faster, and also more exact to find the hue in the materials than it is to mix it up from several colors," he tells me when I visit him at his studio, and he pulls a few examples out of a large box. "Here's where I keep both found and hand-finished materials. This comes from one of my drawings, for instance, while this is from a printed book. Here is a page from a painting book, a gesture in abstract watercolor, here is acrylic on paper, crayon and India ink, graph paper, printed papers, here finger painting, and there the paint has been applied straight from the tube, again more crayon, and this is a sheet of marble-paper. A sheet from an exercise book, painting by numbers, which I dug up in an old bookshop...it's already rather yellowed."<sup>1</sup> This detailed account of the many disparate items in his archive shows the extent to which Herrera derives his imagery from the genuine materiality of the pieces. From the beginning, they are part of the process of developing the image. Elsewhere he explains it like this: "I am interested in how can an image that is so well composed

and is so clear and so objective...made out of these disparate fragments, glued, forced to be together...create an image that will have a different reading from what the fragments say.”<sup>2</sup>

At the time this text was written, the collages reproduced here were largely still being worked on. Even if they were at a pretty advanced stage, Herrera didn't know in advance when his works might have reached their logical conclusion and could be declared finished. He sees this as a moment of coincidence that cannot be anticipated conceptually. That made the visit to his studio even more revealing about the way he creates his pictures. Herrera works on individual collages, in parallel and often over months, and a large number of them were in progress, hanging on the wall or lying on tables. “Coming to the studio is discovery time for me, basically. As Stravinsky said, just as appetite comes by eating, so work brings inspiration.”<sup>3</sup> This means continuous experimentation, trying things out, and playing around with the most widely varied combinations. Then often enough coincidence and the luck of the draw enter the picture. Herrera pushes ahead with a complex process of decision-making from which the collages emerge. It is like sedimentation, a patient process in which a picture remains vague for a long time until decisive additions suddenly give it an unexpected conclusiveness.

Recently, many of Herrera's collages have taken on a more fragmented structure. Combinations appear more open and coincidental, and in some cases more pointedly chaotic. Earlier work groups had a marked tendency to take the motifs for their conceptual starting point—for instance, when Herrera referred to comic figures and used them as pictorial elements, drawing their silhouettes and subjecting them to complex overlayings with collage elements. The motifs were so radically abstracted they practically dissolved into the texture: pictures from the work group *Boy and Dwarf* (2006) offer a good example for this.<sup>4</sup> In another series, Herrera had reproductions of backgrounds from Disney cartoons made—animated films using airbrush techniques—which he then used as the basis for his own defamiliarized collages such as *Keep in Touch* (2004).<sup>5</sup> One can immediately discern the Disney line, but although the original images are not too densely reworked, Herrera's interventions rearrange the picture to an extent that hardly leaves any information about their original form. They blend into almost pure abstraction, yet remain as a clear visual implementation of (pop) cultural history.

Since then, Herrera has developed the concept further. The basic relationship between free abstraction and implemented signifier now goes beyond a

reference to popular images and the interplay of defamiliarization and recognizability connected with it. The notion of a collective imagery is fundamentally ingrained in Herrera's collages and the random, more disparate, and thematically less explicit materials of the recent work also come from our mass culture and carry the everyday into the picture. Every element of Herrera's current collages, even if it just accidentally happened to find its way into the studio archives, contains a social and temporal index that specifically characterizes it beyond its appearance and materiality. Herrera's approach to paper—cutting, splicing, overlaying, and interweaving the pieces—stretches its role as a temporal signifier to the limits of emptiness and into an abstract new form. His collage practice liberates the original source as a carrier of meaning while at the same time neutralizing the cultural subtext. In this way, Herrera is developing an abstract imagery where the “contents”—the fragments of the everyday embedded in it—never function in an illustrative sense but are woven into the immaterial picture space. Herrera is rewriting the forms and elements in a process of composition that decomposes the previous significance of materials, and in effect he is creating the picture from the remnants of its own disintegration.

<sup>1</sup> Arturo Herrera in conversation with the author during a visit to his studio on February 1, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> After Arturo Herrera, “Powerful Images,” video interview for *art:21*, 2007, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BE5nNc3R5Ms&feature=relmfu>.

<sup>3</sup> After Arturo Herrera, “Powerful Images,” video interview for *art:21*, 2009, see [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_ki0sn\\_9qbc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ki0sn_9qbc).

<sup>4</sup> The 75 large-format collages are based on two Disney cartoon figures. Herrera enlarged their front and rear views and put them onto the paper—working with four motifs as a starting point—and constructed complex collages over them, overlaying the original motifs until there was no difference between abstraction and figuration and the two blended into each other. See *Arturo Herrera: Boy and Dwarf* (Berlin: Holzwarth Publications, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Published in full in *Arturo Herrera: Keep in Touch* (Santiago de Compostela: Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea, 2005); individual illustrations also in *Arturo Herrera: Home* (Berlin: Haus am Waldsee, 2010), pp. 80–96.