

To and from elsewhere

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Heel to Toe, Toe to Heel is the title of the seventeen-foot-long wall painting that confronts you as you enter the gallery. Blue, yellow and white lines tangle and pulsate across the wall's surface, edge to edge, floor to ceiling. Quickly, you sense that there is order in this chaos, that the entire scheme is staked on a single motif—a kind of loopy gesture, snaking as if drawn by an enormous brush—that crosses itself, folds back, and springs forward a few times before repeating. Yet, with no clear beginning or end, it's hard to locate. Really, it's not just repeated but layered over itself in positive and negative variations, producing a sense of rhythmic multiplication occurring in two directions at once, in staggered rows that stack in space but never quite resolve. You would be hard-pressed to say what exactly is on top of what.

The title calls forth a formation of dancers pressed up close. The painting's repeating gesture, which already traces back to the hand, and by extension to the artist's body, doubles here as a stand-in for the erect body of a dancer. The work's presence as a picture is both physical and durational. Towering over the figure of the viewer, it puts on a kind of performance that perhaps only painting can, in which its components refuse to settle into a stable set of relationships and leave the eye traveling endlessly across its surface, looping along with the beat. The painting works, then, not merely as an abstraction of dance but as an enactment of it. It steps in as a surrogate dancer itself, one that refuses to be still.

I'm beginning this essay with a description of this particular work not only because it's the first that appears in Arturo Herrera's latest exhibition at Corbett vs. Dempsey, but because of the way it so clearly ventures into the terrain of performance. As a painting made directly on the wall, it's unique among the works included in the exhibition, yet it shares the essential attitude—in its overlays and cuts, figure-ground reversals, and internal interferences—that animates the show's collage-based pieces across the

board. Throughout this body of work, dance circulates as a subject and a model that is by turns evoked, notated, and enacted through the medium of collage. The works' pictorial presence traces to specific channels that Herrera opens between the two media—dance and collage—to imbue each of their internal elements with a hybrid intensity: as traces of material from elsewhere, as components of pictures that cumulatively suggest the space of the stage, and as moves in a sequence of steps that seem to play out in real time before us.

Turning to the preexisting literature on Herrera's work in search of clues toward articulating some of this, an opening appeared for me in a 2006 essay by the art historian Graham Bader on Herrera's Boy and Dwarf series, a set of seventy five large-scale, vertical collage works built from comic book images of its two eponymous characters.¹ Bader's text positions its reading of Herrera against the backdrop of a pair of canonical models for thinking about collage-based work: Rosalind Krauss's "In the Name of Picasso" from 1985,² and Leo Steinberg's "Other Criteria" from 1972,³ each of which offers a definition of collage as a specifically discursive medium—"one that demands to be read rather than perceived" in Krauss' case, and as an analogue to "the scattering of information across a table" in Steinberg's.⁴ Bader's text passes through both on its way to showing how Herrera's work digests and responds to these models while simultaneously relishing in the atmospheric qualities of gestural painting to which collage once offered a radical alternative. His text shows how the works flip between wanting to be encountered as surfaces and entered into as pictures, and a how this ambivalence leads to "a new game board of pictorial and critical possibilities."⁵

What would happen if we approached Herrera's new work by reading the same two sources with performance specifically in mind, working from their respective authors' metaphors of bodily action—of discourse, or speech, and scattering—to consider the apparent dances these pictures perform? Steinberg's text, for instance, is shot through with allusions to the body in action. He tracks, in a by now well known argument, a gradual development in the conception of the surface of painting from its role as a fictive window through which to peer, one which stakes its illusionary gambit on the assumption of the viewer's upright posture, to that of a self-evidently flat surface

on which objects and information can be arranged. In doing so he elaborates new possibilities for the relation between picture and body that open up when pictorial surfaces begin to function analogously “to the horizontals on which we walk, sit, work and sleep.”⁶

Seen this way, pictures effectively point outward rather than inward, directly implicating both the bodies that made them and those that circulate around them. It’s thus no accident that Rauschenberg’s *Combines*, the assemblage works around which Steinberg stakes his argument, made cameos in Merce Cunningham’s dance works, entering into the fray alongside the performers as mobile set pieces. It may be that this type of model plays out at certain points in Herrera’s show—particularly in the glass works, which reflect their surroundings and seem to suggest an aerial view of choreographies across a floor, as well as the wood-paneled works on which paper ephemera accumulate as if piled on a desk. But Herrera’s practice is more complicated than this, particularly in those cases where the accumulations on his surfaces also represent the space of the stage.

