

A PICTURE, RESTLESSLY UNBECOMING

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“It was inevitable that man, inventor of writing and language, would fall into this trap, which he had built with his own hands. He hypostatized words and signs and then believed some god had revealed them to him. ‘I am Alpha and Omega,’ says the Word incarnate in the Apocalypse, thus showing even more than tradition and the cabala would have it, that if God is the beginning and the end of all things, he is at the same time a mere sign, a combination of letters and words.” —Michel Leiris

The ark of flat abstract forms that has been set into the future, through the continual use and re-use of its indexical parts in contemporary art, is a vessel wrought with an eye toward preservation and another on the value of profitable labor. If an artist uses what were once considered universal abstract forms, then history, rhetoric, and value are touched upon and “put to work.” This bracket of visible choices highlights what is known and displays how the author thinks on these archived forms, while also checking the illusions and desires tied to such entities. Each set of strategies deployed further reifies and reinvests in perennial abstractions, but also destabilizes the very standard of their language through repeated use. Yet many persistent forms seem strangely predestined to ever populate the abstract table—the gestural brush mark, the grid, the geometric shape, the arabesque edge, the deskilled scrawl—while also always being oddly and potentially blanched neutral by their having been emptied out over time, or threatened to become obsolete through irrelevance, conservatism, oversaturation, etc. The specter of emptiness as such deflates in advance a supreme value then, on the mere arrangement of these commonly accepted forms as the profitable end, except in kitsch art, where it is precisely this abundant arrangement of accepted forms that is both its currency and its perversion.

It has become more than paramount that a composition of abstract form, in order for it to have resonant cultural value, should complicate itself beyond an arrangement and into the articulate grammar of signs and sense, and therefore

point beyond itself while still acknowledging its difficult origin and its points of departure from the mythos of pure abstraction. A precarious, yet vital, set of near occluding pre-conditions faces an artwork using abstract form and trying anything like getting away with it on those grounds alone. However, if the bank of “working” abstract forms perpetuates itself through continual circulation, but is always at risk, then perhaps it is the very threat that gives it its life, because by abstraction pushing itself to the brink of meaning, it must mutate or retire the forms it uses, a phenomenon that is as atavistic to language as it is to notions of the contemporary. It is due to consider the individual parts of abstraction—the literal, consumable, and perpetuating techniques of it—to be at risk of meaninglessness, and it is also due to consider that the questioning and conceptual framing of these historical techniques is their only way of reforming a vitality.

The practice of Arturo Herrera hinges on the difficulties of the above concerns and does so with an intelligence that is both bold and fretful of the implications. In his collages that fuse painting, drawing, and photography, he moves ever toward pure abstraction, but always pulls back to uneasy tables of reference where one is left situated just there, at the table that is his workplace, sat before things that should declare by their near-perfect athletic arrangement a composition, or more a philosophy of abstraction. On the contrary, all one gets is a restless picture left in an undeclared state where at first glance things may appear to the side of the beautiful, but upon a closer look are restlessly unbecoming in what they refuse to tie up. In all of their sophistication the usual suspects of abstract form are present: scrawl side by side with textile patterns and glops of happened paint shouldering near strong pools of poured enamel or transparent ink, arabesques that arc over photographs and art reproductions, lyrical lattices across color fields, muscular slashes of gesture aberrantly crossing a technical illustration here or libretto cover there. In short, it is just about everything one can imagine to be in a “profitable abstract painting.”

However, these appear in a collaged form that, by its very composite nature of being bound by paper, points to the abstractions therein as near-representations of the kinds of abstraction one would make *if* one were to make an abstract painting. Never fully letting itself be a painting in a total sense, a collage by Herrera is an uncomfortable paper picture that can frame something abstract like an alphabet, or a few words, a grammar key, or a column of vocabulary. Each element is set to work establishing its abstract lineage and pedigree in the picture, but also adjust-

ing itself to its counterparts, testing the aura of its neighbors, setting in its heels for power exchanges in the economy of a forced frame of relation, and suddenly, a “profitable abstract painting” composed of conventional forms of abstraction is behaving badly, as if a volume of an encyclopedia granted life to each of its individual subjects all at once—what strange couplings and murders would take place in that arena.

