

WED NOV 22, 2006

EXHIBITIONS

**ARTURO HERRERA**  
**JANUARY 11 – FEBRUARY 22, 1998**

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**A Gentle Trauma**

*"My oh my! I get the general impression of all kinds of squirmy animals."*

*"This is an idiot child with tongue hanging out."*

*"I see two men fighting over the vertebra of another man."*

*"This looks like a ....a what do you call it?...like an animal ....hanging up."*

*"Oh my God! It's the head of a woman."*

psychology patients responding to various Rorschach inkblots



Arturo Herrera  
Forty Winks, 1998  
wall painting  
latex paint  
Installation View

Hermann Rorschach led a very brief life. The Swiss doctor was only 37 when he died in 1922. His death, however, was not enough to stop the inkblot test which bears his name from becoming a staple of popular psychology. Although Rorschach considered his studies incomplete, he was confident enough in his findings to develop a systematic means for analyzing responses to "accidental forms." On its surface, the Rorschach test seems innocent enough. A patient is asked to look at a symmetrical

inkblot and the diagnosis is initiated with the simple question, "What might this be?" There is no correct answer so the patient is encouraged to respond with whatever comes to mind. Since the diagnosis rests on the premise that the unconscious best articulates itself without one's knowledge, the less conscious the patient's response, the better- all the more pure is the psyche's projection of its contents.

Taken out of context, it is hard to determine if the above quotes refer to an inkblot or the work of Arturo Herrera. Sausages...Hanging stockings...Eyelashes sagging under the weight of too much mascara...Uniform trails of blood gently seeping through a cut. This list of associations could just as easily be grouped with the quotes above. They, however, were not prompted by an inkblot but were derived from Herrera's untitled, black and white print on display in the exhibition. Although psychoanalysis is concerned with gaining access to the unconscious, it hardly concerns itself with what the unconscious must look like. This task has been left to artists such as Herrera. Of the works in the exhibition, Herrera's silk screen print is the one which most resembles a Rorschach inkblot. In fact, the only real difference between a Rorschach inkblot and Herrera's print is the degree of literalness with which either image acts as a picture of the unconscious. For Herrera, once the inkblot has been assigned a representational value of a psycho-symbolic order, it ceases to be abstract. It now functions as an image of the unconscious in its encrypted state. Although this difference is more conceptual than formal, it reconfigures Rorschach's equation so that unconscious can be viewed on its own terms rather than those of an over-determined conscious.

Herrera's exhibition has the look of a pared down children's nursery. In addition to the silk-screen print, the exhibition consists of two vibrantly colored wall paintings, several white plaster figurines protruding from the wall, a photograph of a forest, a series of paper cut-outs which rest on a shelf, and two small but discreet sculptures. As if walking into a kindergarten classroom for the first time, the exhibition and its contents provoke a friendly sense of the familiar and a familiar sense of the friendly. Yet there is no singular meaning or explanation for any of Herrera's works, only a series of associations leaving one with few words other than "weird" to describe the pieces. The fact that his works span a variety of media -- photography, sculpture, painting, collage -- makes them even more difficult to assess. Herrera rarely if ever works in a cumulative manner. Much of his work is derived from the process of making collages. This applies to his work regardless of whether it is two or three dimensional. Elements of disparate weights are combined in an unlikely manner, or they are isolated, severed irrevocably from a larger context with no hope of return. But the most consistent aspect of Herrera's work is his sense of cropping and editing. Rather than construct an image so that its elements rest comfortably in relation to one another or within the frame, Herrera's sense of composition is aimed at generating a fluid dynamic of free associations. His most recent body of collages are freak scenes of intimate proportion. They have the feel of Hieronymus Bosch's hell, a never ending state of undifferentiated becoming. People, places, legs, machines, Santa, vegetables, paint, animals, objects, plants, Cinderella, a recliner,

are arranged in a manner so frighteningly arbitrary as to expose our psychological craving for order, a craving with underpinnings of violence necessary to fit or force, as the case may be, things and ideas together as well as to cleave, pull, or blow them apart.