Here then is yet another way in which Herrera’s new collage pieces, like the wall painting that opens the show, refuse to settle. Their animating tension between self-evidence and depiction—that is, the way many of the works present themselves as flat arrangements of collected material and, at the same time, as images of dance—itself produces a quality of unresolved presence. Krauss, for whom collage is in fact structurally conditioned by absence, can help us here. Her analysis begins by articulating the sign’s status as a stand-in for the necessarily absent thing to which it refers, these two component parts tied by a movement in time in which the former moves “away from, or in the aftermath of” the latter.⁷ Collage, as a construction of already circulating signs, is built from just this movement, its pasted elements creating a layered network of references and negations across the picture’s surface in which, Krauss writes, “discourse [takes the] place of presence, a discourse founded on a buried origin, a discourse fueled by that absence.”⁸

It is not difficult to trace a path from this formulation of collage to dance, the experience of which is equally structured by absence as a function of its ephemerality. Krauss’s observations replayed in my mind as I came across the remarkable opening lines of the New York dance critic Marcia Siegel’s anthology, in which she situates dance itself at a “perpetual vanishing point,” as an event that “disappears in the very act of its materializing.”⁹ Like the elements of a collage, each gesture of a dance eclipses the one that came before, leaving behind a series of traces that extend in memory like pages of a fan-folded book. Looking through the double lens

of dance and collage opens a way to account for what for me is an evocatively prominent quality of Herrera’s works—the way that they assert themselves so vividly in the room and yet simultaneously give off a feeling of not being fully present, not fully *there*.

Herrera’s works are composed of aftermath. They seethe with the bright energy of gestures and ephemera cut and culled from elsewhere, merging, entangling, and interrupting one another on the picture’s surface. Their materiality varies widely—in the works in the present exhibition, from glass to wood to wall painting to felt to paper. Together, these materials suggest variances of weight, liquidity, and absorbency, their differences (both within and across works) creating an extraordinarily nuanced quality of touch. The works’ palette is bold, clear and at times almost confrontational. This is true, for example, in the wall painting with which this essay opens (whose slightly acidic yellow is fittingly dubbed “limelight” in the Benjamin Moore catalogue), and in the high-pitched, pink grounds of his fifteen *Set Design Studies for Dance*, which project across the room from behind pasted elements.

It is in these works that the stage itself comes most obviously into view, its architecture—proscenium, curtain, scrim—evoked by their repetition of verticals from one side of the page to the other. This suggestion is strongest if the works are perceived together; individually, they are loose and more ambiguous. Most of the *Set Design Studies for Dance* evince different types of mark-making—staining, scraping, printing—though others are excerpted from printed matter and have been nudged toward abstraction via deletion. Somewhere on the surface of each, partially or almost totally subsumed by the pasted flurry, is a black-and-white photograph of a dancer. An arm and a leg are visible here, the edge of a jawbone there. The title “Set Design Studies” suggests a diagrammatic intent that the works broadly exceed: their cutaway gestures read at times like mobile architecture or curtains, but other times act like stand-ins for the performers who would inhabit that space—moving in formation, chasing each other, leaping offstage, or striking a pose. The bright pink grounds join in the action too, pulling forward and retreating at various points.

These pictures, then, don’t just read as set designs, but as choreographies of recorded actions that play and replay as the eye follows them in sequence across the page. There is a strange, layered temporality to this. Hannah Höch once characterized collage as a form of “compressed utterance,” and I’m reminded of that compression here. The pictures work like patchworks of disjunctive time zones: arrangements of actions that have happened elsewhere and taken on a new immediacy—contrasting with and amplifying each other—as they coincide

across the pictorial field. They are not fully here because they are happening both here and elsewhere simultaneously.

