

Arturo Herrera

Like a great detective story, the
Venezuelan artist's work is loaded with compelling clues

By David Colman

In art history terms alone, the 20th century took such a sudden and giant leap forward it's hardly a surprise that the art world has been looking over its shoulder ever since.

Which isn't to say that the current climate of dryly observed rumination is any less imaginative or engaging than its decades of forebears. Take, for example, the work of the Berlin-based artist Arturo Herrera, whose collages cull from a century not just of high art (abstraction) but also of low (animation) to form a familiar yet fresh synthesis that coddles viewers even as it challenges them.

The Venezuela native arrived in the United States in 1978, toward the tail end of this heady growth spurt, amid an art scene so teeming with precedents as to be, as one late-1980s Los Angeles group show would call it, "A Forest of Signs." Herrera finally found a path of his own when, after graduating from the University of Tulsa and moving to New York, he began trolling thrift shops for used coloring books, comics, illustrated fairy tales, old science manuals, and how-to crafts guides. As Herrera puts it, "They were the only things I could afford."

The artist in his
Berlin studio.

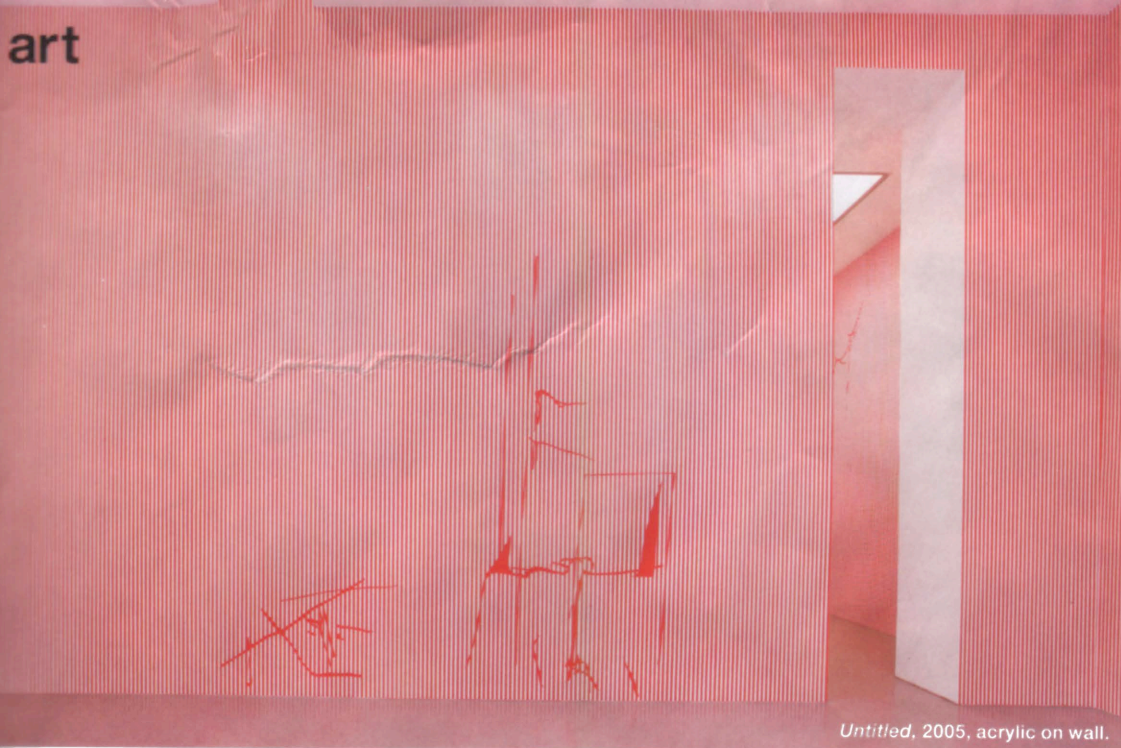


And yet, as he soon found, those cartoons were much more than that: "They were a ready-made encyclopedia of forms," says the artist. Using the children's castoffs, Herrera began experimenting with collage. With scissors, he transformed the pages into heaps of random scraps "full of biomorphic abstraction," then glued them together into altogether new images. It was a process he would perfect at grad school in Chicago.

