

ARTURO HERRERA'S NEW PAINTINGS

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ROBUST MATERIAL MANIPULATION has always been central to Arturo Herrera's studio practice. In every format and with each technique—from cut-felt pieces to collages, wall paintings to multi-media prints—Herrera's work foregrounds the manual transformation of raw materials in the process of making them art. In some pieces, it is possible to discern individual procedures when examining his works' dense material layers, while in others, the singular, iconic character of his final image resists such unraveling. Ironically, his work can appear effortless, even while still palpably buzzing with the energy of the (presumably innumerable) hours that went into its making. The particular balance between process and its result is one of the hallmarks of Herrera's production as a whole. Looking at, and then thinking through, how Herrera's material transformations hold dense manipulation and lithe gesture together comprises part of the pleasure of his art.

It is within this practice of transformation that we can situate the artist's most recent work: a series of smallish objects characterized by dynamic, colorful painted elements and distinctive material supports. Each of the works (all of which are untitled and date from 2014 and 2015) began as a book, which was subsequently painted with oil, acrylic, ink, or silkscreened with gouache, and often a combination of each. Culled from bargain bins and discount tables, these books initially shared nothing in particular except that they had been previously owned and were of low commercial value. Discarded by their former owners, these cheap, second-hand books were selected by the artist using formal, rather than literary, criteria. The physical and aesthetic properties of each book were considered and prioritized. The materiality of its cover,

its proportions as an object, its relative rigidity, and its size and weight in the hand, for example, all took precedence over whatever associations the texts and their authors inevitably carry. By the time Herrera returned to his studio with these books and slathered them with a glue to seal their pages together, their original function had been permanently diverted. They were no longer, strictly speaking, books. Instead, these blocks of paper, cardboard, and fabric were already component parts of independent artworks, transformed to operate in new formal and conceptual registers.

If stripping the books' prior identities figures as an important starting point for Herrera's recent works, the categorical characteristics the generic idea of "book" nevertheless feature prominently in the meanings of the resulting objects. That is, while it may not matter that a particular tome was once a German biography of Humphrey Bogart or a French edition of Samuel Beckett's "The Unnamable," for example, it is significant that each was once a book. Indeed, Herrera uses the salient characteristics of book-as-such—as mass-produced, mechanically-printed multiples—to generate formal and conceptual counterpoints. Thus, the machine-made book becomes a ground for the hand-made mark, making the multiple copies unique. The anonymity of the printed object—initially indistinguishable and interchangeable from all others within the same print run—is replaced with the personality of the authored artwork. The object of negligible commercial worth becomes valuable, as the discarded object is cherished again, and so on. Each of these material and conceptual juxtapositions telescope to larger concerns in Herrera's practice, including, most notably, an on-going negotiation of the relationship between the hand-made and the mechanistic.

Although Herrera's objects operate within the broad discursive field described by these oppositional pairs, the ways in which they elicit reflections the hand-made and the mechanistic is not as straightforward as it might at first seem. Indeed, while the formulation above—that the book element denotes the mechanistic, while the painted element evidences the artist's hand—helps set the interpretative frame, it

oversimplifies the diverse ways in which painted gestures signify in Herrera's work. Indeed, like the books with which the works begin, the painted mark is also an object of the artist's manipulation. It, too, is subject to critical scrutiny and material transformation. In almost all of Herrera's prior production, gesture appears ironically: in quotation marks, as an archly controlled re-presentation of a process rather than its "natural" result. I am thinking of the works like *All at Once*, 1999 (p. 20), in which dripping paint manifests as an image rather than as the result of a "real" process. This type of staged process is also evident in many of the artist's large collages, in which line is created not from a single drawing implement, but rather by carefully carving with a knife to feign its effect, as in *#53DF2*, 2006 (p.17), for example.

In his most recent work, however, the terms of Herrera's examination of the painted gesture have shifted significantly. As the artist moves from work-that-refers-to-painting into the practice of painting proper, he is experimenting with different ways in which the gestural mark signifies. In many cases, he keeps his painted marks at a significant degree of remove by using procedures such as dragging, dripping, and scraping. All of these procedures deliberately court a certain impersonality, as they index how materials operate when subjected to certain basic processes more than they do the distinctive gestures of the artist's hand. A quotidian example might help clarify what I mean: imagine two children, each of whom knocks a glass of milk off a dining room table. Unless you saw them do it, it would be difficult to identify a specific spill with a specific child. This is because the form of each spill has more to do with the material interaction of milk, gravity, and the floor than with whomever spilled it. Many of the procedures Herrera uses in these works create marks that deliberately carry a similar anonymity. Within the context of art (as opposed to dinner), it is more complicated than that, for in the history of painting even such putatively impersonal marks can be understood to signify the distinctive presence of the artist's hand. (Indeed, it is a great paradox that Jackson Pollock's deskilled drip evolved into a "signature style.")