This sense of temporal compression—now coinciding with then, here with elsewhere—is an essential facet of these works’ particular performativity. It is reflected in the title of the group of collages on painted wood, *I Heard Them and I Still Hear Them*, which suggests a trace resonating in the present that continues to play out in the past via memory. In fact, Herrera’s title is borrowed from the opening line of a poem by the American poet Ariel Francisco, “Along the East River and in the Bronx Young Men Were Singing,” which is worth considering beyond this single line.¹⁰ Francisco’s poem descends as a kind of sonic palimpsest in which the sound of an unknown “them” is layered over a progression of additional sounds that collectively conjure the sonically and emotionally disjunctive landscape of New York City:

I heard them and I still hear them
above the threatening shrieks of police sirens
above the honking horns of morning traffic,
above the home-crowd cheers of Yankee Stadium
[...]

The initial sound continues to carry “above” an ever deepening cacophony as the poem moves downward through the page, until the source—the “them”—is finally revealed in the closing lines:

above the seagulls circling the coastal trash
along the East River and in the Bronx
young men are singing and I hear them,
eastbound into eternity even
as morning destars the sky.

The men at the poem’s edges may occupy the speaker’s *now*, but they are decidedly not part of the *here* from which he speaks. Their singing extends “into eternity” through the landscape of overlapping events and textures like a horizon line, orienting a chain of perceptions while remaining itself beyond reach.

The materials in Herrera’s works on wood, by contrast, accumulate as piles that build from the center outward. All seven of them appear as variations on the same structure: wood bases streaked and splattered with liquid color, in the middle of which is planted a stack of vertically oriented rectangular papers that decrease in size as they layer, each framing the next. The lower layers include materials collected from the periphery of Herrera’s studio: pages of magazines sometimes marked or soaked with pigment, offset prints, cutaway fragments of editions. These are finally succeeded by color plates from a Picasso catalogue, and then small, square black-and-white photographs that are usually doubled vertically on the surface, breaking gently with the composition’s logic of one-over-one stacking. Herrera happened upon the photographs by chance at a market in Berlin; they are

snapshots of two young men skiing, swimming, and hiking outdoors, and in their pairings often suggest consecutive moments like shots in a film. The time of materials moving and marking each other in the studio is juxtaposed with the time of Picasso’s paintings and the books that were printed to display them, as well as with the time of the vintage black-and-white snapshots and the outdated fashions, hairstyles, and attitudes they depict. Herrera’s sensitive placing of each element thrusts many of them into semi-abstraction, and at the same time destabilizes the thresholds between them so that in their compressed state, they start to augment and interrupt one another.

Dance as such may be absent from these works, but their vitality as pictures emerges from the same performative attitude that dance, as a motif, serves to bring to the fore elsewhere. In Herrera’s work, the gap between his collage elements’ references beyond the picture and their operation as alienated fragments sutured into new relations within the picture becomes a primary motor, vibrating with a kind of potential that is difficult to hold on to—an energy of possibility that wends its way forward from the depths of flux and temporal disorganization. This holds throughout the body of work in the present exhibition, and in particular in the seven pieces comprising *I Heard Them and I Still Hear Them*. Rather than gesturing toward the infinite by conjuring the image of the horizon, as Francisco’s poem does, the series’ individual components read like vignettes that each hint at a *mise-en-abyme* another kind of vanishing point.

Vanishing points and horizons, of course, appear in whichever direction one looks, and the effect for me as I spend time in front of these works is not only of something like memory, but of its future-oriented counterpart, fantasy, as well—emerging, perhaps necessarily, out of material that is in itself essentially impersonal. Pasted together on the picture’s surface, the amalgam of traces takes on an anticipatory intensity, something like the way each gesture in a dance not only extends from the memory of that before it but points forward to the next. A potentiality that runs forward and backward at the same time, never resting—*Heel to Toe, Toe to Heel*.

1 Graham Bader, “Between Forest and Wall,” in *Arturo Herrera: Boy and Dwarf* (Berlin: Holzwarth Publications, 2007), 81–86.

2 Rosalind Krauss, “In the Name of Picasso,” in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), 23–40.

3 Leo Steinberg, “Other Criteria,” in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 55–92.

4 Bader, 83.

5 Ibid.

6 Steinberg, 87.

7 Krauss, 33.

8 Ibid., 38.

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Marcia Siegel, *At the Vanishing Point: A Critic Looks at Dance* (New York: Saturday Review Press), 1.

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Ariel Francisco, “Along the East River and in the Bronx Young Men Were Singing,” *The New Yorker*, Accessed October 7, 2019. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/03/18/along-the-east-river-and-in-the-bronx-young-men-were-singing>.