What's remarkable about the work is not the clever concept, but the sensitive execution. After all, the notion of putting Walt Disney through a Cuisin-

art may not be the most original idea in a field packed with Pop-revisionist art. Without the wink-wink edge that so many artists make their focal point, Herrera reveals genuine beauty in his mulched metaphors.

Take for example the wall-size 2001 painting, *Untitled*, shown for the first time this year as a cornerstone of the Museum of Modern Art's "Comic Abstraction" exhibition. A slice and dice of a *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* coloring book, it's initially a classic abstract work in soothing shades of sea-blue. Until you start to see a puffed sleeve ▷



Untitled, 2005, acrylic on wall.

Keep in Touch (Set #3), 2004, mixed media on paper.



here, a dwarf limb there. In Herrera's hands, plain abstraction becomes something even more unreal, carefully and lovingly taken to another dimension that—while classically postmodern—is entirely his own. It's as if he punctuates his paintings with the question mark of Dada and Surrealism. As the art critic Roberta Smith put it, Herrera "flirts openly with legibility." It's a quality that curators and collectors find refreshing. "He calibrates just how much to include before you can comprehend the borrowings," says Roxana Marcoci, the MoMA curator who mounted "Comic Abstraction." "It's always slippery. He thwarts the attempt to identify the source material."

In some cases, like the temporary wall murals he has painted since the mid-1990s, the references are all but invisible. In others, the source is more tongue-in-cheek, like the 2004 "Keep In Touch" series, which superimposes shapes and squiggles, Baldessari style, directly onto cartoon landscapes. The effect is like seeing Robert Motherwell's bursting blobs or Brice Marden's wobbly worms lost in that forest of signs, a charming metaphor for the individual adrift in the modern landscape. But whatever editorial comment Herrera may be making is obscure—abstract, even. "They're totally personal," says the shy, soft-spoken artist. "They're not about directing the viewer to how they should be read; nothing is completely objective."

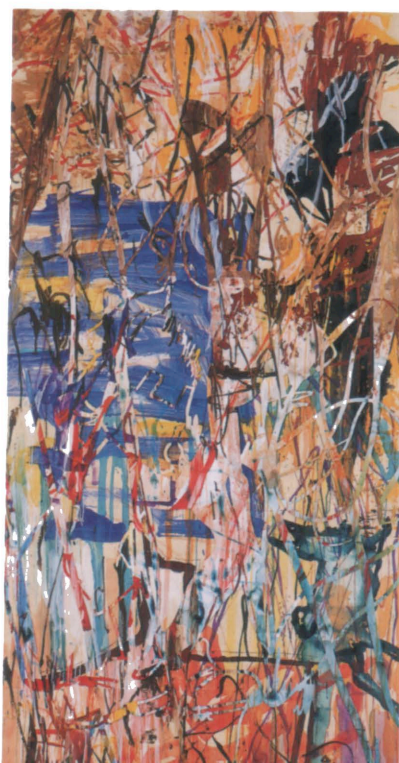
Still, there are plenty of clues to find in his work, and he leaves detectives and connoisseurs a lot to pick at. Wielding scissors on comic books, he has simultaneously conjured Schwitters's collages, Matisse's cutouts, and Lichtenstein's Pop canvases. He has made hanging-felt sculptures, such as 2000's *I Am Yours*, that look like Eva Hesse sculptures and Dalí's melting landscapes. In 2004, he took photographs of his own drawings and collage materials, which he developed after submerging the film in water. The unpredictable and haunting results make you wonder what you are looking at.

It's a good question. Herrera's works—the latest of which will be seen this November at Galeria Fortes Vilaça in São Paulo—embody a different kind of struggle for expression and comprehension, one refreshingly free of formulaic attitudes about the artist's role as an individualist or iconoclast. In Herrera's world, the artist isn't there to break the windows, he's just there to take, or make, pictures of the mess.

And what a fine mess it is. ■



Untitled, 2001, enamel on wall.



Untitled, 2004, gelatin silver print.

#22DF2, 2006, mixed-media collage on paper. See Resources.