

THE PAINTING IS THE BOOK

A DIALOGUE WITH
ARTURO HERRERA
BY
IAN BERRY

ARTURO HERRERA PRESENTED A SITE-SPECIFIC INSTALLATION of nearly 100 untitled abstract paintings in 2015 at the Tang Museum. The works, on view for the first time, were displayed on artist-designed colored walls. Herrera's intervention in the Tang Museum's galleries extended his ongoing practice of investigating and playing with architectures and spaces both large and small.

Herrera's works were made on books, which he paints with vibrant colors and occasional recognizable printed images that obscure titles, drip over edges, and seal their pages shut. Rendered unusable in terms of their original purpose, the books foreground the consideration of the object-ness of abstract painting.

Herrera's twenty-year body of work includes collages, prints, cut-felt sculptures, drawings, paintings, and murals. Early examples of Herrera's altered books debuted at Corbett vs. Dempsey in Chicago in 2013, and at Sikkema Jenkins & Co. in New York in 2014. A fourth installation of the series opened at Thomas Dane Gallery in London in 2015. This catalogue focuses on paintings made for *Day Before* at the Tang Museum and includes views of these recent exhibitions.

Ian Berry: Where do the books come from?

Arturo Herrera: Almost all the books come from Berlin flea markets. I have also received some from friends and other artists. The flea market books are all piled together in huge boxes. Sometimes entire libraries

are exposed, revealing the personalities and tastes of the owners. It is fascinating to see what kind of books people bought years ago, what was important to each reader.

IB How do you choose?

AH What attracts me to a specific book is its cover, typography, colour, and title. Looking for specific titles, authors, editions, or series is useless in a flea market. What you see is what you get and you never know what you will find on any given day. More often than not, the hunt never ceases to offer amazing options.

IB What is your process when making these paintings—how do you decide whether to collage, paint, or print? What comes first?

AH Each book is a ready-made surface already primed for painting. Covers are made of heavy cardboard or colored canvas or linen already printed with letters and illustrations. I react to what is already there using oil, acrylic, ink, gouache, spray paint and silkscreen. Some books need only a few marks while others go through an extensive process of change with multiple layers of paint.

IB I see some motifs repeat—a section of a Roy Lichtenstein drawing for instance, or other abstract patterns. Where do those Lichtenstein details come from? Is he, or Pop important to you?

AH All the books were made using a combination of techniques. Silkscreen was an important part of the process as it allowed drawings and shapes to be transferred quickly in a variety of colours. I selected all kind of images for the screens including old photocopies from the 2011 Lichtenstein Black and White Drawings catalogue from an exhibition at the Morgan Library. I am a huge admirer of his work. I especially like his early works where you see him feverish with energy as he goes for broke. For the screens I selected Steak (1963), Temple of Apollo (1964), and Mail-Order Foot (1961). The economy and power of these drawings is revelatory as he was entering a new territory.

IB How do you feel about the legibility of the original books? Is the goal a total transformation of the object to a painting? Or do you like that they retain some of their book-ness?

AH **The sealed/painted book becomes an unexpected object loaded with a public and private history, but it is also an abstract painting that you can hang on the wall. While the original function of the book has been negated, the new object retains its integrity as purveyor of information. What intrigues me is the relationship between the failed purpose of the discarded flea market book and its new role as a visual object that can be read formally and conceptually.**

IB How did the series begin?

AH **At the end of 2012, after two simultaneous shows in London and Chicago, the studio was almost empty of materials. I had intentionally used up all the paper in order to make the transition from collage to painting.**

It took a while to get going. The few remaining books that were originally intended to be cut-up sat undisturbed on the shelves. And it was on these books that I started making marks. By sealing the front and back covers, the books became a different object altogether. Their particular color schemes, graphic design, cover fabrics and typography became grounds for something entirely new. I reacted to what was already there by constructing the image by adding and not cutting. Was it possible to create an abstract painting on an intimate scale that also addresses the paradoxical nature of a non-functional book? I wanted the painted books to have a dialogue with their history, their physicality, and the fact that they were now a visual entity, a multilayered contradictory experience, provoking associations.