Herrera cannily uses the double-edged nature of such marks to signify both the personal and the generic, thereby inscribing both immanence and irony into at the site of the painted mark. As counter-intuitive as this may at first seem, it is this complicated duality which comprises the most important contribution of Herrera's newest work. Rather than align himself exclusively with a post-modernist critique of gesture on the one hand, or a fantasy of unmediated, autographic expressionism on the other, Herrera adopts the logic of the dialectic to seek a tentative synthesis. He takes some of each position to occupy a new, third space, in which desire and denial coexist and bear the mark of their encounter with each other.

A close formal reading of a single work should help us unpack what this actually looks like. In the current installation, most works are hung in a line near eye-level, however, one piece, *Untitled (007)*, is isolated on a huge, yellow wall by itself (p.24). Such a dramatic presentation invites viewers to take a closer look at this specific work, although almost every piece in the series evidences similar characteristics. Here the artist presents a simplified, graphic display of how gesture moves between the authored and the impersonally material. The work seems

to have begun with the artist taking the grey, canvas bound book and turning it upside down, thereby inverting the printed image on the cover and positioning the books spine on the right, foreclosing our ability to open the pages and read normally. Then he dipped the inverted book into a pot of bright yellow acrylic paint, creating a strong graphic division between the top and bottom of the piece. Although this line follows a soft, eccentric contour, it was rendered materially, rather than by the hand of the artist, deriving as it does “high water mark” of the paint in the pot. Using the viscosity of the acrylic to “draw” the line, the artist highlights the material process more than his hand. (This is a mark on the order of the milk spill). On top of this, however, the artist painted a looping form with a brush loaded with black oil paint (trafficking more in the language

of autographic gestural painting). Since the width of the mark is narrower where it runs off the lower right edge than it is where it enters the lower left, we can assume this putatively singular form is, in fact, comprised of several merged brushstrokes. The apex of the black arc formally rhymes with the weight and shape of inverted image of a horse printed on the book's cover, and forms a shape that approximates the letter "A." The black oil paint behaves differently where the book was dipped in yellow acrylic as opposed to where it was not. On the grey part, the canvas and cardboard wick the oil out of the paint, creating a halo effect and reducing the sheen of the black pigment. In the yellow part of the work, by contrast, the acrylic creates a primed barrier on the book's surface, allowing the oil medium and pigment to remain unified together. The pigmented mix only begins to break down when the artist introduces a solvent, as he appears to have done above the twin dripped rivulets that run towards the work's bottom edge.

Such formal moves, and the diverse ways in which different painted marks appear and signify, comprises the primary subject matter of this work and the series as a whole. The manipulation of material within the context of formal decisions that oscillate between intentional mark-making (such as the shape, sweep and placement of the form) and the impersonal behavior of the materials under different conditions (such as when the paint seeps or runs) constitutes how these works communicate this meaning. Even though gestures ostensibly signify manual control and the presence of the artist, Herrera gives equal pride of place to the specific, and somewhat unpredictable behaviors inherent in his materials. By working with a variety of paints, the artist takes a more direct approach to the question of how a hand-made mark signifies today. He complicates this by using procedures that court anonymity. Additionally, by pursuing this investigation on the pre-printed material of books, he not only capitalizes on the historical conversations about mechanical reproduction vis-à-vis painting (and all the associations that come with them), but he also efficiently undresses the myth of originality that often closely attends gestural abstraction. Painting on books underscores

the fantastical nature of the blank slate as an origin of invention, and reminds us that every field, figures and grounds alike, is densely populated by histories of prior use and meaning.

In these works, Herrera subjects both books and abstract gestures to material transformation and critical repositioning. The play between the intimate connection to an artist's hand that gestural abstraction has historically broadcast and the cool aesthetic of a procedurally-derived mark manifests itself both in the confrontation between the found book and the made gesture, as well as within the myriad painting techniques he uses. In these works, gesture appears in multiple guises through a variety of strategies of application. It arrives as much through the inherent behavior of paint subjected to quasi-mechanical procedures, as much as it does rendered by a dexterous hand holding an oil-heavy brush. By foregrounding how paint operates under a variety of material conditions—and inviting his viewers to witness the fascinating diversity of these operations—Herrera shows new range in his own formal vernacular, while at the same time adding a timely wrinkle in the august history of gestural abstraction.

* Note I have greatly benefitted from the artist sharing insights into his processes and intentions. Interview with the artist. Berlin-San Francisco June 18, 2015.