What occurs in Herrera’s workspace, where essentially no abstract technique or history is excluded, is a super-fullness that in its abundance nods toward kitsch, but clearly keeps going and bears down and grinds its teeth into a vessel brimming with complicated contradictions. Abstract papers in Herrera’s works abut one another despite the fact that all of their attendant histories are based on the roots of exclusion. There was a time when the scratchy figural marks of Philip Guston represented a worldview and they were not welcome in the hard phenomenal world of Ad Reinhardt, or the poetic meander of Brice Marden was counter to Willem de Kooning’s material and hulking flux. On the worktable of Arturo Herrera, each is invited not to operate in the postmodern custom of quotation, but to hammer out a living economy of form and function, sometimes brutal, sometimes elegant, though only on the condition that no invited party may leave the table no matter what interruptions of logic are met with the oneiric or bizarre factors of their ever-changing convergences. The unease that this engenders is beyond an anxiety of influence and into the territory of conditional being, akin to something like the latter factors in Luis Buñuel’s *Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*. Their subjects being detained at the table by circumstance, in which expectations of performance are frustrated, the forms of entitlement subverted, and the players each revealed as ruthless in their attempt to continue no matter the stakes, Herrera and Buñuel touch on the dark nature of play, on humor, the absurd, and the role of abstract form or, respectively, formality.

In Herrera’s large double-paneled work *Arabella* (2012, page 129ff.), all of the above comes to the surface. While it may be that his small-scaled collage compositions in recent years have underscored a strange and sparse preoccupation with painterly abstract language as transferred to the intimate confines of the manuscript page, it is in Herrera’s large collages that these deceptively simple charms are torpedoed. In *Arabella*, left and right panels receive a glut of information on abstract form that makes for a weird violence somewhere between total debris and all-over structure in a cross-contamination of references irrevocably corrupted by a need

to feed the naturally selective economy of abstract accretions. Stuff, as it is taken from Herrera's studio and put into *Arabella*, is not arranged in a picture-making composition of balances and vectors, but instead funneled into a dump of piles and columns as they sit on a packed corner-to-corner field of marks and picture fragments. Six independently stacked piles, or what appear to be composed collage pages, are symmetrically divided into columns of three tall on the left and right side of panels A and B. One can follow their way through the work by walking across and down, up and over, down into the valley of abstract jumble and up into the mesa of composition. Or: the six page-like compositions stacked on each panel block the more expansive horizons of the larger field-like composites made corner to corner behind them. There is no figuring it correctly, but it is certain that like Wittgenstein's "duck-rabbit," both forms cannot be seen at once. Herrera's different ways of piling up abstractions are a Babel that speaks of infinite depth yet confounds by its adroitly flat order of the side-by-side, this-on-top-of-that phenomena, the indecipherable within the simple.

It is a postmodern myth in its own right that we can always be aware of history. There is still the day to day of walking in the world, where one cannot see beneath one's feet through to the strata below revealing the temporal crunch of days gone by. It is only by looking to a cliff that one can see the layers of time. What Herrera does, in *Arabella*, is to make one go over, in time, our desires, our notions of culturally valuable form, and our performative anxieties about them. The cliff is there, but it is only a peripheral kind of scenery one can neither ignore nor dwell on, as there are inevitable stumbles ahead on the ground.

In one section of *Arabella*, thin gesturally painted fragments of paper in cadmium orange, ice blue, straw yellow, and battleship gray literally flank and push a photograph of Diego Velasquez' *Spinners* to the very extreme upper right corner of the first panel. In another fragment, the name *Arabella*, which might stand for the title figure of Richard Strauss' opera, appears as a word below the umber silhouette of a stepping ass printed on foxed paper and blunted by blots of permanent green and white. These are the ends of touchstone references that are ultimately left unfulfilled as keystones or allegorical figures. What really populates *Arabella* is abstraction upon abstraction. Every form from the abstract ark is let loose: sign, word, and letter in a clogged sardine can of references that is undaunted by the contingency of its being, or its unbecoming restlessness, in a composition strangely regardful of all its itinerant forms while also looking like it doesn't give a damn.

What then to think of Michel Leiris' sudden void-like impasse upon God's pronouncement that the end of the world is the final willed Omega moment to his Alpha origin? By stating so in a metaphor on written language, it becomes a simultaneous declaiming of the very existence of a God and a striking down the order of the Apocalypse. The true inventor of writing, humanity, is to remain in a world of imperfect abstractions. God is there denuded and revealed to be a simple "combination of letters and words." However, the play of those words and letters ad infinitum is a condition with which one can live and write, and not be terrorized by the judging hand of a universal God. A daily practice that engages the forms of abstraction engenders a working economy that leaves room for the living to bear the naturalness of the very indeterminate conditions of the historical present. Some things like Leiris' letters and words, or Herrera's page-like alphabets, are not only a screen to divide the space of myth from the terra firma of the present, but are also a place to project the possibilities of what one has to work with from the illusions and inventions that have been fashioned, according to Leiris, "by our own hands."