IB You have used found material, often-printed material, for many years in your work. What does that offer you? Is it the physical-ness of the used things (texture, color, scale) or the metaphoric potential (used, handled, texts within), or both?

AH Found materials are living materials. I am attracted to their physicality, lingering references and evocative potential. Juxtaposing different displaced elements is essential to the ideas of collage, which I have been exploring for several decades. Assembling unrelated fragments is at the core of the work. They come together to form a never before seen image or object replete with multiple ways to access it.

IB What was the first collage you remember seeing? What historical examples of collage inspire you?

AH I can't exactly say but it was probably a work at the Museo de Bellas Artes in Caracas. They had a small but concise collection of modernist works on paper that included Matisse, Duchamp, Delaunay, and Picasso among others. When I lived in Chicago the Department of Prints and Drawings at the Art Institute always showed collages by Yoshida, Ramberg, Grosz, Schwitters, Ernst and Höch. These intimate works struck me as portraits of ourselves with ordinary materials. It showed

me that paper fragments had the same power as oil or acrylic paint. Their physicality and strange familiarity hooked me.

IB Let's talk a bit about the installation. We worked together to come up with a series of rooms each with single bold solid colors deployed around the space. How did you decide on those color combinations?

AH The colored walls allowed me to focus attention on particular sets of books. The open rooms each had their own character and the viewer could move freely within the entire chromatic installation inspecting the intimate paintings within fields of colour.

IB You are a big fan of opera and dance, both which can rely on color, in sets, costumes, and lighting. Have those experiences in the theater influenced your installation ideas?

AH Opera and dance rely on a variety of elements coming together to create a unique experience. As a team effort, it is extremely complex to make every part work, but when it does the performance achieves a certain epiphany in real time. The visual arts are different, as the works don't have an ending, per se. Joan Mitchell spoke about painting as the only thing that is both continuous and still. A show or an installation is nothing like mounting an opera with hundreds of contributors. A solo exhibition allows artists to create an unique temporary setting for the works with simple means like lighting, colored or wallpapered walls that are designed for an specific architectural space for a limited amount of time.

IB Who are your favorite set designers for the theater?

AH I always like seeing sets designed by artists. Some of my favorites were by Johns, Hockney, Matisse, Goncharova, Picasso, Rauschenberg, and Bask. Currently more architects are getting into set design. Gehry, Herzog, de Meuron, Hadid, Calatrava, and Libeskind have all designed opera and dance sets. More often than not they lack the theatrical experience to know how actors or singers should interact with the sets

and the dramatic purpose of a three dimensional object on the stage. However, they bring something different to the productions and their contributions are essential to the performances. Memorable musical productions I remember include Die Frau Ohne Schatten by Richard Strauss at the Met/Production by Herbert Wernicke; Winterreise by Schubert, choreographed by Trisha Brown and sung by Simon Keenelside; Der Ring der Nibelungen by Wagner at the Deutsche Oper Berlin/Production by Götz Friedrich; and Xerxes by Handel at the Komische Oper Berlin/Production by Stefan Herheim.

IB Has your relationship to installation changed over the years? What do you learn from past installation/architectural experiences?

AH Each exhibition gives you the chance to understand the space and create the appropriate setting for each of the works. It was wonderful working with you at the Tang, as it is a unique space that can be reconfigured in so many ways. At the moment I am interacting more with architecture combining wall paintings and wallpaper. In a recent show at the Thomas Dane Gallery in London, I exclusively used wallpaper made from my own photos of Berlin wall paintings. Once the

entire gallery was covered I was able to install paintings and painted books taking cues from the images printed on the wallpaper. The architectural relation between the gallery space, the city buildings seen through the gallery windows, and the Berlin wall paintings created a unique and complex environment.