Herrera's wall paintings are developed directly from his collages. "The spewing of a thrice-knotted tongue stained from drinking orange soda." This haiku was inspired upon viewing *Forty Winks*, the 20 foot mural first visible upon entering the exhibition. The color makes the fecal and phallic undulating and writhing downright playful. Herrera's abrupt sense of cropping gives the work a dynamic sense of movement that relates it to his fascination with the nature of liquids. In *Tale*, an earlier mural executed in yellow, what started as a cartoon-like rendering of a squirt or splat, quickly became a series of suggestive shapes whose provocative associations escalated to an unwieldy clamor. A recent suite of photographs investigates different states of coagulation in an oil and water dispersion. Unlike *Tale* or *Forty Winks* these photographs are less aggressive and more contemplative. In any case, Herrera's interest in the irrationality of the spill, the meandering intentions of a drip, or a splatter's violence are perfectly suited to his investigation into the associative power of the unconscious, an area of the mind which behaves more as if it were in the blood than in the brain.

For his exhibition at The Society, Herrera has chosen to render the unconscious in a style much cooler than his collages. Not only does each work have plenty of space in which to be contemplated, but, unlike his collages, they are extremely simple in both their form and construction. In this respect, the veneer of nursery rhyme nostalgia is simply a ruse lending each work a Fisher-Price-like quality making them easy bait for our conscious to swallow. Once consumed, the associations flow unhindered by issues of the work's origin. Needless to say, the comparison between Rorschach and Herrera rests on the fact that they both rely on a visual trigger for the unconscious. When it comes to dealing with the content of Herrera's work, however, particularly his use of childhood imagery, one has little recourse other than Sigmund Freud (1856-1939).

Freud developed psychoanalysis in an effort to understand such inexplicable mental phenomenon as neurosis, anxiety, hysteria, and dreams. In trying to locate their origin, he found himself tugging at the loose threads of our personality structure, an unraveling which inevitably led to an interest in the psychological development of children. The greater part of Freud's work can be divided into two broad subject areas, infantile sexuality and the unconscious. Given that the Freudian unconscious is a mechanism fueled by the libido, it is impossible to speak of infantile sexuality without reference to the development of the unconscious and vice versa. It is during early childhood that the unconscious is created as a container for forbidden wishes of a violent and sexual nature. These early wishes are generated out of situations of anxiety and are aimed at the child's parents. The violence and sexual energy of the forbidden wish, especially those wishes submerged during childhood and infancy, are mental and emotional forces active throughout our entire lives. Not only do forbidden wishes of childhood form the structure of complexes that ultimately

determine our character, their violent and sexual charge is the force which pushes unfathomable memories and inexplicable longings against the psychic membrane of consciousness. When the forbidden wish emerges, however, it does so in an encrypted state, as a hidden, disguised, displaced desire which can take any number of forms, from a dream to forgetfulness to an inappropriate but telling malapropism known as a Freudian slip. As symptoms, these phenomena can be interpreted and the history of the forbidden wish reconstructed, its latent childhood origins revealed.

Although the unconscious is always encrypted, the stage at which it speaks most directly and forcefully is childhood. The high volume of traffic between the conscious and unconscious, generated as the child comes to comprehend that which is forbidden, makes childhood psychic paydirt for the analyst. As a novice at the art of denial and forgetting, the child is a bundle of poorly disguised urges, anxieties and wishes. But upon gaining access to the unconscious and discovering the child's forbidden wish, how do we respond? On the one hand, there is the unconscious of the child, an instinctual driving force akin to molten lava, on the other is the benign world of colorful, cuddly things constructed in response by adults. These worlds are about as commensurate as the life achievements of Sigmund Freud and Walt Disney (1901-1966).

But who knew more about children, Disney or Freud? This question may seem silly on its surface but it reveals the conspicuous degree of over-determination at work in crafting a culture for children. Whereas childhood remains a psychic landmine for most individuals, it is a psychic goldmine for the culture and entertainment industry. As a fantasy world constructed by adults, children's culture, with its movies, books, toys, television programming, fast food, and cereal tie-ins is so over-determined as to appear immune from a psychoanalytic reading. But many of the characters in today's animated fairytales are literally and figuratively bloodless, oblivious to their roots in the disciplinary tales of yore. Yet, these overwrought fantasies, by virtue of their association with childhood, remain psychologically potent symbols not for the message they impart to children but what they say about us as adults.

Herrera has chosen childhood imagery specifically for its ability to signify the workings of the adult unconscious. But he is less interested in the interpretive aspect of psychoanalytic theory than he is with provoking and registering the force of the unconscious in its encrypted state. His work is not about revealing a hidden code in the stories we construct for children, although there are plenty of those. His fragmentation, splicing, recontextualization, and ultimately defamiliarization of the world we construct for children captures a very subtle psycho-symbolic tension indicating the presence of the unconscious in a place where we least expect to find it -- which is to say a place where it is actually omnipresent.



Arturo Herrera  
Untitled, 1998

Herrera usually does not have to look very far to illustrate this point. Appropriately enough, it comes in the form of a strikingly obvious ready-made. When mounted through the wall so that their interiors and a portion of their exteriors are exposed, the plaster figurines provide a haunting model for the unconscious. Appearing as small random protrusions spread across a generous white expanse, the figures emerge in a seamless, surreal, erect manner. Although they appear to be odd phallic blobs, there is something determined, something discernible in their shape. On closer inspection they turn out to be none other than our friends, Pluto and Jimminy Cricket. Bearing expressions of joy and delight, they present themselves as having always-already been known to and formed within our conscious. By contrast, the interior, negative forms, created during the casting process, bear absolutely no resemblance to their exterior counterparts. They are indeterminate orifices, smooth but lumpy voids which make it difficult to determine if the exterior form was determined by the interior or if the interior form was determined by the exterior. Under these circumstances, the wall not only represents the invisible boundary between the conscious and unconscious, but in mediating the relationship between always-already known forms of expression -- joy, delight, whimsy etc. -- and an indeterminate orifice which the surface tension of the wall is simultaneously shaping yet being shaped by, the wall also represents the discrepancy between the world we construct for children and the space of the unconscious described by Freud. Moreover, if this plaster wall work, taken as a whole, were assigned to represent a specific portion of the adult unconscious, it would most certainly be the super-ego.

As the psychic mechanism responsible for maintaining an ideal version of the self, the super-ego also acts as the dispenser of shame. In this capacity it is the portion of the unconscious, however warped it may be, that we transmit to the children. In short, the super-ego is the psychic panopticon which keeps watch over the forbidden wish of the child, a wish unacknowledged or denied by the exterior of the white figurine but all the while maintained within its spooky suggestive interior.

So, who knew more about children, Freud or Disney? With respect to Herrera's work there is a third party, Melanie Klein (1882-1960), whose work in the field of children's analysis best addresses this question. Klein was a follower and associate of Freud's, and was responsible for developing Psycho-analytic Play Technique, a method of analysis specifically for children. Klein was a firm believer that the child's unconscious was far more accessible than that of the adult. So much so, that the history of the child's forbidden wish need not be reconstructed for it is evident in the manner the child engages its toys. Klein's introduction of the toy as a medium for the unconscious goes a long way in bringing Freud and Disney closer together in relation to Herrera's work.

Although the untitled red and green sculpture resting upon the floor resembles a 10 foot stretch of garden hose, its lax, uncoiled state indicates that it has a substantial mass, that it is solid rather than hollow. It simply lies there, hermetic, unobtrusive, flaccid but heavy, a dead weight. It is a rubber that has a familiar density, flesh, an association reiterated by its color. But the green strip which runs its entire length gives it the cheer of a cheap Christmas ornament. And the work is eerily discreet. It begins as abruptly as it ends. It is limp, as though it once belonged to something living. Upon inspecting the flat ends of the piece, one realizes that what looked like a round length of tubing is actually an icon in the shape of an apple with a green leaf. Again, Herrera has employed a very subtle but psychologically charged ready-made. This untitled work is actually an elongated eraser that after being cast and assembled in an extrusion process, is sliced into individual 3/8" pieces.

Revealing the source of this work, however, only increases its psychological valence. Starting with apples, a possible chain of thought might proceed as follows: Adam, Eve, knowledge, sin, Wicked Witch, Snow White, eating. Or consider the formal aspects of the piece which yield thoughts of its fleshy tenderness, of its extrusion, of production, industrial defecation, over-production, waste. Thinking of its fate as an eraser and violence enters the picture: the process of it being sliced, of its aggressive use to remove marks, of the pink strands of waste it creates, of its rapid wear and disappearance. Considered together, these associations parallel Klein's thought at a level deeper than that of the sculpture's resemblance to a toy. Food, children and violence are the basic components for Klein's theories of oral aggression and oral sadism.