IB Your photos showed graffiti and murals, right? Did you find them in your neighborhood, or do you carry camera around just in case you happen upon a surprise wall?

AH During the war, many buildings in Berlin were totally or partially destroyed, exposing complete walls. Once the lots were cleared, the city built modest three to five story apartment houses or playgrounds. Going around on the train, bus, or bicycle I noticed that many walls were painted with figurative or abstract designs. I started photographing them regularly in 2012. I was surprised to find so many. These unsigned murals are meant to embellish the building and the neighborhood and they are artworks for the citizens of Berlin. It's monumental urban art that is free for all to look at. Sometimes I wonder who the artists are, or were, and why this or *that* specific motif or image on *that* building. What motivated them to paint *that* wall on *that* scale?

IB In a way do you see yourself creating graffiti on the books?

AH Even though graffiti can be very colorful and made up of complicated shapes and linear designs, writing remains its focus. My interventions on books are paintings in a small scale. The physical reality of the book covered with paint creates a hybrid object engaged more in a visual/ conceptual dialogue than a literary one. The book is now a painting; the painting is the book.

IB You have made many large-scale wall paintings—some inside museums and homes, some outside on billboards or other walls—do you see your own work in relation to more 'unofficial' wall painting?

AH I started doing wall paintings to probe the impact of my small collages

on a large architectural space. The earliest wall works date from the early 90's and they are directly connected to the work that I was doing at the time. I wanted to see how these intimate pieces functioned on a large scale. Wall paintings and drawings are the most effective way to transform a space. Berlin is a great city for unofficial wall works. Some of them are truly fantastic. There have been several books published on street art in Berlin. It is great to be surrounded by so much public art that is always changing and being made anew.

IB Where are the book paintings headed? Do you have a sense of what is next?

AH Concurrently with the books, I began making works on linen, aluminum, and canvas. These abstract paintings were built with the imagery and language of found materials, such as cloth bags, commercial flags and banners, thrift store paintings and embroidered tablecloths. Modest in scale, they challenged the traditional two-dimensionality of the painting by deconstructing the surface of the picture plane. The layers of materials, painted and printed, hung loosely like pages or curtains, both revealing and veiling, what is below. What is next? To paint entirely with oil or acrylic paint on a larger scale without collaged elements.

IB How does living in Berlin affect you?

AH I find the energy to be ideal. The tempo is relaxed and effective at the same time. You are able to try things in the studio which is more akin to playing and that is unbelievable helpful to artists. The cultural offerings for a city of 3.5 million are staggering. There is so much music, especially classical music. It's world class with multiple concerts and operas the same night. The city is always in flux and never fixated on being monolithic.

IB Did you first come to Berlin on a fellowship?

AH I moved to Berlin when I received the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst in 2003. After living in New York for five years I was

ready for a change and Berlin was the perfect place to go. The DAAD is a fantastic grant and it made the transition between New York and Berlin very easy. After six months in Berlin, I decided to move here permanently. Space, unmatched classical music and great museums and galleries remain the attraction for me.

IB You were born in Caracas—how long did you live there?

AH I lived in Caracas with my parents and three brothers until I moved to Tulsa, Oklahoma to go to an English course at the University of Tulsa. My oldest brother was already studying there and that was very convenient. In 1982 I received my BFA and after that I travelled through Europe. In 1992 I received an MFA from the University of Illinois at Chicago and in 1998 after receiving two grants I was able to move to New York. Moving around cities widens your perspective and keeps you on your toes. Since my parents passed away and my three brothers are also living abroad, I haven't had a chance to go to Venezuela lately.

IB Is it important to have other artists close by you?

AH Berlin has been a magnet for artists for many years now and several have decided to stay. Just in my building there are more than twenty artists from several countries working full time. Stopping over and have a chat or seeing whatever they are working on is a treat. Artists here are generous with their support, time, and advice. I'm fortunate to be here.