In addition to psycho-analytic play technique, Klein was also one of the first analysts to apply Freudian thought in an in-depth manner to the relationship between mother and child. According to Klein, this relationship, in an objective sense, is antagonistic. The infant is an oral aggressor, it can only assert itself through its mouth, its primary means for knowing the world. Pleasure and dissatisfaction are expressed orally, through consumption, which is to say towards the mother's breasts. The child's impulse is to consume its mother, to devour her and empty her of her contents. For Klein, the oral impulse is where the psychic and the real overlap. The impulse goes from being real at the level of an infant's preconscious to later being symbolic, submerged within the

unconscious yet manifest in the child's interaction with its environment, making the mouth a site for some of our earliest internalized prohibitions. Any permutation and combination of the thoughts provoked by Herrera's piece are bound to conclude with an acknowledgment of such neuroses as shame of greed or fear being eaten.

Herrera often speaks of a space "created between the viewer and the individual work" which is psychologically charged and therefore private, making a collective viewing experience impossible. One of the analogies he used for his exhibition was that of a toy store. "When children enter, they proceed, as if demonically possessed, to a very specific section. They know what they want before they know why." This is the effect he wants to achieve in his exhibition. "None of my works effect viewers in the same way. A work could leave a person cold, while the same work will become an obsession for someone else. I cannot and do not want to control this. I am much more interested in having them respond in an unexpected pattern of their own making." This statement explains Herrera's penchant for a variety of media and makes it clear that not all of his work operates in the same manner.

In the context of this exhibition, the photograph of the forest cannot help but signify the fairy tale. As a setting, the forest represents that unsettling region just beyond the edge of town where an absence of law and authority conjures a slight fear. But not everyone believes in the unconscious. If this happens to be the case, the photograph's associations with fairy tales are superficial rather than psychological. It is simply a beautifully printed, silver gelatin photograph of a forest, an homage to the natural world in which there is nothing to fear, no big bad wolf to threaten Little Red Riding Hood and no cannibals hungering for Hansel and Gretel. Just some trees. But to return to the toy store analogy, Herrera would be curious as to why this type of image is inexplicably comforting for some and haunting or mundane for others. What associations is the viewer bringing to bear? Does this image have the teeth of a menacing dog whose bite we could never forget or are they the nearly microscopic teeth of a leech whose presence we barely feel? Herrera actually gave the photograph teeth. Amongst the trees there is a very slight reflection as if there were puddles of water beneath them. Herrera created this reflection with a mirror to give the photograph an eerie, abstract grin to which some viewers will respond and others ignore. Unlike his other bodies of work, Herrera's use of photography is by and large strictly representational. Although the phenomena he captures may be rendered abstract once it is cropped, for Herrera, photography is a medium capable of signifying reality as it is read like a face whose psychological value some would never think to question.

Although Herrera's use of any and all media make it hard to categorize his artistic practice, his underlying interest in the associative powers of the unconscious invites an interesting comparison with Surrealism, a comparison which actually clarifies the use of the label "conceptual artist." As a figurative- and narrative-based strain of modernism, Surrealism's connection to conceptual art is often overlooked. If Herrera is considered a conceptual artist rather than a surrealist, it is not simply his

minimal aesthetic, but because of the problems of signifying the unconscious, a problem identical to that faced by conceptual artists of the sixties and seventies who grappled with the more sober, rational problem of signifying ideas rather than mysterious psychosexual forces. The conceptual artists of the sixties and seventies, unlike the Surrealists, made the problem of signification part and parcel of the work's content. If the post war New York surrealists which included the likes of Adolf Gottlieb, William Baziotes, Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock, are any indication, then Surrealism, in trying to resolve the dilemma of signifying the unconscious, had no choice but to resort to abstraction, a move which further obscured its link to the conceptual.

Using art historical hindsight, Herrera's work can be read as Surrealism's alternate path, one made possible only after the advent of minimal and conceptual art. But the lack of a narrative, let alone urgent or expressive element in Herrera's work, as well as his slightly off-kilter, ready-made strategy, places him firmly within the conceptual movement. Granted this, describing his work as a representation of the unconscious in its encrypted state is perhaps too strong an assertion. Herrera's work instead represents the idea of an unconscious. If his sensibility is any indication, then there is little to fear from the analyst's couch. Should sessions be conducted in a tone similar to Herrera's work, the river of rage and tears produced by delving into the psyche's recesses would be transformed into the comforting ebb and flow of a thoughtful, gentle trauma.



Arturo Herrera  
Untitled, 1998  
extruded rubber  
1" x 20' x 1" each

Author: **Hamza Walker**

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